

Comparing the effects of play intervention and skills training on children with autism

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Rationale: For children with autism, play is a crucial factor for successful social participation in schools or communities. Occupational therapists use play as both a means and an end for children with autism.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to compare the efficacy of traditional occupational therapy (play as means) and play intervention (play as ends) for children with autism aged 3-6 years to improve their play skill, adaptive behavior, and occupational participation.

Method: Two groups of children with autism completed 3 months of traditional occupational therapy treatment (n = 17) and play intervention (n = 18) respectively. The mean age was 62.5 months. Group characteristics, such as age, gender, and IQ, were similar, but the play intervention group had better verbal intelligence. Outcome measurements included the Pediatric Daily Occupation Scale, Preschool Play Scale-Revised, and Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale.

Results: Results indicated that after 3 months treatment, both groups improved significantly in play skill and adaptive behavior after controlling for the effect of verbal IQ. However, no significant difference was found in the performance of occupational activities and play skill.

Conclusions: Play uses by occupational therapists as an effective strategy for children with autism as either a means or an end. However, occupational performance of children with autism should be facilitated in the natural environment via combination with environmental modifications and parenting skills.