Early Intervention, Space and Place

An Exploration of Early Intervention for young children with ASD in Ireland
Nov 21st, 2014 Early Intervention Conference

Dr Miriam Twomey

Trinity College Dublin
that space that encircles one’s body… where we move towards another, engage...connect

place may represent our authentic human attachment and belonging, it may also be the physical environment
Space and Place

Key Messages

Early experiences are built into our bodies (Center on the Developing Child – Harvard University)

The discovery of the epigenome provides an explanation, for why and how early positive and negative experiences can have lifelong impacts. Children will react to positive as well as negative interactions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010)

Notably when children are very young the most important space surrounding a child are relationships

We need to demystify ‘Early Intervention’ in terms of space and place: all relationships (space)and early environments (place), that children are growing up in are early interventions. We can enhance these interventions by supporting children and their parents.
Space and Place

Existing gaps:

During the last decade, intervention research in ASD has gradually recognised the need to identify child characteristics that predict intervention outcomes. A greater understanding in identifying children’s differing responses may highlight further need to match children to successful interventions, guide our attempts to individualise programmes and refine intervention approaches to meet the needs of all children (Siller et al., 2014).

Style, synchrony, and sustained engagement, the examination of parental skill in sustaining and developing play skills themselves has not been targeted (Freeman & Kasari, 2013).
Space and Place

Play has long been established as a platform for social connection and engagement

Play intervention is a particular need for both child and parent:
  - Joint attention
  - Imitation and object play
  - Establishing engagement (Kasari et al., 2013)

Areas of difficulty for parents [maintaining attention, joint engagement (implications for language development) and reciprocal, symbolic turn taking, and play (Kasari et al., 2010a).]
Walton and Ingersoll (2014) showed that parents of children with Autism who were failing to play with their child became more didactic and command oriented; resulting in poorer engagement and increased isolation.

Freeman and Kasari (2013) found that parents of children with autism initiated more play schemes and suggested and commanded play acts more than parents of typical children. They also responded to their child’s play acts more often with a higher level play act - challenges.

Adult responsiveness is related to language development both in young typically developing children and in children with Autism spectrum disorders, such that parents who use more responsive language with their children have children who develop better language skills over time (Walton and Ingersoll, 2014).

Children with Autism show improved social behaviour following imitation (Escalona, Field Nadel & Lundy, 2002)
Parents of children with Autism may have more difficulty achieving productive, enjoyable, and interactive play experiences because of the child’s limitations in person/object engagement. Object dominated and difficulty with synchronous, interactive without intervention (Kasari et al, 2010a).

Need to move beyond functional play. According to Poustka et al (2014) we need to explore the effects of novel interventions.

While children may benefit in terms of functional play development, creative outlets such as movement, dance, drawing and music would enable children to express their inner emotions, leading to increased self-esteem and pride (Sheratt & Peter, 2012).
Space and Place – Methodology

Sample:
Small-scale qualitative case studies
Five children with ASD aged between 2.5 and 6 years in Early Intervention and school settings
Parents, Teaching personnel, Resource teachers, Early Interventionists, School principals, SNAs
Multi-disciplinary Early Intervention and School based Teams
Focus groups including peer mentor groups (Buddies) in mainstream schools following transition (phase 2 and 3)

Methods:
In-depth, qualitative interviews (n=83) over 18 mths with parents, teachers and professionals, one parent focus group and development of creative methods including children in research
In-depth interviews with parents took place at each phase of the research, coinciding with school terms. School visits took place approx. twice per school term
Interview schedules were adapted to elicit information appropriate to each phase and were sensitive to parents’ experiences (for example recent diagnosis, transition to EI Unit/preschool/mainstream school)
Space and Place

Research with children
Puppets as co-researchers

Development of creative methods was needed to engage with children with ASD in inclusive settings
Findings: Thematic overview relative to parents and children

Inter-related themes relating to parents:
- Play
- Challenges for inclusion
- Transitions
- Transdisciplinary approach to keyworking

Inter-related themes relating to children:
- Children with ASD embody and represent their world visually.
- For non-verbal children, mirroring, movement, imitation and puppetry identified a different dialogue
- The need to support engagement
Sue described the effects of play skills on sibling relationships. “Charlie would definitely play beside his sister but not with her.” She described how Charlie later benefited from a session with a play therapist. She procured this privately:

“Yeah, we went to a play therapist as well, John came with me and we saw a play therapist for a long time you know, so I mean she was very good as well at giving me instructions and showing me how to play with him, right from messy play to help with sensory stuff, to imaginative play, which is coming...on his own, he’ll play with Buzz Lightyear now...flying around the room which he never would have done 12 months ago.” (P3, phase 2)

She described the effects on her other child: Her daughter rushed to her following a game and said: “he really knows it’s me Mammy”....

Sue described how as a parent she craved interaction with her son: “I suppose one of the biggest challenges is every day looking at your child and wanting more”... (P4, phase 2).
Inclusion

Amy’s described Aaron’s lack of progress in the local preschool "he doesn’t play with other children, Aaron isolates himself from other children; he will spend hours on end moving pencils from one table to another” (P1, phase 1)

A parent in the focus group explained that she could identify the differences through how her twins played: David is one of a twin; he and his sister Aoife are growing up very differently. (FG, Phase 2)

Another focus group parent described the difference Early Intervention had made – not only to her child with Autism:

“Jake and Luke, Luke wouldn’t play with Jake first when he came up here [Early Intervention Unit], now he’s interacting with Jake... interacting with his own brother. He still loves him.” Luke’s Mum added “They’re like two normal 4 and 5 year olds, little boys that can be killing each other one minute....” Luke’s Dad, “and loving each other the next.” (FG, Phase 2)
Space and Place

Transitions

During Aaron’s attendance at the local preschool Amy described the difficulties: “He’d been there a few months and they started to just tell us little things like “he won’t come and sit down at story time with all the other children”…” (P1, phase 1)

She described the home situation: “I mean, and at this point as well we had more major concerns at home with his behaviour. His tantrums seemed very extreme” (P1 phase 1).

Kate felt that while Callum was in Nurture [Early Intervention Unit], “he was included in the playground and always had other children, he was always included, he was included in drama and he was included in P.E”. (P2, phase 2)

In his new mainstream school setting Kate saw evidence of the benefits of an emphasis on play in the Early Intervention Unit, and the Buddy System and peer mentorship in the new school. She felt that “the girls kind of mother him and bring him along, whereas boys, you kind of have to, you know… do what they’re doing… but he is better to play now. You know, it’s not as big a chore now to bring kids in to play as it was.” (P2, phase 3).
Space and Place

Transdisciplinary Approaches and Keyworking

Helen recalled the difference a key worker made to their lives. “The best thing that ever happened to us in our lives was being assigned a key worker. The keyworker taught us how to play with our child”(P 8, FG, Phase 1)

John referred to the ideal scenario as when the keyworker “implemented everything within the sessions; Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Play, bringing recorded note taking every three weeks to the house”. (P 7 FG, phase 1)

An innovative perspective from a keyworker associated with one of the Early Intervention teams in this study was the following: “Definitely, definitely, we try to look at parent as an equal clinician if you will, or the expert on the child.” (K-EI Team 2, phase 3)
Space and Place

Points for Discussion:

Parents were challenged by play and found it difficult to engage with their child.

While parents assumed the role of ‘pathfinder’, in terms of their children’s needs for services and resources, parents needed guidance and training in play.

Early Years Educators required specific and on-going training in ASD-specific and creative methods.
Implications of the Findings:

Parents and early years educators would benefit from specific training in creative methods including play, imitation, movement and puppetry.

Using non-verbal interactions as a point of entry:

- The need to create teaching and learning experiences that enable children, parents, educators and peers to play and engage; and engage through play.

The need for a trans-disciplinary approach not specifically to support the child, but for parents and educators own learning and professional development.
Space and Place

Children may be hard to reach
Parents may find it hard to reach their own child
We need to look at space and we need to re-imagine it as the ‘we-space’
Early Intervention – Space and Place

Thank You!