

Young Exceptional Children

<http://yec.sagepub.com/>

Playdates for Young Children : With Autism and Other Disabilities

Nancy Rosenberg and Gusty-Lee Boulware

Young Exceptional Children 2005 8: 11

DOI: 10.1177/109625060500800202

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://yec.sagepub.com/content/8/2/11>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children](#)

Additional services and information for *Young Exceptional Children* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://yec.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://yec.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Playdates for Young Children

With Autism and Other Disabilities

Playdates are a regular part of life for many preschool age children. Opportunities to play together with peers can help preschoolers develop and strengthen friendships and practice social skills (Ladd & Coleman, 1993). Playdates may also serve a social function for the parents of the children, allowing them opportunities to socialize, develop new friendships, and support each other in their child-rearing roles (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Raab, & McLean, 2001). Thus, when a child with disabilities cannot participate in the typical playdates of childhood, not only can the child become increasingly isolated, but the parent(s) of this child may also experience increasing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Social deficits such as lack of interaction with peers, lack of initiation, and lack of appropriate play skills are core symptoms of many developmental disabilities, most notably autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Guralnick, 2001; Odom, McConnell, & Chandler, 1993). Research has shown that working on these deficits in the context of natural environments is the best way to promote generalization of these skills (National Research Council, 2001). Thus, teaching a child with developmental disabilities, particularly a child who lacks competence in social skills, in the context of a playdate with a typically developing child is likely to provide an ideal environment for teaching critical social skills.



For all of these reasons, ensuring that a child with disabilities is able to participate in playdates with other children is highly desirable. Simply bringing a child with disabilities together with a typically developing peer and letting them play as you might do with two typical children, however, will almost always be unsuccessful (Odom, 2000). The experience often leaves both the parent and the typically developing child frustrated and discouraged. This article discusses different aspects of running successful playdates for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. These playdates differ from typical playdates in that an adult is actively involved in facilitating the playdate. This adult facilitator can be a parent, a child care provider, a home interventionist, or an early childhood educator. We first discuss a few practical aspects of the playdate, such as who makes an ideal playmate and how long the

playdate should be. We then discuss how to select appropriate social goals for the child with autism and suggest a variety of strategies for successfully achieving those goals.

Finding a Playmate

Ideally, the playmate for a child with disabilities will be from the focus child's "community": a neighborhood child, a child from preschool or child care, or even a sibling. When such a playmate is chosen, the child with disabilities is more likely to generalize what he or she learns, because the child will see the playmate in other environments on a regular basis. A ripple effect among other peers can also occur when they see the playmate successfully interacting with the focus child. A sibling of the focus child can also be considered as a potential playmate. This situation can be especially rewarding if the two siblings have not been able to successfully interact and play together in the past. Both parents and siblings can be greatly encouraged by the successful interactions and thus be motivated to attempt more of them.

Optimally, a playmate for a child with disabilities is outgoing and likes to please adults. Even more important, however, is that the child chosen is truly motivated to play with the focus child. Many times, there is a child in the focus child's life who has shown particular interest in interacting with the child with disabilities. This is the child who will most likely be successful. It is also important to con-

sider the level of motivation of the potential playmate's parent(s). A successful playdate for a child with disabilities is not a one-time occurrence; it is something that should continue on a regular basis. Thus, the parent of the playmate must be motivated to make the playdate a priority.

Length of the Playdate

In determining how long a playdate should be, it is necessary to balance the needs of the child with disabilities with the expectations of the playmate and the playmate's parent. Sometimes, the ideal time for the focus child may be very short. A half hour of intense interaction may be all that the child with disabilities can realistically tolerate. Such a short playdate, however, may be upsetting to a typically developing child who is used to a much longer playdate. To reach a balance between what is ideal for the focus child and the playmate, there are various strategies to extend the playdate time without overtaxing the child with disabilities. Frequent "free times," when the children can play separately if desired, can be interspersed with structured interactive activities. Snack time and outside play can also extend a playdate so that it feels more natural to the typical playmate but does not require sustained, intensive interaction from the child with disabilities.

■ Simply bringing a child with disabilities together with a typically developing peer and letting them play as you might do with two typical children ... will almost always be unsuccessful.

Identifying Social Goals

Most parents identify playdates as a priority because they want their young children to play successfully with other children and have fun. In order to promote such success, it is important to understand the focus child's current strengths and challenges in the area of social interaction. One way to gain this knowledge is to complete a social skills assessment (e.g., McGinnis & Goldstein, 1990; Quill, 2000). Such results provide the information needed to support positive interaction and skill development. For example, using assessment, you may learn that sharing is quite difficult for Sandra, a four-year old child with autism, and often results in her pulling other children's hair. Knowing such information allows you to be proactive in designing and supporting activities that will give Sandra lots of practice in sharing.

Parents may also find that by completing a social skills assessment they more fully understand how a complex skill like social interaction can be broken down into manageable teaching units. Our team has developed "The Social Skills Checklist" (Boulware, Williams, & Leon-Guerrero, 2004), which we find helpful in supporting fun, successful, educational playdates. Parents complete the checklist by rating their child's current skill level on a variety of social behaviors. Once the assessment is complete, parents prioritize the social skills they would like to address.

Achieving Social Goals

Once you have chosen goals for the child, you want to be able to focus on the goals while still maintaining a fun and natural playdate. There are four main strategies for doing so: (1) setting up a successful play space for the children; (2) structuring the playdate effectively; (3) embedding work on the goals within activities; and (4) providing necessary support to the child with disabilities.

Designing Successful Play Spaces

It is extremely important to be thoughtful about choosing where the children will play together. For many children with disabilities, particularly those with autism, areas that are cluttered with toys, that provide too much open space, or that have many distractions will influence their ability to successfully attend to their peers and activities (Quill, 2000).

Physical Space

Choose a play area that provides enough space for the children to move around comfortably, but that discourages the focus child from wandering. If a large room is all that is available, create a play nook by defining boundaries with items such as bookshelves, furniture, or hanging sheets. Provide enough space for the children to sit at a small table as well as play on the floor. This will allow for a balance between "sit down" activities and movement when needed.

■ Most parents identify playdates as a priority because they want their children to play successfully with other children and have fun. In order to promote such success, it is important to understand the focus child's current strengths and challenges in the area of social interaction.

Make sure the space is free from competing distractions. For example, establishing the play space too close to the kitchen where other family members are cooking or talking may distract the focus child from the peer.

Organizing Materials

In order to promote engagement, materials should be visible, within reach of the children, and organized in an orderly fashion.

Bookshelves can be very helpful for organizing. Do not have all of the child's toys available at once; this can be visually overwhelming for many young children, leaving them unable to make a choice. Be systematic in what you decide to make available. Choose activities that are motivating and lend themselves to social interaction. For activities with many small pieces (e.g., a dollhouse with props), store them in containers so that children are not searching for lost pieces. With materials that require supervision (e.g., paint, scissors), provide symbols as a visual reminder that they are indeed a choice, but must be requested from an adult.

Structuring the Playdate Effectively

Providing a degree of structure or a schedule for the playdate can be very helpful for many children with disabilities, giving them a sense of predictability and routine. One successful strategy for providing a sense of predictability is to use a dynamic schedule that the children set up themselves. The

children take turns making choices from a set of visual options to determine what they will do next. Depending on the children's developmental level, they may plan the entire playdate or, more often, make choices for the next couple of activities. The visual representations of activities can both help the children choose and, once displayed on the schedule, can serve as a visual reminder of the activities they have chosen.

Such a schedule gives the focus child a degree of predictability while still capitalizing on both of the children's spontaneous preferences by changing the schedule from playdate to playdate. It also ensures that both children get a chance to choose their favorite activities. When they are playing a less preferred activity chosen by their playmate, the schedule serves as a visual reminder that their preferred activity is coming soon. Sometimes the children choose activities together, creating problem-solving opportunities. Another desirable aspect of this type of structure is that you can also make choices, interspersed with the children's, allowing you to include activities especially suited to targeting a child's particular social goals or to introduce the children to new activities that they otherwise might not choose.

Embedding Work on Goals Within Activities

An effective strategy for working on social goals while still maintaining a natural-feeling playdate is to provide short teaching

■ Providing a degree of structure or a schedule for the playdate can be very helpful for many children with disabilities, giving them a sense of predictability and routine.

episodes within the routines and activities of the playdate, referred to as embedded learning opportunities (Sandall & Schwartz, 2002). When thinking about appropriate activities in which to embed goals, concentrate on two main ideas: (1) finding activities that will be motivational for the children, and (2) choosing activities that provide lots of opportunities for the particular goals on which the child is working.

Choosing Motivating Activities

Children with disabilities, particularly those with autism, often have limited and idiosyncratic interests (National Research Council, 2001) and thus can be difficult to motivate. The more that you do to ensure that the child is interested in the activities you choose, the more successful the playdate will be. Activities with a sensory component, such as materials that can be touched, are often successful, as are activities that involve physical activity, such as jumping or swinging. If a child has a strong interest in a particular character or video, this interest can be incorporated into many activities. Of course, the interests of both children should be considered. For example, Tony, a four-year old with autism, loves the movie *Toy Story*; his playmate, Jeff, enjoys Play-Doh®. Using *Toy Story* figurines while playing with Play-Doh® creates an activity that is motivating for both children.

Choosing Activities With Many Opportunities for Practice

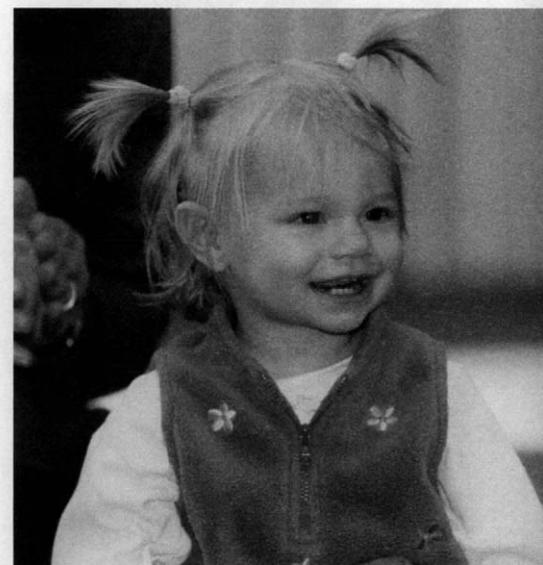
Some activities more easily lend themselves to working on a given social goal than others. If a child is working on sharing, for example, activities that require particular tools are ideal, because you can provide only one tool so that the children need to share it to complete the activity. For example, five-year old Allison is working on sharing. During a “buddy art project,” she and her friend Tanya have only one glue stick and one pair of scissors available and thus need to share them. Activities in which children create something are ideal for working on the skills of getting a friend’s attention and showing things of interest. Six-year old Carlos is working on these skills. He and his friend, Alex, build Lego® creations that they then show to each other.

Providing Support

For some children with disabilities, the information provided up to this point might be enough to create successful playdates. For other children, additional support may be needed to enhance success and social development. Fortunately, there are a variety of support strategies a facilitator can use, including prompting, peer coaching or peer-mediated strategies, visual supports, and explicit reinforcement procedures.

Prompting

There are two types of prompting to consider: the system of least prompts strategy and most to least prompting (Wolery, Ault, & Doyle, 1992). With the first strategy, you allow the child to initiate or try to perform the behavior, but if you see the child having difficulty, you provide assistance. Use the least amount of help necessary to facilitate success. For example, Jackson, a five-year old with high functioning autism, is playing with his friend, Sasha. It is Sasha’s turn to choose an activity and she chooses charades. Jackson takes a card from the “charade bag” (with cards denoting animals or actions they act out) and stares at it; it’s obvious he does not know what to do. The facilitator prompts by whispering in his ear what he is expected to do. He still does not respond, so the facilitator models



the response. Jackson imitates the model and Sasha guesses.

With the second type of prompting, most to least prompting, you assist the child immediately. You do not give the child a chance to make a mistake, because if the child does, he or she may give up, wander away, or perhaps engage in aggressive behavior. For example, Jose, a four-year old with Asperger's syndrome, gets very upset when a friend has something he wants. His first instinct is to hit the person. In the past, children have given Jose his desired objects after he hits them. Since this problem is a priority for his family, his mother, Maria, decides to address it systematically during playdates. She creates a game called "Ask Your Friend," which she chooses as an activity when it is her time to select (within the dynamic schedule, discussed previously). In this activity, each child is given preferred items of the other child. Maria knows that Jose loves to push toy trains on a wooden track. She gives Jose's friend, Seth, five trains and gives Jose five pieces of train track. Maria immediately prompts Jose to say, "Seth, can I have a train?" and Seth gives him a train. Seth then takes a turn and asks for the tracks. Over time, Maria fades her prompts so that Jose is asking independently.

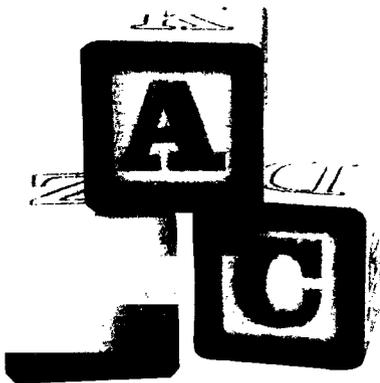
Peer-Mediated Strategies

With peer-mediated strategies (Odom & Strain, 1984), you provide coaching to the peer in order to promote social interaction skills, rather than prompting the

child with disabilities. For example, a priority for Jeffrey's family is that he responds to his peer's questions. Instead of prompting Jeffrey to respond, his father, who supervises his playdates, coaches the peer on how he can get Jeffrey to respond. During a playdate, Carlos asks Jeffrey if he wants to paint. Jeffrey is overfocused on a toy and does not respond. Jeffrey's father coaches Carlos to bring over the paint symbol and show it to Jeffrey while repeating the question. Over time, Jeffrey's dad fades the coaching as Carlos integrates the strategies into his repertoire and uses them independently.

Visual Supports

Visual supports can be very helpful to children with autism because the information visuals provide is static, unlike verbal information that comes and goes quickly (Hodgdon, 1995). During playdates, visuals displayed around the play area can serve as easily accessible cues to assist in regulating social interactions for the child with autism. For example, Breanna is learning how to problem solve when things do not go as planned. Her mother and teacher have taught her numerous strategies. However, it is difficult for Breanna to remember what to do, especially when she is anxious. Her mother and teacher create a problem-solving board with pictures of what Breanna can do when there is a problem (e.g., get an adult, take a break, find another toy, set a timer for taking turns). This board is on the wall in



the playdate area for Breanna to refer to when she needs support.

Explicit Reinforcement

Many children with disabilities, particularly those with autism or other social skills deficits, are not “internally” motivated to interact with their peers and, therefore, you may need to use explicit reinforcement to increase social behaviors that are difficult or not motivating to perform. If praise or attention from an adult is reinforcing, provide behavior-specific praise to the focus child after he or she performs the behavior targeted. For example, Jake, a five-year old with autism, shares a toy with a peer. You say, “Let’s give Jake a thumbs up for sharing.”

Sometimes, praise or attention is not reinforcing to a child with disabilities. In these cases, other types of reinforcers such as activities or toys may be required. For example, five-year old Caleb plays a game of “Don’t Break the Ice” and loses. In the past, he would have become very agitated and upset when he lost; however, during his playdates he has been working on saying, “Oh well, maybe next time” and maintaining a calm state. After this game, he does exactly what he has been taught. You reinforce his calm behavior by saying, for example, “You were such a good sport. You and Alex [his peer] should go swing in the hammock for five minutes!” (Swinging in the hammock is a reinforcing activity for Caleb.) Over time such tangible reinforcers can be faded.

It is important to note that reinforcement should not be provided solely to the focus child. Provide positive attention to both children. In addition, make a regular habit of praising the two as a pair. For example, you might say, “I like how you both work together as a team to build the tower! You must be very proud!”

Pulling It All Together

Successful playdates for children with disabilities can increase the quality of life for both the child and his or her family, allowing both to enjoy the benefits that playdates provide. The strategies in this article help to ensure that playdates are fun and successful for children. The following vignette illustrates how many of the previously described strategies can be incorporated to design effective playdate opportunities.

Shane is a four and a half-year old boy who enjoys playing on the computer, engaging in roughhouse play with his father, reading with his mother, and going out to eat. He also has been diagnosed with high functioning autism. Shane’s parents are very interested in cultivating his social skills since he often becomes agitated when playing with children his own age. His early childhood special education teacher recommends playdates as a way to enhance Shane’s comfort and competence with peers. Since she

■ Successful playdates for children with disabilities can increase the quality of life for both the child and his or her family, allowing both to enjoy the benefits that playdates provide. ■

provides a monthly home visit, it is decided that she will coach Shane's parents on how to facilitate a playdate. His parents are nervous, but excited to get started.

First, they discuss who might be a good playmate. They decide on Daren, a little boy from their neighborhood who has tried to interact with Shane at the local playground. Shane's mother contacts Daren's family and they agree to give a playdate a try. Prior to the first playdate, Shane's teacher and parents fill out "The Social Skills Checklist." From the checklist, Shane's parents are able to see his strengths and where he needs some assistance. Their top priorities include: (1) using acceptable ways to express his anger/frustration when playing with peers, (2) engaging in pretend play in which he assumes a role, and (3) playing games.

The parents agree to begin with a one-hour playdate at Shane's house. If successful, they will have some playdates at Daren's house in the future. The playdate will take place in the family room, as half of the room is already set up with some of Shane's toys and art materials on a bookshelf. Shane's mother suggests using the backyard or kitchen as well, depending upon the activities chosen. Since Shane

responds well to the use of schedules at home and school, Shane's parents and teacher decide to implement a dynamic schedule with the boys, building the entire schedule at the start of the playdate. Choices will be presented through the use of pictures and words. The schedule will also include choices made by Shane's mother in order to create additional learning opportunities. Shane's mother decides to use a white board on which she can write the name of the activity next to a line drawing to denote the schedule.

Next Shane's parents and teacher create a list of Shane's highly preferred toys, games, and activities to create fun interactions for the boys as well as address the three identified goals. They check this list with Daren's parents to ensure that items on the list are also preferred by Daren, and they ask about Daren's preferences. The final list includes: computer play, reading stories, jumping on the bed, Play-Doh®, making cookies, being chased, and using a variety of art materials.

Next they brainstorm how Shane's parents' priorities can be embedded into such activities, remembering that not every activity must include an embedded objective. With Shane's teacher, they fill out a

matrix designed to increase the probability of learning opportunities (see Figure 1). Since they are able to brainstorm only a few ways to embed game play into the preferred activities (see Figure 1), they add some games that will be Shane's mother's choice when creating the dynamic schedule. Since Shane is entering kindergarten in the fall, they choose games that he may play in kindergarten such as "Red Light, Green Light," "What Time Is It, Mr. Wolf?," and "Mother, May I?"

Shane's parents and teacher also add some additional supports to enhance success. Although Shane is becoming more proficient at expressing his anger or frustration with his parents using visual supports and an explicit reinforcement system, they have not yet practiced this skill with another child. They will build on these existing strategies during the playdate. At the beginning of the playdate, Shane's mother will explain to both boys in a friendly manner that during the playdate they might need to be problem solvers! This means that if one of them is feeling upset or angry he can look at the "problem-solving chart" (a visual depicting problem-solving ideas, such as "take a break," "ask for help," etc.) to help figure out what he could

do to help himself or his friend think of a solution. If the boys solve the problem, they will earn a star on the problem-solving chart. If they earn five stars together they will get to jump on the bed or choose another favorite activity for a few minutes. Shane's mother will also remind the boys that they can always ask her for help to solve a problem.

For Shane's goal of assuming roles during pretend play, Shane's mother and teacher assume that, since the opportunities are embedded into preferred activities, describing and modeling the roles will be enough to enhance success. Concerning playing games, Shane's parents' final priority, it is difficult to know whether or not Shane will protest participation. His teacher and

mother decide to always follow a game activity with a highly preferred activity that Shane has chosen on the schedule. Shane's mother will highlight, for example, "first we will play "Red Light, Green Light" and then we will play _____ (stating Shane's activity)." She will also keep the game brief for the first couple of times, with only two to three turns.

Figure 1
Activity Matrix

Parents' Priorities	Computer Play	Reading Stories	Jumping on the Bed	Playing With Play-Doh*	Making Cookies	Being Chased	Using Art Materials
Play Games						Play chase, alternating between being chaser/ chasee	Take turns drawing/ painting a picture and the other child needs to guess!
Play a Role	Pretend the computer is broken. Take roles of calling someone to fix the computer and the person who fixes the computer. Then play a quick game on the computer.	Act out a preferred short story/ take on roles	Take on roles from the story "no more monkeys jumping on the bed"	Act out going to a restaurant (Shane likes going out to eat). One child is the patron and the other is a waiter/cook who has made food with the dough.			Set up a toy/art store. One child is selling the items and the other is buying them. When done, they play with the materials together.
Acceptable Ways to Express Anger	This goal is pervasive across all activities, as it is sometimes difficult to know what will cause Shane to become angry or frustrated. Typically, it will happen when he does not get what he wants right away or at all, which can happen during any activity. Have a problem-solving chart visible, with visual supports for problem-solving ideas. Prior to beginning play provide explicit instruction on how they can earn "stars" for reinforcement as they successfully solve problems.						

Through Shane's story we observe the team of important adults in his life (i.e., his parents and teacher) planning together to develop a successful playdate opportunity to support the development of important play and social skills. First they worked through the processes of identifying an appropriate playmate and determining when and for how long the playdate would occur. Then they took the important steps of conducting an assessment and, based on the information gathered, developing appropriate learning goals for Shane as he participates in playdate activities. Specific plans for the initial playdate were then carefully developed by implementing the four main strategies described in this article: (1) setting up a successful play space for the children; (2) structuring the playdate effectively; (3) embedding work on the goals

within activities; and (4) providing necessary support to the child with disabilities. While requiring collaborative effort by the adults in Shane's life, these efforts will certainly enhance the likelihood that all, including Shane and Daren, will be satisfied with the outcome of the playdate.

Note

You can reach Nancy Rosenberg by e-mail at nancyr@u.washington.edu

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., Text Revision). Washington, DC: Author.
- Boulware, G., Williams, P., & Leon-Guerrero, R. M. (2004). *The social skills checklist*. Unpublished checklist, University of Washington-Seattle.
- Dunst, C. J., Bruder, M. B., Trivette, C. M., Raab, M., & McLean, M. (2001). Natural learning opportunities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. *Young Exceptional Children*, 4(3), 18-25.
- Guralnick, M. J. (2001). Social competence with peers and early childhood inclusion. In M. J. Guralnick (Ed.), *Early childhood inclusion: Focus on change* (pp. 481-502). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Hodgdon, L. A. (1995). *Visual strategies for improving communication: Practical supports for school & home*: Troy, MI: QuirkRoberts.
- Ladd, G. W., & Coleman, C. C. (1993). Young children's peer relationships: Form, features, and function. In B. Spodek (Ed.), *Handbook of research on the education of young children* (pp. 57-77). New York: Macmillan.
- McGinnis, E., & Goldstein, A. P. (1990). *Skillstreaming in early childhood: Teaching prosocial skills to the preschool and kindergarten child*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- National Research Council. (Ed.). (2001). *Educating children with autism*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Odom, S. L. (2000). Preschool inclusion: What we know and where we go from here. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20, 20-27.
- Odom, S. L., McConnell, S. R., & Chandler, L. K. (1993). Acceptability and feasibility of classroom-based social interaction interventions for young children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 60(3), 226-236.
- Odom, S. L., & Strain, P. S. (1984). Classroom-based social skills instruction for severely handicapped preschool children. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 4(3), 97-116.
- Quill, K. A. (2000). *Do-watch-listen-say: Social and communication intervention for children with autism*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Sandall, S. R., & Schwartz, I. S. (2002). *Building blocks for teaching preschoolers with special needs*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Wolery, M., Ault, M. J., & Doyle, P. M. (1992). *Teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities: Use of response prompting strategies*. White Plains, NY: Longman.