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## Turning Everyday Activities into Play: Building Relationships and Fostering Connections for Adopted and Foster Children

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# Turning Everyday Activities into Play: Building Relationships and Fostering Connections for Adopted and Foster Children

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## BACKGROUND

Foster care provides a temporary living situation for children whose biological parent(s) are unable to care for the basic needs of a child (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2015). Children remain in foster care until they can safely return home or are permanently placed with an adoptive family or family member (AOTA, 2015). As of September 30, 2018, there were over 430,000 children in foster care and over 195,000 children waiting to be adopted (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Many foster and adopted children experience some form of childhood trauma as a result of the initial abuse or neglect from their birth parents (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019). Additionally, many believe that the act of separating a child from their biological parent is also traumatic. The prolonged separation of children and biological parent(s) puts a toll on critical bonds of attachment resulting in long-term effects on a child's mental and physical health (Gunnar, 2017). Childhood trauma can result in poor interpersonal relationships, poor coping strategies, difficulty handling emotions, sensations, and stress (Liu et al., 2018; AOTA, 2015).

## PROBLEM

Trainings and programs for foster parents vary by state. Many trainings fulfill the minimum requirement to certify a family to take foster children into their home (Hebert & Kulkin, 2017). Programming is inconsistent for those individuals who are not foster or adoptive parents. Existing programs for teachers and school personnel focus on mental health and overall well-being for children (Bazyk, 2014). Although there are some programs that incorporate the occupation of play, these programs are typically directed at therapists and parents rather than community members who work foster and adopted children in their profession. Program development is needed not only because of the inconsistent training available for community members but also because the number of children in foster care is continuously growing. Community members should be made aware of the effects of childhood trauma while also being trained to support the development of a child who has been exposed to childhood trauma.

## PURPOSE

This project aims to utilize an occupational therapy lens to develop a training program for community members who work with foster children, adopted children, and their families. This program will incorporate the occupation of play to support child development while providing strategies to help establish a sense of trust, security, and comfort to build stronger bonds and relationships.

### Capstone Project Objectives:

- I. Conduct a literature review to learn about gaps in current programming for children in foster care.
- II. To identify the developmental needs related to occupational participation of children in foster care due to the childhood trauma experienced at a young age.
- III. To identify common play activities that are used to aid in child development in occupational therapy.
- IV. To create play activities tailored specifically to aid in the development of a child in foster care.
- V. To create a program that educates and trains community members on the needs of children in foster care and how to structure play activities in a way that will support child development.
- VI. To measure the understanding of community members on this program directed at child development for foster children.
- VII. To measure the receptiveness of community members incorporating this training program into their childcare services.

## PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

As a part of the program development process, ten weeks were spent at an outpatient pediatric clinic in Rescue, California. Six of the ten weeks took place in the summer camp program with children ages 4-15. The camp participants included adopted children, foster children, and children of varying diagnoses. After working closely with occupational therapy students and therapists, play-based activities were developed then implemented to support child development, social interactions, and relationships between children. Time spent outside of summer camp was devoted to developing strategies to use play to support child development and strengthen the bond between adult and child. A 17-page resource was created for foster families, adoptive families, and community members. The resource provides readers with strategies for turning everyday activities into play to foster connections and build stronger bonds and relationships.

EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES	INFORMATION PROVIDED
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cooking</li> <li>2. Exercise</li> <li>3. Household Chores</li> <li>4. Play</li> <li>5. Self Care</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible sensory triggers</li> <li>• How to foster the connection</li> <li>• How to increase social interaction</li> <li>• Brief activity ideas</li> <li>• Skills being targeted</li> <li>• How to upgrade &amp; downgrade activities</li> </ul>

## PROGRAM OUTCOMES

PARTICIPANTS	QUESTION	RESPONSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OT, COTA, OTS</li> <li>• SLP, SLPA</li> <li>• School Psychologists</li> <li>• Program Specialists</li> <li>• Inclusion Specialists</li> <li>• Special Education Teachers</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Paraeducators</li> <li>• Counselors</li> <li>• Marriage Family Therapists</li> <li>• School Administrators</li> <li>• School Nurses</li> <li>• Daycare/Childcare Providers</li> <li>• BCBA's</li> </ul>	What was something you learned from this resource?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to effectively communicate with students</li> <li>• The importance of play for a child</li> <li>• Although activities may be fun, they can be overstimulating</li> </ul>
	What was the most valuable information presented?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to modify activities to fit a child's needs</li> <li>• How to empower families and caregivers to connect with their children</li> <li>• Important terms related to child development</li> </ul>
	How would you use this resource in your profession?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 80% said provide this as a home program or resource to families</li> <li>• 76% said apply the concepts of the program to my profession</li> <li>• 68% said use specific activities from the program</li> </ul>
	Who would you recommend this resource to?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 84% said other professionals who work with foster/adoptive families</li> <li>• 84% said all families that I work with in my profession</li> <li>• 64% of participants said foster or adoptive families</li> </ul>

## NEXT STEPS

In the community member survey, the final question allowed for feedback on how to improve the program or information that should be added to the resource.

**The following are some suggestions that I plan to incorporate into the program and deliverable.**

- How to include siblings in play.
- How to strengthen the sibling bond or relationships between foster siblings.
- A section on community integration.
- A section on nighttime routines.
- A resource full of direct links and videos that model the activities.
- A resource to provide families and community members step-by-step instructions (specific recipes, ways to set up an obstacle course to provide movement, how to grade activities)

### Envisioned Next Steps:

- Presenting and training on a larger scale at foster agencies.
- Presenting this to other therapists to provide them with another tool in their toolbox.
- Providing this as a one-on-one training with foster and adoptive families.

## REFERENCES

