

Improvisational Play Interventions: Fostering Social-Emotional Development in Inclusive Classrooms



Barbara E. O'Neill

In September, 4-year-old John played by himself in the block corner each day. He made small stacks of blocks, banged the blocks together, and frequently knocked over other children's structures. He spoke using one- to three-word utterances.

Now, at the end of the school year, John plays by himself in the housekeeping area. He puts a baby doll on the table and covers her with a blanket. Next, he takes a plastic pizza out of the oven and places it on the table with dishes and cups. John asks me, "Want to be the mom?" I tell him I cannot play just now.

John approaches one child and then another. He travels from the art table to the block corner to the book corner,

asking children, "Want to be the mom?" By the time he asks the seventh child, I am concerned—will anyone say yes? Just then Hanna smiles enthusiastically, takes Michael's hand, says "Come on," and they follow John back to the housekeeping area. What happens next amazes me.

The three children play house for half an hour. Hanna is the mother, Michael is the sister, and John is the dog. During their cooperative play, John announces his role ("I'm the dog"), transforms objects ("Here are my dog biscuits"), builds on Hanna's and Michael's ideas, and uses what is for him elaborate language ("Hanna, you and I go to the grocery store, buy chocolate ice cream?").

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR, JOHN did not play interactively with his peers. He had delays across all domains and received 20 hours of special education services every week. I used theater improvisation as the basis for developing play interventions to promote his social competence and play skills. Each of these small-group improv interventions consisted of games, dramatic play, and ongoing dialogue about how our play group worked together.

By *improv* I mean an adaptation of the set of techniques performers use to create unscripted performances, such as one might see at an improv comedy theater. Improv relies on the idea that anything a participant says or does is an “offer.” The job of the improv ensemble is to work together to create a scene by accepting and building on one another’s offers. Ensemble members use improv games to help them learn to work together to create improvised scenes.

During the intervention sessions, John began to initiate interactive play and respond socially to other children’s invitations and social cues. As time went on I saw great leaps in both his capacity to play and in the language he used during play intervention sessions. He also initiated play using new language and play skills outside of the play intervention settings, often in surprising ways.

This article shares highlights from my journey with John. It suggests ways teachers can use improv as a tool to promote the social competence and inclusion of children who need support to develop their social and play skills. Using improv as an intervention technique gives teachers in inclusive settings a new approach for fostering children’s social-emotional development. Improvisational play interventions can support preschoolers like John, whose Individualized Education Plan (IEP) includes identified social-emotional needs and annual performance goals that are specific to initiating and sustaining play with peers. Teachers can use improvisational play interventions to creatively and playfully work on these goals.

Individual Education Plan

By law, every child receiving special education services must have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This document, which must be tailored to the unique needs of the child, includes a description of the child’s present level of performance, annual goals and objectives, a description of necessary accommodations, and specification about related services, such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech/language therapy.

The need for play intervention

In any given classroom there are almost always some children who struggle during playtime. There are children who consistently play alone, children who are rejected by peers when they initiate play, and children whom teachers

think of as disruptive during playtime. Sometimes the children who struggle also receive special education services and many have developmental delays. Research shows that simply placing children with special needs in an inclusive setting with a play-based curriculum does not afford them the same benefits their peers reap, because during dramatic play they do not interact socially at the same rate as their peers without special needs (Odom et al. 2006; Iarocci et al. 2008; Guralnick, Connor, & Johnson 2009). Therefore, it is important for teachers to support these children in expanding their repertoire of play skills and gaining the tools necessary for social integration and success (Conroy & Brown 2004; Sandall et al. 2005; Brown & Conroy 2011).

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During the last three decades, early childhood special education researchers have created and tested social skills and play interventions, including peer-mediated approaches. While targeted social and play skills and intervention designs vary, in peer-mediated approaches a trained adult teaches a child without special needs to serve as a peer mediator by initiating play with a focus child who has special needs and identified social development goals. The adult teaches the peer mediator to prompt and reinforce the focus child’s use of certain play skills (Brown et al. 2008; Harris, Pretti-Frontczak, & Brown 2009). Peer-mediated approaches emphasize the importance of teaching play skills in a social context and recognize that sometimes children respond better to a peer than to a teacher. Research has consistently found a positive impact on targeted children’s social and play skills from the use of peer-mediated intervention approaches (Robertson et al. 2003; Chung et al. 2007).

Despite the promise of peer-mediated interventions, several studies have found that interventions developed under research conditions are not being widely adopted (Strain & Joseph 2004; Odom et al. 2006; West et al. 2007; Guralnick 2010; Brown & Conroy 2011). Although teachers rated tested interventions as acceptable and feasible, they were not sufficiently used in classrooms (West et al. 2007).

I have used aspects of these peer-mediated techniques since I was a new preschool teacher in the 1990s. Experi-

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ences in my classroom confirmed both the benefits and the limitations of such approaches. Children's range of play skills and frequency of social interaction increased during my use of peer-mediated interventions; however, changes did not generalize to choice time and I found it difficult to sustain my ability to use the interventions. The intense teacher effort and time required to prompt and reinforce specific skills in individual children made it difficult for me to implement play intervention on a regular basis.

Given the limitations of existing interventions, researchers in the early childhood special education field continue to explore how best to ensure the social integration of children with special needs and how to make it easier for teachers to adopt evidence-based interventions. Brown and Conroy (2011) propose that future research should focus not only on what interventions are most effective but also on what types of interventions are acceptable to teachers and therefore most likely to be used in classrooms. Researchers also increasingly recognize the significance of the fit between interventions and teachers' views (Yang & Rusli 2012). Phillips and Halle (2004) understand the importance of using naturalistic strategies that build on children's interests and play in an unobtrusive manner.

My development of an improvisational approach to play intervention addresses skills targeted by traditional social and play skills interventions and incorporates the benefits that come with using peer-mediated interventions. For me as a teacher, the improvisational approach feels acceptable and feasible, because games and open-ended dramatic play build on children's interests and provide a natural and unobtrusive method for building on children's play.

Applying Improv Principles to Play

- **Anything anyone does or says is an offer.** Look at both play and nonplay behaviors as offers—building blocks to create play scenarios. Picking up pretend pizza, pouting, announcing a pretend play role, and banging blocks are all offers.
- **Accept and build on offers—“Yes, and.”** Copy what children do (eat pie, pout, bang blocks). Take *small* steps to build on offers. In improv, simple is good. Bang the blocks in a new pattern and see if children copy you. Ask them to give pie to a peer.
- **Use everything.** Noise, distractions, objects, knowledge of children's strengths and needs—these are all building materials. Experiment with incorporating these into play.
- **Be spontaneous.** Use improv as a tool to play for play's sake. You are creating a journey together, without knowing where you will end up.
- **Build the ensemble.** The job of the improviser is to make fellow players look good, not to steal the show. Work to support the offers of your fellow players, especially when they take a risk or do something unusual.

Improv as a play intervention technique

Several researchers have explored the relationship between improv and children's play. Sawyer (1997) applied improvisational concepts to his study of kindergarten children's play, finding that their play resembled the collaborative performances of theatrical improvisers. Likewise, improvisation has been used as a lens to view early childhood classroom activity (Lobman 2006) and as a tool for professional development (Lobman 2005). Lobman's (2006) case study revealed that teachers play improvisationally sometimes, but not consistently. Lobman (2005) also found that improv training helped teachers use skills associated with responsive teaching, including attending to children's interests, building on children's play, and giving directions that follow from the activity the children are doing. She found that after participating in improv training, teachers reported increased confidence in facilitating play. My own quest to reconsider play intervention focused on how I could use improv to be more creative in fostering children's play abilities. Children's play is a creative, dynamic process, so I aimed to develop creative, holistic, and playful interventions. I turned to improv as a tool to achieve this goal.

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I experimented with using improvisation as a play intervention technique over the course of several years. During the first year, I taught in a private special education preschool classroom. In the years that followed, I was a Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) working in Head Start programs, early childhood centers, and private nursery schools. As a SEIT, I worked one-on-one with preschoolers receiving special education services. I met with each child several times a week, sometimes in the classroom and sometimes outside, mostly in small groups that included children without special needs. Classroom teachers can adapt the techniques described in this article for use with children who have identified social-emotional development needs. (See “Improvisational Play Intervention—Tips for Teachers,” p. 68.)

“Yes, and”: The basics of improv

This collective storytelling game and basic improv exercise works with small groups of preschool children. Through playing “Yes, and” children learn how to accept and build on offers—the basis of all improv activity. (See “Applying Improv Principles to Play.”) To begin playing “Yes, and” the teacher asks “What should we call our story?” and accepts the first answer a child calls out (“The Dog,” “Our Trip to the Park,” or any other idea). Then, the teacher offers the first sentence (“Yesterday Sasha and her mother went to the



park”), and each child adds a bit to the story (“Yes, and Sasha went on the slide,” or “Yes, and Sasha fell and hurt her knee”). Each sentence after the first begins with the words “Yes, and” to remind the players to practice accepting and building on offers. Children can pass a ball or other small object around the circle so it is clear whose turn it is to talk.

I used the “Yes, and” game in an ongoing play group with John (who had developmental delays), Michael (who did not have special needs), and myself. The first time we played the game, John threw the ball a few feet outside of the circle of chairs where we were sitting, refused to take the ball from Michael, and made silly noises and gestures. “Okay, John does not seem to want to take his turn,” I said in a neutral tone. As Michael and I created the story, I continued to offer John his turn each time. I played enthusiastically and looked at both children as I spoke. I related to John as if he were participating fully in the activity.

The next day we tried again. Michael began a story about a dog and a boy. When it was his turn, John said, “Dog.” I asked, “Another dog?” and John nodded. To make it clear that I was accepting and building on both children’s offers, I repeated what had been said so far. I smiled and made eye contact with John. “Yes, and they all ate some ice cream,” I offered. When it was John’s turn again, he said, “Ba, ba, ba.” I knew that due to John’s language delays this activity was difficult for him. I said, “Okay, the dog said ‘Ba, ba, ba.’ Yes, and the boy said, ‘Da, da, da.’” I focused on building on the children’s offers and creating collectively, not on how sensible the story was.

When we played “Yes, and” three months later, everyone participated by adding a sentence or phrase related

to the developing story. The three of us had become much better at playing this game. I have had similar experiences with other groups. At first children are tentative, uncertain about what to say. But as we practice collective storytelling, the children often forget about getting it “right” and get caught up in the story. The focus becomes the group activity—the storytelling—rather than individual performance.

Once a group becomes proficient at following the structure of the game and each child is contributing verbally, teachers can challenge the children to improve their skills when accepting and building on offers. Children use this important skill to sustain socio-dramatic play. When children ignore offers, I ask, “Can you say something about the cake?” or “What happened to the cake?” to draw attention to the

overlooked offers. Sometimes this helps them respond to each other’s offers and work together and sometimes it has little effect at the time. In using this improv technique, I focus on the group activity and on continually encouraging the children to collaborate, rather than on promoting a specific behavior. It’s best for teachers to evaluate the success of interventions and the development of new skills and behaviors over time, not the particular behaviors used during any one session.

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Nonverbal improv games

After a week or two of playing “Yes, and” and other games with John and Michael, I decided to incorporate an improv game that would not require participants to speak, because using language put John at a significant disadvantage. Mirror, Mirror is one such non-language-based activity.

In a typical mirroring activity, players pair off and face one another. One person is the leader and the other is the follower. The teacher or other adult periodically asks the pairs to switch roles. The leader uses actions, and sometimes gibberish words, that the follower copies. In kindergarten and primary grade classrooms, teachers can lead this game by pairing all the children, but as a play intervention with preschoolers I find it works best with

a group of three. In a three-person version of Mirror, Mirror, the roles of leader and follower can be rotated or switched fluidly, and all three people copy one another. I tell play groups there are two rules to the game—copy one another and use only non-sense words or gibberish.

I quickly explained the game's rules to John and Michael and then prompted them to copy me, explaining that I would soon copy them. I first made a face, then jumped, then made a silly noise. I reminded the children to copy me. They copied me, but also looked at one another, not following directions and engaging in off-task behavior such as laughing, making silly faces, or picking up a nearby toy. I looked at these inevitable gestures as offers and copied them. Sometimes, when John or Michael did something by accident, I copied that. This game can involve marching, kicking, or making silly sounds such as “beep, beep, beep.” Teachers can take children's silly initiations as offers and building blocks for the game as long as no one is doing something unsafe. Mirror, Mirror creates opportunities for children to imitate, and to make and respond to social initiations, without relying on language.

Unexpected offers, unexpected developments

After six weeks of play intervention sessions, John asked me, “Keol come play?” He was initiating play with a peer and, even though we were not yet playing the improv game, I accepted this offer, telling him he could invite Keol when it was time for our play group. We played Mirror, Mirror, which proved to be quite challenging with a fourth person. The four of us played the fluid version John and Michael preferred, in which no clear leader is designated. We persisted for several minutes and then played “Yes, and” for 10 minutes. The 20-minute session had been chaotic, and our new four-person group had difficulty working together. Just as I was wondering whether it had been a good idea to bring a new child into the play group, something interesting happened.

I asked the three children what they planned to play with next. Michael said he would play in housekeeping. Keol said he would play with blocks and use them to make a road for trucks. John said he would play with Keol and the blocks and trucks. This was an interesting choice for John, who did not often choose Keol as a playmate. Their



classroom interactions were sometimes reduced to fighting over a toy. I was curious to see whether they would follow through with their plans.

A few minutes later I saw Keol and John sitting in the block area. John was handing Keol blocks from the shelf, one at a time. Keol placed them in a line. They played together for 20 minutes, smiling and talking. Twice I saw them reach for the same block. Each time I stood at the ready, expecting a conflict; however, they continued to cooperatively pass blocks to one another. I had never seen either child maintain play with a peer for this long without needing adult assistance.

In reflecting on this I wonder about the impact of our play group on John's development. Throughout the months I had watched him slowly begin to take an interest in following the improv games' directions, perhaps as they became more familiar to him and as he and Michael formed a friendship. During the improv games and dramatic play, Michael and I worked to follow John's lead and interests. Over time, John began to follow our leads and build on our initiations at least some of the time. I accepted as many of John's offers as I could during the improv games and pretend play. I believe this helped build collaboration and collective play. John seemed to be learning to lead and to follow, which leads to successful cooperative play episodes. The cooperative play between Keol and John in the block area is an example of John's emerging social and play skills.

Applying improv principles to dramatic play

In addition to playing improv games with children, teachers can use improv principles as the basis for a small group's choice time. During improv games, a teacher leads the activities; in choice time, children take the lead. Choice time is best scheduled immediately after the improv games. Props designed for pretend play—open-ended materials children can use in unconventional ways—work best for improv. The open-ended features allow the teacher to build on children's offers and make creative offers without worrying about a specific outcome, in the way a more goal-oriented material such as a puzzle would encourage. I urge teachers to enter the play and look for offers to copy to extend improvised play.

In dramatic play, John always played the role of a dog. While sometimes the barking was a nuisance and I was concerned about him taking only one role, when we used improv I always accepted this as his offer. I trusted he would be inspired to take on other roles over time. In addition to giving him ample time to be the dog in whatever way he wanted, I frequently made my own offers to encourage him to act this role in new ways. For example, I offered him pretend dog biscuits and suggested other things a dog might do. I wanted to expand his repertoire of play behavior from his secure role as dog.

Resources

Lobman, C., & M. Lundquist. 2007. *Unscripted Learning: Using Improv Activities Across the K-8 Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Detailed descriptions of games follow a brief discussion about the developmental nature of improv and play. Targets a K-8 audience, but many games can be played with preschoolers or adapted.

Bedore, B. 2004. *101 Improv Games for Children and Adults*. Alameda, CA: Hunter House.

Offers a brief introduction to the history of improv and games for all ages.

Improvcyclopedia.org

Website offers games and information about improv.

I suggested ways for John to interact with his peers and I incorporated play skills that are targeted in traditional approaches to play intervention, such as pretending one object is another, announcing his role, and offering a toy to a peer. Sometimes John took these suggestions and sometimes he did not, but I felt comfortable when he did not take my offers. I was not invested in him exhibiting specific behavior or acquiring certain skills on a given day. Rather, I introduced some skills I hoped he might eventually acquire, trusting that his range of play behaviors would grow.

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I also took direction from Hanna, in her role as mother, and from others who joined the play. One day Hanna asked John if he would be the babysitter. I think John surprised us all when he said yes. In applying improvisational principles to play, teachers need to accept and build on the children's choices, while offering encouragement based on children's strengths and needs. I never required John to be anything other than the dog he always chose to be. The other children and I accepted that as his chosen role, though occasionally one of us asked him to perform as the brother, father, or store clerk. I believe that accepting children's play choices and offering ways for them to expand their repertoire is key to the success of improvisational play interventions. No one is assigned a certain role or behavior, just as an improv performer has no script. Instead, as we learn to work together creatively in a positive and accepting environment, players can take a risk and try a new role in response to another player's offer. This is what happened when John agreed to be the babysitter.

Play group talk: Are we playing together?

In improv it is important for all players to take responsibility for the developing performance and recognize that they are active creators of the play. This is an essential component of play intervention, which I addressed through ongoing discussions with the children. On the first day of the three-person play group, I said to John and Michael, "The play group's job is to get better at playing *together*." The

words came from me through a small, bright green dragon finger puppet. I always used the puppet when speaking to the children about the play group. Through 10 years of experience as a preschool teacher I learned that children often listen more attentively when I speak through a puppet. I told the children that we needed to create, in improv terms, "an ensemble"—our play group. Each day I asked the children how the group was playing together to help the children reflect on the collaborative process.

During the last week of school, I asked the children, "What are we learning in the play group?" John quickly replied, "Play blocks, play food, play big trucks." John had

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indeed developed his capacity to play blocks with Keol, to play with food in the house area with Hanna, and to play with big trucks with Michael. Michael added, "Yeah! And we play *together*." He drew out the word *together*, mimicking the way I often emphasized it. "Yes," I said, "Remember when playing *together* was really hard for us?" Michael nodded. "I was just thinking that. Now we play *together*," he said with a smile. John smiled too and said, "Play together! Can we play with trains?" Michael and I immediately took John up on his offer by setting out the trains. "And let's pretend there are dogs on the train and they are getting all dressed up!" added Michael. And we did.

Improvisational Play Intervention— Tips for Teachers

- Set aside time each day to play with children during choice time or center time.
- Play with consistent small groups that include children with an array of identified play strengths and needs. Include only one child who struggles during playtime.
- Keep the play group consistent for several weeks.
- Develop key phrases and use child-friendly language that conveys that the play group is a time to get better at playing together.
- Lead selected improv games such as "Yes, and"; Mirror, Mirror; and those found in improv guides (see "Resources").
- Ask questions about how well the group is working together in order to help the children experience themselves as creators of the group's activity and process.
- Immediately after the games (or on a different day), play with the children using improvisational principles during choice time, as suggested in "Applying Improv Principles to Play" (p. 67).
- Look for unexpected offers and consider playful ways to build on them.
- Use a long-range lens. Improv and play can both be chaotic. Don't judge the success of the intervention based on how any one activity or day goes.

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