



Research Brief

A summary of a published research article

Object Play in Infants with Autism: Methodological Issues in Retrospective Video Analysis

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A child's day consists mainly of play, which is crucial to the development of many skills. Through play children learn to explore their world and experience close interaction with their caregiver. Assessment of a child's play skills may assist in the identification of developmental disorders such as autism. Currently there is no single factor that can identify a child with autism. Instead, research has shown that there is a combination of impairments noted in social interactions, communication, and repetitive patterns of behavior. Autism is typically diagnosed between the ages of two and four years of age, yet many parents report symptoms around 18 months and have concerns about their child's development as early as in the first year of life.

Typically developing children pass through a hierarchy of play skills, moving from simple manipulation of objects to more difficult tasks like pretend play as

they develop. Previous research has indicated that children with autism demonstrate marked differences in their play when compared to their typically developing peers or peers with other disabilities. For instance, preschool aged children with autism appear to be less creative in their play, and they often play more repetitively with objects (e.g. the child always brushes and dresses the doll, but never expands on the play to include bathing the doll or taking the doll to the store after it is dressed).

The participants in this study were divided into three groups: 1) children with autism, 2) children with developmental delays and 3) typically developing children. All families were asked to submit home movies of their child when they were 9-12 months of age (before a diagnosis of any kind had been identified).

This research brief is based on an article, Object play in infants with autism: Methodological issues in retrospective video analysis, by Baranek, G. T., Barnett, C. R., Adams, E. M., Wolcott, N. A., Watson, L. R. and Crais, E. R. (2005), published in the journal *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 59(1), 20-30.

The videos were reviewed by researchers in the hope of finding differences in the early play behaviors of the children diagnosed with autism compared to the other children.

To read more about Dr. Baranek's current research projects visit the Sensory Experience Project website www.med.unc.edu/sep



A goal of this study was to learn more about the first developmental level of play, called object play, and to determine if this could be an identifying factor in early autism. A child is engaged in object play when they are using inanimate objects in their environment to explore and learn more about their surroundings. For example, when a child finds a block and begins to hold it, look at it, and mouth it, they are engaged in object play.

Results indicated that all three groups of children were engaged in object play approximately 25% of the time and the children with autism were not distinguishable from the other groups of children at the early age of 9-12 months.



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