



DIR® ON THE PLYAGROUND: A Pragmatic Approach

Michele Ricamato, CCC/SLP

What makes playgrounds so challenging for children with disorders in relating and communicating? The answer is as complex as the politics our children face at the swing sets. However, from a language perspective one component that creates the difficulties on the black top is pragmatic language. Pragmatics is defined as a set of sociolinguistic rules related to the use of language during communication. It is the way that language is USED to communicate with others, rather than the way it is structured or sounds. Social pragmatic rules in conversation include: turn taking, opening conversations, maintaining conversations, and making relevant contributions to the topic. Additionally, the ability to repair through giving and receiving feedback, correcting errors in conversation, and maintaining roles within a dialogue are also important aspects of pragmatic language.,

In order to support children who experience difficulty using pragmatic language, one to one intervention is often effective, necessary and facilitating. For children who are developmentally ready for peer interactions, starting with a small group (1-3 peers and the child needing support) and one facilitator within a quiet environment is often a stepping stone before going to the actual playground where sensory information is often overwhelming and disorganizing, derailing the process of interaction.

Within the small group, activities that work to build mutual relationships between peers while supporting pragmatic language goals are essential.

Utilizing the principles of DIR ®, the child with special needs can bring an item of interest, initiate a topic or bring a favorite game to play with the group. Focus on interpreting and providing the correct nonverbal cues to communicative partners is often the first goal within sessions. Playing games without the use of verbal language heightens the opportunities for peers to begin to interpret meanings of gestures, facial expressions and affect cues.

Once the dynamics within the group are well established and comfortable, the facilitator can create opportunities for problem solving and discussions where conflicts or differences of opinion may arise between the children. The facilitator can then act as an interpreter when a peer partner misreads, cannot repair or is unable to express their intent effectively within the group process. We have found that groups work best when they meet at least three times per week within a recess/lunch time during the school day. Alternating the peers within the group from time to time also supports building relationships when there are many students in the class.

When the child with special needs begins to feel successful during interaction within the small group setting, moving to the playground with the core group of children (a total of 3-4) can be a supportive bridge to interacting in the face of multiple interpersonal and sensory dynamics. The group will have an established relationship to bring to the outdoors while the facilitator supports the interactions on the playground, helping the child with special needs initiate, mediate, repair,



and generally maintain interactions, and interpret and give appropriate nonverbal cues in order to successfully engage and communicate. This multi-step, multi-faceted process will benefit all

children (typical and atypical in development), by supporting richer social pragmatic abilities in interactions as they navigate the complexities of the playground environment.

DIR® ON THE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

Michele Havens, Ed.D, Educational Director

Nanette Tangkeko, MA, Floortime Director

Imagine Academy

Brooklyn, NY

Floortime is traditionally thought of as an intervention indoors, at home or in the classroom. The playground is a great place for Floortime with all children. How can we bring this method of intervention outside onto the playground, either at home or school? The same principles will apply. Engagement is the ultimate goal and priority; with affect and movement as the critical ingredients. Model strategies and offer coaching to the children and staff, if necessary. Be on the lookout for opportunities to engage in a back and forth exchange. The playground is a highly motivating place for most children, so capitalize on the affective states that are naturally present on the playground. Some downtime is inevitable, but work to keep it to a minimum.

What equipment is available on the playground? Slides, climbers, tubular structures, and swings all lend themselves to playful obstruction. Get in the way! Some playgrounds can also be modified. Swings can be removed or moved. You can use other materials on the playground. Dolls or stuffed animals can go on the climber or down the slide.

Follow the child's lead, but don't act on what you anticipate the child wants, wait and watch. Your level of waiting and watching is largely dependent on developmental levels of the child, so begin with something familiar. When the child reacts and attempts to communicate-expand, expand, expand, using high affect. If the child is unfamiliar and tends to wander without showing interest, gesture toward choices of play equipment and give yourself time to observe the child. Change your tone of voice or volume, if needed.

To "woo" the child: appeal to his sensory profile – rub dirt into and around your hands (and his if possible). Appeal to his visual perceptual profile – use a funnel with the dirt or sand. Appeal to his auditory perception, pour dirt or sand into a cup, cover and shake. Try motor planning, make a mound of dirt and jump on top. Continue to use gesture and high affect as you describe your actions.

If the child walks away, go where she's going, get involved again with what appeals to her. Start again and remember the following:

- I. Open and Close Circles
Find what interests the child, stop and wait for the child, in turn, to initiate and use intent to continue engagement.



Use repetition initially in creating the play exchange, keep going – when the child becomes comfortable with the partnership, add another action / toy / play sequence. Keep in mind his individual differences.

II. Extend the circles of communication.

III. Expand-expand-expand

Depending on what you have observed as the child's ability in motor planning and their interest in the equipment, use playful obstruction. Then wait, what does the child do? Try playing dumb; put your hand in the way, then your foot, whatever it takes!

Some activity ideas for the playground:

1. Chant to "Going on a Bear Hunt": We're going to the playground – the playground – the playground...
2. Play stop & go / fast & slow games
3. Become a dinosaur and stomp around toward the child, see if there is a reaction
4. Sing out your actions, as you do the motor movements
 - Knock, knock on the playground
 - Up, up, up on the steps
 - Down, down, down on the slide
 - We'll have fun on the playground
 - Today! Hooray!
5. Bubble hunt with a battery operated bubble machine; find where the bubbles are coming from
6. Hide & Seek
7. Tag with home base
8. Dance and move to:
 - Round, round, round on the playground
 - Twist, twist, twist, by ourselves
 - Round, round, round on the playground
 - We'll have fun
 - On the playground
 - Today! Hurray!
9. On a warm day, use physical elements playfully. What was the reaction to sand and dirt?
10. Climbing – Representational drama
 - a. 3 Little Pigs
 - b. Ants Go Marching
 - c. Daddy Works With One Hammer
 - d. Camping
 - i. Lost
 - ii. Treasure Hunt
11. Balance beam activities
 - a. Fishing
 - b. Picnic in the tower
 - c. Bumble Ball Madness
 - d. Kickball Targets
 - e. Follow the Leader
 - i. Marching
 - ii. Crawling



- iii. Jumping
- iv. Galloping
- v. Waddling
- vi. Noising
- vii. Whispering
- viii. Tapping
- ix. Pounding
12. Musical swings
13. Hunt for bugs with flashlights
14. Simon Says
15. Act out a Train Trip
 - i. Tunnel
 - ii. Mountain
 - iii. Circus
 - iv. Roller coasters
 - v. Canada
 - vi. Florida
 - vii. Ice cream factory
 - viii. Farm
16. Create a trail
 - i. Lines to follow
 - ii. Ropes to cross
 - iii. Hula hoops to jump
 - iv. Balance beam to cross
 - v. Monkey bars to swing
17. Animal swings-move the swings as an animal
 - i. Horse
 - ii. Elephant
 - iii. Bird
 - iv. Ostrich
 - v. Tazmanian Devil
 - vi. Polar Bear
18. Parachute tent
 - a. Who could be around my tent-a bear, an alligator, a Daddy?
19. Water spray tag
20. Rock hunt for rock gardens
21. Stick hunt
 - a. Send an SOS message
22. Bean bag catch to the highest tower
23. Jump rope can be a snake or other animal or lizard