An Introduction to Activity-Based Intervention

Why Did We Write This Book?

Each intervention session is a learning experience for the interventionist as well as for those receiving services. The young children and families with whom we have worked have taught us many things. One of the most important lessons was to appreciate the complex, and sometimes delicate, interactions that occur among children, adults, and the environment during intervention. We discovered that the most effective, enjoyable, and productive sessions were characterized by a relaxed and mutually supportive atmosphere. We also began to realize that the desired atmosphere usually developed when the sessions centered on situations such as bath time, baking cookies, or going to the playground. This realization marked the start of our commitment to activity-based intervention.

Our transition from a more traditional therapeutic approach to activity-based intervention has been gradual. We had to develop and refine our ability to read and respond to the cues of children, their families, and the environment. We also had to learn to relinquish control during intervention sessions. At times these changes were unsettling for us and we suspect that they may be troubling for others as well.

We hope that Activity-Based Intervention Guide will offer support to practitioners who are implementing activity-based intervention. This book:

- provides guidance on how to incorporate activity-based intervention into an existing practice
- discusses factors involved in planning and delivering activity-based intervention
- offers examples of activity-based units

This book does not discuss specific therapeutic techniques since we assume that readers are already skilled in their particular professional areas. Our aim is to help therapists and educators use their abilities in an activity-based setting.

What Is Activity-Based Intervention?

Activity-based intervention is a strategy for working with infants and young children that helps them develop functional abilities by embedding goals and objectives into routine, planned, and spontaneous activities (Bricker and Cripe 1992). It capitalizes on children’s daily interactions with their social and physical environments to facilitate skill development. Activity-based intervention, which is based on an ecological approach to child development, emphasizes natural, functional, and meaningful interactions with the environment. This type of intervention is founded on the belief that real-life activities consist of sensory, motor, cognitive, communicative, and social components that should not be isolated from one another. Real-life activities, therefore, are the most appropriate milieu for conducting intervention and they can be structured to meet a child’s developmental and therapeutic needs (Bricker and Cripe 1992).
What Types of Activities Are Included in Activity-Based Intervention?

Bricker and Criple (1992) describe three different types of activities: routine, child-initiated, and planned. Routine activities are events that occur in the day-to-day life of the child. They include meal-times, bathing, dressing, and other caregiving situations. Child-initiated activities occur spontaneously when an object or event catches and maintains a child's attention. Planned activities require adult organization. During planned activities, an adult sets the stage for a child's exploration and learning by providing selected toys, materials, and situations. One example of a planned activity is making cookies.

Although routine and child-initiated activities are briefly discussed, this book focuses on planned activities. Please refer to a resource such as Bricker and Criple (1992) for a more thorough discussion of routine and child-initiated activities.

What Are the Characteristics of Activity-Based Intervention?

Activity-based intervention is distinguished by several important characteristics. It is engaging and integrated; it acknowledges the importance of play; and it emphasizes functional skill development and generalization (Bricker and Criple 1992).

It is engaging. In order for learning to take place, a child must be attentively engaged in an activity. This engagement is more likely to happen when objects and events are chosen by the child rather than by an adult (Jones and Warren 1991). As a result, an important part of activity-based intervention involves creating a stimulating, responsive atmosphere and then following the child's lead as the child interacts with that environment.

It is integrated. Child development occurs in multiple domains that are intricately interrelated to one another. Development in one domain directly affects development in other domains. One example of this relationship may be observed during the period that Piaget (1962) calls secondary circular reactions. As infants develop and refine motor abilities, they may unintentionally hit a mobile hanging over the crib. If this action results in a pleasing movement or sound, they will try to repeat the action that led to the interesting effect. In this example, motor exploration facilitated development of cognitive abilities. Our interventions must reflect developmental interrelatedness. Activity-based intervention provides an opportunity for children to practice a number of skills in different developmental domains during a single activity.

It recognizes the importance of play. The importance of play in the developmental process is documented in the literature (Fromberg 1987; Garvey 1977; Piaget 1962). Play is the strategy that children use to develop sensory, motor, cognitive, communicative, and social competence (Fromberg 1987; Garvey 1977; Piaget 1962). Unfortunately, intervention is sometimes far removed from a pleasurable, engaging, intrinsically motivating, child-directed activity. An activity-based approach is designed to capitalize on children's interests so that they are active explorers, rather than passive recipients, in the learning process.

It emphasizes functional skill development and generalization. Interventionists have become increasingly aware that abilities acquired in isolation often fail to generalize to real-life situations (Miller 1989). Research indicates, however, that skills can be gained very effectively in naturalistic environments and that these skills tend to be generalized across settings and times (Warren and Kaiser 1986). When goals are embedded in functional daily activities, maintenance and generalization are enhanced.

What Is the Role of the Interventionist in Activity-Based Intervention?

In this type of intervention, the adult has two basic responsibilities. The first is to construct a challenging and responsive environment in which learning can take place. The second is to facilitate, enhance, and expand the child's interaction with the environment.
What Is the Difference between Activity-Based Intervention and Play-Based Intervention?

Some people use these terms interchangeably. We believe that all intervention should be pleasurable for the participants but choose to use the term *activity-based intervention* because it encompasses a wider variety of activities than those typically considered play. For example, mealtimes provide excellent opportunities for children to acquire and refine skills. Mealtime, however, is not play in the traditional sense. In addition, some of the planned activities in this book require a degree of structure not usually associated with play.

What Are Some Advantages of Activity-Based Intervention?

Many advantages result from the use of activity-based intervention. It is easily used with groups of children but is also applicable for individual intervention sessions. It is appropriate for use in home-based, center-based, and integrated settings. This approach is particularly effective for accommodating groups of children with and without special needs. Activity-based intervention provides a natural way of including parents as active participants in intervention. It is also very compatible with the transdisciplinary approach to intervention that is frequently used by early intervention professionals.

What Is Contained in the Rest of this Book?

The remainder of this book includes information on how to put activity-based intervention into practice. We have found that a plan-implement-monitor-modify system of service delivery is efficient and successful. This book explains how to incorporate an activity-based approach at each stage of the service delivery sequence. Chapter 2 lays the foundation for activity-based intervention by describing how to choose activities, expand children's play schemes, and facilitate communication development. Other chapters present information on team building and working with families. Various ways to plan and conduct activity-based intervention in different settings, such as center-based programs, home programs, and integrated environments, are presented. *Activity-Based Intervention Guide* includes chapters on adapting activities and incorporating assistive technology into sessions. Chapter 10 contains a full year of activity-based lesson plans suitable for early intervention programs. Finally, we have included a list of resources that we have found helpful for implementing activity-based intervention with young children and their families.