

3-2020

## A 3-Month interdisciplinary Process Drama Program to Build Social Skills in Pre-Schoolers with ASD: A Feasibility Study

Lorie G. Richards  
*University of Utah*

Heidi Woolley  
*University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences, HWoolley@USA.edu*

Xan S. Johnson  
*University of Utah*

Pamela Mathy  
*University of Utah*

Stacy Manwaring  
*University of Utah*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soar.usa.edu/ot>



Part of the [Communication Sciences and Disorders Commons](#), [Occupational Therapy Commons](#), and the [Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Richards, Lorie G.; Woolley, Heidi; Johnson, Xan S.; Mathy, Pamela; Manwaring, Stacy; Raby, M.; Caywood, Penelope; Wilde, W.; and Thornton, L., "A 3-Month interdisciplinary Process Drama Program to Build Social Skills in Pre-Schoolers with ASD: A Feasibility Study" (2020). *Occupational Therapy Collection*. 19.  
Retrieved from <https://soar.usa.edu/ot/19>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Research at SOAR @ USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occupational Therapy Collection by an authorized administrator of SOAR @ USA. For more information, please contact [soar@usa.edu](mailto:soar@usa.edu), [erobinson@usa.edu](mailto:erobinson@usa.edu).

---

**Authors**

Lorie G. Richards, Heidi Woolley, Xan S. Johnson, Pamela Mathy, Stacy Manwaring, M. Raby, Penelope Caywood, W. Wilde, and L. Thornton

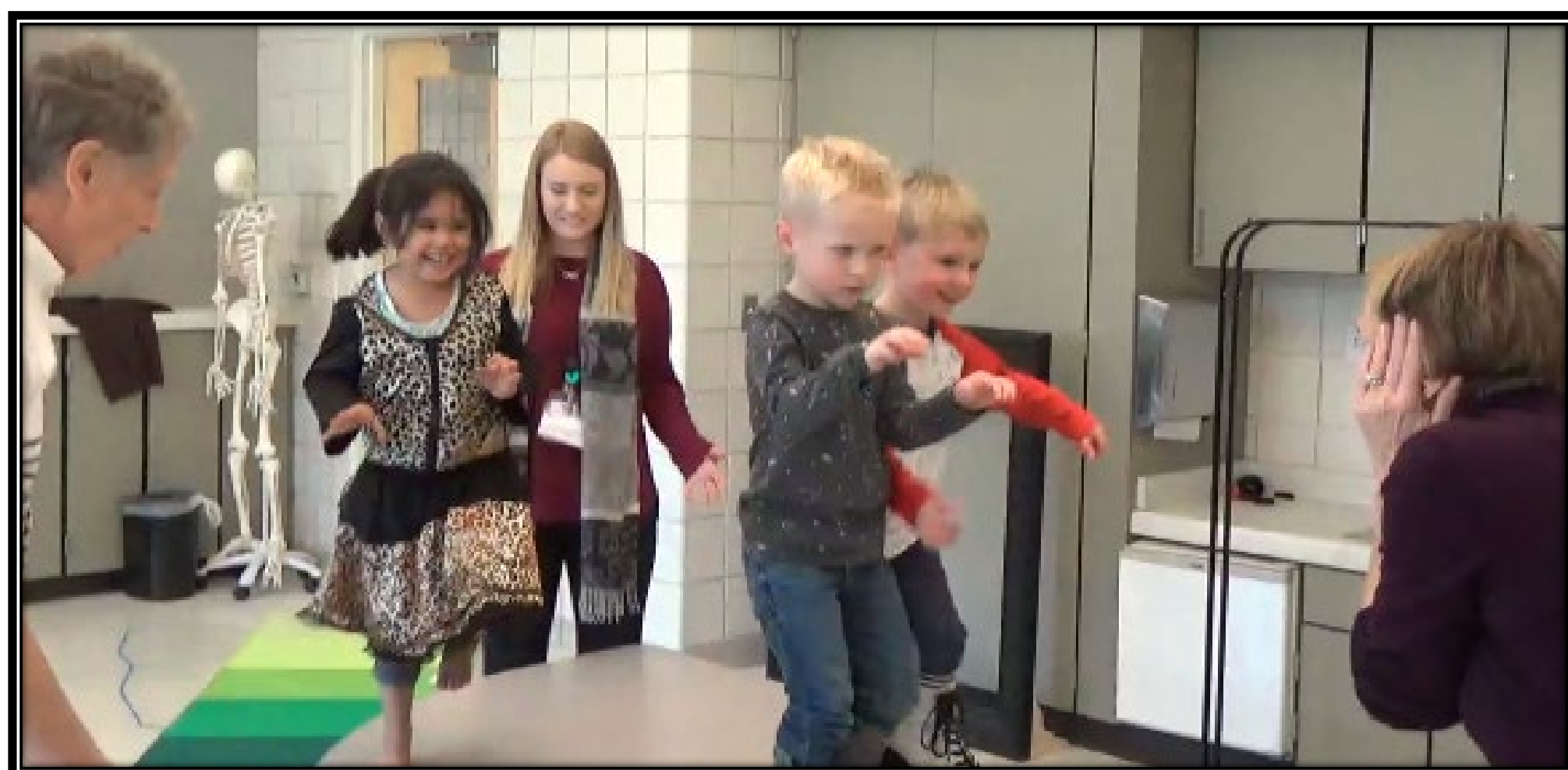
# A 3-Month Interdisciplinary Process Drama Program to Build Social Skills in Pre-Schoolers with ASD: A Feasibility Study

G. Richards, PhD, OTR/L,<sup>1</sup> X.S. Johnson, PhD,<sup>1</sup> H. Woolley, OTD, OTR/L,<sup>2</sup> P. Mathy, PhD, CCC-SLP,<sup>1</sup> S. Manwaring, PhD, CCC-SLP,<sup>1</sup> M. Raby, MS, CCC-SLP,<sup>1</sup> P. Caywood,<sup>1</sup> W. Wilde,<sup>1</sup> & L. Thornton<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Utah; <sup>2</sup>University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences

## Background

- Social skill deficits are ubiquitous in ASD, leading to significant disability and limitations in occupational participation<sup>1</sup>
- Process drama may be an effective intervention technique. This process creates specific experiences in an autotelic manner, providing embodied cognitive and emotional experiences without conscious commitment to abstract social skill improvement goals.<sup>2</sup>
- Process drama is a dynamic teaching methodology in which the teacher and the students work together to create an imaginary dramatic world and work within that world to explore a particular problem, situation, theme, or series of related themes, not for a separate audience, but for the benefit of the participants themselves.<sup>3</sup>
- Scenes can emphasize social and emotional cues and explicit identification of scene-related feelings for formation of social cognitive and emotional memories
- These memories can be recalled as the basis for later social functioning
- Theatre approaches have some evidence of fostering social skill development in older elementary school and adolescent children with ASD.<sup>4</sup>
- We present our feasibility study testing an interdisciplinary process drama program for preschool children with ASD



## Methods

### Participants:

- Age 4-5 years; dx of ASD or TD; receptive language at > 24 months. No other neurologic conditions other than ADHD, no seizures, no uncorrected vision or hearing deficits

### Setting:

- A large multi-purpose room in a school for children with ASD

### Procedure:

- Baseline & Post Intervention: The Mullen, Structured Play Assessment, and Theory of Mind (ToM) Battery. A parent completed the Vineland, the Social Skills Improvement System, and the ToM Inventory.
- 3 Month post intervention follow up consisted of parent interview.

### Intervention: Process Drama Program

- 12 weeks, 3days/week, 1 hr/session
- Each session led by 1-2 drama teachers; OT in 2 sessions/week; SLP in each session
- Sessions: 1) Warm up & hello, 2) teaching drama techniques 3) create & participate in drama scenes 4) Warm down review & goodbye
- Adaptations by occupational therapist & speech therapist made to overall session structure & teaching strategies
- Individualized interventions and adaptations to programming made by OT & SLP during session to increase participation and understanding

## Results

### Recruitment:

- Despite taking place in a school for children with ASD, only able to recruit 4 children with ASD and 2 who were TD

### Retention:

- 1 child with ASD and 1 TD withdrew – didn't go to the school and transportation too burdensome
- Attendance varied

### Engagement:

- All children engaged a lot more than previous pilot study – children at higher functioning level – more child-child interaction
- Children took on roles, but didn't always accurately imaging pretend environment (e.g., leaving "bus" through side of bus, rather than front door)
- Each child added to the stories, worked together to form physical scenes
- One melt down 1 time – child not getting role wanted

### Effect:

- Children enjoyed the programming; all expressed sadness that the program was ending
- Parent reported one child organizing drama events at home over holiday break
- No changes on assessments

## Discussion

- Program was feasible for children of this age!
- **Next steps:**
  - Tailor intervention by developmental level
  - Determine best assessments
  - Determine best location and schedule to reach more children
  - Create manualized for intervention fidelity



## References

- <sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC.
- <sup>2</sup> Johnson X. (2014). Understanding and mastering complexity. *Information Age Education Newsletter*, 129.
- <sup>3</sup> Carlin, Gary. "Teaching English through Drama." TESOL DRAMA Blog. TESOL/Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Web address: <https://tesoldrama.wordpress.com> (2012). Year accessed 2018.
- <sup>4</sup> Corbett, B.A., Key, A.P., Qualls, L., Fecteau, S., Newsom, C., Coke, C., & Yoder, P. Improvement in social competence using a randomized trial of a theatre intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 2016;46:658-672. doi: 10.1007/s10803-015-2600-9.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas, M., Davis, R., Karmiloff-Smith, A., Knowland, V.C., Charman, T., et al. The over-pruning hypothesis of autism. *Developmental Science*, 2016;19:284-305. doi: 10.1111/desc.12303.