

# A Practical Guide to Child-Led Therapy

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Capstone Project

# The Problem and Goal

- Given the increasing caseloads and continuing needs in fast-paced early childhood special education classrooms, teachers need quick access to data supported intervention and instructional strategies to engage all learners.
- To develop a user-friendly and practical guide for child-led therapy to enhance preschool special education interventions in the school setting.

# Objectives and Activities

- Literature Review
- Colleague Interviews; Needs Assessment
- Colleague Interviews; Experts
- Guide Development
  - Definition
  - Research
  - When to Use
  - How to Use
  - Examples
- Training Development

# Stakeholders and Resources

- Team-level colleagues
- Related service providers
- Administration
- Private service providers
- Families
- Access to relevant and peer-reviewed research regarding child-led therapy
- Experienced therapists
- Time!

# Timeline and Criteria for Success

- Timeline: To have the guide and the professional development training ready for the start of the 2024-2025 school year.
- Criteria for Success: The project will be successful when colleagues attend the professional development training and reference their guide during the school year.
  - To scale it up: I presented the training as part of my current master's program with professionals teaching from early childhood through high school!

# Colleague Interviews; Needs Assessment

- I interviewed preschool special education teachers from three different districts
  - Commonalities: teachers feel prepared to implement play-based intervention
  - Differences: there were varied responses to the possibility of implementing child-led therapy due to administration concerns, curriculum concerns, and time concerns
- Interviews supported the need for research-based information on child-led therapy to be easily accessible to practicing teachers

# Colleague Interviews; Experts

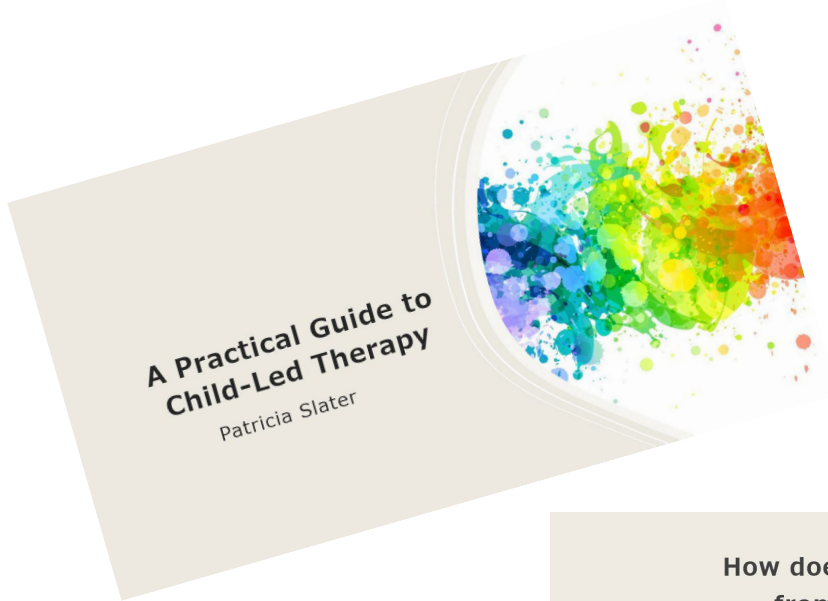
- I then interviewed colleagues that are currently utilizing child-led therapy in their practice
- I inquired
  - How did you learn about child-led therapy?
  - What learners have you found have success with this therapy?
  - What have you found makes implementing child-led therapy easiest?
  - What information would be most important for a teacher to know about child-led therapy?

# Literature Review

- I engaged in a literature review to focus on the research behind child-led therapy
  - "Child-led therapists are able to follow a child's lead and work therapy targets into those interests" (Kirby, 2023).
  - "The brain needs 400 repetitions to develop a new synapse; play helps the brain create a synapse for every 10-20 repetitions" (Elbeltagi, Al-Beltagi, Saeed, & Alhawamdeh, 2023).
  - Child-led therapy is referred to as Pivotal Response Treatment in the ABA field (Gengoux et al, 2019); research conducted on this intervention yielded significant improvement in communication, spontaneous social initiations, and overall functioning (Elbeltagi, Al-Beltagi, Saeed, & Alhawamdeh, 2023).



# Guide and Training Development



## What is child-led therapy?

Child-led therapy is a method of engaging special education students in instruction by immersing targeted goal areas into the preferred activities of a specific child.

"Child-led therapists are able to follow a child's lead and work therapy targets into those interests" (Kirby, 2023).

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## How does child-led therapy differ from play-based therapy?

### CHILD-LED

In child-led therapy, students take the lead in developing the play sequence, materials used, and purpose of the play. Instructors then embed learning targets into the activity.

### PLAY-BASED

In play-based therapy, instructors intentionally choose games, materials, or activities to target learning outcomes with the child, providing structure and direction.

# Guide and Training Development

## When should child-led therapy be considered?

Child-led therapy can be accessed by any learner. However, it may be a helpful approach for learners with exceptionalities including:

- Pathological Demand Avoidance
- Gestalt Language Processing
- Self-Directed Behaviors Consistent with an Autism Diagnosis

## Getting Started

*First and foremost, identify your target skills or knowledge!*

### ENVIRONMENT

- Consider sensory needs: lighting, sound, visual stimuli
- Consider the physical space: too much space may invite running/leaving the area, too little space may not provide adequate room to play

### MATERIALS

- Be intentional with materials!
- Match materials to your target skills/knowledge
- Strategically place/remove materials in the play area

## Goal considerations for child-led therapy

When designing IEP goals/objectives, be cognizant of the type of intervention you may wish to implement. Use goal/objective language that lends itself to flexibility of implementation.

1. Child will correctly imitate ten adult motor actions when provided the verbal directive "do this" and a visual model in 4/5 opportunities across three data collections.

vs.

2. Child will spontaneously imitate adult actions (motor or with objects) two times in a thirty-minute observation period across three data collections.

## Implementation

1. Invite the student into the play space intentionally designed with your selected materials
2. Provide wait time for the student to explore the materials and become engaged
3. Determine how you can embed target areas into their play
4. Engage, model, invite!
5. Note data

*If the child does not start playing after a few moments, consider playing with the materials yourself as you continually observe for their engagement. Keep it light and fun!*

# Guide and Training Development

## Data Collection

Pursuant to your goal/objective mastery criteria, develop data collection instruments to easily capture skills during child-led therapy sessions. This may include:

- Tally marks
- Anecdotal notes
- Circling +/-
- The use of specialty tools such as timers or click counters
- Co-treating! Work with a colleague to alternate engagement and observation



## Examples of Materials and Targeted Skills



1. Counting
2. Motor imitation
3. Finger isolation
4. Waiting
5. Functional Communication (More)

## Examples of Materials and Targeted Skills



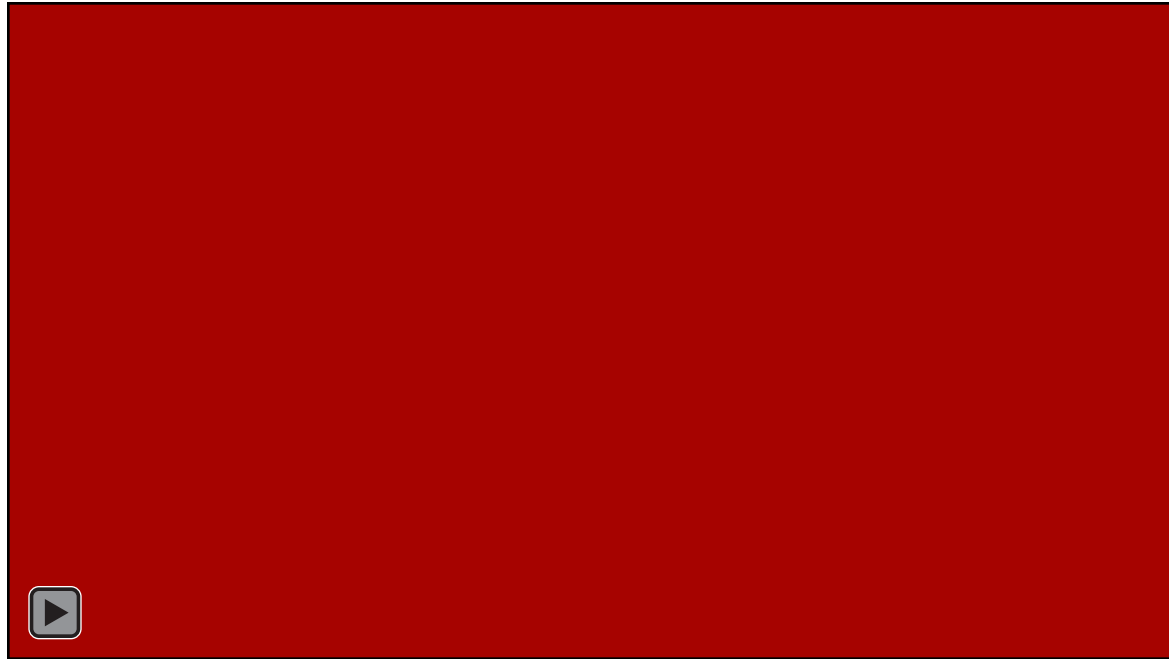
1. Vocabulary (Animals)
2. Environmental Sounds in play (animal noises)
3. Put in and take out (animals in barn, on tractor, etc.)
4. Open and shut (doors)
5. Positional words (on top, next to, in front of, etc.)
6. Motor imitation
7. Early academics: colors, counting, etc.

## Examples of Materials and Targeted Skills



1. Counting
2. Number Identification
3. Addition/Subtraction
4. Money Values
5. Activities of Daily Living; Shopping
6. Giving vs. Taking

# Guide and Training Development



- I recorded a training presentation for ease of sharing and am in the process of finalizing training activities to engage with my building staff at the start of the coming school year!

# Next Steps

- Complete the training activities for the start of the school year.
- Continue to develop a catalog of materials and possible targeted skills.
- Consider creating video models of implementing child-led therapy.