

# Children's play – worlds colliding or therapeutic tool?

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## / BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Play is the engagement in activities for enjoyment rather than a serious or practical purpose. At the same time, play is considered fundamental to children's development of new skills and learning to make sense of themselves and their surroundings. Therefore, **physical therapist(PT)s are encouraged to provide therapeutic measures in a playful setting.**

In doing so, PTs combine children's joyful play with the serious process of achieving goals that is essential for physical therapy practice. **This raises the question of if and how PTs can use play as a means to achieve therapeutic goals, and still maintain play as a joyous and meaningful activity for the child.**

In this study, we investigated how PTs' use of play as a means to achieve therapeutic goals influenced children's play initiatives and engagement during therapy sessions.

## / METHODS

We collected observational data from **20 physical therapy sessions with infants born preterm, aged 3-14 months.**

In the analysis, we interpreted the data material by connecting to phenomenological and enactive perspectives regarding sense-making, intentionality and cooperation.

## / RESULTS

The PTs made extensive use of play as a means to promote the children's rehearsal of motor skills. Overall, the children engaged in the activities with increased attention and a striving to complete activity tasks and goals.

Crucial to this successful use of play was the PT's detection of the child's play intention and the fidelity to this intention throughout the play sequence. Contrary, when the PT's intention came into conflict with that of the child, disengagement arose and the child came to be a passive observer.

Furthermore, the PT had to find the right level of striving for the individual child, and make continuous adjustments to improve the child's motor performance and accomplishment of tasks. When the PT failed at this, the child was unable to achieve the activity goal and ceased to make new attempts at the given task.

## / CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The use of play as a therapeutic tool relies on a sharing of play intentions and a cooperative relationship in which the PT scaffolds the child's ability to achieve play tasks and goals.

PTs should attend to the ways by which they use play during therapy sessions. While children's play can be used to provide meaningful learning events, it can also become a detrimental and discouraging experience for the child.

Our future work on the use of play in pediatric physical therapy will include a larger range of therapeutic settings, children's age and diagnosis.

## / HOW TO USE PLAY AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

- Acknowledge and comply with the child's play intention.
- Find the child's right level of striving toward play goals.
- Facilitate improvements of the child's motor performance.
- Scaffold the child's accomplishment of play goals.



Illustration: Colourbox

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