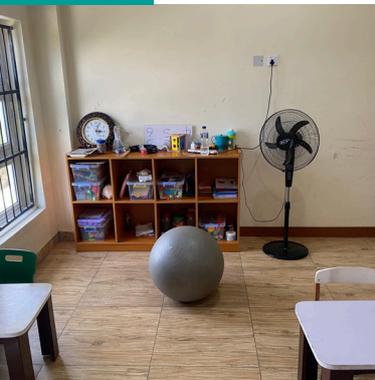


IN COMMEMORATION OF INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PLAY

WINNING ESSAYS

How Can Play Be Used as a Transformative
Tool in the Development, Therapy, and
Inclusion of Neurodiverse Children?

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ESSAY ENTRY: WINNER

How Can Play Be Used as a Transformative Tool in the Development, Therapy, and Inclusion of Neurodiverse Children?

Full Name: Uchechi Linda Lilyarn Oyiga (Mrs.)

Profession: Human Resources Manager & Educator

Four years ago, when my son was just nine months old, our world shifted dramatically. What began as concerns about missed milestones led to an early autism diagnosis—a moment that reshaped my understanding of neurodiversity personally, not just professionally. As an Inclusion and Diversity HR Manager, I'd built policies for neurodiverse employees, trained leaders on accommodations, and advocated for workplace equity. Yet nothing prepared me for the humbling reality of parenting a child whose brilliant mind worked differently. I'll never forget sitting in that specialist's office, my HR expertise feeling suddenly theoretical as I grappled with terms like "sensory processing" and "social communication delays." My professional knowledge hadn't vanished—it just lacked the heartbeat of lived experience. That disconnect became my catalyst: if I was to truly champion inclusion, I needed to start in my own living room.

- **The Revelation: Learning Through Play**

Our breakthrough came subtly. During speech therapy sessions, my son would shut down when asked to name flashcards. But at home? He'd line his toy cars into precise rows, whispering numbers like a tiny mathematician. One rainy afternoon, I threw away the flashcards and sat beside him. "Is the blue car faster?" I wondered aloud, nudging a car down. His eyes lit up. "Red FASTER!" he screamed with so much excitement. We spent an hour racing cars, counting laps, and without realizing it practicing verbs, colors, and turn-taking. Later, stacking blocks became our sneaky math tutor: "If I add TWO blocks, how tall is your tower?" Suddenly, abstract numbers felt concrete. Play wasn't just fun—it was his native language for understanding the world. Music became our secret weapon. Brushing teeth was a battle until we turned it into a ridiculous teeth-brushing disco ("Scrub those sharks in the ocean!"). Overnight, resistance melted into giggles. I realized his brain didn't just tolerate rhythm—it thrived on it. We embedded social scripts into songs: "When I feel ANGRY in my heart, I get Sad" became a riff where stomping replaced meltdowns. These weren't just parenting hacks; they were proof that neurodiverse minds blossom when we speak their sensory dialect.

- **Science Meets Real Life**

Research confirms play activates multiple neural pathways, something I witnessed when my son, overwhelmed by noisy birthday parties, would retreat to a corner to methodically sort LEGO by color. What looked like avoidance was actually his brain self-regulating through pattern-seeking. By joining him (“Can we build a BLUE Box?”), I leveraged his natural strength to ease him back into the chaos. Play’s repetition provides the predictability autistic brains crave, while novelty slips in through the backdoor. That dance between routine and discovery? It’s neurological magic.

- **Therapeutic Play: Beyond the Classroom**

Play also healed us. After a sibling conflict left him sobbing, we role-played with stuffed animals. “Bear is MAD because Rabbit took his rock,” I narrated. His tears paused. “Bear... sad too?” he pointed at himself, Ebuka, Sad!! Ebuka, Crying! In that moment, play built an emotional bridge no lecture could span. Board games like “Snakes and Ladders” became stealth social labs: losing still stung, but rolling the dice taught him resilience through ritual. And when transitions triggered panic? Our “Goodbye Song” (See you later, Bye Bye Board, closing you and keeping you to love you laaaaateeeeeeeeer!) I anchored and he hummed with auditory cues. These weren’t just skills- they were trust-building exercises in neurological safety.

- **From Playroom to Boardroom: An HR Revolution**

Walking this journey reshaped my HR philosophy profoundly. Watching my son thrive through sensory-friendly strategies made me audit our office through his lens: Could fluorescent lights feel like assault? Would ambiguous deadlines trigger the same anxiety as open-ended play? I started noticing parallels everywhere.

Take David Ebuka, a brilliant data analyst on my team. He’d miss meetings or seem abrupt in emails. Remembering how my son needed agendas to process expectations, I asked David: “Would a written brief before brainstorm help?” His relief was palpable. We later learned he’d been masking autism for years. Now, his workflow includes noise-canceling headphones (his “sensory armor,” like my son’s weighted blanket) and project outlines with clear deadlines - simple tweaks that boosted his performance (and confidence)

Another lesson: strength-based inclusion. My son’s stimming-focus on train schedules revealed an extraordinary memory. Similarly, Sarah in accounting—diagnosed with ADHD, was criticized for distractibility, until we noticed her knack for spotting discrepancies in complex spreadsheets. We shifted her role to auditing, where hyperfocus became her superpower. Like play-based learning, workplace inclusion thrives when we design around neurodivergent strengths, not deficits.

- **The Heart of Transformation**

Four years ago, autism felt like a diagnosis. Today, it's a dialect I'm learning to speak, through play, patience, and profound humility. My son taught me that inclusion isn't about forcing round pegs into square holes; it's about redesigning the holes. As HR professionals, we have the power to build cultures where neurodiverse minds aren't accommodated but celebrated - where the play-based principles of engagement, sensory safety, and strength-focused growth create workplaces as transformative as a living room fort. And honestly? That's a legacy worth building, one joyful leap at a time.

ESSAY ENTRY: SECOND PLACE

How Can Play Be Used as a Transformative Tool in the Development, Therapy, and Inclusion of Neurodiverse Children?

Full Name: Sam Okwuoha

Profession: Caregiver

Beyond Toys: How Play Transforms the Lives of Neurodiverse Children

In the soft hum of a sensory-friendly playroom, five-year-old Jacob, a non-verbal child with autism, lines up toy cars along a windowsill. His occupational therapist gently introduces a second car beside his, mirroring his actions without intrusion. For the first time in months, Jacob turns, smiles, and nudges her car forward. In that fleeting exchange—silent yet profound—play transcends its surface frivolity and becomes a bridge between isolation and connection, challenge and growth. Play, far from a mere pastime, is a transformative tool that fosters development, facilitates therapy, and nurtures inclusion in neurodiverse children.

In my professional experience as a developmental therapist working with children on the autism spectrum and those with ADHD, dyspraxia, and sensory processing disorders, I have witnessed play's catalytic power. It is not a luxury—it is a necessity. When tailored thoughtfully and respectfully, play becomes a language, a therapy, a means of learning, and a vehicle of belonging.

1. Development through Play: Building Skills at a Child's Pace

Neurodiverse children often experience developmental delays in areas such as communication, motor coordination, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. Play provides a non-threatening, motivating context for developing these competencies.

Consider the case of Maria, a six-year-old girl with dyspraxia. Traditional tasks like buttoning a shirt or tying shoelaces triggered anxiety and resistance. However, when embedded into playful narratives—rescuing princesses with shoelace bridges or buttoning up a superhero's cape—Maria began practicing these skills with excitement. Over six months, her occupational therapy sessions evolved into joyful quests that simultaneously improved her fine motor coordination, planning, and confidence.

Structured play, such as LEGO® therapy, further illustrates developmental gains. In LEGO® sessions, children assume rotating roles—engineer, supplier, builder—encouraging communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. For children with autism, who may struggle with perspective-taking or flexible thinking, these sessions offer scaffolded opportunities to develop social cognition in an environment that celebrates structure and predictability.

2. Therapeutic Applications: Healing through Joy and Sensory Integration

Play is a natural form of therapy. Through therapeutic play modalities—such as floor time, drama therapy, and sensory integration play—children learn to process emotions, regulate behaviour, and cope with the complexities of the world.

One memorable client, eight-year-old Liam, was recently diagnosed with ADHD and trauma-related anxiety. In traditional counselling, he was restless and guarded. However, in our play therapy sessions using sand trays and puppetry, Liam revealed hidden fears through narratives involving sharks, heroes, and magical forests. Through these metaphors, he externalised his emotions, gained emotional vocabulary, and began to heal.

For many neurodiverse children with sensory sensitivities, play can also help desensitise and re-regulate. Therapies incorporating swings, textured materials, trampolines, and water play allow children to explore their sensory thresholds in a controlled, enjoyable manner. Play-based occupational therapy transforms hypersensitivity from a source of daily distress into a journey of discovery, one splash or spin at a time.

3. Inclusion through Play: Cultivating Acceptance and Belonging

While development and therapy are critical, the social power of play cannot be overstated. Inclusive play environments create shared spaces where neurodiverse and neurotypical children learn to relate, empathise, and collaborate.

One of the most impactful initiatives I've contributed to is the design of "Friendship Circles"—a lunchtime peer-led play programme in mainstream schools. In these sessions, neurotypical peers are trained to understand neurodiversity and co-create inclusive games that prioritise patience, flexibility, and empathy. Children like Ahmed, who previously sat alone at lunch due to his echolalia and rigid play patterns, began engaging in modified board games and role-play sessions with classmates. Over time, peers stopped viewing him as "strange" and began seeking him out, recognising his creativity and humour.

The playground, traditionally a site of exclusion for children who "don't play the right way," can become an inclusive stage when adults embrace flexibility and empathy.

Teachers, caregivers, and parents must move away from deficit-based models of play (“He doesn’t share,” “She plays alone”) and instead embrace neurodiverse styles of engagement—solitary lining-up, deep-focus imaginative play, repetitive spinning—as valid and meaningful.

4. Strategies for Effective Play-Based Engagement

To maximise play’s transformative potential for neurodiverse children, several key strategies have proven effective:

- **Follow the Child’s Lead:** Whether a child is fixated on trains or dinosaurs, joining their world—rather than dragging them into ours—builds trust and motivation. Play becomes reciprocal, not prescriptive.
- **Use Visual Supports and Schedules:** Structured play environments with visual cues help reduce anxiety and increase predictability. A simple “first-then” board (e.g., First puzzle, then bubbles) helps children anticipate and transition between activities.
- **Create Sensory-Informed Play Spaces:** Calm corners with weighted toys, textured mats, fidget tools, and dim lighting allow children to regulate while engaging in self-directed play.
- **Train Adults as Play Facilitators, Not Directors:** Teachers, therapists, and parents should be trained to observe, adapt, and participate in play without hijacking it. Instead of correcting or redirecting “unusual” play, they should ask: What purpose is this serving? What can I learn from it?
- **Celebrate Neurodiverse Strengths through Play:** Encourage activities that highlight individual strengths—puzzle-solving, musical play, detailed drawing, or storytelling—fostering confidence and joy.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Play-Informed, Inclusive Future

As professionals, we must reject the idea that play is optional for neurodiverse children. It is their right, their language, their healing, and their gateway to community. Play is how non-verbal child says, “I trust you.” It is how a hyperactive child learns to wait, a sensory seeking child discovers comfort, and a lonely child finds a friend.

In a world that often demands conformity, play offers a sanctuary of authenticity. When we honour and adapt to the unique ways neurodiverse children play, we not only help them grow—we grow ourselves, as caregivers, educators, and humans.



Jacob, who once played in isolation, now shares giggles in group puppet shows. Maria, once anxious about fine motor tasks, confidently buttons a friend's costume during play. Ahmed, once excluded at recess, is now the Dungeon Master of an inclusive storytelling club.

These aren't isolated miracles—they are the predictable, powerful outcomes of a world that takes play seriously. Let us continue to champion play not as a distraction from real progress but as its most joyful and effective path.

ESSAY ENTRY: THIRD PLACE

How Can Play Be Used as a Transformative Tool in the Development, Therapy, and Inclusion of Neurodiverse Children?

Full Name: Igbo Rebecca Ebum

Profession: Occupational Therapy Student

As an occupational therapy student passionate about childhood development and neurodiversity, I believe that play is not just a fun activity; it is a language, a bridge and a therapeutic tool. For neurodiverse children, play has the potential to support attainment of developmental milestones, support emotional regulation and foster meaningful inclusion in schools and communities.

This essay explores how play can be used as a transformative tool in development, therapy and inclusion of neurodiverse children, highlighting practical ways play can be used, through the lens of occupational therapy.

To start with, play is considered the natural way through which children explore and connect with the world around them. It is much more than just a fun activity. It is the foundation through which children develop important skills needed for everyday life. In occupational therapy, play is recognized as the occupation of children because it supports the development of cognitive, motor, social, communication and language skills.

For neurodiverse children, who often face challenges in some of these areas, play becomes a transformative tool for development, therapy, and inclusion. By understanding and using play effectively, caregivers and professionals can help neurodiverse children reach their full potential in a way that feels natural, engaging, and empowering.

Building on this, development in children occurs across various domains, including physical, cognitive, emotional, and social domains. For neurodiverse children, progress in these areas may happen differently and sometimes more slowly, but with the right support, meaningful development is possible. Engaging these children in goal-oriented play where specific activities are designed to build certain skills can be helpful. For example, building leggo blocks, drawing shapes, sand play etc. can improve fine motor control, while memory games such as puzzles can strengthen cognitive skills like concentration, planning and problem solving.

A Play that involves interaction with peers also promotes social development, helping children practice communication and turn taking in a friendly environment. Because play is flexible and can be adapted to each child's needs and preferences, it offers a unique way to support development without the pressure of formal instruction. In this way, play becomes a bridge, helping neurodiverse children build key life skills while enjoying the process of learning.

Beyond development, play can also be used as a therapeutic tool to support neurodiverse children experiencing challenges in learning, social and communication skills. Through play, children engage in activities that are naturally motivating, making it easier for therapists and caregivers to address challenges in cognition, communication, and emotional regulation. Occupational therapists often use play-based intervention to build cognitive skills such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. For example, matching games, building blocks, and sorting activities can help improve concentration and planning skills in a fun, interactive way. These activities are not only enjoyable but also serve as steppingstones toward classroom readiness and learning.

Communication and social interaction, which are areas where many neurodiverse children struggle, can be nurtured through play. Games that involve taking turns, sharing or following group instructions provide opportunities to practice conversation skills, understand social rules, and build relationships with peers. In therapy sessions, these moments are used intentionally to model and reinforce positive social behavior.

Additionally, play helps children regulate their emotions and manage sensory experiences. Activities like bouncing a child on a therapy ball, navigating an obstacle course or using a sensory bin with sand or textured items allow children to explore their environment safely and learn how to respond to different stimuli.

Over time, these playful experiences support better emotional control and physical coordination both of which are essential for participation in daily activities.

Lastly, Inclusion is more than just placing neurodiverse children in the same environment as their peers. Instead, it is more about ensuring that they feel seen, heard, and accepted as valuable members of a group. Play, by its very nature, creates a shared space where differences can be embraced and children can connect beyond words, labels or learning styles. In group play settings, neurodiverse children can engage with peers in meaningful ways when activities are thoughtfully designed. For example, during a group storytelling session, a teacher or occupational therapist might introduce visual story cards alongside spoken words. This supports children with language delays or processing difficulties to follow and contribute to the story, giving them a voice in the activity.



Inclusive playground design is another strategy that promotes participation. i.e. Swings with harnesses that offer postural support for children with motor difficulties, while dim lighting in sensory rooms creates a sensory friendly environment for those sensitive to bright lights. These adaptations create spaces where children of all abilities can enjoy the environment equally without fear or frustration.

Another effective practice is using structured cooperative games like passing a ball in a circle while naming favorite animals or food with simple visual cues. These games emphasize teamwork, social participation allowing children to practice social skills such as turn taking and active listening in a playful, low-pressure environment.

In conclusion, play is more than a fun activity. It is a means of supporting development, delivering therapy, and fostering inclusion. When used intentionally, play can help neurodiverse children build essential skills in a way that is engaging and fun. As an aspiring occupational therapist, I am committed to promoting play-based approaches that honor every child's unique strength and need, ensuring no child is left behind in their journey towards growth and independence.



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