Children with Autism: SEL through Drama

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Drama time is a weekly group activity that my classroom participates in. The drama time activities were developed by the Red Kite Project, a subset of the Chicago Children’s Theater which involves students with autism in the arts. Last year, I was granted the opportunity through the Chicago Foundation for Education to work with Red Kite Project’s John Francisco to develop a Friendship Unit for my autism classroom. This friendship unit uses drama based games and the structure of our drama time center to work on the skills necessary to be a good friend.

Social Emotional Learning: Social emotional learning is a critical component of any curriculum. Including social emotional learning into the curriculum of an autism classroom is necessary as well. Many children, both with and without disabilities, need direct instruction on social skills, problem solving, and appropriately dealing with their emotions.

Autism: Children with autism demonstrate significant deficits in the areas of communication and social abilities. Often times children with autism are developmentally behind their peers in these areas. Children with autism are capable of learning social skills and developing friendships!

This Unit in All Classrooms: The drama time activities and this Friendship Unit are also effective teaching tools for children in the general education setting. These concepts are areas of high need for instruction for many students and these games can be adapted for several grade levels.
Drama Time

Drama time is special time we set aside each week to work on social emotional learning through the use of drama based games. The structure of this activity is routine based and structured which helps children with autism anticipate the events and reduce anxiety about transitions.

What Drama Time Looks Like:
- We go to a new location. Somewhere that we only use for drama time. We use a room in the basement of our school or sometimes the stage of the auditorium.
- We sit on the floor in a circle on carpet squares.
- We start with the same “drama time” song and then move into warm ups.
- Warm ups consist of the same movements with the same words to match. This consistency is great for children with autism.
  - Hello sky, hello ground.
  - Yes, please. No, thank you.
  - I don’t know.
  - Jazz hands.
  - Donkey kicks.
  - Reach for the stars.
- We started with a visual schedule with one picture for each game, but now we just say what games we are doing.
- We go through a few games.
- We usually end with “Go to Sleep.”

Drama Time Games (here are a few examples):
- Drama Mask Drawer: Students pretend to reach into a drawer and teacher tells them to put on their _______ (emotion: sad/happy/angry/etc/) face. Students put their hand over their face (pretending to put a mask on) and reveal their facial expression to show the emotion. Then you ‘take it off.’
- Magic Wand: Students pick a friend and using the magic wand ‘turn them into something.’ The student will point the magic wand to another child and say, “I make you a penguin.” Then the other student pretends to be a penguin.
- Present: Either use a cardboard box or a pretend present box. Each student in the circle gets a chance to ‘open’ the present and pretend to take their gift out using their imagination. They describe what it looks like and how they will use it.
- Go to Sleep: Teacher says, “Go to sleep.” Everyone lays down and pretends to be asleep. Teacher then says, “When you wake up, you will be a _______. 3, 2, 1, wake up!” The students all wake up and pretend to be whatever the teacher had said.
Friendship Unit

We developed this unit to work on the skills needed to be a good friend. Many of our students had tons of emerging social skills but were missing some key components. We taught these activities initially during drama time but now use them throughout our day. We spent about 2-4 weeks on each concept but always integrated previously learned topics as well!

Targeted Skills:
- Listening and Remembering
- Dealing with Jealousy & Taking Turns
- Personal Space & When to Give a Hug
- Standing up for your Friend
- How to Interrupt

Listening and Remembering
- **Listening face**: first we taught a listening face - what does listening look like? We used the listening face in our “Drama Mask Drawer” activity. Teacher says, “reach into your drama mask drawer and put on your listening face.” - we now use this all the time in the classroom!
- **Listening face collage**: before drama we sorted through pictures of “good listening” and “bad listening” and made a poster collage of what good listening looks like
- **Listening game**: Works on students listening to each other! I always feel like I’m ‘translating’ for my students. Saying, “Hey Rachel, Alex asked you what you ate for lunch” instead of them responding directly to each other. This is my favorite activity we did! Ask every student a question (we do everything from favorite movie, to favorite food, how many brothers, what did you do last night, etc.). After everyone answers, go around to each student ask them what another student answered. Ie. “Sarah what is John’s favorite cereal?” If they get it right all the kids say ding, ding, ding, and if it’s wrong everyone makes a buzzer noise (they LOVE this!).
- **Staying on topic**: Role playing game to practice staying on topic. Two students (or one student and one adult) have a conversation and the other student enters the conversation by talking about the same thing.

Dealing with Jealousy/Taking Turns
- **Jealousy face**: First we taught the word jealously and taught a jealous face. What does jealousy look like? Then we added this to our “Drama Mask Drawer” activity.
Dealing with Jealousy: After we learned the jealous face, we learned what to do when you’re jealous. We taught them to “shaaaaake it off” (students shake their whole body) and then say “oh well” (shrug shoulders).

Practice Being Jealous: In drama time, we used some of our favorite toys and food (iPad, gum, etc.) and practiced being jealous. The teacher would give the iPad to one student and not the other. Then we would prompt the student, you are jealous. What does jealousy look like? What should you do when you are jealous? When kids used the correct response (shake it off, oh well) - we gave tons of praise!

Good Friend/Bad Friend Role Playing Game: We used role play activities to practice being a good friend and bad friend about jealousy. We would pick two students to be in the middle of the circle and let them practice being a bad friend about jealousy. Then we rewind (use a pretend remote and pretend to talk backwards super fast) and redo the scenario with being a good friend about jealousy.

Personal Space and When to Give a Hug

Hula Hoop Example: We introduced this by using hula hoops held around our waist. We let the kids wander around and bump into each other and practice being in their personal space. We talked about how it is not being a good friend to get into our friend’s personal space.

Can You Please Get Out of My Personal Space: Using hula hoops again, the teachers got into each students’ hula hoop with them and the students practiced saying, “Excuse me, can you please get out of my personal space?”

Personal Space Role Playing: Then we did this same concept with role playing. One student stood in the middle of the circle and the other one got in their personal space, then the student would practice asking nicely to get out of their personal space.

Stuffed Animal Hug Game: We used a huge stuffed animal to practice when to give a hug. First we practiced asking for hug. Then we worked on practice scenarios for when it is okay to ask for a hug. A teacher took the stuffed animal around to each student and said a different scenario (ie. “Today is my birthday.” “I am the teacher and I am in the middle of giving a test” “It is the last day of school.” “My friend is hurt”) Students would work on deciding if it is the appropriate time to ask for a hug or not.

How to Interrupt

That’s So Rude: Two students are chosen to go talk in the middle of the circle. Another student comes to interrupt and at first does it the ‘bad’ way. They LOVE this. They get to act all goofy and run up and yell. All of the students yell, “That’s SO rude!” Then we rewind (using pretend remote and jumbled talking) and do it the right way.
Standing up for your Friend

- **Writing exercise**: We started with a writing exercise using photos we took of the students and wrote about what we should do to stand up for our friends.

- **Stand up for your friend role playing**: 3 students were picked at a time to do a role playing game. One was picked to be a bad friend to one of the other students. Then the 3rd students interrupted and said, “hey, don’t do that! That’s my friend.” We started this initially by prompting the students but they got the hang of it pretty quick.

- **Make sure it generalizes**: We also did a lot of out of context and contrived scenarios to be sure that this generalized. For example one of the teachers would go ‘be a bad friend’ to another student to prompt someone in the class to stick up for their friend.

For any questions or comments please feel free to contact me at sasha.theautismhelper@gmail.com! Visit my blog theautismhelper.com for more tips, resources, and materials to help you help children with autism.