

Teaching Language with AAC During People Play

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People Play fosters interaction by tossing the toys and putting the connection between the child and you (the engaging and supportive adult partner) at the center of the fun! People Play is particularly engaging for children who are still developing their shared attention and regulation skills. These games are great at building connection and communication skills because they offer many clear and motivating opportunities for children to make something fun happen.

People Play activities are also great for building language with AAC because they limit the demand for the child to juggle so many points of attention and action (i.e., their body, their ideas, you, an AAC device *and* a toy). With some simple strategies, you can model AAC and encourage AAC exploration during People Play activities that embrace each child's needs and interests.

People Play should be child-led, simply structured, and most importantly, fun! Consider these broad guidelines to integrate People Play into your AAC learning routine:

1. Find the Fun

Identify something that you and the child love to do together. Maybe it's tickles, swinging, jumping, or playing chase. The best People Play games are those that take the child's sensory and social preferences in mind; have a simple, predictable, structure (beginning, middle, end); and have a role for you and the child to play. It doesn't matter what you do together, if it's fun and interactive, and you can keep it going, it's fair game! Feeling stumped about where to start? Check out the bottom of this handout for some People Play game ideas to try.

2. Be a Broken Record

Repeat the words, sounds, and actions that go along with the game. It may be necessary to engage in the game many times, using simple and predictable actions, sounds, and words to ensure that the child understands the game and knows what will happen at each step. The tried and true "Ready, Set, Go!" routine is a great example of how repetition helps the child anticipate the steps in the game and understand what their role is. To tie in AAC, pick a magic word that makes something fun happen and say that word as you show it on the AAC system to model how the word fits into the game.

3. Tempt a Turn

Pause in the routine for the child to take a turn that makes something fun happen. The child can use many different signals to make something happen, including eye contact, a gesture, a body movement, a sound, a facial expression, or even a word on the AAC system. All communication counts, so whatever the child does to keep the game going, accept it and reward it with that fun response they're waiting for.

4. Wait with Wonder

Some kids might need hints to know they are supposed to take a turn. If simply waiting with an expectant look on your face doesn't work, try other cues to help the child know it's their turn to make

something happen. Some hints to try include repeating your words and actions and pausing again or showing the child what to do (by doing it yourself). Be silly and fun to encourage the child to problem-solve with you to make that fun thing happen.

5. Keep it Up!

The main event in People Play is getting the child to stick with you in a back-and-forth interaction that lasts a long time. This means that you take a turn by playing part of the game, then the child takes a turn, and so on. Keep the game fun and flowing for as long as the child is interested. You can add new actions, words, and sounds from time to time if the child seems to be getting bored of the same game. The more turns you both take, the more opportunities you have to model that magic word on the AAC system and to pause here and there to inspire the child to explore how AAC can make fun things happen.

People Play in Action

Here is an example of how you can use People Play and AAC strategies during a tickle game

Be a broken record – Sit, stand, or lay face-to-face with the child in a comfortable and familiar position for tickles. Move in slowly for tickles with your hands and fingers making a tickle gesture as you say a fun phrase with a playful tone of voice, or make a playful sound. As the child’s anticipation builds (it will surely show on their face!), deliver some tickles at a pressure and location you know the child enjoys. Make a sound or word as you tickle and then stop, making a sound or word to show that the tickles have finished. Repeat the same action with the same words/sounds again and again so that the child knows what to expect. You can model a magic word on the AAC system that names this game and the fun action it involves. Remember to say the word and show it on the AAC system when you model.

Tempt a turn – Decide what the child’s role might be in the tickle game (do this before you play the game). What turn could they take to keep the game going? For example, you might expect them to indicate that they want you to tickle them again by grabbing your hand or making the tickle sound you modeled. Or, if they are starting to say words with their AAC system, they might take their turn by using the magic word that you modeled with AAC. Remember, all communication counts, so don’t be afraid to respond to all the ways the child is taking their turn, even if they aren’t using the AAC system. If the child uses their own signal to take a turn, you can always model the magic word on the AAC system in step with their signal. This helps the child match the word with the meaning right within the fun activity you’re playing together.

Wait with wonder – Remember to pause the game when it’s time for the child to take a turn. You can stop your tickles and look at the child with an expectant look. Animate your face to give hints, such as by raising your eyebrow, turning your head to the side, or raising your shoulders in a quizzical gesture that asks “What next?”. If they don’t take their turn, offer a stronger hint. For example, put your hands and fingers in the “tickle ready” stance and wait again. If they still don’t take their turn, pick up from where you paused, tickling them again with your repetitive words, sounds, and actions. Showing the child what they can do to make the action happen again is a great way to help them understand the game and their role in it.

Keep it up– As soon as the child uses their signal to let you know they want to keep the game going, tickle them and repeat the same sounds and words from step two. Once they can play the game easily, add some variety. For example, you can use big or tiny tickles, tickle different areas of the child’s body, or use a different type of touch such as squeezes. This variety helps to keep the game interesting and opens the door for the child to find new aspects of this familiar game that they can make happen. After you have played the game using some of these new ways (and modeling the words that go along with them), you can provide the child choices of how they want to play. Just as with any People play game, follow the sequence with these new actions and offer the child some examples of ways to make their new choice to keep this fun game going!. For example, the child might point to a body part to tell you where to tickle or choose a different, magic word on the AAC system to tell you they want “big” tickles.

People Play Game Ideas

Bounding on a lap or therapy ball

Swinging in a blanket (two adults needed, one on each side of the blanket swing)

Chase

Lifting the child up in the air

Flying the child like an airplane and crashing them onto a bed or a couch

Peekaboo

Spinning the child around in your arms or in an office style chair

Blowing raspberries

This Little Piggy

Ring Around the Rosie