

PRETEND Program Tips for Challenging Behaviors During Sessions

Enhancing engagement from the child

Children may struggle to engage in play, try new things, get bored easily, or may show hesitancy or a disinterest in playing with their play facilitator. Below are several options and strategies to enhance child engagement in pretend play:

Offering choice:

Offering choice is much more likely to increase child engagement because it allows the child to have a say in their sessions. This increases the child's interest, buy-in, and enjoyment of play.

1. Provide two options of choice. Explain them to the child.
2. Allow child to choose an option. Remind them there are only two options, but they get to decide.
 - Praise their choice using labeled praise, such as "great job choosing ___!"
 - *Ex. "We're going to play a pretend story today. We can play a story about going to the moon, or about an underwater city. You get to choose! Which one should we play first?"*
 - *"Great job choosing! Now we get to play your story"*

Use of timers:

Timers can be very helpful when a child is unwilling to transition, or change, to another activity

1. Tell the child you are setting the timer for the activity and what happens when it ends
2. Start the timer. Put it in view of the child.
3. Provide reminders of how much time is left on the timer (ex. 1 minute, 30 seconds).
4. When it is time to transition, explain to the child that the timer has gone off and help them gather materials for the next activity. Consider handing them what they need. Start the next activity.
5. Praise any compliance with the timer and any efforts to transition or engage in the next activity.
 - During play:
 - *"We have one more minute of setting up the toys and then we're going to start the story. My timer is starting now."*
 - *"Ok, our dolls are going to play soccer for two more minutes, and then we're going to end the story. My timer is starting now."*
 - Difficulties engaging in the play session:
 - *Ex. "you have 1 more minute of snack time and then we're going to start our story"*
 - *Ex. "we're going to play for 15 minutes and then you can go back to playing on your tablet"*

Modeling:

Modeling can help draw a child into a play story and stay on-task without directly telling them what to do.

1. Begin or continue playing the story and modeling to the child how to play the pretend story, act as characters, or build on your own.

2. Demonstrate that you are having fun, or that you need their help in the story! This often pulls a child in naturally because they are interested in playing along.
 - Ex. *“Wow, I’m going to start building my rocket ship, here we go! Ooh I’m having so much fun!”*
 - Ex. *“Look, my guy is playing soccer, here he goes, he’s gonna score!”*

Premack Principle & First, Then Statements:

The **Premack principle** is the idea that if a child wants to do a given activity, they will perform a less desirable activity to get to the more exciting activity as a reward. For example, if a child really wants to play a cooking story that they like to play every week, the facilitator can motivate the child to get what they want by first meeting the goals for their play session, using the cooking story as the child’s reward. Similarly, if a child wants to go outside with their facilitator, the facilitator can motivate them to participate in the play session in order to be able to go outside as a reward.

First, then statements are useful to help children understand if they need to do one activity first in order to get their reward activity. Use these statements and clear, simple language to help children with PWS understand what they need to do to cooperate and get their reward.

- Ex. *“First, we will play my pretend story, then we will play your story”*
- Ex. *“First, we’ll play with our toys for 15 minutes. Then, we get to go outside!”*

Addressing Challenging Behaviors

Challenging behaviors common to children with PWS may arise during play sessions.

Rigidity, or stubbornness, about behaviors and ideas is common in children with PWS and may cause them to insist on certain ways of playing. Children may want to play a particular way, spending time focused on one element of the play or one toy (for example, trying to take the jacket off of a doll, or continuously spinning the wheels on a car). Using the below strategies can help the child focus and stay engaged on the play story, encouraging them to be more flexible in their play.

Inappropriate behaviors may also be common, such as off-topic conversations or questions, getting out of their seat, or whining, protesting, or showing anger at the facilitator. Some children may also not play nicely or play aggressively. For example, a child may not share and may hog all toys from an facilitator, or they may have the dolls fight inappropriately.

Tantrums are also common in individuals with PWS and can unfortunately arise during sessions. Consider the extent of emotional challenges during sessions and needs to redo sessions at another time if needed.

Selective attention:

Selective attention is the principle of purposefully ignoring behaviors to decrease their likelihood of happening. When a child exhibits behaviors that we want to get rid of, such as

whining, playing aggressively, or saying off-topic things, we do *not* want to draw attention to those behaviors because that will reinforce it and cause it to happen more. Instead, using selective attention will help decrease the frequency of these behaviors, because they will not produce any desired effects.

1. Identify what behaviors you will ignore.
2. When the child does the behavior, do not look at, speak, or touch them until they stop this behavior. Play by yourself if needed briefly.
3. Once the child starts behaving appropriately, re-enter the play.
 - Ex. Child is whining while they play
 - Ex. Child has dolls play too aggressively or inappropriately

The “big ignore”:

Sometimes, you may need to tell the child you are going to ignore or stop playing with them and be more explicit about what behaviors are inappropriate. To do the “big ignore,” tell the child that if they continue to engage in the challenging behavior, you will not play with them.

1. Tell the child what they are doing. Give the child a warning: tell them that if they continue doing the behavior, you will not play with them or stop the story.
2. Wait for the child to respond
3. *If they stop the challenging behavior:* praise them directly, such as “thank you for listening and playing nicely!”
4. *If they continue the challenging behavior:* tell them that they have continued the behavior, and that you are going to stop playing with them or ignore them for a while until they stop.
5. Monitor for the child’s response and re-enter the play once the child can play appropriately.

Redirection with clear instructions, & labeled praise:

Redirection through **clear instructions** and **simple language** can be effective to help direct a child to what they should be doing. For example, if the child is scripting (repeating set phrases or words from media) or repeating a story that was already played and not showing complexity or creativity in their play, you can redirect them by suggesting that they start a new story.

1. Use simple language to describe what the child *should* be doing, so they know exactly what to do, rather than what they *shouldn’t* be doing.
2. Provide a simple explanation, such as “we already played that story, today we are playing new stories”
3. Start showing the child what to do, such as engaging in the new activity or behavior yourself, to model what they should be doing.
4. Reinforce and praise the child when they follow along!
 - Ex. Comment upon scripting to show the child you understand: “we already played that story” or “we know that story”, then redirect: “Now we’re playing a different story. Let’s start a new story”
 - Provide suggestions if needed, such as, “instead of going to grandma’s house, let’s have them go somewhere else. How about a playdate or the movies?”

Always give **labeled praise** to reinforce positive behaviors. This is critical to ensuring the child continues to listen!

1. Praise the child immediately upon seeing the behavior.
2. Tell the child exactly what they are doing correctly, either thanking them or commending their effort.
3. Be genuine, enthusiastic, and continue praising them for positive behaviors as the session continues.
 - Ex. “Great job choosing something different! That’s a great idea” “thanks for being flexible”

Ending or rescheduling sessions:

Sometimes, you may need to end a session because a child is upset, tired, too distracted, or unable to engage in the play. Try your best to have the session. If you realize that it won’t be productive, end the session by explaining to the child why you can’t play with them. Always reschedule the session to ensure you complete all play sessions. Remind the child that you will continue to play together. Consider using reward systems to identify activities or objects that the child will “work for” by engaging in their play session.

Reminder: Why Play?

Ultimately, keep in mind that playing and interacting with others may be a challenging skill for many children with PWS! Having an adult who is encouraging, patient, and wants to play with them can help encourage their social skills, flexibility, and enjoyment in playing with others. Play is a fun and naturalistic activity for many children, and by providing social support and scaffolding in play, you are preparing the child for more successful, enjoyable future interactions with peers and adults. While you may run into behavioral challenges common in the PWS population, your engagement with the child can still have an impact on them to help them grow, learn, and be successful.