

Symbolic Play in Children with Autism: A Longitudinal Study

Chung-Hsin Chiang¹, Chin-Chin Wu¹ and Chi-Hua Lee²

¹ National Chung Cheng University

² China Medical University Hospital

The purpose of this study was to examine symbolic play in children with autism. A longitudinal study was divided into two experiments: a modified paradigm of symbol comprehension by Tomasello, et al. (1999) and spontaneous play measurements, for testing children with autism (mean CA= 41 months, mean MA= 27 months), and MA-matched children, with developmental delay and typical development. For measuring symbol comprehension, two sets of replicate and natural toys were arranged in the first experiment, and one other set of functional toys was added in the second experiment. Gesticulatory and object prompts were arranged in each condition. In the first experiment, children in all three groups displayed higher results on the replicate condition than on the natural condition in symbol comprehension. Children with developmental delay and typical development, revealed an ability to understand the symbol comprehension of the replicate set, but not the natural set. However, children with autism showed impairments on symbol comprehensions concerning both replicate and natural sets. In spontaneous play, there was no difference in any play skills among the three groups. In the second

experiment, after 18 months, both the children with autism and those with developmental delay, showed intact symbol comprehension of replicate and natural sets, but deficiency in relation to the functional set. However, high functioning autism did not encounter this barrier. In spontaneous play, although autistic children could demonstrate similar frequencies as children with developmental delay did, in functional play and symbolic play, children with autism showed fewer types on the schema on functional play. The concept, symbolic play deficit in autism, was partly supported by this study. Most of children with autism could gradually develop the capacity of dual representation; and moreover, in the case of high functioning autism, symbol comprehension of triune representation remained intact. Their difficulties are more on the flexibility of functional or symbolic spontaneous play, rather than symbolic comprehension. The implications on diagnosis and early intervention were discussed. The limitations of the study and the direction of further studies are also provided.

Keywords: *symbol comprehension, symbolic play, autism, dual representation, triune representation*

