Identiplay – Teaching Play to Children with Social Communication and Interaction Differences
Early Years Team

What is Identiplay?

Identiplay is a strategy that can help children with social and communication differences learn 'play acts'. Identiplay is an approach that helps establish a shared focus. By doing this, it helps develop imitation skills, which in turn can develop into functional play. Using repeated play scripts, the approach promotes the development of social skills, understanding, imagination and exploration.

Why use Identiplay?

Identiplay supports children who have differences in the key areas i.e.:

- Shared focus
- Imitation
- Parallel play
- Play dialogue
- Narrative structure
- Flexibility

Benefits of Identiplay

Research shows that children who participate in Identiplay activities show an increase in time playing alongside other children in parallel play. They also show an increase in social interaction behaviours. There is evidence that the children's play becomes increasingly more purposeful with the toys available to them. The children can be observed replicating the taught play sequence with the toys and sometimes adding their own creative additions.

How to use Identiplay

Example of Identiplay

Beginning

- Observe the child's free play before beginning Identiplay so you are aware of the child's current skill level and therefore chose toys that are appropriate to their

play level. For example, a child who currently engages in sensory play, mouthing and emptying boxes is not ready to be introduced to a doll and accessories. A more appropriate starting point would be a car to push, or playdough to roll out.

- Choose a distraction free area where you can sit opposite the child at a table which is clearly divided into two areas (use coloured tape if required). You may need to adapt your seating to meet the child's needs i.e. side by side play may be more comfortable for the child, or seated on the floor.
- You will need two sets of the same chosen toys, one for you and one for the child.
- The session starts with the adult setting out the two sets of toys on the tabletop.

During the activity

- Plan your language keeping it simple and narrating the play. A simple script can help with this. The adult models a simple play script, watching and waiting for the child's engagement. The child may need a few minutes to explore the toys first.
- If the child doesn't engage it may be appropriate to prompt/encourage the child to copy your actions with their set of toys (verbally, hand under hand). If the child is still reluctant the adult can choose to put the toys away, saying, "Play finished" and then repeat the process the next day.
- You can gradually build on the play as the child starts to learn/respond.
- You can use a sand timer to help the child understand how long they are expected to remain at the activity.
- Remember, if a child is non-verbal, they may not copy the speech but may copy play.

After the activity

A key part of Identiplay is ensuring the child has access to the toys used during the session with the adult, during their 'free play' within the nursery setting, so that they can practise the play skills learnt independently and with their peers.

Top tips

- Write out the script you are using on paper/card, so the words/routine used is the same each time.
- Bag up kits in 'zippy wallets' to keep the toys and scripts together.
- Use the example Identiplay activities and video examples for script and play ideas.
- Make sure you have matched your script and kit to the child's current play level.
- Always have the kit available for children to access during their free play.
- Don't worry if things go wrong – just try again!

Writing/using a script

When writing/using a script it is first important to consider the child you will be working with:

- What toys are they motivated by?
- What are their language levels?
- How long can the child focus their attention?
- What is your target/planned outcome? E.g. I want the child to copy pushing the car.

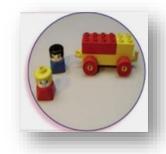The Identiplay script should provide structure and narrative. It should:

- Have a clear start e.g. How to lay the toys out
- Contain a narrative, specific language to talk through the actions (suitable for the child's development level) e.g. Push car brrmm
- Have a clear finish e.g. "Finished, bye-bye car".
- Follow the same routine each time.
- When the child is ready, gradually build on to the play, e.g. "man in car, push car brrmm, car stop, finished, bye-bye car".

Example Identiplay Activities

Example 1 - Cars

Equipment:

- Two cars
- Four people

Script:

Put one person on the car and say, "Man on car".
Push the car along the table and say, "Push car brmm, brmm".
Say, "Finished, bye-bye car".

Extension (do not introduce until child is confidently copying the first play activity, which may take several sessions):

Introduce the other man saying, "Look man".
Drive the car to the new man and stop beside them say, "Stop the car".
Put the new man on the car, say, "Two men on car".
Push the car along the table and say, "Push car brmm, brmm".
Say, "Finished, bye-bye car".

Example 2 - Playdough

Equipment:

- Playdough
- Rolling pin
- Circle cookie cutter

Script:

Pat the playdough and say, "Playdough".
Use the rolling pin to roll lout the dough saying, "Rolling out the dough".
Once the Playdough is flat/rolled out say, "Finished, bye-bye playdough".

Extension (do not introduce until child is confidently copying the first play activity, which may take several sessions):

Pat the playdough and say, "Playdough".
Use the rolling pin to roll out the playdough saying, "Rolling out the dough".
Show the cookie cutter saying, "Look, circle".
Use the cutter to cut out a circle of the playdough saying, "look, circle".
Say, "Finished, bye-bye playdough".

Example 3 – Click Clack Cars

Equipment:

- Two click clack runs
- Two sets of cars (green, red, blue, yellow)

Script:

Begin by using one car only.
Put the car at the top of the track, release it and say, "Car down – click clack, click clack".
Say, "Finished, bye, bye car".

Extension (do not introduce until child is confidently copying the first play activity, which may take several sessions):

Gradually introduce the other cars, putting them down the run one after the other.
You could introduce colours or numbers as part of this script, depending on the child's developmental level. For example, "Red car down – click clack, click clack" or "One car down – click clack, click clack…two cars down – click clack" etc.

Example 3 - Ducks

Equipment:

- Two plastic ducks
- Two bowls containing a small amount of water

Script:

Place a water bowl and duck in front of both the child and adult.
Put the duck in the water and say, "Duck in bath".
Gently splash the water and say, "Splash, splash, splash".
Remove the duck from the water and say, "Duck out of bath".
Say, "Finished, bye-bye duck".

Extension (do not introduce until child is confidently copying the first play activity, which may take several sessions):

Gradually introduce more ducks, putting them into the water one after the other. You could introduce numbers as part of this script, depending on the child's developmental level. For example, "One duck in the bath, splash, splash, splash…two ducks in the bath, splash, splash, splash" etc.

Example 4 - Dolls

Equipment:

- Two dolls
- Two bottles
- Two bowls with spoons

Script:

Begin with just the doll.
Hold the doll in your arms and rock it, say, "Rock baby to sleep".
You can introduce actions such as kissing/stroking/hugging the doll.
Name the action as you do it i.e. "Aah hug the baby".
Say, "Baby finished, bye-bye baby".

Extension (do not introduce until child is confidently copying the first play activity, which may take several sessions):

Introduce the other equipment gradually, as the child becomes confident with one new piece of equipment, add the next. Give the bottle to the doll and say, "Give baby a drink, mmm". Spoon the food from the bowl to the doll's mouth and say, "Give baby food".

More information and video links

Playground – Identiplay video

Frog – Identiplay idea

Making a sandwich – role play Identiplay example.

Garage – Identiplay video