

Helping Children with Autism Become More Social: 76 Ways to Use Narrative Play

Ann E. Densmore

Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007. Notes, references, index. 272 pp. \$49.95 hardback. ISBN: 9780275997021.

Ann Densmore's book is very much a distillation of her many years' experience with children who have autism. Her book is intriguing on many levels. As she describes in her many examples, Densmore has found creative ways to engage autistic children by using the natural world in which they live. I especially liked her descriptions of a farm setting for lively, preschool twin boys and a lakeside setting for quieter, young girls she worked with over longer periods of time. Densmore's love of nature, and her talent for sharing her experiences with her clients and encouraging them to develop their own connections with nature, was touching and compelling. Her clinical examples also were in keeping with current thinking about autism, which calls for developing children's social skills, play, and language as a whole at the outset, rather than using more discrete skills training. Densmore also demonstrates how she helped unrelated children develop their social interactions with one another by her skilled and intensive scaffolding of their play experiences in her presence over a long period of time. Densmore brings her speech therapy practice to her work with these children in productive ways, showing how play and social interactions are at the heart of the motivation to communicate and need to be addressed first for children who are more profoundly autistic. In these ways Densmore's book will be a valuable resource for everyone interested in autism and in ways to work creatively with children having serious developmental difficulties.

In other ways, however, the book is less satisfying. Densmore's approach of describing strategies to use for autistic children based on developmental levels is conceptually sound, but did not work very well for me in practice. Overall her book is fragmented and difficult to follow because many areas of conceptualisation and research in this field are not adequately discussed. For example, she does not link her work with the research literature in a satisfying way. These links are left entirely to the reader to make. The research evidence is cited in an undigested manner in the notes section at the back of the book. Also, she uses terms in unfamiliar ways. For example, Densmore describes her approach as play therapy, but she does so without making any connections to the play therapy literature. This extensive literature on the subject

would have been very useful, given that play therapy has always been devoted to children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties but not in the ways that Densmore uses this term in her own work. It would have been especially interesting for Densmore to compare her own work from a speech therapy perspective to the wider play therapy literature. The field of play therapy continues to broaden, and it now includes a wider age range—from very young children to adults—and a variety of disabilities, such as autism. Therefore, it would have been useful to compare the advantages and disadvantages of working in playrooms to working in the natural environment with these children, to compare working individually to working in pairs, and to compare working from a speech and language perspective to working from a psychological perspective.

Even with these caveats, I did find this book enlightening. And obviously it generated a range of ideas and questions for me about how to work most effectively with children having more serious autistic difficulties. Densmore was able to draw on her lengthy, specialized clinical work and seemed very effective in helping these children, based on her own notes and thoughts in this area. Ultimately, of course, I hope Densmore's book generates more interest in action research, since it is very important to research which methods and strategies work for which children and for which therapists most effectively.

—Virginia Ryan, *University of York, York, UK*