

## Encouraging Play Skills with Children/Young People with Complex Learning and Physical Disabilities



Children/young people with complex needs often need additional support to help them develop their play skills in order to help them participate in play activities in school. Below are some strategies to try and encourage these skills;

### **Motivation**

It's really important to use activities which motivate the child/young person, talk to parents/carers to get more information about the things the child/young person enjoys. Common motivators are - music, food, toys which light up, a favourite toy or TV programme, movement.

### **To Encourage Engagement in Play**

Children/young people who have difficulty using their hands can engage in play activities by looking at items of interest and showing enjoyment in them by smiling or giggling. You can also use touch, smell, taste and music to engage the child/young person in a story or play activity.

- Use different pieces of material and place it on the child/young person's skin so they can feel it.
- Blow bubbles over the child/young person so they feel them popping on their skin.
- Play them pieces of music which they can enjoy.
- Offer the child/young person different foods to try to illustrate a story or engage them in a group activity.

- Talk to the child/young person throughout each activity explaining what you are doing and asking if the child/young person is enjoying it.
- As you work more with the child/young person you will learn to recognise when they are enjoying something or not. Some signs of enjoyment may be; smiling, giggling, looking, relaxing. Signs of a child/young person not enjoying an activity may be; frowning, grimacing, crying, tensing or turning their head away. Talk to parents/carers and other members of staff who know the child/young person well to find out how the child/young person communicates how they are feeling.

### **To Encourage Looking**

- Use toys which the child/young person is motivated by or enjoys such as toys which make a noise, toys which light up or reflect (mirrors or mobiles).
- Hold the toy directly in the child/young person's eye line to begin with then move it to the side or up/down. Ask the child/young person where the toy has gone and ask them if they can find it. Give the child/young person lots of praise when they find it by looking at it.

### **To Encourage Reaching and Exploring**

- Use items of interest; you may need to begin with a large range of toys if you don't know the child/young person that well to begin with.

#### **Suggestions for toys:**

- Tins of dry rice, pasta and sand with small toys buried in them.
- Different materials - feathers, foil, bubble wrap, silk, soft blankets.
- Gloop - cornflour mixed with water - you can add glitter to make it more interesting.
- Play doh
- Water
- Paint
- Squashy toys
- Vibrating toys
- Cause and effect toys and switches
- Mirrors
- Musical toys

- Balls

### **Positions for Play**

It's important to make sure the child/young person is in a comfortable position when engaging in play. If the child/young person has special seating or a standing frame it may be beneficial for them to be in these pieces of equipment if they are concentrating on refining their play skills such as reaching and grasping. The equipment provides them with a stable base which means they will be able to concentrate on what they are doing.

However, play sessions are also a great opportunity for the child/young person to enjoy spending some time out of their equipment, particularly if they are exploring new play experiences. If they are involved in a sensory session or a group activity where they are experiencing a story through touch, smell, music or vision it might be a good time to position them on the floor, with support from an adult. Below are some positions for play, you should consult the child/young person's Physiotherapist if you are unsure about how to position the child/young person.

### **Side Lying**

- Place the child on their side so that their hands fall together. Stroke their hands and move them against each other.
- Each time you attend to the child move their hands into their line of vision for a short time to promote practice at looking at their own hands.
- Regularly massage the hands and arms.
- Place bright bands or bells onto their wrists to encourage her to look at them.
- Rattle and move a toy to stimulate and encourage the child to reach out for the toy.
- Lie next to the child with your face in their reach to encourage your child to explore your face with their hands.

### **Tummy Time (prone):**

- Using a toy or object of interest, move it up and down and from side to side so that the child needs to move their head in order to see the object.
- Place your face at eye level. Gradually move so that they can move their head to maintain eye contact with you.
- It is important that children learn to tolerate lying on their tummy as an important part of their development. Little and often during

the day is best so that they have the opportunity to practice lifting their head and pushing up through their arms, engaging them in play activities while they are in prone will make the experience fun for them.

- Place a rolled up towel underneath the chest or lie the child on a wedge to help to provide more support.

### **Lying on Back (supine)**

- When the child is on their back, talk to them with your face in the line of vision. As the child looks and watches you, move your face slowly from side to side keeping their attention as you do.
- Repeat the above using a toy of interest close to your face. Experiment with different toys especially ones that light up.
- Place the child on their back on a soft blanket or duvet (the softness will give more support). Dangle a shiny object on a string above the child's face. As they watch the object slowly move it from side to side.
- You can bring the child's hands together and to your face as you talk to them, blowing on their hands.
- Present a small bright object in front of the child's face, if she does not bat at it; gently push her arm towards it.

If after trying a variety of these activities and suggestions you feel that you need more specific input from the Occupational Therapy team please contact the child/young person's allocated OT. If they are not known to the service and you feel that specific advice would be beneficial please complete a referral to the team.