



THE IPG LUNCH TIME CREW

The IPG LTC

SPED 794 Socialization and Imagination: Autism (Spring 2021)

PLAY FACILITATORS

01

Norma E. Torres

03

Justina Eskaf

02

Katrina Japson

04

**Allie
Kernan-Penaloza**

RATIONALE

- Lunch time during middle school and high school is a less structured; therefore, gives more of an opportunity to socialize and engage with others.
- “Lunch Bunch” programs allow children to explore their skills with unstructured social interaction.
- When given the opportunity to interact, students can target goals of developing strong interpersonal skills.
- Social goals can be generalized within the “Lunch Bunch” setting. Being that lunch time is more casual, the social goals can be addressed across this context and with multiple communication partners.
- Research:
 - “Lunch Bunch” programs allow students to enjoy and build additional friendships while strengthening the awareness in making better choices (Poster, 2012).
 - Socialization through any kind of interaction whether it’s play or conversation decreases the helplessness that often develops in autistic children because their social skills are not explored and exercised at their own pace and abilities (Mastrangelo, 2009).

RATIONALE

- Research (continued):
 - Child-centered approaches that are developmentally based have also been devised to support autistic children in peer play. Guided by a careful appraisal of a child's current abilities and initiations, emphasis is placed on following the child's lead to stimulate, expand and scaffold higher levels of spontaneous social interaction and play. In early studies, autistic children made significant gains in social play through repeated exposure to familiar peers and their activities with minimal adult facilitation (Yang et al., 2003).
 - Given the importance of play, along with the time that autistic children spend at school, there is an urgent need for effective evidence-based interventions that target and promote the engagement with play in school settings. Furthermore, it is important to understand the context that these interventions are applied and evaluate their effectiveness in order to meet the individual needs of autistic children and learn how to maximize the benefit for them by using play as an intervention strategy (Kossyvaki & Papoudi, 2016).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Objective:

To create inclusiveness with students on the autism spectrum in developing natural relationships while increasing their social skills by engaging in structured group.

Goal:

Students on the autism spectrum will display spontaneous conversations and play with all students with less adult prompting.

SETTING & CONTEXT

○ Hybrid - School and virtual settings

- Face to face x 2 a week
- Virtual setting x 1 week

Non- Academic activities

- During lunch
 - Will have a separate room connected to the cafeteria
- Group meeting
- 50 minutes



WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE?

- 8-10 middle school students
 - 4-5 novice players
 - 4-5 expert players
 - SLP and special education teacher
 - Weekly themes
 - Activities based on the themes
 - Lunches will be based on the themes
- 

HOW ARE THE NOVICE PLAYERS SELECTED?

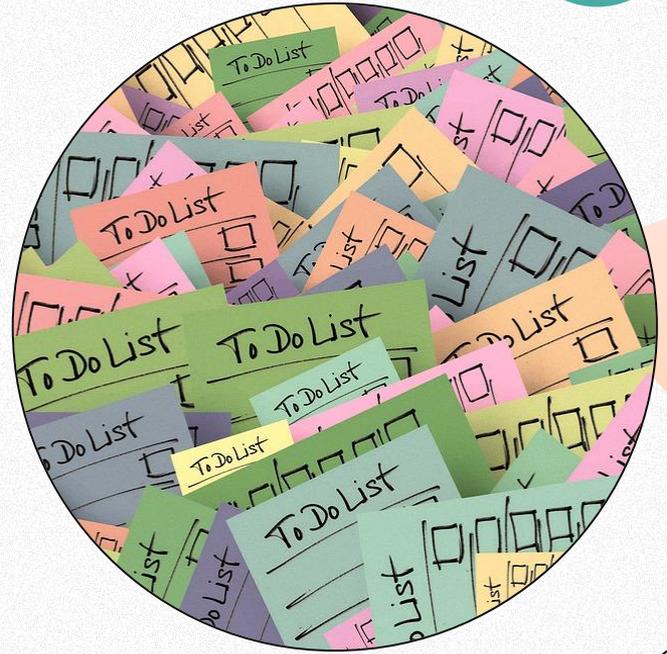
- Students will have the opportunity to participate in the lunch bunch.
- Students will be asked to answer 4 questions.
- IPG flaciators will then speak to students classroom teachers.
- 4-5 students will be selected based on questionnaires and teacher feedback.

Questionnaire:

Name:

- Have you ever been in contact with autistic students ? Yes or No
- Do you have any friends who identify as an autistic student? Yes or No
- Will you attend the IPG group 3x times a week for the school year? Yes or No
- Do you consider yourself a social person? Yes or No

DELIVERY & EVALUATION



DELIVERY METHODS

Pre-Meeting

- Set up recurring Zoom Meeting
- Pre-select Countries for foods
 - Italy
 - Germany
 - China
 - India
 - America
- Contact families ahead of play group gain approval & to coordinate lunches
- Set up area for play
 - Kitchen with table
 - Sensory areas
 - Imagination areas
- Set up cameras
- Select & identify assessments & paperwork to track data

Lunch Bunch

- Opening Ritual
 - Cheer, hand shake, song etc.
- Start discussion on foods and the roles the students could play
- Allow students to engage each other
- Observe, facilitate/interact when help is needed
- 2 minute warning, then Clean up
- Closing circle and Ending Ritual

EVALUATION TECHNIQUES

- SMART goals in all areas of play and pragmatic language created for novice players
 - Symbolic dimension
 - Social dimension
 - Social Communication
 - Play-Preference
 - Generalization
- Social Skills Questionnaire
- Orion's Pragmatic Language Skills Questionnaire
 - Teacher questionnaire
- Baker's Assessment
- Bellini Interview
- Integrated Play Groups Observation
- Assessment of Social & Communication Skills for Children with Autism
 - Caregiver questionnaire
- Clinical Observation

PROCESS

Facilitators

- Strategically instruct on demystification during opening and closing circle
- Instruct on rules of the IPG LTC, have the members go over the rules together, make them meaningful
- Recording each session in order to log data at a later time
- In charge of redirecting play and conversation between the novice and expert players when necessary
- Target is to follow the players lead and not interfere with their choices

Players

- Role is to engage in play and conversation of choice
- Direct the play between themselves
- Manage breakdowns with repairs & self-advocate when/if need assistance
- Always participate, follow the rules

PROGRESS

Facilitators

- Facilitators became more familiar and fluent with assessment and data taking
- Document data using proper charting and SOAPs
- Became easier to insert strategies that were influential over directive
- Experienced disappointment over failure of participation

Players

- Students slowly opened their social circles and included everyone
- Expert players started to learn their novice player counterparts tells of when they needed more support
- Novice players lead more independent conversations and play starters

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Evaluation Results

- Participation was inconsistent. Players' attendance was inconsistent which affected participation.
- Players either ate their lunch the entire session, conversed the entire session, or engaged in both eating and social interactions.
- Many responses were often "blurted out" throughout sessions.
- Both sets of players, novice and expert, spoke more with students they had already known or had classes with.
- Students enjoyed Lunch Bunch, but often asked for more recess time.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Evaluation Analysis

- Participation and attendance may have been limited and inconsistent due to the new implementation of a program into students' schedules.
 - A new activity in a student's routine can be challenging for them to transition into. Students may have forgotten about the program as it was presented while most students have already had set school schedules and routines.
- The concept and expectations of a "Lunch Bunch" may have been confusing for players. Lunch Bunch programs often have the same goals, but are executed differently. Expectations may have been unclear for every role.
- Because the nature of lunch time, the environment may be more casual. Therefore, dialogue is more candid. Conversation manners may appear as less of an expectation which may lead to students' "blurting out," rather than politely taking turns, not interrupting, and waiting to speak.
- It a new program, players may have felt more comfortable in speaking and conversing with other players that they had already known or been familiar with. This may have lead to more social interaction among those players.
- According to survey, students mentioned their enjoyment of Lunch Bunch, but often worried that it cut into their break time to eat or have "recess."

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Were the objectives met?

- Increased participation among novice players when talking about their lunch meals
 - Although all players often blurted out responses, novice players responded and commented more during conversation. Responses from novice players were also more relevant and appropriate to the topic at hand.
- Increased spontaneous conversations initiated by novice players
 - Novice players demonstrated more initiation of conversation topics throughout the Lunch Bunch program. This looked like asking questions about other students' food, whether their food tastes good, and which foods are from particular countries.
- Increased facilitation by players themselves
 - Expert players, especially, were observed to guide and maintain most conversations. They assisted with communication breakdowns by repeating the responses of novice players that weren't heard or that needed support. Some wait time was also provided for novice players during dialogue.

REFERENCES

Kossyvaki, L., & Papoudi, D. (2016). A Review of Play Interventions for Children with Autism at School. *Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 63(1), 45-63.

Mastrangelo, S. (2009). *International Journal of Play Therapy*. Play and the Child With Autism Spectrum Disorder: From Possibilities to Practice. ResearchGate. 18(1):13-30.

Poster, A. F. (2012). *University of Wisconsin-Whitewater*. The Lunch Bunch: An Intervention Program for At-Risk Students. University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Graduate School Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

Yang, T. R., Wolfberg, P. J., Wu, S. C., & Hwu P. Y. (2003). Supporting Children on the Autism Spectrum in Peer Play at Home and School. *Autism*, 7(4), 437-453.



REFLECTIONS



JUSTINA'S REFLECTION

In reflecting upon this final project, it is positive to see how an IPG can allow value, creativity, and growth. The IPG was a structured program but was based on 'play' that allowed students to learn through play. The challenge in creating the IPG was overall the logistics of how to create an effective IPG. However, the challenge allowed us to be creative and put all the final pieces together.

I am proud to see the success of a relatively new program and has a low-cost budget. While the limitations included having a low budget, a small window of scheduling, and insufficient resources could have interfered with becoming a thriving playgroup. The hardest step was promoting it to the students and having students see the value in attending the IPG. The attendance was inconsistent initially, but once the students became engaged and started to have fun.

The biggest challenge I felt was coordination and finding some incentives to use with the expert player. It was a challenge pairing novice and expert players; however, reaching out to students and explaining what IPG helped attract more students to participate in the IPG. Once we were able to get the students to sign up, we had to vet the students to make sure they were a good fit for the IPG and find a way to pair them with the novice player. We collectively worked on a mini-application the students were required to complete and helped choose the right expert players. However, I wish we began the search for expert players earlier and find a way to reach out to students. I plan to promote and advertise the IPG to find expert players at the beginning of the year. One of the best things that came from the IPG group was how the expert players talked positively about their experiences in the IPG group. The positivity influenced other students to want to join the IPG group.

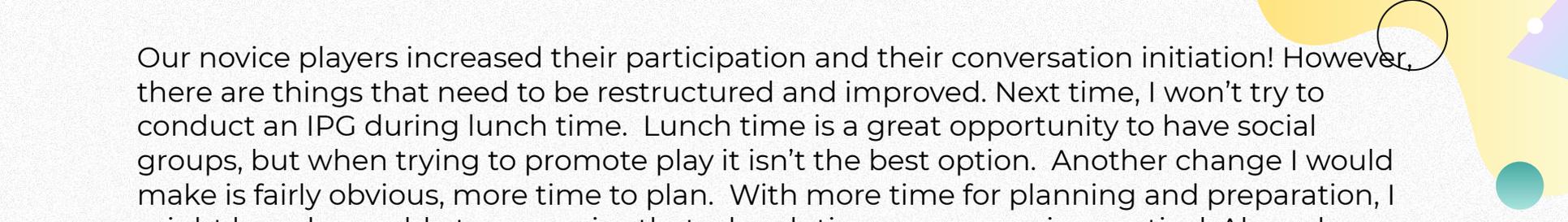
I learned not everything can be planned, and not all matches will be a perfect match. The importance is having a solid mission and organization, which I thought was the backbone to the success of the IPG group. Finding commonality between the novice and expert players allowed the socialization through their children's unique expressions. The IPG Lunch Time Crew Lunch Bunch gives all players the opportunities to express themselves and learn through play. I am excited to see the future of the IPG play groups as I am hopeful it will continue to be a success year after year! I was fortunate to work with a group who all showed flexibility and creativity to create a successful IPG.

ALLIE'S REFLECTION

The Lunch Time Crew (LTC) was thrown together quickly, but with a lot of thought and different experiences. As I look back at how our attempt of an integrated playgroup came out, I find that we had both successes and challenges, for the facilitators and the players. There are plenty of ways I could improve or changes I could make to further elevate the next LTC.

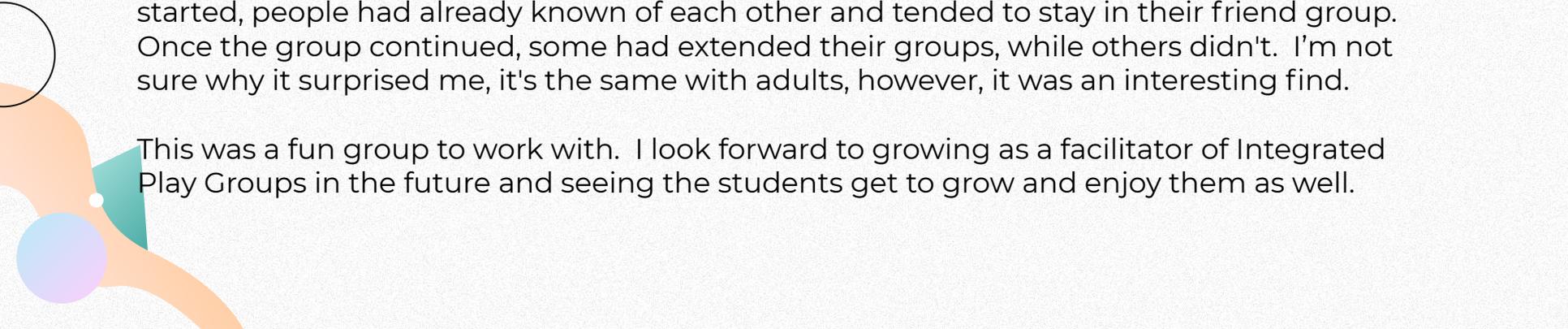
A major success of the LTC was that we had students actually show up! There was a group of students, mostly novice and a few expert players, that would attend LTC regularly. Others attended less consistently, but generally, there were enough students to conduct a full play group. Another success was the level of comfortability the students were able to achieve. It allowed them to engage with each other and create conversation easily. Personally, there was one major success as a facilitator. I was able to work on how to step back from directing play and learn more how to indirectly influence it.

There were challenges identified with our playgroup as well. First, it was put together so quickly that not every role or expectation was extremely clear to the students. Some of the students were not familiar with how play groups worked, and with it being conducted during lunch time, there was confusion about what was supposed to happen and when. I found it challenging as a facilitator to promote play amongst middle schoolers during lunch time. The concept was great and I think with more time to prepare, facilitation of the concept would have been much easier.



Our novice players increased their participation and their conversation initiation! However, there are things that need to be restructured and improved. Next time, I won't try to conduct an IPG during lunch time. Lunch time is a great opportunity to have social groups, but when trying to promote play it isn't the best option. Another change I would make is fairly obvious, more time to plan. With more time for planning and preparation, I might have been able to recognize that a lunch time group was impractical. Also, when selecting students for the group, (in a perfect world) I'd like to be able to select students that do not know each other. Finally, I'd like to be able to incorporate more neurodiversity acceptance or demystification. Before we started the LTC, it had been part of the plan, but there was so much confusion and not enough planning.

My takeaways from the LTC are fairly upfront. I learned that I need much more hands on practice with facilitation. There are opportunities that I miss or times where I extend too much instead of allowing the students to initiate themselves. It was eye opening to see how different students tend to accept each other into their "clicks." When the group first started, people had already known of each other and tended to stay in their friend group. Once the group continued, some had extended their groups, while others didn't. I'm not sure why it surprised me, it's the same with adults, however, it was an interesting find.



This was a fun group to work with. I look forward to growing as a facilitator of Integrated Play Groups in the future and seeing the students get to grow and enjoy them as well.

KATRINA'S REFLECTION

In reflecting upon this final project, there were many positives that came in the interactions and socializations among all the players. Though there were several challenges in the program itself, it was inspiring to witness and experience an increase of participation among novice players. When I reflect and contemplate the success of a program that quickly came together and could have used more planning, I look to the small wins that were achieved within this project. This includes participation and attendance. Although it was inconsistent and sometimes lacking in attendance, students showed up. In a time where students had virtual school schedules with many events and routines, they still showed up. I felt that that was an accomplishment in itself, especially because this was a newly implemented program. Even with small and varying attendance rates, there was always conversation throughout a session. Initially, some prompting, and support was required to help introduce conversation. However, after a couple of topics were introduced, students began transitioning into their own topics of conversation.

As I look back at the challenges of the program, I feel that with more time to prepare and plan, the experience for the players and us as facilitators could have improved. One of the challenges prior to implementing the program was the lack of time to plan. Due to the schedules of the facilitators at this particular time of the school year, planning for the program needed to be quick and efficient. All of us applied the knowledge from previous Integrated Play Group clinics and our experiences working with autistic children. Collectively, we felt it was important for us to encourage all our players to engage and explore their social communication and interaction skills in a setting that can be generalized across peers, family members, and others.



During the sessions of the program itself, I learned that conversation was not something that can be actually planned and prepared for because it can be so unpredictable. Although there were topics, themes, and activities designed for implementation, players appeared more interested in their freedom to converse during their lunch time about what they were eating, what video games they were playing, and other age-appropriate topics. The expert players were also observed to take on facilitation of the conversations by supporting conversation breakdowns of the novice players. This was inspiring as it may have boosted the confidence of the novice players and encouraged their expression during IPG Lunch Bunch. I make the connection to the lecture that highlighted model programs whose activities and agendas promote neurodiversity and socialization through their children's unique expressions. Hopefully, the IPG Lunch Time Crew Lunch Bunch provided a space for all our players to express themselves freely, even if just for 1 hour a week.

Due to the timing of this project and semester, I would have allocated more time to planning and preparing to help for better organization and flow during the session. Additionally, I would have set reminders for this program. Because it is during lunch time, we were essentially asking students to sacrifice their lunch time after being in their virtual classrooms all morning. Furthermore, we were implementing a new program that which all our players needed to adapt and adjust to. Transition into routines and new schedules may sometimes be challenging, especially for our novice, and even more so, under the current circumstances. This experience reminds me to consider environmental factors as well as internal elements when planning and developing programs like our IPG Lunch Bunch.



NORMA'S REFLECTION

In retrospect, I think the Lunch Bunch Program was a successful program because it created a space where students with autism and neurotypical students had the opportunity to interact in a non-structured setting where they chose to talk about common and uncommon interests. Another reason why it was successful was the accessibility of the play facilitators and preparedness, each facilitator brought in skills that complemented each other and that gave participants access to a more wholesome experience. One thing I would like to improve about my experience as a facilitator would be to allow participants more time to interact without the need to intervene; I realized that some participants, specifically novice players, sometimes need more time than others to initiate an exchange and it naturally takes time to approach someone new to interact with. This observation made me consider that conversation initiators are equally challenging for adults and it is no less the case for teenagers who are in a significant life stage where they are more self-conscious. Another success was attendance consistency. Novice and expert players' attendance was consistent; some players were absent certain days but they continued to participate in the program all along.

The idea that lunch time is less structured and it gives students a space to socialize and engage with others was a great consideration to support the Lunch Bunch Program, but a challenge was that the participants did not have enough time to simultaneously eat and interact; although some conversation initiators revolved around food. A consideration would be to extend the time length of the program by



○ transitioning to a classroom setting as a group—the learning environment would be in a subject area that would target their social and communication skills while still developing independent learning strategies in the core subject.

A way to improve the Lunch Bunch Program would be by allowing more time for planning; there was not enough time to distribute information to recruit expert players, however, now that it is running, and that children know about it, recruitment can be facilitated by word of mouth and also by posting flyers and announcements on the school bulletin board and equally by creating a Lunch Bunch Program recruitment page on the school's website.

Overall, it was a wonderful idea to create a platform during lunch time for autistic and neurotypical students to connect through spontaneous conversations as a way to develop natural relationships.

