

The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor, and Sensory GAMES

B A R B A R A S H E R

WITH KAREN BEARDSLEY

Using Every Child's
Natural Love of
Play to Enhance
Key Skills and
Promote Inclusion



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Praise for The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor, and Sensory Games

“This authentically something-for-everyone book is a joyous reaffirmation that children learn best through fun, imagination, simple materials, and exploration of the many wondrous things of which their bodies and minds are capable. A timely guide to the timeless kind of child’s play that should not be allowed to slip into history.”

—Ellen Notbohm, author, *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*

“Barbara Sher understands children! In her new book, she not only gives great ideas for play, but creatively weaves stories into the book to show how to involve children and excite their attention.”

—Kathleen Morris, MS, CCC-SLP creator of *S.I.Focus* magazine and author of *Sensory Soup*

“A resourceful book that takes the ‘Power of Play’ to the next level.”

—Jennifer Gilpin Yacio, editor, *Sensory Focus Magazine*

“A treasure chest of creative ideas for adding play to the learning experience. Not only teachers, but parents, grandparents, and caregivers will welcome this wealth of ideas for engaging children in these playful and educational games that foster skill development, engage reluctant children, and create shared joy and focused excitement.”

—Phyllis Booth, author, *Theraplay*

“A book that has a rich variety of play activities that are gentle on the budget and are layered and tailored to appeal to different personalities and developmental abilities.”

—Lorna d’Entremont, M.Ed., *Special Needs Book Review*

“What I really found to be encouraging is the variations of those activities, which help to stay fresh.”

—Marla Roth-Fisch, award-winning author/illustrator,
Sensitive Sam and VP, Sensory Processing Disorder
Foundation

“Everyone from grandmothers to therapists will benefit from the easy and practical activities in this book. The author’s personal anecdotes and video clips are heartwarming and made the book come alive.”

—Darlene Mannix, Special Education Teacher and author,
Social Skills Activities for Special Children

Other books by Barbara Sher

Self-Esteem Games: 300 Fun Activities That Make Children Feel Good About Themselves

Spirit Games: 300 Fun Activities That Bring Children Comfort and Joy

Smart Play: 101 Fun, Easy Games That Enhance Intelligence

Attention Games: 101 Fun, Easy Games That Help Kids Learn to Focus

Early Intervention Games: Fun, Joyful Ways to Develop Social and Motor Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum or Sensory Processing Disorders

The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor, and Sensory Games

Using Every Child's Natural Love of
Play to Enhance Key Skills and
Promote Inclusion

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For my Dream Team and the many children we have loved
at work

For my husband and the many ways he shows love at home
And for my children and grandchildren for everything,
always

—Barbara, Mom, and Bubbie

In loving memory of my parents, who took the time to play
with me,

and to my daughters, who continue to do so

—Karen and Mom

Preface

We all know that each child is his or her own unique person with individual interests and skills. We also know that most children go through the same crawl-before-you-can-walk developmental sequences, although some children walk at ten months and others walk at eighteen months. There is a range we all respect. However, all children need experience. Infants are born without a clue about how to move their body; it's the caregiver giving her baby time on his tummy to strengthen his back and putting toys slightly out of reach who helps her baby learn which muscles to use to inch forward. It's the toys that are hung above a baby's crib that help her develop her vision and the skills of reaching and grasping. Being in a playgroup or with others at the park can expose a child to an awareness of facial and body cues.

Experience is always the best teacher, no matter what age we are and what skill we are trying to learn. And for the first five years of life in particular, experience makes all the difference. It has been only in the last ten years that brain researchers have explained how a child's brain develops and grows according to what the child has experienced. We have learned that each time a new activity is consciously experienced, new synapses are formed and the brain enlarges. We have also learned that the one hundred billion neurons that babies are born with and that are connected by practice become atrophied without experiences.

This book is about ways of making these learning experiences fun for children by turning them into games. When children are laughing while they are doing something, they are engaged, and they are learning. When parents and teachers are enjoying the activities as much as their children, or when children are inspired to do the activities on their own, children's skills flourish. You may realize that you

already do many of these kinds of activities, but you want to learn more. As you read this book, you will see ways you can use many games to fit your special child. There are games that are perfect for the child on the autism spectrum, whereas others work well for a child who is hyperactive, and almost all can include neurotypical children. Modify or mix and match, and your child's smiling response will let you know if you've picked the games that suit him.

What Key Skills Are Being Enhanced in the Games?

All of these games address motor, sensory, and social skills in one way or another.

The sensory skills include ones that stimulate the five senses, especially vision, hearing, and touch. The tactile system, the largest sensory system in the body, is composed of receptors in the skin that send information to the brain concerning such factors as light touch, pain, temperature, and pressure. The input gives form to body and spatial awareness and plays an important role in enabling an individual to perceive the environment and establish protective reactions for survival.

The motor games work on proprioceptive and vestibular skills. Proprioceptive skills provide us with a subconscious awareness of body position and how the body is moving. They allow us to adjust automatically in different situations, such as stepping off a curb, sitting in a chair, or staying upright on uneven surfaces. Even fine motor tasks, such as writing, using a soup spoon, or buttoning a shirt, depend on an efficient proprioceptive system.

The vestibular system is found in the inner ear and detects movement and changes in the position of the head. It is how we relate in space and know, for example, if we are right

side up or tilted to one side. The information we receive from this system tells us which muscles to tighten to keep our balance, and so affects our muscle tone and coordination. All other types of sensation are processed according to vestibular information, so it is a unifying system in our brain.

Social skills include the being aware of others; attending to what is happening in the present moment; and learning to share, take turns, play cooperatively, and read social cues.

The Videos

Some of the games include links to short video clips. These are included to help you see how the games are organized. For visual learners, which many of us are, this type of presentation can make directions instantly easy to understand. These are not professional videos. They were taken in classrooms where I've worked by teachers Marlon Cabrera, Juana Atalig, Patty Staal, and Ivan Garces. I hope these videos will give you a better sense of how simple, fun, engaging, and inclusive these games really are.

The children are from Head Start centers in Saipan and Tinian. Saipan and Tinian are American protectorates in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Although I am from Northern California, I work during the school year for the Special Education Department at the three islands in the CNMI: Saipan, Rota, and Tinian. As an occupational therapist wanting to increase the motor, social, and sensory skills of children with special needs, I go into each child's classroom and present games for all the children that target the skills I want "my" child to learn. In this way, the child with special needs also gets the benefit of feeling part of the group.

In the videos, I do not identify which child has special needs because the point of seeing the games is to notice

how everyone can use practice in all the skills and how much fun all the children are having by playing the games together.

How the Book Is Organized

The first chapter presents spontaneous games for all ages, because sometimes an improvised moment can be the best teaching. In addition to enhancing skills, these games can make waiting at the doctor's office or for food at a restaurant enjoyable, helping raise spirits and put everyone in a good mood. "Whose Hand Is on Top?" for example, is a great family game in which everyone has silly fun together but all have to pay attention to keep track of whose hand moves next. And "Ways to Walk" is ideal if you've got a cranky kid not happy about walking a distance. If everyone takes gigantic giant steps and mincing baby steps to get there, you will end up with children who are in a much better mood.

The second chapter includes lots of fun games you would do one-on-one with your little one. They work in particular on the foundational sensory and motor skills on which all other skills are built. As with other games in this book, you only need to look around the house to find the materials you need to engage and lengthen your baby's attention.

The third chapter is full of progressive games. Progressive games continually change to challenge different skills, but each series of games can be done with just one easy-to-find material. For example, kids can start by jumping over a rope that is slowly raised, requiring increasing strength to jump over it. This same rope can then be slowly lowered so that children have to continually adjust their posture to go under it without touching it. The rope can even be wiggled so children have to manage their timing to make it over without the wiggly rope touching them, and so on. Most of the links to videos are in this chapter so that you can access visual information on how to play each set of games. These games can be played in the inclusive classroom or with any

mixed group of young children, such as siblings and neighbors.

Chapter Four, written by occupational therapist Karen Beardsley, provides therapy games for a wide range of children from ages three to twelve. Karen is very experienced and knowledgeable and has that same let-it-be-fun spirit. Her games include ones played in small spaces, such as “Flipping Pancakes,” and others that are played outdoors, such as “Flying Meteorite.” The games are organized by type of skill you want to focus on. Karen also contributed the appendix for home therapists and parents who are thinking of inviting a home therapist to work with their child.

The fifth chapter presents group games for children ages three to fifteen. Each game has a single theme, and there is a large range of games to accommodate the different interests of the various ages. An example of a game for little ones is stacking cans in “Can You Do the Can-Can,” whereas older children enjoy “Bowling for Dollars.” One group game has older kids making up a cool group dance, and another has preschoolers jumping on letters.

The Stories

Scattered throughout are personal stories that tell of experiences I have had with children I work with, as well as my own children and grandchildren. My hope is to give you a sense of who I am, to show you real ways that games can fit into daily life, and to amuse you with tales of the joys and frustrations of being with children.

Acknowledgments

Barbara's

My guiding plan when working with children in a classroom is to include everyone. To that aim, I use games in which there is room for children of differing skills to play together. These are games that can also be played at home and in neighborhoods where children of varying ages and abilities play together. To see which games work best, I needed playful teachers, aides, and parents and, most important, scores of children!

I am so appreciative of all the children at all the Head Start centers who played with me and would enthusiastically greet me when I came in the door, *knowing that a game was coming*. Big love also goes to their teachers, who were and are enthusiastic about my bringing games into their classroom, especially Quin Besong, Miranda Smith, Juana Atalig, and Ivan Garces, the amazing impresario for our shows.

It may take a village to raise a child, but it also takes a dedicated team to make a difference in the life of a child with special needs. I work with such a team. They are a group of fine people who know how to laugh and play and care. There is an expression that goes, "If you've seen a child with autism, you've seen a child with autism," meaning that like all children, each child with autism has his or her own unique interests, skills, strengths, and needs. One size does not fit all. One way of working with children is not "the" way.

I'm grateful to our Dream Team, who understand this and work toward knowing each child well. They are the special

education teachers and the related service staff in the Early Childhood Department of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System: Leilani Nielsen, Mary-Margaret Peyton, Yoli and Chrislaine Lely, Rose and Jerry Diaz, Joe Cruz, Jacob Villagomez, Mark and Patty Staal, and Mercy Tisa and Marlon Cabrera—the last of whom captured most of the great video shots of kids playing the Progressive Games and Short Group Games.

We are also fortunate to have a director with vision, Suzanne Lizama, who is willing to grow and be open to ever better possibilities in working with and evaluating the whole child.

Writing a book is also a collaborative effort. It starts with an idea and expands to many other people. I am thrilled that my former colleague and dear friend Karen Beardsley, whose work I have always admired, agreed to enrich this book with her home therapy ideas.

I've always admired my editor, Kate Bradford, for her diligent and careful editing, but now I am also enjoying getting to know her good sense of humor. Thanks also to copyeditor Francie Jones, who added her thorough editing skills. Ralph Butler never fails to come up with a joyful group of people in his illustrations, and I appreciate his willingness to match my visions. I must mention Nana Twumasi and Justin Frahm, Wiley associates who are fast to answer whatever questions I have and contribute their valuable touch. My thank-yous to them all, and to the others who are part of the production group whom I have never met, but who are, I know, of great importance to the final product.

Gratitude extends beyond the writing of this book. It belongs to the people in my life, such as my sisters, Bonnie Wilson, Trisha Ferlic, and Glo Harris, who have always cheered me on. Two people, however, get special recognition. One is my nephew Marc Wilson, who taught me how to love my iMovie feature. The other is my dear

brother, Monty Sher, who expresses his understanding of the synergy of my games with his articulate words.

And—as if it were even possible to have a good life without close women friends—I owe so much to my wonderful Saipan buddies, Rita Bonnici, Susan Baetge, Jenny Slack, Patty Staal, Mary Peyton, and Jill Derickson, for all the lovely and meaningful walks and talks; to Janet McCulloch for so many insightful conversations; and to my dear Humboldt lifelong, loving friends, Lorraine Carolan, Cindy Taylor, and Joan Becker.

I also want to give recognition to two people who are an enormous help in my life, Lorna Arcega and Mario Santillan.

As always and forever, I depend on the support and continuous love of my own wonderful, talented, beautiful, and intelligent daughters, Roxanne and Marissa, and my adorable and bright grandchildren, Oliver and Julien. I also have the good fortune to have spectacular sons-in-law, Ehren and Mark, who have always been so good to me.

And I'm grateful to the universe for bringing this former widow a warm, funny, kind, loving, and handsome husband, Don Cohen, who is my comfortable ballast, cuddly companion, and head cook. He makes our life work smoothly in our tree house home by the sea.

My love and gratitude for you all.



Karen's

We learn through play, and should never underestimate its power. A dear friend and fellow colleague of mine once told me, "I see myself kind of like an inspirational fairy, sprinkling permission for therapists, teachers, and parents to make fun use of whatever they have, to do therapy with." Her name is Barbara Sher, and I am grateful for her invitation to collaborate on this wonderful project. I hope we have been able to accomplish a bit of this inspirational work with this book and our games.

To the children around the world, thank you for teaching me to be the therapist I am.

To the parents of these children, thank you for welcoming me into your homes and lives.

To the professionals with whom I have worked, thank you for your wisdom when I needed guidance.

To my husband, Don, thank you for your support and eternal confidence in me.

To my two beautiful and loving daughters, Kaya and Raina, thank you for inspiring me with your creativity, your

eagerness to always play with me, and your honest critiques of my games. But mostly, thank you for teaching me that the importance of most anything we do in life all starts in the home.

Introduction

The Power of Play and the Synergy of Games

This book is about play. As such, it confronts a common prejudice: play is frivolity, incidental to life's purposes and direction. Right? No. Of course there are contexts in which play is frivolity for its own sake—but at the foundation of what makes us human, play is central. This is true for all of us, but particularly true for the developmentally atypical. Still, let's briefly examine the importance of play for all of us.

To quote Stuart Brown, psychiatrist, scientist, clinical researcher, and founder of the National Institute for Play, “Neuroscientists, developmental biologists, psychologists, social scientists, and researchers from every point of the scientific compass now know that play is a profound biological process. It shapes the brain.”¹

This is true for all children. Stanley Greenspan, author and noted authority on children with autism spectrum disorder, emphasized the importance of the “floortime” approach: getting down and creatively playing on the floor with these children can make a significant difference in their brain growth and subsequent increases in skills.²

The instant effect of joyful play on brain growth was shown dramatically when two groups of typical children had brain imaging done before and after activities. One group's activities were watching TV, playing repetitive video games, and the like. The other kids were engaged in activities that were exciting for them, such as playing with a train and