Samantha, a nonverbal 5 year old female diagnosed with autism, was intently listening to the story Goldilocks and the Three Bears. As I read the book, I acted out the various scenes, encouraging my language group of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders to do the same. We pretended to be Goldilocks and eat from the different sized porridge bowls, sit in the different sized chairs, and sleep in the different sized beds. Finally, we pretended to be the family of bears who discover Goldilocks sleeping in our home. Samantha stared at the book throughout most of the activities. At the end of the day when I walked into the classroom, she came up to me, put her hands up imitating a bear, and said, “Roar, Roar, Bear.” These were her first spoken words.

The Center for Disease Control estimates that about 1 child in 68 is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), “a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges” (Center for Disease Control, 2014). The three types of ASD are Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). A major challenge for children with ASD is communicating with others. Since the spoken language abilities of children with ASD vary from verbal to nonverbal, some of them communicate their wants and needs with augmentative and assistive communication devices, methods of communication other than oral communication. These may include picture boards and electronic devices.

Regardless of verbal abilities, all children with ASD have particular challenges with their social language skills. Traditional therapies utilize discrete-trial training and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to facilitate communication for children with ASD. However, there are new frontiers to be explored in helping children with ASD communicate more effectively. One of these is creative drama techniques that maximize language development through a model that I have created called The Building Blocks Model.

### Background on Autism

According to the Autism Society of America, “Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person’s ability to communicate and interact with others” (2012, p. 1). No definitive cause for autism has been discovered. Researchers continue to search for causes, as well as for effective treatments for autism.

There are many different symptoms of autism. Since autism is a spectrum disorder with linked conditions, its symptoms are similar and can range from mild to severe. Children with ASD also exhibit a variety of unique symptoms that contribute to the need for individualized learning. There is no one-size-fits-all with ASD. Researchers, educators, and parents continue to struggle with guidelines and best practice treatments to help children with ASD. However, any disorder within the spectrum of ASD presents a significant challenge with social language. These social language difficulties can range from mild, such as robotic speech and avoiding eye contact, to severe lack of awareness, often with a complete lack of social reciprocity (Tubbs, 2008, p. 13). Children with ASD also have trouble with generalizations and figurative language. For example, when a child with ASD hears the phrase “It is raining cats and dogs.”, this child may literally believe that cats and dogs are falling from the sky. Such children are often visual
learners and do generally excel when technology is utilized. Technology tends to provide visual clues that trigger a response.

Varied approaches to therapy and treatments for children with ASD have been suggested; however, most have achieved only mixed results depending on the individual child. This is due to the fact that each child with ASD presents a different pattern of symptomology or a series of symptoms. For this reason, there is no standard practice of treatment for students with ASD in the fields of special education or speech language pathology. The two common treatments, discrete trial training and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), are heavily reliant on routine training to get a student to achieve a skill. PECS is a reward-based visual communication system that teaches initiation and helps a child learn incentives for communication. It is a nonverbal communication system, while the discrete trial training is a behavior-based technique in which the desired behavior is shaped by multiple trials. For example, when teaching body parts, the teacher may begin by asking the child to do a very specific task, such as to touch his or her nose. Prompts are used to help the child achieve the behavior and gradually fade away with rewards when the child successfully completes this behavior. Once the child can successfully touch his or her nose, then the teacher moves onto another body part.

These treatments have demonstrated moderate levels of success in the ASD population. However, both of these techniques have difficulty with generalization of skills and have been criticized for their routine and often robotic responses. They also do not address understanding and expressing emotions (Delprato, 2001).

Obviously, the field is open to new approaches, especially treatments like creative dramatics that encourage more spontaneous communication.

### What is Creative Dramatics?

Creative dramatics is process-oriented drama consisting of various activities and exercises. It is a group experience wherein each child is guided through a process of self-expression and interaction with others. Creative dramatic activities include puppetry, imaginative playmaking, storytelling, pantomime, sound to movement, and improvisation. The purpose of creative dramatics is not performance for an audience but the process of using activities to develop the social and language skills of the whole child. It creates a pressure-free environment for the child to be guided to develop self-confidence through artistic expression. Creative dramatics begins with play, the natural way that a child learns (Way, 1998).

### Why Creative Dramatics Benefits Students with ASD

Despite the need for social language intervention in the burgeoning ASD population, creative dramatics has been slow to emerge as an accepted approach to maximize language development. This is surprising because play experiences, particularly symbolic play, are particularly lacking in students with ASD.

For many children with ASD, the various stages of play never truly develop or occur in a fragmented fashion. Difficulties in motor planning, expressive and receptive communication, imitation, and fine

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**Photo by Nancy Alexander**

Dramatic play, or make believe play, is an important component for children to establish their social competence.
and gross motor movements are just some of the many obstacles they encounter during play (Mastrangelo, 2009, p. 34).

There are limited opportunities for all students to participate in play activities in the schools today. However, there are even fewer for children with ASD. Usually their schedules are so overloaded with various therapies and activities that they are given fewer opportunities to be exposed to the arts, gym, and free outdoor play with peers. This is a particularly serious deficiency because dramatic play, or make believe play, is an important component for children to establish their social competence. As Lewis (2003) points out, “play, particularly when other people are involved, provides many opportunities for developing social, cognitive, and communication skills” (p. 391).

Creative dramatics offers an especially effective approach to counter these challenges through play and make believe. Structured classroom play activities allow children to facilitate important language skills in a positive and rewarding fashion. Peter (2009) asserts that “drama as narrative pedagogy can offer even the most remote, hard-to-reach, socially challenged children the opportunity to develop a sense of narrative identity and to move toward more effective participation within a social world” (p. 16).

While there is little research on creative dramatics as an effective therapy technique for students with ASD, there are studies that have focused on components of creative dramatics used with children with ASD. For example, Kempe and Tissot (2012) analyzed a high school senior year, mixed classroom in England containing 12 students. Some students in this study had no special education needs and others were in special education, but the study focused on two female students with ASD. The teacher guided the class through the drama process of creating a play and performing the play. The researchers aimed to analyze the social language skills of the two girls. This study found that the drama process created a “safe space” for the students to have the opportunity to practice social skills that might not have been present in a more traditional learning environment. The study also unexpectedly found imagination skills in the students that had previously not been identified.

The research of Schrandt et al. (2009) indicates that children with ASD can develop important language skills of pragmatic language, including interaction with others, nonverbal cues, and recognizing and practicing emotions. Paralinguistic communication skills (the characteristics of how words are spoken), specifically prosody (the melody of language) and rate of speech (how fast or slow someone is talking) can be improved by creative dramatic exercises (Potter & Whittaker, 2001). Difficulty with metalinguistic language or problems with reflecting and discussing language concepts, can also be explained and illustrated through creative dramatics (Sherratt & Peter, 2006). Overall, creative dramatics provides children with opportunities to generalize in different communication situations rather than only in therapy, but generalized outside of therapy.
than practice single-scripted communication behavior in a therapy setting (Tubbs, 2008, p. 238). Peter (2009) also found that the under-functioning parts of the brains of children with ASD may be stimulated by playful activity that tends to provoke emotional responses.

Lastly, creative dramatics provides an outlet for creativity and play. Unfortunately, many students with ASD have few if any creative opportunities in the school system. With creative dramatics, students can express themselves in the classroom while interacting with peers in a pressure-free situation to build self-esteem, as well as relationships with peers (Sherratt & Peter, 2006).

The Building Blocks Model

Language Development for ASD through Creative Dramatics: The Building Blocks Model is a creative dramatics model based on Brian Way’s techniques. Brian Way (1998), a pioneer creative dramatist, outlined a hierarchical series of stepping stones of creative drama techniques for educators to use to facilitate dramatic expression with students. His creative dramatic techniques are based on developmental learning to nurture the whole child. These techniques are concentration, pantomime, movement to sound, moods and emotions (role playing), voice and diction, storytelling, and playmaking/improvisation.

It is a hierarchical model. Each part of the model builds on the previous parts because each building block provides the foundational skills to successfully complete the other building blocks. Thus the skills and parts of the preceding building blocks are continually reinforced as each building block contains the
components of the previous blocks. Therefore, by the time a child reaches the playmaking/improvisational level, he or she has internalized the other skills of the preceding building blocks. This is the strength of this model.

The Building Blocks Model is a practical guide, based on the seven components of Way’s drama techniques that I have adapted for general education teachers, special education teachers, and speech language pathologists to use to maximize language development across clinical and educational settings for students with ASD. The Building Blocks Model employs Way’s techniques due to the effective results gained by applying his development guide to using dramatic expression for maximum language development in students with ASD. Every child, regardless of his or her disability and severity, can participate and benefit from this model. Especially, early childhood educators who encounter children with ASD in their classrooms can benefit from The Building Blocks Model as a tool to help develop their communication abilities.

Practical Examples of The Building Blocks Model

This section will explain each of the seven building blocks. It will provide targeted skills and specific examples to implement each building block. Critically, it will provide detailed examples for educators to utilize each building block in the classroom based on the theme from *The Three Little Pigs*. Regular educators, special education educators, and speech language pathologists can all incorporate The Building Blocks Model into their lessons. This model is particularly useful for early childhood educators and can be easily adapted into any early childhood learning environment. Early childhood classrooms usually contain the materials needed to implement the model, such as picture books, nursery rhymes, puppets, and art materials. Plus, early childhood educators already use ideas and skills in this model every day in their classroom, such as singing with their students, show and tell, and encouraging imagination with their students. This section provides further insight on how educators can use this model.

Concentration

The first and foundational building block is concentration. Think of concentration as the foundation of a house upon which the rest of the house is built. Without it, the house cannot stand. Concentration involves becoming aware of self and others through the senses and opening the imagination. The targeted skill of the concentration building block is joint attention, the ability to share one’s attention between another individual and an object. Specifically, reciprocal eye gaze is
the most important component in this area. Educators can implement the concentration building block in their classroom with puppet activities by using a hand puppet or marionette to gain the attention of students. They can also use pictures, as well with taste, smell, and touch activities, to improve concentration skills in their students. Educators can move from teaching children to focus on inanimate objects to interacting with humans (student peers, teachers, and parents). A specific example using the theme from the story *The Three Little Pigs* is to increase concentration through a play-doh activity. Students can use play-doh to make pigs and wolves. The goal of this activity is to gain attention and focus through sensory activities (rolling out the play-doh and forming the play-doh into pigs and wolves) and to expand vocabulary and oral language skills as the students describe their efforts.

**Pantomime**

The second building block, pantomime, is imitation of movement without sound. Pantomime can be used to increase symbolic play and increase production of facial expressions and actions. Pantomime can be utilized in activities by using imaginary objects (e.g. passing a pretend object), acting out situations (daily routines like washing your face), pretending to be characters and exploring facial expressions/emotions, such as show me (happy/sad). A specific example is to encourage students to pretend to be pigs (show facial expressions, walk like pigs, etc.). The educator leads the activity: “You are a pig and you are walking through mud, snorting, running through the grass, eating, picking up sticks, making a house.” The goal of this activity is to imitate facial expressions and actions to increase receptive language knowledge and to imagine others’ feelings and responses. Students with ASD sometimes have trouble with non-concrete activities, so the educator could also have the students make a paper bag pig puppet to create something tangible for children to use during their pretend play to reinforce pig movements and emotions.

**Movement to Sounds (Dance-A-Story)**

The third building block consists of singing and acting to songs and parts of stories. This building block targets the skills of following directions, repeating sentences or phrases, increasing vocabulary skills, and understanding spatial language concepts. Movement to Sounds activities include interactive songs (e.g. “Hands, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”), choral reading activities (e.g. “Polar Bear Polar Bear”), and finger-play activities (e.g. “Itsy Bitsy Spider”). A specific example is to have students sing and act out the “Six Little Pigs Song.”

**Moods and Emotions (Role Playing)**

The fourth building block is pretending to be someone or something else. This moods and emotions building block targets the skills of generalizing emotions and identifying the feelings and needs of others. The ability to understand the moods and emotions of others is critical in problem-solving skills as well. Examples of activities using moods and emotions are puppetry and role plays (e.g. pretending to be a fireman putting out a fire). A specific example is a *Three Little Pigs* finger puppet and coloring activity. Students share *Three Little Pigs* finger puppets to explore the story. Each student role plays one of the pigs and later takes turns being the wolf. They identify and discuss the emotions of the pigs and the wolf. They also work together to solve various problems that arise in the story (e.g. how to break into a house, how to build a safe house). Lastly, the educator also leads a discussion on personal safety issues related to the story (e.g. not opening the door to strangers, not talking to strangers, and what to do if you are in trouble such as “tell your mom or dad; yell ‘help’,” etc.).

**Voice and Diction**

The fifth building block emphasizes using appropriate vocal qualities and the manner of sound for communication. Voice and diction activities allow students to work on speech suprasegmentals of prosody (the melody of language), rate of speech (how fast or slow one speaks), and stress (which words or sounds in words are emphasized.) Specific classroom examples of voice and diction activities are chanting and reciting nursery rhymes, jump rope rhymes, and poetry. One example is for the educator to repeat the rhyme *This Little Piggy* several times with students. This rhyme is:

This little piggy went to market.
This little piggy stayed home.
This little piggy had roast beef.
This little piggy had none.
And this little piggy cried, “Wee, wee, wee!”
All the way home.

**Storytelling**

The sixth building block is telling a story, also known as “oral narrative.” Storytelling targets the
social language skills of following rules of conversation: introducing the topic, staying on topic, rephrasing when misunderstood, using verbal and nonverbal cues to tell the story, and applying receptive and expressive language skills to sequence events, produce grammatically appropriate sentences, increase vocabulary skills, and comprehend language concepts. Examples of storytelling activities for the classroom are felt board storytelling activities, sequencing story cards, and book activities, such as those suggested in Autism and PDD Picture Stories and Language Activities (Koski, 2008). A detailed storytelling example is the educator reading The Three Little Pigs with students using felt board characters to act out the story as it is being read. The educator asks students questions throughout the story. The educator also encourages the students to collaboratively retell the story using the felt board puppets.

**Playmaking/Improvisation**

The seventh and final building block is playmaking/improvisation. This is creating, reacting to, and/or extending a story. Playmaking/improvisation targets pragmatic language skills of changing language according to the needs of listener and situation, increasing peer interaction, and applying problem-solving skills in social situations. Classroom examples of this building block are story extending activities where students add their own versions and **Teacher in Role** where the educator becomes part of the story as well.

An educator encouraging students to tell their own versions of The Three Little Pigs is a specific example of Playmaking/Improvisation. The scenario involves the three pigs going on a journey to build their own home. The students use stick pig masks. The educator holds the wolf mask at one point during the improvisation. To begin the improvisation, the educator prompts interactions through questions such as the following:

- Where are we going to find our new house (e.g. in a city, in the woods, on a mountain, by an ocean)?
- How will we get there (e.g. by car, by plane, by boat, by train)?
- What will we see during our journey to find our new home place?
- Once we get to our new home site, how will we build our homes?
- What materials will we need to build our own home?
- What do we want in our home (e.g. a swimming pool, a toy room, etc.)?
- Will the wolf go on the journey with us? Will the wolf see the homes that we have built?
- Will the wolf be nice or mean?

The improvisation ends when we all “live happily ever after.”

In performing the activities, the students may change roles or introduce new characters to the story. The educator and the students undertake their pretend trip together with the educator as the guide. Collectively, they also solve problems and conflicts that arise during the improvisation.

**Conclusion**

The Building Blocks Model is proposed as an effective tool for regular educators, special educators, and speech language pathologists to increase language development for students with ASD. This model can be an all-inclusive technique in early childhood environments. This hierarchical model guides children with ASD to expand their language skills through creative dramatics. It is important for children with ASD
to be exposed to creative and enjoyable therapy activities to develop their imaginations and creativity. Through the Building Blocks Model, children can not only practice and develop important and critical social language skills, but foster their confidence in a stress free environment and enjoy important play opportunities confirming that all children are entitled to their childhoods.

References


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