

Teaching Pretend Play to Young Children With Autism

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while Mia got her favorite doll and gave it a bottle. Tristan and Zanidy went right to the block area and made ramps and a track for their cars. Jonathan, a 3-year-old boy with autism, sat alone, away from his peers, and lined up blocks in a corner of the classroom. This was a typical day for Jonathan and his peers. Jonathan often lines up the blocks and holds them close to the corner of his eyes but rarely builds towers or ramps with them like the other children. Also, he often starts protesting when other children attempt to play near him or with his blocks. Over the past several weeks, LiAnna has encouraged him to play with different toys or near his peers. However, he consistently spends most of his free play time alone, lining up the blocks. Jonathan's parents recently expressed concerns about Jonathan's social skills and lack of friends. His parents also said they would like to see Jonathan play with his older brother, George, who is 6 years old. At Jonathan's Individualized Education Program

LiAnna, a preschool teacher, announced, "Story time is over; its time for play!" Most of the children left the circle time area immediately and found their favorite toys or activities. Tyrell and Raphael went to the kitchen set and began pretending to make dinner

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(IEP) meeting last week, his team (his parents; LiAnna; Jo, the area autism specialist; and Eduardo, his speech pathologist) selected two new goals: Jonathan will (a) interact socially with peers during play or daily routines by giving a peer a toy (or object) or taking a toy (or object) offered to him, 3 times per day for three consecutive days and (b) verbally communicate with peers during play by using four one-word comments or requests during a play interaction for three consecutive days. Jonathan's current play repertoire is not likely to provide opportunities for positive social or communicative interactions with peers. LiAnna realizes that the first step in promoting meaningful peer interactions during play for Jonathan is teaching him to play with toys in the same manner as his peers and near his peers, which means teaching him to engage in pretend play.

Federal law, specifically the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), mandates children with disabilities receive services within the least restrictive environment, which means inclusive, community settings must be considered. Furthermore, research supports the inclusion of children with autism into community preschools with typical peers (e.g., Strain, McGee, & Kohler, 2001) when instruction is delivered in meaningful contexts by contingent, responsive adults using child-focused, embedded instructional practices with multiple opportunities to respond (McBride & Schwarz, 2003; Wolery, 2005). The basic premise of child-focused, embedded instruction is that adults embed learning into daily routines (e.g., Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker,

2004; Sandall & Schwartz, 2008). In this manner, instruction is intentionally contextually relevant and more likely to produce functional, durable, and generalized skills. Inherent in this premise is the assumption that children will *play independently* or engage in meaningful ways with objects and people in the environment (with toys, peers, or other adults). However, research has shown that children with autism exhibit less frequent and varied independent play behaviors than their peers with typical development or with other disabilities (e.g., Barton & Wolery, 2010; Kasari, Freeman, & Paparella, 2006). For example, young children with autism, like Jonathan, might line up blocks or spin the wheels on trains rather than make a tower with the blocks or pretend the train is a racecar and move it around the carpet. Repetitive, stereotypic play is less likely to afford multiple, contextually relevant opportunities for embedded instruction and social interactions with peers.

Play is a *critical* intervention goal for children with autism in inclusive settings because it sets the occasion for social interactions and communication with peers, caregivers, and teachers, and provides an authentic context for embedding instruction. Furthermore, several research studies have found *pretend* play to be a predictor of social and language skills, particularly for young children with autism (Charman et al., 2003; Toth, Munson, Meltzoff, & Dawson, 2006). The purpose of this article is to define pretend play (based on recent reviews of the literature; Barton, 2010; Barton & Wolery, 2008) and provide strategies for promoting the independent pretend

Table 1
Types and Sequences of Pretend Play

Types of Pretend Play	Definition	Examples	Sequences
Functional play with pretense	Nonliteral use of actual or miniature objects in the manner in which they were intended without the reality-based outcome	Putting an empty spoon up to your mouth Stirring a spoon in a bowl Feeding a doll with a plastic bottle	Stirring a spoon in a bowl and putting the spoon up to your mouth Feeding a baby a bottle, wrapping the baby in a blanket, and putting the baby to bed
Object substitution	Use of an object as if it were a different object	Pretending a block is a train and pushing it back and forth on a train track Pretending a block is a spoon and stirring it in a bowl Pretending a comb is a phone and putting it up to your ear to talk	Pushing a block on a train track, and connecting it to another block to make a longer train and pushing it across a track Stirring a block in a bowl and putting it up to a doll's mouth to eat
Imagining absent objects	Performing an action as if an object was present in the object's absence	Putting fist to your mouth and chewing (as if holding a spoon) Rocking your arms back and forth (as if holding a baby) Holding your hands up to a doll's mouth (as if feeding)	Moving fist around a bowl to stir, bringing to mouth to taste, and giving to a stuffed bear Holding hand to ear to talk on phone and giving to a peer to talk
Assigning absent attributes	Assigning roles or emotions to the self, others, or objects	Saying "the food is hot" and moving hands away quickly Saying "the baby is crying" and rocking the doll back and forth Saying "I am the doctor. Can I check your ears?"	Saying you are the doctor checking a doll's ears, and listening to her heart Rocking the "crying" baby and then saying, "she is tired."

Note: Adapted from Barton, 2010; Barton & Wolery, 2008, 2010.

play skills of children with autism in inclusive classrooms.

What Is Pretend Play?

Although the definitions of pretend play vary in the literature (Barton, 2010), most define pretend play as *nonliteral* play behaviors (e.g., Garfinkle, 2004; the child pretends to drink from a cup, feeds a baby a bottle, or plays doctor with her stuffed animals). We developed a taxonomy (i.e., system for categorizing and defining) of pretend play to synthesize the literature and provide consistent,

measurable definitions for assessing and teaching pretend play (see Barton, 2010; Barton & Wolery, 2008, 2010). The taxonomy can be used to develop functional, measurable pretend play goals. The taxonomy includes four types of pretend play: (a) functional play with pretense (e.g., taking a sip from an empty cup), (b) object substitution (e.g., using a bowl as a hat), (c) imagining absent objects (e.g., talking on the phone with an empty hand), and (d) assigning absent attributes (e.g., saying, "the baby is hungry" referring to a doll). Table 1 lists operationalized definitions of each type of pretend

play with examples. It is important to note that this taxonomy is not an exhaustive description of play.

LiAnna spent several days observing the play behaviors of Jonathan and his peers. She wanted to target play behaviors she could teach with toys Jonathan already used. LiAnna decided to initially target functional play with pretense and object substitution behaviors. She often observed him playing with the blocks and at the water table. She planned to teach him to pretend the blocks were cars and trains (object substitution) and to feed the animals and fish at the water table with the big plastic spoons and cups (functional play with pretense). Also, she thought this might provide opportunities for social interactions and communication with peers because several of the other

children regularly played with the blocks and cars in the same manner and the water table always had two or three children.

Using the System of Least Prompts to Teach Independent Pretend Play

The National Autism Center (2009) gave antecedent-based teaching strategies the highest rating (i.e., an *established* evidence-based practice) in their report on effective practices for children with autism. This rating indicates that antecedent-based practices have extensive empirical support for teaching a variety of skills to children with autism. The system of least prompts is one example of an antecedent-based teaching strategy using a prompt hierarchy. The prompt hierarchy is a system of planning and delivering three to four prompts (e.g., modeling, visual cues, hand over hand) from least intrusive (i.e., with the minimal amount of teacher control) to the most intrusive (i.e., ensures the child demonstrates the skill), when necessary. In this manner the teacher plans and delivers prompts based on the child's performance. The system of least prompts has been shown to increase the frequency and diversity of pretend play in preschool-age children with disabilities, including autism, when implemented by preschool teachers in inclusive classrooms (Barton & Wolery, 2008, 2010). In fact, a variety of skills, including pretend play, can be taught using a system of least prompts (e.g., self-help skills, Doyle, Wolery, Gast, & Ault, 1990;



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conversation skills, Filla, Wolery, & Anthony, 1999; toy play, Lifter, Ellis, Cannon, & Anderson, 2005).

The goal of the system of least prompts is to teach the child to play independently in natural settings without teacher prompts. Initially, the child is given an opportunity to play without prompts, and the subsequent prompts are presented from least to most intrusive. The system of least prompts allows teachers to teach new, more complex play skills within a natural play interaction, while systematically fading prompts. Thus, children are less likely to become prompt dependent. Also, teachers can embed the system of least prompts across daily activities, routines, and settings. The system of least prompts might be more effective than other child-focused instructional strategies to teach play skills (e.g., naturalistic time delay, incidental teaching; see Wolery, 2005) because the teacher does not have to interrupt the play interaction to deliver instruction or wait for the child to initiate an interaction. The following sections describe strategies for using the system of least prompts to teach pretend play.

After careful planning with Jonathan's parents and other members of his educational team, LiAnna decided to embed the system of least prompts into free play to teach Jonathan pretend play behaviors. Jonathan's educational team selected the system of least prompts because Jonathan had responded well to modeling and prompting in the past. LiAnna used modeling and prompting to teach Jonathan to follow the circle time and snack routines. Also, LiAnna felt confident implementing the system of least prompts during free

play because the strategies allowed her to use the toys Jonathan was playing with, follow his lead in play, and provide multiple and varied instructional opportunities. Also, she would still have plenty of time to observe and interact with the other children.

Securing the child's attention.

One possible obstacle for using the system of least prompts with children with autism is ensuring the adult has the child's attention. Contingent imitation (i.e., simultaneously imitating the child's behavior with the same toy) is an effective strategy for obtaining the child's attention during play (Ingersoll & Schreibman, 2006). Contingent imitation (e.g., if the child is pushing a train back and forth on the floor, the adult pushes the train back and forth in the exact same manner) helps build a play interaction and allows the teacher an opportunity to observe and plan the next prompt. By responding to the child's behaviors, the teacher indicates she is attending to the child's play. In this manner, the adult's behavior is contingent on the child's behavior, thus creating a conversational framework of turn taking and promoting a natural, interactive play interaction (Delaney & Kaiser, 2001).

Selecting prompts. The teacher should select prompts based on the child's learning history (e.g., adult models, a choice between two toys, visual cue; see Tables 2 and 3). The long-term goal for most children will be to play independently in the presence of the toys (i.e., without any additional prompts). The prompt hierarchy might include three or four levels. The first level is

Table 2
Steps for Using the System of Least Prompts to Teach Pretend Play

Planning for Instruction	Considerations
Step 1 Identify target behaviors or types of pretend play you are going to prompt	Consider the types of play and toys the child uses currently. For many children, particularly children who demonstrate limited to no pretend play, it might be best to start with functional play with pretense behaviors. Consider teaching vocalizations along with the pretend play behaviors.
Step 2 Identify which toys will be most likely to elicit the target pretend play behaviors	Consider the child's preferences and make sure you have two of most toys so that you can imitate the child with the same toy. Also, make sure you rotate the toys. Include vague objects (e.g., blocks, cloth, wooden rods) if you are teaching object substitution.
Step 3 Establish a prompting sequence based on the child's needs and learning history	For some children, three levels will work well (e.g., presentation, model, hand over hand). Other children will require four levels (e.g., presentation, choice, model, hand over hand).
Step 4 Establish reinforcement (i.e., feedback) that fits within the play context or interaction	Avoid interrupting the play interaction as much as possible. Consider the child's learning history. If descriptive praise has worked as reinforcement in the past, consider using it within the play interaction to initially teach play and plan to decrease its use gradually. Over time, replace descriptive praise with a natural play response.
Step 5 Ask or direct the child to the appropriate area with the toys	Identify and use the child's preferred toys or toy types. Include new toys or rotate toys to maintain interest.
Step 6 Present the toys directly in front of the child	Make sure the child can see the toys.
Step 7 Contingently imitate the child for 12 to 20 s to obtain his or her attention	Get down at the child's level and do exactly what the child is doing
Step 8 Initiate the prompting sequence	Prompt behaviors related to the child's interest by using the toys he or she is currently touching or looking at. Recall the play interactions from the previous sessions and build on these. Also, attempt to consistently allocate time when delivering prompts. For example, consistently wait at least 5 s after delivering a model prompt.
Step 9 Reinforce any pretend play	Provide feedback and reinforcement even if the child exhibits a pretend play behavior different from the one you prompted.
Step 10 Monitor progress	Record the child's progress. Change or modify the sequence or type of prompts as needed.

Table 3
Examples of the Prompt Sequence Using a System of Least Prompts

Level	Prompt Type	Example
1	Presentation of toys	Have a variety of toys and materials to encourage pretend play.
2	Choice	"Do you want the cup or the spoon?"
Or 2	Visual cue	Present a picture of a doll drinking from a cup and say, "The doll is drinking!"
3	Physical model	Put the wooden block up to the doll's mouth and say, "The doll is drinking!"
4 ^a	Hand-over-hand prompt ^a	Gently guide the child's hands to give the doll a drink and say, "The doll is drinking!"
Or 4 ^a	Give toy and verbal prompt ^a	Put the doll in the child's hand and say, "Your turn to feed the baby!"

a. Level 4 prompts should be a controlling prompt. These should ensure the child performs the target behavior and is reinforced immediately.

always the presentation of the toys or objects. The second level might be a choice of two toys (e.g., “Do you want to play with the cup or the spoon?”) or a visual cue (e.g., picture of a doll drinking from a bottle). The third level might be a physical model of pretend play behaviors (e.g., hold the doll and a bottle, “My baby is hungry,” or pushing a block back and forth saying “My car is racing!”). The fourth or final level is the controlling prompt. The controlling prompt ensures the child responds and receives the reinforcement (e.g., teacher praise and feedback). Over time, the child will understand the link between the target behavior and the reinforcement. The controlling prompt might be a hand-over-hand prompt, placing the toys in the child’s lap, or presenting a choice.

Teachers should consider the child’s learning history and select the controlling prompt that has been effective or is most likely to be effective for each child. If the child is resistive to touch, the teacher can place the toys in the child’s lap or offer a choice between two toys. For some children, a visual or verbal choice between two toys functions

as a controlling prompt (i.e., the child always chooses one toy and plays with it). Also, children with autism often have delays in understanding and using language. Thus, a separate verbal prompt (e.g., “Feed the doll.”) might not be effective. However, a verbal cue can be *paired* with other prompts. For example, teachers might say, “My car is fast!” while pushing a block back and forth (a model prompt), rather than, “Pretend the block is a car.” Table 2 provides steps for implementing the system of least prompts and Table 3 lists examples of prompts and prompt levels.

The day LiAnna planned to begin teaching Jonathan pretend play, she set up the block area so there were at least two of each block. During free play, Jonathan immediately went to the block area and started lining up the blocks. LiAnna imitated him for several seconds and waited for him to look at her blocks. When he looked at the blocks, she modeled pretending the block is a train while saying, “Choo! Choo! A train!” After waiting 5 s for him to respond, she used her hands to prompt him to move the block around the carpet like a train while saying, “There goes the train!” After using the prompting procedure for a couple of days, she realized that Jonathan was not looking at the model prompt, even when she thought she had his attention. LiAnna decided to embed a choice prompt prior to the model prompt. Jonathan had successfully responded to choice prompts when LiAnna taught him to request snack items. When implementing, LiAnna contingently imitated him and waited for him to look at her. When he looked at her, she delivered a choice of two toys near him, “train



Figure 1.
Example of data collection form for pretend play

Event Recording Data Recording Form

Child Name: Jonathan

Date: 5/12/10 **Setting/ toys:** Water table/ sponges, animal figures, plastic blocks

Behavior: Prompted (i.e., a nonliteral play behavior that occurs within 5s after a teacher or peer prompt) and unprompted pretend play behaviors (i.e., nonliteral play behaviors that occur at least 5s after a teacher or peer prompt)

Recording System: Event Sampling

Metric: Frequency (Rate)

Start Time:	9:37 am					
Behavior						
<u>Prompted pretend play</u> Place a P for each prompted pretend play behavior	P	P	P	U		
<u>Unprompted pretend play:</u> place a U for each unprompted pretend play behavior	U	U	P	P	U	
	U	U	U	U	U	U
	U	U	U	P	U	U
End time:	9:50 am					
Total time:	13 min					
Total number of pretend play behaviors:	21					
Prompted/Unprompted	6 prompted/15 unprompted					
Rate of unprompted pretend play:	$15/13 = 1.2$ unprompted play behaviors per minute					

or car?” while holding two different blocks. If he did not make a choice, she modeled pretending the block is a train while saying, “It’s a train!” or pretending the block is a car while saying, “The car goes fast!” After several sessions with numerous opportunities to respond, Jonathan began responding to the choice prompt and imitating her model prompt. LiAnna no longer needed to use the hand-over-hand prompt. Almost 2 weeks after implementing the choice prompts, Jonathan began engaging independently in pretend play. Jonathan moved the blocks back and forth on the carpet and said, “T” (for train) or “car.” LiAnna was thrilled with Jonathan’s meaningful, independent engagement with the blocks! However, Jonathan did not seem interested in the other toys or water

table. So, for the next several days, LiAnna focused on using the same procedures with other toys and at the water table.

Prompting sequence. The prompting sequence begins by presenting the objects, observing, and contingently imitating the child for a short time (e.g., 12-20 s) before prompting play. The time provides an opportunity for the teacher to observe toys or materials the child is interested in or playing with, and select a pretend play behavior to prompt. If the child does not display a pretend play behavior after presentation of the materials, the teacher should deliver the second-level prompt (e.g., choice between two toys or a physical model of a pretend play behavior). If the child does not respond to the



second-level prompt, the third-level prompt or the controlling prompt is delivered. In this manner, the teacher should carefully observe the child's responses and systematically deliver prompts. The teacher should change the prompts or prompting sequence if the child is resisting or not responding to the prompts. For example, if after several sessions the child is not attending to the model prompt, like Jonathan, the teacher might change the model prompt to a visual cue or a choice prompt. Also, as mentioned above, vocalizations are a natural part of play interaction and can be paired with every prompt. Some pretend behaviors might involve vocalizations (e.g., sipping noises when drinking from a cup, modeling eating soup and saying "It's hot!"); if not, teachers should describe what the child is doing or what the child might say (e.g., if the child is playing with the cars and people figures, she might say, "Dad drives the car!").

Materials. Rotating toys can help maintain child interest in play activities. When rotating toys, the teacher should include toys related to the interests and preferences of

the children. As described in the above vignette, LiAnna knew Jonathan enjoyed playing with the blocks and the water table. She used these toys and activities to teach him pretend play. She included at least two or three of each toy to promote contingent imitation and social interactions. Teachers also should select a variety of toys to promote each type of pretend play. For example, dolls, bottles, plates, and spoons might promote functional play with pretense. Arranging the housekeeping area near the block area might promote object substitution by providing opportunities for incorporating blocks into dramatic play as food items, cars, or plates. Likewise, dress up clothes, toy medical kits, animal figures, and a dollhouse might promote assigning absent attributes.

After several days of LiAnna teaching pretend play with the spoons, cups, plates, and miniature plastic foods, Jonathan was starting to engage in pretend play independently. He often put a spoon up to his mouth and stirred the spoon in the cup. However, he did not feed the animals in the water table unless prompted. In fact, since LiAnna had started teaching him pretend play, Jonathan did not seem interested in the water table at all. She was using all the same strategies and reinforcement. However, because he rarely played at the water table anymore, there were fewer opportunities for Jonathan to respond. She called Jonathan's parents to discuss his progress and ask for suggestions for expanding his pretend play repertoire across settings. His parents told LiAnna that Jonathan had started engaging in pretend play at home during bath time. His dad suggested using plastic

blocks, sponges, animal figures, and bars of soap in the water table to teach pretend play, because he played with these toys at home in the bath. LiAnna planned to switch the toys in the water table immediately. Once she did this, Jonathan seemed interested, and started playing at the water table again. She was able to embed several opportunities to respond within play interactions at the water table each day!

Reinforcement. As with all embedding procedures, the natural, related consequence should be considered before using an unrelated reinforcement. The natural consequence for a play behavior is a related response by the adult or peer. For example, if a child is stirring a spoon in an empty bowl and says, “ice cream!” the related, natural consequence would be the adult immediately stirring a spoon in a bowl and saying, “Yummy! Can I have a bite?” or “We are making ice cream!” Also, instead of saying, “Good playing with the doll!” teachers might say, “Your doll is drinking!” The teacher avoids interrupting the play context, while still providing feedback and reinforcing the child’s play. However, some children might need more direct, explicit feedback (i.e., descriptive praise), particularly when teaching more complex play behaviors. Descriptive praise is a statement telling the child exactly what she did correctly (e.g., “I saw you feeding the doll! That’s how we have fun with toys!” or “Yeah! You put the hat on your head”). However, descriptive praise might interrupt the play interaction, and should be gradually replaced with positive, enthusiastic comments related to the child’s play

activities and toys. Teachers should absolutely continue providing feedback (i.e., verbal descriptions of the child’s play), which is a natural consequence within a play interaction.

Play sequences. The play interactions of children with typical development involve sequences of play behaviors (e.g., making dinner and feeding stuffed animals, building train tracks and pushing the train, being a mail carrier and delivering mail to their peers) that involve multiple, related actions and often duplicate a routine or theme (Thorp, Stahmer, & Schreibman, 1995). It is important to teach children with autism multiple, related play behaviors to increase their opportunities for social interactions with peers and sustained play interactions. Play sequences should build on the child’s independent play behaviors. The system of least prompts also can be used to teach sequences of play behaviors (e.g., making a bottle, feeding the doll the bottle, and putting the doll to bed). Begin prompting sequences once the child demonstrates a variety of independent pretend play behaviors. Table 1 provides examples of sequences of pretend play.

After several days of prompting pretend play with the new toys, Jonathan was playing independently at the water table. LiAnna was able to step away from the water table and observe Jonathan engaging in pretend play without prompts. She continued to provide feedback by talking about what he was doing (e.g., “That horse is so fast!” “You are sailing the blue boat!”). He continued to play even when peers were next to him playing with the same toys. He was not interacting

with peers, but he was not avoiding them anymore either. LiAnna planned to start using a peer buddy system to teach his peers to play with him (Kohler, Greteman, Raschke, & Highnam, 2007). She knew exactly which peers to select—Tristan, Toma, and Zanidy. They also liked to play with blocks and trains, were socially competent, consistently compliant, and rarely absent. She planned to teach them to give Jonathan toys, talk about what Jonathan was doing, and ask Jonathan to take turns and play with them. She also wanted to make sure they knew they did not always have to be his peer buddy; they could always decide they wanted to play in a different center or with different toys. However, by selecting and teaching three peers, she knew at least one of them would want to play at the water table with Jonathan.

LiAnna was pleased that Jonathan had generalized pretend play across toys and settings. His parents also were thrilled that he had started playing independently at home. Jonathan had even started playing with his older brother, which freed up time for his parents to do other things around the house without having to worry about them playing together. Overall, Jonathan's expanded pretend play repertoire affords several opportunities for meaningful engagement in the natural environment, to use and understand language, and to interact with peers.

Progress monitoring. Progress monitoring is essential for ensuring teaching strategies are effective and the child is learning new pretend play behaviors. There are a variety of options for monitoring progress of pretend play and related behaviors (e.g., social interactions or

vocalizations). For example, teachers might use event sampling, time sampling, category sampling, or duration measures (see Hojnoski, Gischlar, & Missall, 2009). Event sampling systems can be designed to fit almost any activity and can be recorded with post-it notes or pieces of tape. A teacher might make a tally mark on a piece of tape on the floor each time the child demonstrates an unprompted play behavior or a vocalization related to play. Conversely, a teacher might place a small post-it note on wall each time a child interacts with a peer during play. Figure 1 provides an example of a data collection form for measuring the frequency of unprompted pretend play. Category sampling can be used to measure the number of different types of play the child demonstrates (Garfinkle, 2004). For example, a teacher might create a data collection form with two boxes: one box for functional play and one box for pretend play. The teacher would place a tally or check mark in the appropriate box for each pretend or functional play behavior. This will help the teacher measure frequency of each type of play. Event and category sampling systems are ideal for discrete behaviors with a clear beginning and end. Duration measures can be used to measure how long behaviors last. For example, duration recording systems can be developed to measure the amount of time a child spends playing near peers or playing with the same toys as peers.

Conclusion

Play, by its very nature, is flexible and child directed. Thus,

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play provides an ideal context for embedding a variety of instructional opportunities. Pretend play, in particular, provides opportunities to embed instruction across a variety of skills. The variety and frequency of instructional opportunities might increase when children independently engage in pretend play. However, many children with autism will not play without systematic teaching. By

teaching children with autism to engage in pretend play, teachers are providing opportunities for learning and independence within natural, social settings. Also, because it is flexible and child directed, play provides opportunities for embedding child-focused instruction within and across meaningful activities in natural settings with typical peers.

Note

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