
Pamela Wolfberg, San Francisco State University
Eliot Turiel, University of California, Berkeley
Mila DeWitt, SFSU-UC, Berkeley; Kristen Bottema, Vanderbilt University
Gregory Young, MIND Institute, UC, Davis; Thanh Nguyen, University of Washington

Core challenges in socialization, communication and play place children with autism at a high risk for being excluded by peers. Social isolation in turn deprives children of opportunities to develop their social, communicative and symbolic potential. The Integrated Play Groups (IPG) model has gained recognition as an effective, evidence-based intervention in promoting core challenges in children with autism while building relationships with typical peers in socially integrated settings (Wolfberg, 2009).

This project expanded on established research to further evaluate the therapeutic benefits of the IPG model for promoting symbolic play, social engagement and communication in 48 children with autism (5-10 years). Another aim was to determine whether developmental capacities attained through guided participation with familiar peers in the IPG setting would generalize to an unsupported play setting with unfamiliar peers. Using a randomized control group design, we compared the development of children with autism (treatment group) who participated in a 12-week after-school IPG program to children who had not yet participated in the program (control “waitlist” group). A measure of Children’s Play and Social Communication was used to code and analyze videotaped observations of 12 children at the beginning and end of the IPG intervention and 36 children during unsupported play sessions with 2 unfamiliar peers before and following the IPG intervention. Significant findings revealed that children with autism progressed in their social engagement and symbolic play over the course of IPGs, and that gains within the symbolic play domain generalized to unsupported play with unfamiliar peers following the IPGs. An increasing trend for both social and symbolic play domains was also noted for the treatment group. An ad hoc analysis of joint attention (JA), a building block of social communication, in 8 children with autism showed emerging evidence of longer duration of joint attention (JA) with typical peers, with an increasing trend of both peer initiated and mutually initiated JA behaviors following the IPGs.

An additional complementary pilot study explored the influence of IPGs on typical peers’ (k-5th grade) judgments about inclusion and exclusion of children with autism. Participating in structured interviews before and after the IPG program, 29 typical peers enrolled in IPGs and 16 additional peers were questioned about four hypothetical stories in which a story character chooses to exclude a child with autism. The interviews were analyzed using domain theory analysis (Turiel, 2006). Although the findings were inconclusive, they point to interesting areas for future exploration. The findings revealed that a large proportion of participants, even before participating in IPGs, judged that it was not okay to exclude a child with a disability from any of the four contexts. This likely reflects the pedagogical philosophies of the school sites where awareness and acceptance of diversity, social justice and inclusion are promoted and valued. It would be pertinent to explore this area of research with typical peers who have less awareness of and exposure to children with autism.

Further evidence of developmental trends, generalization and social validation was supported by IPG Field Assessments (Wolfberg, 2003) conducted by IPG facilitators and documentation of feedback from the parents of both children with autism and typical peers, teachers and typical peers who participated in IPGs. Limitations, plans for future research, and implications are discussed in terms of compelling evidence validating the efficacy of the IPG model and enhancing our understanding of the nature of peer socialization, communication and play in children with autism.