



PLAY Project Headquarters

New Published Study Validates Play as Effective Path to Social & Emotional Development in Children with Autism

Three-Year Randomized Trial of Children and Families Published in October Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics

Ann Arbor, Mich., October 14, 2014 – A new published study shows the benefits playful interaction can have on the social and emotional development of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The three-year study, *PLAY Project Home Consultation Intervention Program for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Randomized Controlled Trial* (“the PLAY study”) was published in the October issue of [*The Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*](#). The study was led by Richard Solomon, MD, an Ann Arbor-based developmental and behavioral pediatrician and recognized expert on autism and families. The research was conducted in collaboration with Michigan State University which independently performed the data analysis with approval by their Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The PLAY study was specifically designed to provide data on the role playful interaction can have in the social emotional development of children with ASD. Dr. Solomon has been a respected leader in the field for more than 25 years, and in 2001 created the PLAY Project aimed at training professionals to partner with parents to deliver intensive autism early intervention. Simply stated, the PLAY Project helps parents learn the intervention through supportive guidance, coaching, modeling, and video feedback delivered by certified child development experts.

One of the largest and most rigorous clinical studies of its kind ever conducted, the PLAY study followed 128 families of three- to six-year-old children with ASD – autism or pervasive developmental disorder – in five US cities. Families were randomly assigned to one of two groups: either the PLAY Project plus usual community services for autism or usual community services alone. Usual community services consisted of special education pre-school, speech-language therapy, and occupational therapy services.

After one year, children assigned to the PLAY Project group showed greater improvement in social skills (increased shared attention and initiation), compliance, social emotional development, and autism symptomatology. Additional outcomes included significant improvements in parent-child interaction and moderate to large



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improvements in parents' ability to "sensitively respond and effectively engage their child."

"The research confirms what we have been seeing over the years in one family after another," Solomon said. "Playful interaction is a catalyst in helping parents truly connect with their child with ASD, with the child's development improving substantially and consistently over time."

The PLAY study revealed that parents delivered the intervention without adding to the stress associated with caring for a child with autism. Overall, symptoms of depression and stress **also significantly decreased for parents** in the PLAY group making this trial one of the first studies to show an improvement in parents' mental health following autism intervention.

"One of the major consequences of having a child with ASD is that parents experience high levels of depression," said Gerald Mahoney, Ph.D., child and maternal depression expert and Motto Professor of Families and Communities at Case Western Reserve University. "The PLAY study appears to be the first large scale investigation of a behavioral intervention to report a significant decrease in depressive symptoms."

The PLAY Project group was also associated with improved interactional and functional developmental outcomes. On a standard autism rating scale, about one-half of children in the PLAY group improved by at least one category (as did one-third of children in the comparison group). However, these results must be interpreted cautiously, "This kind of dramatic improvement in one year is not in agreement with clinical experience."

The PLAY Project group received a monthly three-hour home visit from a Certified PLAY Project Consultant. PLAY Consultants coach parents in the PLAY Project methods, principles, and techniques so they can help deliver the intervention with their child throughout everyday interactions. Consultants model and teach parents how to identify and respond to their child's subtle and hard-to-detect cues. They also show parents practical ways of making every interaction with their child a growing and learning experience.

To keep the child's autism intervention at the high intensity level, two hours per day of PLAY Project time between caregiver and child is recommended; this can usually be done in multiple 15-20-minute sessions. Families in the PLAY study reported that this time is enjoyable and did fit into their schedules.



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“This study is important because of the compelling need for evidence-based and effective, less expensive and more easily disseminated forms of intensive intervention for children with ASD,” Solomon said. “The PLAY study results and our clinical experience confirm that this is a replicable and easily disseminated model that can cost-effectively help the growing number of children with autism make gains in development, social skills, academic skills, functional life skills, and their overall ability to be happy.”

About PLAY Project Headquarters

As a professional training and development organization, PLAY Project Headquarters develops training curriculum for professionals and parents; helps establish systems of care through public or private networks in Early Intervention and Community Mental Health; organizes training events; manages Dr. Rick Solomon’s speaking schedule; manages the credentialing process of the PLAY Project Certification program; and supports 500+ licensed PLAY Project providers across the U.S. and internationally where families can access direct services. To find out about PLAY Project training opportunities including the certified PLAY Project consultant program, visit www.playproject.org, email training@playproject.org, or call 735-585-5333 x207. To locate PLAY Project services in your community, [visit this page](#) <http://www.playproject.org/parents/play-project-near-you/>

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