

The Following is a White Paper on:

Potential and Possibilities:

***Model for Providing Children with Disabilities
Access to Benefits of Play Experiences***

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Please note that within this white paper we have utilized the term “parent” to signify the roles of all primary and secondary caretakers for a child.

Introduction

“... play deprivation is a kind of emotional and multisensory starvation. We see the tragic evidence of it in the neglected orphans in Romania and Serbia. Remember, we’re also primates. When we’re deprived of play, we’ll suffer in ways similar to the way those laboratory animals suffered. Play is part of our original equipment, but it has to be nurtured to develop. Normally we play. When we don’t, something has gone very, very wrong, and nonplayers will suffer a number of effects.”⁽¹⁾

Dr. Stuart L. Brown

President, The National Institute for Play

Play as a Right

As a result of the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁽²⁾, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights generated a paper in 1989. This document would serve as a universal resource for the explanation and understanding of the rights of young children throughout the world.

Two focus areas are mentioned, namely; the necessity to assist children who have disabilities in developing to their full potential, and the importance of children participating fully in family, cultural and social life through the experience of play.⁽³⁾

These principles were detailed in two mandates out of the 54 articles:

Article 23 (Children with disabilities): *Children who have any kind of disability have the right to special care and support, as well as all the rights in the Convention, so that they can live full and independent lives.*

Article 31 (Leisure, play and culture): *Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.*

The challenge in implementing the principles of these two mandates lies in connecting the right of children who have disabilities to have the care and support they need and their right to the activity of play.

Parents and professionals who live and work with children who have disabilities strive every day to try and deliver what the United Nations was fighting for with the above-mentioned document -- *the ability for every child to live a full and independent life*. How insightful of this international commission to recognize play as a key instrument in delivering quality of life to every child.

Fortunately, the benefits of play are well established and documented by experts like Kenneth R. Ginsburg, M.D., M.S.Ed. in his clinical report for the American Academy of Pediatrics, *“Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive,*

physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children. Because every child deserves the opportunity to develop to his/her unique potential, child advocates must consider all factors that interfere with the optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play.”⁽⁴⁾

This paper presents a model that will allow parents, caregivers and professionals to optimize a child’s strength and abilities. This model is designed to reduce barriers and/or obstacles that may impede the child’s successful access to play and the vital developmental benefits inherent in play experiences.

Value of Play

“Play is essential to a young child’s health. As today’s children continue to experience pressure in their lives, play becomes even more critical. Play increases affiliation with peers, releases tension, advances cognitive development, and increases exploration. Play increases the probability that children will converse and interact with each other. During this interaction, children practice the roles they will assume later in life.”⁽⁵⁾

Research is universal on the benefits of play. It is the very fuel children use to explore the world, develop their mind, relate to others, solve problems, reason, acquire skills, recognize their abilities to function in the world and utilize the play experience for both physical and emotional release.

When children play, they learn through exploration of their imagination, dexterity, physical, cognitive and emotional limits and then move beyond them. The struggle to master the play experience becomes the driving force for children to push beyond the barriers of their mind and body, conquer their fears and create a world where they can fully engage their passions.

In some ways, play can best be described as it exists in contrast to non-play. Indeed, many examples of play, if examined in isolation, can at first glance appear identical to non-play experiences. There is a dynamic quality that characterizes play. Witness two children in a public swimming pool. One lost in the experience of weightlessness, water and pleasure, the other struggling to combat his anxiety and fear.

“... play proves often a subtle, elusive phenomenon that seems to appear without notice and then disappear just as quickly.”⁽⁶⁾

For the first child, this is a play experience. For the second child it is a non-play experience. However, within the blink of an eye, the reluctant child could exhibit the slight beginnings of a smile and then relax and enjoy the experience. It is perhaps at that very moment that the experience moves into the realm of play. **For it is the spirit**

of the experience that delivers the inherent qualities of play and it is that spirit that makes play such a powerful force within the context of a child’s life.

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, former head of the department of psychology at the University of Chicago, studied an important aspect of the play experience. In his seminal work, *“Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,”*⁽⁷⁾ he outlines his theory that people who are engaged and completely involved in an activity for its own sake (such as play) can easily fall into what he terms the “flow.” Within that state, all temporal concerns slip away and the person can access their skills and capabilities to the utmost and through that experience achieve intense feelings of competence, fulfillment and happiness. For children with complex or challenging disabilities, the curative aspects of achieving this mental state of concentration through the play experience cannot be overstated.

“... play is not defined in terms of a single identifying characteristic, but in terms of a confluence of characteristics, all having to do with motivation or attitude and all of which can vary in degree.”⁽⁸⁾

Elements of Play

Researchers often have slightly different definitions of play as one can observe from these two eminent thought leaders:

Catherine Garvey, Professor Psychology, University of Maine ⁽⁹⁾	Peter Gray, Research Professor of Psychology, Boston College ⁽⁸⁾
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Pleasurable and enjoyable</i> ■ <i>No extrinsic goals</i> ■ <i>Spontaneous and voluntary</i> ■ <i>Active engagement</i> ■ <i>Play has certain systematic relations to what is not play</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Self-chosen and self-directed</i> ■ <i>Intrinsically motivated</i> ■ <i>Structured by mental rules</i> ■ <i>Imaginative</i> ■ <i>Produced in an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind</i>

It has become evident to researchers, educators, therapists, parents and caregivers, that when the spirit of play is present, possibilities for the child to grow, learn, relate, develop, explore and create multiply exponentially.

Inherent Benefits of Play Experiences

		Cognitive Development	
			Focus/attention
		Emotional Development	
			Planning
			Literacy
		Mood enhancement	Problem solving ■ convergent (one solution) ■ divergent (more than one)
		Confidence	
		Self-knowledge	
		Resiliency	Organization
Physical Development	Social Development		Sequencing
Language/conversation/communication	Healthy body	Relationships	Decision-making
Prevention of obesity	Cooperation	Courage	Creativity
Dexterity	Confidence	Coping abilities	Adjustment to school
Hand/eye coordination	Compromise/negotiation	Self-compassion	Understanding of how world works
Muscle strength	Flexibility	Empathy	Metamemory (memory abilities and strategies)
Core strength	Self-regulation	Decreased risk of depression	Language
Balance	Self-awareness	Elimination of frustrations	Imitation
Brain development	Leadership	Sense of wonder	Basic thought process
Physical release (de-stress)	Group skills	Connection to nature	Symbolic play
		Ability to defuse emotionally charged events (cathartic)	

Play Deprivation

Children who are deprived of or have limited access to play, often experience a negative impact to their development, overall health and well-being. Yet in our society today, we continue to experience a trend towards fewer playtimes both at schools and at home. Children who have disabilities are particularly vulnerable.

Play deprivation not only denies children the benefits of play, it has been suggested that it fosters depression, aggressive behavior, and social isolation while lowering quality of life and a child's ability to read social cues.

Children with special needs are particularly vulnerable and therefore at higher risk of play deprivation.

Primary Symptoms of Play Deprivation	Secondary Symptoms of Play Deprivation
<i>“Depending on the types of play opportunity that are lacking, children could be affected in the following ways:</i>	The secondary symptoms are in many ways just as insidious to the healthy development of the child.
<i>Poorer ability in motor tasks</i>	Childhood obesity
<i>Lower levels of physical activity</i>	Nature deficit
<i>Reduced ability to deal with stressful or traumatic situations and events</i>	Screen addictions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ TV ■ computer ■ video games
<i>Impaired ability to assess and manage risk</i>	
<i>Poorer social skills, leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as dealing with conflict and cultural differences⁽¹⁰⁾”</i>	Social isolation
	Bullying risk
	Difficulty relating to peers
	Inability to utilize mainstream toys

“Kids who play less are weaker and heavier and less fit and more injury prone. So we protect them more, and weaken them more, and so on.”⁽¹¹⁾

In researching the possible outcomes from lack of play, academics used animals, due to the fact that depriving a child of play would have moral and ethical implications. Jaak Panksepp, emeritus professor at Bowling Green University in Ohio has identified an effect on rats’ brains, namely lack of maturation of the frontal lobe. This area of the brain is responsible for problem solving, attention, reasoning, planning and basic thought processing. One method that has been utilized in the diagnosing of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is by the lack of development in the frontal lobe.
(12)

Children with Disabilities

Can play help a child cope? Can play teach a child to navigate the difficulties he faces? Does play have a natural healing capacity? Finally, does play allow a child to experience power over her world, providing a platform to reform or remake it?

If the answer to any or all of these questions is “yes” then play occupies a place in a child with disabilities’ life more relevant and necessary than its imperative role in the development of a child who is developing typically.

“Play activities then are a way of sharpening swords or of developing war plans for life’s difficulties.”⁽¹³⁾

Children who have disabilities are often at a greater risk for play deprivation due to barriers to the environment. The barriers include actual physical barriers, as well as philosophies and attitudes that inhibit inclusion. However, the benefits of play are too important to deny any child the opportunity to experience them.⁽¹⁴⁾

The play experience is rich in its rewards, but accessing these rewards for children who have disabilities can be a challenge. Cognitive, physical, communicative or sensory limitations may block the engagement in play. Typical toys and games may offer challenges that could remove the fun and spontaneity by increasing the child’s frustration and lowering self confidence. Struggling to meet the traditional standards of play could minimize the pleasure and enjoyment.

The very concept of play needs to be managed in order to evaluate the implicit goals and engage the child not just in the efforts but in the energy of free, spontaneous, delightful enjoyment within the act of play.

Managing this effort for parents and professionals who live or care for with children who have disabilities can be daunting. All the research tells us that in the play experience, the child should lead. According to Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, *“Some play must remain entirely child driven, with parents either not present or as passive observers, because play builds some of the individual assets children need to develop and remain resilient.”⁽³⁾* The question becomes, how do you manage that with a child who has serious disabilities or who relates differently to the world around him?

“... play as we know it is primarily a fortification against the disabilities of life.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Every child who has a disability also has a unique set of abilities. The first step in utilizing play therapeutically is to assess the child accordingly and the next step is to develop specific activities tailored to his/her individual needs. This prescriptive approach to play includes specific techniques, toys and varying levels of professional and family involvement.

Barriers for children who have disabilities to engage in the play experience can span a wide range of conditions and these issues are often not completely independent. For example, children with visual impairments often experience delays in language and motor skills.

Examples of Barriers for Children with Disabilities in the Play Experience

- Limited *mobility* may necessitate accommodations and adjustments
- Limited *communication/language/verbal skills* may require accommodations or creative intervention
- *Involvement of others* in the play experience may need to be planned and implemented
- Limited *cognitive abilities* may require the modification of typical games and toys
- *Sensory issues* of the child may need to be accommodated including sight, hearing, sensory sensitivities as well as intimacy tolerances
- *Physical conditions* of the child may need to be addressed in order to make play accessible and enjoyable
- Toys, games and general play activities may need *modifications* in relation to the abilities of the child
- *Availability and cost of toys* and special accommodations may be prohibitive or difficult
- *Time to play* may be difficult given demands of family situations such as scheduling doctors, therapy and educational requirements

...” children play out their phobias, feelings, and emotions ... play has natural healing powers.”⁽¹⁶⁾

These barriers and so many more can present a formidable challenge for children who have disabilities. A model needs to be established to help the child with special needs navigate through these obstacles. **Parents and professionals need to build a bridge offering access to the play experience for children who have disabilities; and in so doing allow these children to seize the right to learn, grow, develop and succeed to their greatest possible potential.**

Intervention Model

Not surprisingly, just such a model was developed in Sweden, a country that ranks at the top of worldwide healthcare rankings.⁽¹⁶⁾ In the early 1960s, two parents of children who had disabilities sought ways to help their children during their formative years. Believing that intervention strategies must be a part of a child’s earliest experiences, they wanted to develop a model that included their children fully in society while fostering their development. The model they created was called Lekotek (pronounced lě’-kō-těk).

Today, Lekoteks are widespread throughout Scandinavian countries, providing services to all children with special needs. This model is now a mandatory part of the social welfare delivery system in Norway and Sweden. The Lekotek concept has also expanded globally to places like Brazil and South Africa.

“Lekotek transcended therapy and transformed both my child and my family.” Lekotek Parent

In the late 1970s two American special educators, Sally deVincentis and Sharon Draznin, were exposed to the Lekotek concept while attending a conference in Scotland. They were so impressed with the effectiveness of this model, that they traveled to Norway to receive training. They replicated the program and opened the doors of the first U.S. Lekotek in 1980.

This model was based on three principle components:

- **Play Sessions (both professional and parental guided)**
- **Prescriptive Toys (in professional session and toy lending for home)**
- **Family Involvement (in session and at home)**

Here is an overview of each of these elements as it relates to this model.

Play Sessions

“Let us open our homes to play and let us schedule activities around play rather than squeeze play around our activities. Let us also acknowledge that children need us to help them get going in their play, by providing stimulating environments and by entering in and injecting important knowledge from the wider world. By doing so, we will be sending the message that play is the answer to how we build happy, health, and intelligent children.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Professional Guided Play Sessions

Understanding how to work with individual differences of children who have disabilities has led to a fundamental shift in our understanding of engagement in the traditional play experience. This change utilizes a model that involves three essential elements – play sessions, prescriptive toys and family involvement. **The first element – play sessions -- necessitates working with a family play specialist.**

Having established the importance of play, parents of children who have disabilities may need to be guided in the successful ways they can connect their children to the play experience. A trained family play specialist who is experienced with children with special needs is the ideal candidate to lead the child into relating to this world of wonder and opportunity.

Family play specialists are experts in analyzing the needs and abilities of the child, creating a safe and welcoming play environment and gently involving both the child and the parents in the play.

“The... child may need special support and encouragement from adults in order to play to his or her maximum potential ...”⁽¹⁹⁾

The role of the family play specialist is complex and challenging. A delicate balance needs to be reached by guiding the child and then letting the child take the lead. Training allows the specialist to look for subtle clues from the child as to when the child is engaged, when he needs to move on and when the specialist needs to prod or encourage him to test his limits and expand his boundaries.

The beginning point of a session starts with the family play specialist zeroing in on the child’s current abilities and capabilities. The specialist then adds to the equation two seemingly contradictory elements at the same time – an awareness of the existing limitations and an intuitive sense of the potential for developmental advancement within the child.

Parent Guided Play Session

The family play specialist is then called on to model and mediate the parent’s role and involvement in the play experience, a unique feature that is typically not replicated by other play-based services. Parents need to participate during the professional-guided play session and later assume the guiding role in their own home play sessions. (See Parental Involvement.)

“They (parents and child) learn new (play) strategies for dealing with the world.”⁽²⁰⁾

Qualities of Family Play Specialist	
In relation to child:	In relation to parent:
Ability to establish warm, friendly, safe relationship	Ability to relate
Ability to allow freedom of expression	Ability to support
Ability to facilitate expression and understand behavior	Ability to model behavior
Ability to encourage problem solving	Ability to involve in session
Ability to create a safe and comfortable environment	Ability to educate
Ability to discern current capabilities	Ability to motivate
Ability to actively engage	Ability to monitor
Ability to continually hold attention/interest	Ability to understand entire family's situation or stressors
Ability to introduce new play elements	Ability to engage siblings
Ability to deal with frustrations	Ability to draw siblings into play
Ability to extend limitations	Ability to transition all support
Ability to recognize when milestones are met	
Ability to challenge without overwhelming or frustrating	

Prescriptive Toys

"Toys are best seen as the tools of play ..."⁽²¹⁾

If toys can be compared to tools, then the analogy can go further. In choosing a toy, one would want to have knowledge of the applications of that tool and clear understanding of the qualities it can best deliver over other options.

A trained family play specialist has the ability to discern both the obvious benefits of a toy and the hidden attributes it can offer to a child who has special needs and/or his/her family. These special needs may necessitate that the play specialist layer or scaffold the introduction of toys starting at a very basic level and slowly evolve and reveal more complex applications of the toy. Challenging tasks are broken down, reinforced and acknowledged as the child becomes more familiar with the skills demanded in the play process.

The second element in this model is “prescriptive toys.” Special attention is given to the menu of toys selected, giving the child a range from simple concept-based play objects to more multifaceted items as needed. Interest levels and attention span of the child are monitored and when tolerance wanes, movement to other play elements are then woven into the play experience.

Criteria Used in Selecting Prescriptive Toy Menu

- Current abilities of the child
- Targeted skill development
- Potential abilities of the child
- Cognitive skills development
- Communicative skills development
- Sensory skills development
- Physical skills development
- Interests of child
- Interests of siblings and parents (if present)
- Play space at family home
- Current educational program (IEP)
- Others in household (i.e. choking hazards for younger siblings)

Ideally the family play specialist can offer the parents a series of toys and play ideas to take with them as part of the toy lending library aspect of the Lekotek model. **This concept allows the parents to further implement and reinforce the goals and objectives of the professional play sessions at home.**

The toy lending concept further provides the parents with toys and games that are matched to their child's skills and interests. This service greatly simplifies the entire play process and provides parents with examples and ideas of the types of toys they may decide to purchase for their child in the future.

Benefits of Toy Lending

- Geared towards child's ever-changing developmental goals
- Selected with child's interests in mind
- Allows parent to implement play session easily
- Provides toys without need to purchase
- Provides interest for siblings participation
- Grows with child and progresses as child progresses
- Changes toys as needed to re-stimulate child's interest

The aspect of providing the parents with prescriptive toys cannot be overestimated. Just the effort of bringing interesting and exciting toys into the home spurs the child and the parent to utilize them. Ideally, parents return home confident from their participation in a professional play session and believe they have the tools and concepts readily at hand to implement play sessions at home. Parents also know that they can contact the family play specialist with any questions or for additional guidance.

"We fit the toy to the learning needs of the children just as a physician prescribes a specific drug for a patient," explains Sally deVincentis, one of the two founders of Lekotek. "You see, for a child, play is work. It is the way children learn, so we have to give them toys they find challenging, yet not so difficult that they become discouraged"⁽²³⁾

Parental Involvement

“Family members are the first and most important influences on the learning of children at all ages...Research suggests that the most creative children are those who have adult involvement in their play. The richest play can occur when an adult takes an active role and plays alongside the child, rather than just providing the toys or supervising the activity.”⁽²⁴⁾

The last element and the key to this model is parental involvement. This aspect is particularly critical due to the fact that children acquire most of their social behaviors through the process of observation and imitation. Like the family play specialist, this is a delicate role. The parent creates the space and structure for the play experience but should allow the child to assume the lead. Having witnessed the play session with the specialist, the parents can then strive to model this behavior at home.

“The uniqueness and efficacy of the Lekotek model relies heavily on the role the parent plays.”
Sarah Paweni, former Director, National Lekotek Center

Behaviors like getting down on the floor to meet the child at his level, knowing when to introduce a toy or play concept and sensing when to increase or lower the challenge level for the child need to be reinforced. Parents have to develop the ability to discern frustrations and shifts in the child’s mood, which might signify that the play experience has dissolved from play to non-play, and needs some intervention.

All of these parental abilities are engendered from witnessing and participating in professional sessions. The parents then have the opportunity to provide feedback to the family play specialist and vice versa on progress and share with specialists the toys and play activities that most benefited the child. Together parents and the specialist can then develop play strategies that can be implemented and amended during future sessions.

**Benefits of
Parent-Rich
Child Play Experiences**

		for Child:
		Provides confidence to tackle other tasks
		Remains appropriately challenged
		Feels valued/important
		Encourages expression of feelings
		Increases affection (potentially)
		Promotes opportunities to communicate
for Parents:		Builds enduring relationships/bonds within family
Plays a significant role in increasing the competency of their child		Stimulates verbal expression
Views world from child's perspective		Assists in inclusion into family
Forges relationships/bonds		Creates life-long memories
Instills confidence		Sees parents from another perspective
Increases understanding		Supports healthy attachments
Provides input on child's capabilities		Fosters sense of independence
Creates relaxing, de-stressing family fun		Engages sense of belonging
Fosters role as positive force through praise		Engenders sense of accomplishment
Observes developmental milestones being reached		Increases self-esteem through praise

“The effectiveness of play as an adjunct to therapy has been well established. The nondirective approach seems to be the more effective than directive approaches, and the results are more impressive if parents trained in therapeutic procedures work directly with their own children. The curative powers of play have been widely documented.”⁽²⁵⁾

Closing Thoughts

When a child enters the realm of play, he also enters the realm of potential and possibilities. Children who have disabilities can and do face obstacles engaging in play. Parents and professionals can help children connect to the benefits of play by instigating play sessions, utilizing appropriate toys and getting involved in the actions and experiences themselves.

“Lekotek synchronizes parent and child through the element of play, creating new possibilities for both.” Macy Welsh, Director, National Lekotek Center

When children experience new situations through the act of play they create new understandings and conceptualizations of the world around them. The vehicle of play provides a powerful link, especially for children who have special needs, to their family, their culture and society as a whole.

When the child’s special needs are thus met, they can depart from a world of struggles, tasks, therapies and treatments into the joyful experience of play and through that accomplish more than anyone ever dreamed possible.

The National Lekotek Center is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing children who have disabilities access to the benefits of play experiences. Lekotek’s Play Development Model consists of professional and home play sessions, the prescriptive use of toys and strong family involvement.

As an active supporter of the value of play, Lekotek promotes the importance of finding appropriate toys and disability-friendly playgrounds and advocates the elimination of such play deprivation issues as: childhood obesity, excessive screen time, nature deficit, lack of inclusion, social isolation, and bullying.

For more information go to www.lekotek.org and www.ableplay.org.

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