



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PLAY TECHNIQUE PROGRAMME FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD**

#### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapters the researcher focused on an outline of the complete study, autism as a phenomenon, autism in middle childhood and the impact on the family and play techniques with autistic children. It is now necessary to focus on the specific play technique programme that will be followed when conducting the empirical part of the study with the 12 autistic children (respondents) in middle childhood.

The goal of the study is to enhance the social behaviour of autistic children through giving them an opportunity to express themselves through the various play techniques. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there will be six phases held with each child. These will be individual phases and will therefore only include the researcher and the specific child. The reason for this being that any other observer or even the use of a video camera would have been a distraction for the respondents', due to their diagnosis of autism, and would therefore have had an influence on their social behaviour and the rating achieved for the social behaviour being measured. The phases will be held once a week at The Key School for Specialized Education, for a period of half an hour per child, over a period of six weeks.

The following outline can be considered a guideline for the programme. The researcher is of the opinion that it is important to be relatively flexible when conducting the programme. The reason for this is that an autistic child is most likely to respond differently to all the techniques and the experience as a whole, and, as mentioned by Oaklander (1988: 56), it is important to stay with the child's



presentation, his 'foreground', and therefore the programme might need to be adapted and changed when working with the individual children.

The following section will thus focus on the six specific phases that will be held. Within the outline the focus will be on the goal for each phase, the objectives for the phase as well as the specific content of the phase. It is important to note that the specific programme is aimed for use by parents and/or professionals dealing with autistic children, therefore not necessarily trained in the field of play therapy. The researcher would therefore, as commented in chapter 7, conduct workshops in order to educate and assist these individuals in conducting this specific programme.

## **5.2. PHASE ONE (Introduction)**

### **5.2.1 Goal of the phase**

The goal of the phase will be to begin developing a relationship between the child and the researcher, in order to facilitate a positive working environment.

### **5.2.2 Objectives of the phase**

- a. By the end of the phase the child and researcher would have been introduced to one another and a relationship would have begun to be formed.
- b. By the end of the phase the child would have been exposed to the play room and the various play activities.
- c. By the end of the phase the researcher would have been able to assess the child's initial response to the environment and play activities.
- d. By the end of the phase the researcher would have had the opportunity to rate the child's social behaviour on the designed scale (pre-test).



### 5.2.3 Content of the phase

Time allocated	Content of the phase	Material required
5 minutes	<b>Introduction</b>  Within the first 5 minutes the researcher will not provide any direction whatsoever, simply allowing the child to explore the room and activities. In this time the therapist will communicate the fact that the child is there just to play, encouraging him/her to focus on the things around him/her. This will also allow time for the child to begin to get used to the researcher's voice.	
20 minutes	<b>Content</b>  As this will be the initial phase, the researcher is of the opinion that it is necessary to allow the child time to adapt to the environment. Therefore, there will not be a focus on completing any specific activities, but rather allowing the child the opportunity to explore the play environment and activities.  The researcher will assist the child, if necessary, to become aware of the activities and attempt to play with them in some form.  The researcher will also encourage some interaction, but not put the child under any pressure at this early stage.  The activities that will be available will be the relaxation activities, as can be seen in the material column.	Play activities puzzles; games; books; CD player and CDs
5 minutes	<b>Termination</b>  This phase will involve packing away the activities that have been used, indicating to the child that it is the end of the phase.  The researcher will also verbalize that there will be another phase in the following week.	



#### **5.2.4. Comments on the phase**

Van der Merwe (1996: 77) comments that relaxation play "is mostly directed towards the attainment of process goals, namely, to prepare the child for the helping process by attaining the correct level of tension so as to ensure that he finds the helping process worthwhile".

Robledo and Ham-Kucharski (2005: 27–42) consider the following to be some of the manifestations of autism, namely lack of eye contact; inability to read/recognize facial expressions; inappropriate play; increased aggression towards others or him/herself; and unusual behaviour such as echolalia, 'stimming' and perseveration.

This comment brings to one's attention that an autistic child may battle with relaxation. Therefore, the researcher will have to focus a great deal on relaxation play, all throughout the process, allowing the child extra time to relax.

As this will be the first phase with the individual child, the researcher feels that it is important that the child is not rushed or forced into anything. The main purpose of this phase should be to allow the child time to get use to the environment and the researcher.

The researcher will also use this phase to assess how the child responds to the environment, in order to make any necessary changes for the upcoming phases. These changes will be in line with each individual child, depending on his/her level of functioning as well as his/her individual responses to the experience.



### 5.3. PHASE TWO

#### 5.3.1 Goal of the phase

The goal of this phase is to expose the child to sensory experiences in order to increase his/her sensory awareness.

#### 5.3.2 Objectives of the phase

- a. By the end of the phase the relationship between the researcher and child would have developed.
- b. By the end of the phase the child would have been exposed to the play room and the various play activities.
- c. By the end of the phase the child would have been exposed to various sensory experiences, such as sand and water play, in order to increase sensory awareness.
- d. By the end of the phase the researcher will be able to make an assessment about the child's level of sensory awareness, within him/herself and within the environment.

#### 5.3.3 Content of the phase

Time allocated	Content of the phase	Material required
5 minutes	<b>Introduction</b> The researcher will allow the child time to settle into the phase, encouraging him/her to become aware of the activities for the day.	
10 minutes	<b>Content</b> <u>a. Sand tray and animals</u> The first activity will be the use of the sand tray and the animals. The researcher will encourage the child to play in the sand for as long as possible, encouraging touch, with both the	Sand tray Plastic animals



10 minutes	<p>sand texture and the texture of the animals.</p> <p><u>b. Water and plastic toys</u> The second activity will be with water and plastic toys, again encouraging the child to simply play and feel the sensation of the water and toys.</p>	<p>Water Plastic toys</p>
5 minutes	<p><u>c. Clay</u> The final activity will be using the clay, simply encouraging the child to touch and smell it, and mould it into anything, with the object not needing to be realistic.</p>	<p>Clay Shape cutters Roller</p>
5 minutes	<p><b>Termination</b></p> <p>This phase will involve packing away the activities that have been used, indicating to the child that it is the end of the phase.</p> <p>The therapist will also verbalize that there will be another phase in the following week.</p>	

#### 5.3.4. Comments for the phase

Oaklander (1988: 109) states that through the play techniques of sensory experiences a therapist is attempting to "give the child experiences that will bring her back to herself, experiences that will renew and strengthen her awareness of that basic senses that an infant discovers and flourishes in: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell".

Williams (1996: 8–9) considers autism to include certain 'bizarre' behaviour/s, 'bizarre' responses to sensory stimuli, and impairment in the use of imaginary play.

The researcher is of the opinion that an autistic child is likely to respond dramatically to sensory input, as commented by Williams in the above statement, and therefore it is likely to be effective. However, this will need to be guided with



care in order to avoid a sensory overload, which will cause further frustration for the child.

## 5.4. PHASE THREE

### 5.4.1 Goal of the phase

The goal of this phase is to encourage the child to express him/herself more adequately.

### 5.4.2 Objectives of the phase

- a. By the end of the phase the relationship between the researcher and child would have developed.
- b. By the end of the phase the child would have been exposed to the play room and the various play activities.
- c. By the end of the phase the child would have been given the opportunity to express him/herself through the various mediums available.

### 5.4.3 Content of the phase

Time allocated	Content of the phase	Material required
5 minutes	<b>Introduction</b> The researcher will allow the child time to settle into the phase, encouraging him/her to become aware of the activities for the day.	
10 minutes	<b>Content</b> <u>a. Drawing</u> With this activity the child will be encouraged to simply draw, with the researcher sticking a big piece of paper onto a plastic table and giving the child the various mediums with which to draw. The researcher will provide physical assistance if the child is battling to draw.	Paper Crayons Pencil crayons Oil pastels



10 minutes	<p><u>b. Play dough</u> Again the child will simply be encouraged to play with the play dough, using the various tools provided or even just his/her hands.</p> <p>The researcher will also encourage the child to make something, by assisting the child or simply indicating how to do it.</p> <p>The researcher will also encourage the child to bash and smash with the play dough, to encourage the release of any frustration.</p>	<p>Play dough Shape cutters Roller Plastic hammer Cutter</p>
5 minutes	<p><u>c. Puppets/Dolls</u> The researcher will encourage the child to pick up and attempt to use the puppets and dolls. The focus will not be realistic play, however, but rather simply getting the child to interact with the new activity.</p>	<p>Puppets Dolls</p>
5 minutes	<p><b>Termination</b> This phase will involve packing away the activities that have been used, indicating to the child that it is the end of the phase.</p> <p>The therapist will also verbalize that there will be another phase in the following week.</p>	

#### 5.4.4. Comment on the phase

In this phase, the mediums used included drawing, play dough and puppets/dolls.

With regard to drawing, Van der Merwe (1996: 138) comments that it "can be relaxing and can therefore create the correct atmosphere for further therapy".

From the researcher's point of view, drawing has the potential to be an appropriate technique to use with autistic children, as a means of communication, replacing verbal communication.





Focusing on play dough, Van der Merwe (1996: 139) states that making things "is a way of gaining information concerning the child's world and it offers the child the opportunity for examination and release of feelings". This technique includes the use of clay; play dough; water; sculpture and construction; wood and tools; and collages (Oaklander, 1988: 67–84).

The researcher is of the opinion that this technique could be beneficial with an autistic child, as it will allow him/her to express him/herself without verbal language. It can also be a good opportunity to release frustration, which in the researcher's opinion is a concern that many autistic children battle with.

It is important to note that within the six phases all the activities will be used twice. There are various reasons for this: firstly, the researcher wants to encourage the child to feel comfortable within the environment, and therefore not expose the child to too many new activities; secondly, the researcher wants to see the effectiveness of the various techniques and feels that using them only once will not give sufficient opportunity to do so; and, finally, the researcher is of the opinion that through using the activities twice, the necessary changes can be made for the second time, in order to increase the effectiveness of the technique.

## **5.5. PHASE FOUR**

### **5.5.1 Goal of the phase**

The goal of this phase is to encourage the child to express him/herself more adequately.

### **5.5.2 Objectives of the phase**

- a. By the end of the phase the relationship between the researcher and child would have developed.



- b. By the end of the phase the child would have been exposed to the play room and the various play activities.
- c. By the end of the phase the child would have been given the opportunity to express him/herself through the various mediums available.

**5.5.3 Content of the phase**

Time allocated	Content of the phase	Material required
5 minutes	<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>The researcher will allow the child time to settle into the phase, encouraging him/her to become aware of the activities for the day.</p>	
10 minutes	<p><b>Content</b></p> <p><u>a. Painting</u></p> <p>The child will be encouraged to paint a picture, although it does not have to be of something realistic, as the focus is on the experience, rather than the outcome. If possible, the child will be encouraged to use his/her fingers to paint; otherwise paint brushes will be available.</p>	<p>Paint Paint brushes Paper</p>
5 minutes	<p><u>b. Puppets/dolls</u></p> <p>The researcher will encourage the child to pick up and attempt to use the puppets and dolls. The focus will not be realistic play, but rather simply getting the child to interact with the new activity and the researcher.</p>	<p>Puppets Dolls</p>
5 minutes	<p><u>c. Sand and animals</u></p> <p>The next activity will be the use of the sand tray and the animals. The researcher will encourage the child to play in the sand for as long as possible, encouraging touch, with both the sand texture and the texture of the animals.</p>	<p>Sand tray Plastic animals</p>
5 minutes	<p><b>Termination</b></p> <p>This phase will involve packing away the activities that have been used, indicating to the child that it is the end of the phase.</p>	



	The therapist will also verbalize that there will be another phase in the following week.	
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#### 5.5.4 Comment on the phase

Oaklander (1988: 12) states: “children manufacture a fantasy world because they find their real world difficult to live in” – and this assertion is very pertinent to an autistic child. The reason for this is that an autistic child may be frustrated within his/her own circumstances and therefore will create a fantasy world. The challenge could be linked to the autistic child’s ability to communicate his/her fantasy world and experiences, rather than a lack of fantasy experience. Fantasy play with autistic children may include the use of stories and music, as well as the various other play mediums, such as dolls, play dough and paint, drawing and puppets, which have been included in this phase.

As can be seen in the previous phases, as well as the upcoming phases, the researcher has included three activities within each phase. However, the researcher is not certain how the child will respond to the various activities and therefore it could be necessary to eliminate some activities and/or include some others in the phases. As previously mentioned, this outline is merely a guideline for the programme, and the researcher feels strongly that it is important to be flexible throughout the programme.

### 5.6. PHASE FIVE

#### 5.6.1 Goal of the phase

The goal of this phase is to encourage the child to express him/herself more adequately.



### 5.6.2 Objectives of the phase

- a. By the end of the phase the relationship between the researcher and child would have developed.
- b. By the end of the phase the child would have been exposed to the play room and the various play activities.
- c. By the end of the phase the child would have been given the opportunity to express him/herself through the various mediums available.

### 5.6.3 Content of the phase

Time allocated	Content of the phase	Material required
5 minutes	<b>Introduction</b> The researcher will allow the child time to settle into the phase, encouraging him/her to become aware of the activities for the day.	
10 minutes	<b>Content</b> <u>a. Bibliotherapy (books)</u> The main focus of the use of books will be to encourage the child to communicate, either verbally or non-verbally, as well as interact with the researcher.  The researcher will pick books that focus on emotions, such as anger and happiness, and read them together with the child, encouraging the child to focus on the picture and the researcher's voice.	Books x 3
5 minutes	<u>b. Drawing</u> With this activity the child will be encouraged to simply draw, with the researcher sticking a big piece of paper onto a plastic table and giving the child the various mediums with which to draw. The researcher will provide physical assistance if the child is battling to draw, encouraging interaction with the researcher.	Paper Crayons Pencil crayons Oil pastels



5 minutes	<p><u>c. Play dough</u>          Again the child will simply be encouraged to play with the play dough, using the various tools provided or even just his/her hands.</p> <p>The researcher will also encourage the child to make something, by assisting the child or simply indicating how to do it.</p> <p>The researcher will also encourage the child to bash and smash with the play dough, encouraging the release of any frustration.</p>	<p>Play dough          Shape cutters          Roller          Plastic hammer          Cutter</p>
5 minutes	<p><b>Termination</b>          This phase will involve packing away the activities that have been used, indicating to the child that it is the end of the phase.</p> <p>The therapist will also verbalize that there will be another phase in the following week.</p>	

**5.6.4. Comment on the phase**

Thompson and Rudolph (2000: 85) define bibliotherapy as "reading and discussing books about situations and children similar to themselves (the client), in order to help him/her in several ways".

The researcher is of the opinion that this could be an appropriate technique with autistic children, in order to encourage recognition of similar circumstances, and, if possible, discussions regarding these situations to encourage positive changes in behaviour. This technique can also be used as an alternative means of communication for the autistic child, again focusing on non-verbal communication rather than verbal communication.

As this will be the penultimate phase, the researcher will also introduce the fact that the following phase will be the final phase. The researcher is unsure whether the child will understand the concept of termination or whether the child will even



notice that the phases are no longer taking place. However, the researcher still feels that it is important to try to inform the child of the fact.

After the completion of this phase the researcher might look at including some of the previous activities in the final phase, if there are any further changes that need to be made or if there is insufficient data gathered regarding the particular technique.

## 5.7. PHASE SIX (Termination)

### 5.7.1 Goal of the phase

The goal of this phase is to terminate the programme with the child.

### 5.7.2 Objectives of the phase

- a. By the end of the phase the child would have been informed that this was the final phase, through various discussions, using both verbal and non-verbal cues.
- b. By the end of the phase the researcher will be able to make an assessment of how the child has responded to the play technique programme, focusing on the changes in social behaviour. This will be done through the use of the designed scale (post-test).

### 5.7.3 Content of the phase

Time allocated	Content of the phase	Material required
5 minutes	<b>Introduction</b> The researcher will allow the child time to settle into the phase, encouraging him/her to become aware of the activities for the day.	



20 minutes	<p><b>Content</b></p> <p>Within the final phase, the focus will again be on relaxation techniques, such as games, puzzles and music, allowing the child to enjoy and respond to the calming environment.</p> <p>As this will be the final phase, the researcher will hope to encourage more interaction and play than in the first phase, as well as more expression by the child, either verbally or non-verbally.</p>	Play activities puzzles; games; books; CD player and CDs
5 minutes	<p><b>Termination</b></p> <p>This phase will involve packing away the activities that have been used, indicating to the child that it is the end of the phase.</p> <p>The researcher will also attempt to explain, through verbal and non-verbal communication, that it is the end of the programme.</p>	

**5.7.3 Comment on the phase**

As the researcher has already mentioned, it is unclear how the child will respond to the attempt to indicate that it is the final phase. However, the researcher feels that it is important to attempt to explain the situation to the child, in order to avoid disappointment, leading to negative behaviour, in the future.

**5.8. SUMMARY**

This chapter focused on the specific play technique programme that will be used with the autistic children in middle childhood. This had included looking at the six specific phases, focusing on the phase goals and objectives, activities and techniques that will be used.

It is important to note that through doing the programme the researcher hopes to see improvement in the children’s social behaviour. However, also through implementing the programme the researcher hopes to get a better understanding



of what techniques are effective with the autistic children, and thereby making the necessary adjustments to the programme.

It is now necessary, in the following chapter, to focus on the empirical study and the results of the quantitative research.