

Clinical populations with significant social skills deficits are growing, highlighting the need for evidence based treatments and effective interventions (Polanczyk & Rohde, 2007; Rao, Beidel, & Murray, 2008). Social skills training programs are a standard in multicomponent interventions for populations with deficits in this area (Spence, 2003). One promising treatment model for social skills training programs includes using naturalistic environments and incorporates group cooperative play using developmentally appropriate games (Hirsch, 2016; Reddy, 2010). Play has been described as, "...the child's workshop, a place where rules, behaviors, and consequences are explored, changed, and learned" (Bay-Hinitz, Peterson, & Quilitch, 1994, p. 435). Thus, it follows that the use of play would be an appropriate avenue for youth to learn social skills, and games are a central component of play (Bay-Hinitz et al., 1994).

The benefits of using cooperative group play and developmentally appropriate games to promote healthy social emotional development and prosocial behaviors have been documented for decades (Ames, 1981; Bay-Hinitz et al., 1994; Garaigordobil, Maganto, & Etxeberria, 1996; Orlick, 1981). However, the majority of the research is outdated and has been conducted on student populations in the school setting. There is a lack of recent research studying this treatment model for social skills training programs conducted outside of the school setting (Cook, Gresham, Kern, & Barreras, 2008; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Magg, 2006).

In response to the limited research on such programs outside of the school setting, Bridget Hirsch, Psy.D., psychology resident from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine in Pennsylvania, along with the Director, Ken Barringer, M.A, LMHC, and clinical staff at the Academy of Physical and Social Development in Newton, Massachusetts decided to explore the benefits of their program. Pre-intervention and post-intervention data were collected starting in September 2013 and again in December 2013. Results of the study indicated that participants had improved social skills at post-intervention and highlighted several salient characteristics that contribute to successful social skills training programs (Hirsch, 2016):

- The majority of the sessions in the study occurred in a large gym to provide the context of where children play. Research has found that teaching children in the context in which they work and play has been shown to promote generalization of skills across settings (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Reddy et al., 2001).
- The program primarily utilized physically active play, which researchers have found to be an important factor in child development that serves as an instrument for communication and socialization (Bay-Hinitz et al., 1994; Garaigordobil, et al., 1996; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1998).
- An additional component of the program was the use of cooperative games, which has also been found to improve the socialization and prosocial behaviors of children (Ames, 1981; Aronson & Patnoe, 2011; Bay-Hinitz et al., 1994; Garaigordobil et al.,1996; Orlick, 1981).
- Finally, the programs frequency and duration of sessions were consistent with other studies that have evidenced positive behavior changes (Miller, Vernon, Wu, & Russo, 2014).

The social emotional challenges faced by children with social skills deficits highlights the importance of developing effective interventions that increase prosocial behavior and peer acceptance, in turn improving self-esteem (Hirsch, 2016). The treatment model at the Academy of Physical and Social Development appears to be a promising intervention for youth with social skills deficits.

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