Teaching Appropriate Social Skills to Adults with Developmental Disabilities Using a Modified Educational Board Game

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my grandmother, who supported me from elementary school to college. I know she would have loved to see this finished.

1932 ~ 2017
Abstract

Adults with developmental disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder or Down syndrome, often experience difficulties engaging in appropriate social interaction. These individuals may struggle when participating in conversations, social language skills and/or interpreting and responding to social cues. These difficulties in turn affect an individual’s ability to navigate social spaces like shops without someone to assist him or her. Improving communication skills can lead to a better quality of life and possibly more independence for adults with developmental disabilities. This thesis project was the development of a social skills board game using a modified version of the game Cranium Cadoo®. Board games, like Cranium Cadoo®, were identified as a desired activity within a day program for adults with developmental disabilities. The board game mixes social skills questions and roleplays with general questions to keep participants interested, and provides learning opportunities as well as positive reinforcement mediated by the opportunity to progress in the game. The game simultaneously gives participants a cooperative space to practice social behaviours such as turn taking, asking for help, and helping others. The limitations of this thesis project included motivating participants to begin the game if it is not a desired activity and the potential for cheating. This thesis can be used as a model for people who work with adults with developmental disabilities to create their own social skills board game.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The term developmental disability (DD) encompasses a range of conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down Syndrome, Fragile X syndrome and intellectual disability (Developmental Disabilities, 2015). According to Developmental Services Ontario, a common feature of DD is a deficiency in social skill and appropriate social interaction (“What is a Developmental Disability?”, 2016). People with DD may struggle with initiating or holding conversation (Nuernberger, Ringdahl, Vargo, Crumpecker & Gunnarsson, 2013), social language skills (Martin et al., 2017), interpreting, and responding to social cues (Chung, Han, Shin, & Renshaw, 2016). The development of these social-based skills can improve an individual’s quality of life (Nuernberger, Ringdahl, Vargo, Crumpecker & Gunnarsson, 2013).

The teaching of social skills is especially important for adults with DD. Adults with DD will engage in more daily social interactions as they potentially enter a more independent living situation (Nuernberger, Ringdahl, Vargo, Crumpecker & Gunnarsson, 2013). Learning how to initiate conversation and respond to basic social cues in daily life can allow individuals with DD more freedom to travel, shop and attend appointments without the help of a caregiver or staff. The acquisition of basic social skills is therefore an asset to the well-being and independence of adults with DD.

When preparing to teach educational material to any population, regardless of age or ability, it is important to find what can make the content engaging. Creating more engaging content can help with anyone’s participation and attention levels. A game-based model is an especially interesting way to teach, and has been shown to accelerate the learning process (Charlton, Williams & McLaughlin, as cited by Malinverni et al., 2017). A board-game can also simultaneously teach content and improve interactional skills like turn-taking (Montenegro & Greenhill, 2015). An educational board game that uses both the content as well as participation in the game itself to help improve social skills is a possible way to engage individuals with developmental disabilities on content they may be bored with or uninterested in. Even if individuals playing the game do not learn from the educational content, they will still be practicing collaborative behaviours like turn-taking. Overall, the goal of this thesis was to help adults with developmental disabilities function in daily social situations by developing a board game that will aid in the teaching of social skills.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Value of Social Skills

Individuals with developmental disabilities such as Fragile X Syndrome, Down Syndrome (DS) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often struggle with pragmatic (social) language skills (Martin et al., 2017). For example, a central feature of ASD is a deficit in social skills (Nuernberger, Ringdahl, Vargo, Crumpecker & Gunnarsson, 2013). These researchers (2013) state that individuals with ASD have difficulty interacting with others around them, particularly engaging in conversation and initiating interactions. Chung, Han, Shin, and Renshaw (2016) in their study of an online game for teaching facial cues to individuals with ASD note that a deficit in the ability to interpret and respond to social cues is a critical issue for people with ASD. Chung et al. express that individuals with ASD face many challenges in later adolescence when attempting to build interpersonal relationships, functioning in the workplace and participating within the community due to a deficiency in social skills. Despite these challenges, Bellini, Peters, Benner, and Hopf (2007) as cited by Nuernberger et al. (2013) found that few children diagnosed with ASD were given proper social skills training.

Social Skills for Adults with Developmental Disabilities

The need for social skills training only increases as individuals with DD age. Nuernberger and colleagues point out in their study of a roleplay training package to teach non-vocal conversation skills to adults with ASD that as people with DD move into more independent situations such as employment or new living arrangements, they will need to engage in more social interactions in order to be independent. Roessler, Brolin, and Johnson as cited by Nuernberger et al. also found that students with DD that had rated higher in social skills by teachers were more likely to succeed in living independently and engage in post-secondary employment.

Walton and Ingersoll (2012) conducted a literature review of multiple methods of teaching social skills to people with DD. They list video modeling, peer-mediated teaching, behavioural teaching and structured teaching as some established social skill interventions. In video modelling, the learner watches a video of an adult, peer or him/herself conducting the behaviour correctly. This method is derived from social learning theory. Walton and Ingersoll (2012) indicate that video-modelling requires more research, as findings are limited but promising.

Peer-mediated teaching is a method that involves teaching typically developing peers strategies on interacting with individuals with ASD. Involving peers is thought to be beneficial in fostering inclusion in school settings and give individuals with ASD multiple potential models for social skills. Walton and Ingersoll suggest that this type of strategy is most effective in an integrated school settings. The main limitation of this intervention is that most studies only involve one individual, and are not easily generalizable to adult populations. Behavioural interventions utilize the concepts of reinforcement and punishment.

Behavioural interventions can be used in multiple settings, structured or naturalistic, and typically involves a prompt to perform a behaviour and a reward of a tangible item or praise. If the behaviour is not correctly performed, the reward is withheld and the individual is corrected. Walton and Ingersoll state that the studies that they evaluated show that this type of intervention can increase appropriate social initiation in adolescents with ASD and intellectual disabilities. They also identify that a major limitation of these procedures is that they rely heavily on verbal communication which may be inappropriate for individuals for profound intellectual disabilities.

Structured teaching is a style of teaching that includes a comprehensive assessment of strengths and weaknesses, developing an individualized learning plan that targets their strengths.
Walton and Ingersoll state that these programs can have positive effects on several social behaviours. A major limitation in the literature that Walton and Ingersoll indicated was that most studies only had a simple pre-test measures and it was difficult to see if the change in behaviour was due to other factors. Overall, the researchers recommended more research into these methods, as well as more research regarding the development of alternative methods of social skills teaching.

**Games as a Learning Model**

A game-based intervention has been shown to accelerate the learning process in general populations (Charlton, Williams & McLaughlin, 2017). Malinverni et al. (2017) in their study of inclusive game design approaches for children with ASD state that game-based interventions reduce the need for supplementary rewards by building reinforcement into the game itself through the earning of game points or moving forward. Malinverni and colleagues also note that the use of games increases participation and cooperation with completing the task.

Tripiana-Barbosa, Andressa and Souza (2015) conducted a study on teaching reading and writing to adults with DD. They created a board game that included educational elements. The participant rolls a die and lands on a square that requires a reading or writing task to be completed. When the participant correctly performs the task, they were rewarded with both advancement in the game as well as stars. Punishments such as missing a turn were lightly used to avoid a decrease in interest. Tripiana-Barbosa and colleagues state that the use of a game contributed to motivation, and generated greater interest in the content being learned.

Montenegro and Greenhill (2015) state that the use of board games as a learning tool may offer the opportunity to learn about a specific topic while simultaneously improving perception skills, reasoning and social interaction. Montenegro and Greenhill created a board game for adults with developmental disabilities that teaches the concept of human rights. Their study implicated that the active learning of the board game encouraged the participants to maintain focus on the task for the required amount of time, and made the learning of the content more appealing and engaging. Results of a study conducted by Wiersma (2011) that evaluated various teaching models for teaching human rights to individuals with DD suggest that additional skills such as turn taking, sequencing, forced choice and counting may be learned while participating in the game.

**Social Skills Board Games**

Foxx, McMorrow and Schloss (1983) designed a board game using an adapted form of the game “Sorry” with the inclusion of special cards that stated a social scenario and elicited a response of what the player would do in that situation. If the socially appropriate response was given, the player could move around on the board. This set of rules provided reinforcement for correct response by allowing the game to progress. Foxx and colleagues also mention that during viewings of the video-taped sessions, there was a corresponding increase on social behaviours that were not previously targeted. Examples of these unexpected behaviours included spontaneous conversation, offering to move pieces for others, asking others for help moving pieces and helping others count the amount of spaces there were to move. The researchers explain that the reason for this phenomenon was most likely that participation in the game itself was a cooperative social situation where interactional behaviour was socially reinforced. Additionally, Lalli, Pinter-Lalli, Mace, and Murphy (1991) note that follow-up data of this intervention over an 18-month period showed continuous improvement after the training was completed.
Chapter III: Format and Methodology

A functional and educational board game has been designed and created for use with adults with developmental disabilities (DD) who have the capacity to learn basic skills, are able to engage in written or spoken content at a minimal level, can perform basic tasks with or without prompts, have the ability to understand and comply with basic game rules presented written or verbally. The board game has been based on the gameplay mechanics of Cranium Cadoo®. This board game was chosen due to observations of adults with developmental disabilities within a day program expressing a desire to play Cranium Cadoo®. It was also chosen over other board games due to its general educational elements.

Cranium Cadoo® is a two to four player game with the goal to place four tokens in a row on a game board. In order to place a token, a SOLO or COMBO card must be drawn. SOLO cards have true/ false or multiple choice questions, and a correct answer will allow the player drawing the card to place a token. COMBO cards will have all players participating. These cards can have the main player acting out a situation or action with other players guessing what is happening, or a task like drawing an object while other players watch and try to figure out what it is. If another player can correctly guess the action or drawing, they can place a token on the board with the main player.

The game being made was modified to teach and reinforce social skills. This game was designed for adults with developmental disabilities to be used in a day program environment. An instructional pamphlet on the use of the board game as well as instructions for gameplay is available in Appendix A. A visual guide to the games contents is in Appendix B. A sample set of social skills questions is available in Appendix C.

Materials

This board game is a modified version of Cranium Cadoo®. The modified board game will contain the original foldable cardboard game board, seven sets of six coloured plastic tokens, a pad of blank paper, pencil, moldable clay, one-minute timer, decoder mask (for answers of original game questions), 50 SOLO cards (multiple choice or true/false questions) and 50 COMBO (roleplays, charades and drawing challenges) cards. A total of 15 of these SOLO and COMBO cards will be re-laminated with a different piece of paper over the original question, writing in a social skill question instead. The box that the game is contained in will contain a pamphlet explaining benefits and uses as well as the rules of the game (Appendix A).

Setup

The game board, once taken out of the box, is unfolded and placed onto flat surface, ideally a table. The SOLO and COMBO card decks are taken out and set aside. The timer, paper, pencil, die and decoder mask are taken out and set aside. Each player will choose his or her token colour (options being pink, blue, orange or green) and set them beside them. The original game suggests that the youngest player will go first and roll the die to choose their first card and begin the game, which is also used in the modified game.

Gameplay

Cranium Cadoo® is a game that can be played with 2-4 players. The goal of Cranium Cadoo® is to get a line of four tokens on the game board by answering questions or completing tasks. SOLO cards are completed by one player alone and, if answered correctly, allow the player to place a token on the board. In the modified version, SOLO cards will contain multiple choice or true or false questions surrounding social skills, which will be mixed in with the original cards. COMBO cards are completed by multiple players, with the drawer of the card making or acting something that others must guess. If someone guesses correctly the original
player lays a token and the player who guessed correctly lays a token on top of that. In the modified version, COMBO cards will contain roleplays of different social situations and the acting out of social cues mixed in with the original cards. Depending on the card, materials such as paper or clay may be needed and are included within the game. All cards must be completed within a minute with the guidance of a timer.

During the game, players are expected to engage with their own questions as well as others, and practice turn-taking and collaborative behaviours while simultaneously interacting with educational social skills content.

**Observational Measures**

While there are no concrete measures to track heightened social skills included in the game due to the difficulty of rating in a day program environment, there are observational measures that can be used. Successful teaching of social skills can be shown with noticeable rises in collaborative behaviours such as turn-taking and asking for help during the game, or proper modeling in concepts taught within the game questions (e.g. proper greetings, interactional skills).

A different way to measure the success of this game model would be observations of how engaging the game itself is to its players. This can be seen through how many participants volunteer to play, how many keep playing until the end of the game, and how engaged they are during the course of the game (e.g. participating in questions, using attentive posture, helping and listening to others).
Chapter IV: Results

A modified board game was produced that incorporated social skills education to be used with adults with developmental disabilities. Images of the board game and all materials (Appendix B) were provided as a visual guideline for how the board game was set up. An informative instruction pamphlet (Appendix A) was developed to include with the game. This pamphlet consists of the rules of the game as well as a rationale for the creation of the modified game. The modification of the board game itself was made simpler by use of a physical copy of the original game.

The goal of the game is to get a line of four tokens on the game board by answering questions or completing tasks. The roll of a die determines whether the card drawn is a SOLO or COMBO card. SOLO cards are completed by one player alone and, if answered correctly, allow the player to place a token on the board. COMBO cards are completed by multiple players, with the drawer of the card making or acting something that others must guess. If someone guesses correctly the original player lays a token and the player who guessed correctly lays a token on top of that. Depending on the card, materials such as paper or clay may be needed and are included within the game. All cards must be completed within a minute with the guidance of a one minute timer. All the original items were kept in the modification of the game, such as the timer, pad of paper and game pieces. The only change to the original game was the creation of new cards with social skills elements. These modified cards consisted of multiple choice or true or false questions about social scenarios and charades surrounding social situations for the player to act out.

The modified board game provides a creative way to teach and reinforce appropriate social skills for adults with developmental disabilities. Placing tokens on the board are intended to motivate players and encourage them to think about the social questions they are being asked. The game design will also simultaneously provide players with an ongoing social interaction by playing the game with others, therefore reinforcing other skills such as turn taking and body language cues.
Chapter V: Discussion

People with developmental disabilities often struggle with social cues, interactions and rules. It is important for their quality of life to learn some rudimentary social skills to help them interact with those around them. This is especially true for adults with developmental disabilities who may be trying to gain more independence and are more likely to interact with other people more often. These scenarios can range from an independent trip to the grocery store to a doctor’s appointment where they need to self-advocate. A board game has specifically shown to be an effective way to reinforce social skills both within the content of the game and while interacting with other people playing (Foxx, McMorrow & Schloss, 1983). It is also important to consider a way to teach these skills that engages an individual as well as a way of teaching with minimal reading.

A minimal reading approach can accommodate individuals that cannot read without assistance or have low reading comprehension. In scenarios where an individual cannot read at a basic level, it would be beneficial for a teacher or staff to be supervising the gameplay so that they can aid the participant. A modified version of the board game Cranium Cadoo® was created that included both original questions from the board game and questions pertaining to social skills. Original questions from the game were kept in order to keep the content of the game varied and avoid participants becoming disinterested in the learning content.

Throughout the creation of the game, the strength of board games as a teaching model was explored, as well as the value of motivation in the teaching of a skill or concept. This format will hopefully engage participants, accelerate learning, and teach collaborative and social skills effectively. It can

It is expected that both collaborative behaviours practiced during the game and social skills taught within the game content will increase over time.

Strengths

A major strength of the design of this project is that board games have been observed to be a desirable activity among adults with developmental disabilities. Integrating a learning component into a desired activity can increase engagement. Modifying an educational board game to include social skills questions creates a multi-educational format. There are general knowledge questions from the original game mixed in with the social skills questions for variation, which ask simple questions about spelling, history, science and more. Another strength of this game is its ability to reinforce social skills in multiple ways. It does this by giving participants exposure to social situations due to the multi-player nature of the game. Even if players do not digest any information given through the questions and scenarios, they are active in a social situation that may require turn-taking, asking for help and collaborating with other players. This may facilitate conversations or friendships between players. There is a potential for participants to not take the game seriously, either by cheating or by not taking questions seriously. However, even if the participant is not playing the game well, it is still possible for them to learn interactional skills while playing with others.

Another strength of this model is its generalizability. Although the project focuses on teaching social skills to adults with developmental disabilities, this format can be adapted for other educational material, such as teaching other skills like personal hygiene or emotional identification. Teaching these skills would require relatively small changes to the project, which would be the writing of different modified questions.
Challenges/Limitations

There are some challenges associated with this teaching style. A major factor is motivating participants to play. A game-based model would not work well with forced play and participants would learn little unless they want to play a game in the first place. Individuals who already have higher social skills may be more likely to play the game, while those who would benefit most may not want to play with others or play a social skills focused game.

Another limitation with this interactive board game approach is that individuals who are non-verbal will most likely not be able to participate fully in the game. It would also be difficult for individuals with no reading comprehension to read the questions themselves. This model is intended for individuals who have the capacity to learn and perform basic skills, can interact with either written or spoken simple content, can perform tasks with or without prompts and have the ability to understand basic rules and instructions and can comply with them. This eliminates some individuals with developmental disabilities from benefiting from the game.

The lack of data collection is also a limitation of the program. Due to time constraint, data could not be collected. This means that the efficacy of the created game cannot be indicated. Insufficient staff training could also be an issue. If staff does not know how to appropriately monitor the game, then the reinforcing properties of the game could be undermined. For example, if the staff member reinforces at the wrong times or punishes participants for being wrong, the game could quickly become less motivating.

Multilevel Challenges

At the client level, the variety of diagnoses and behaviours of potential participants may interfere with the efficacy of the game. Due to the fact that the game requires the display of basic rule following skills, an individual who is frequently non-compliant may not benefit from trying the game if they do not become engaged. Another example is that an individual that is blind may not enjoy the reinforcing properties of the advancement in the game and become disengaged easier.

At the program level, a lack of time to complete the game could be a challenge. The game is listed as taking approximately 20 minutes, but individuals with developmental disabilities may need extra time to complete the tasks in the game. Depending on the environment that the game is being played in, there may not be enough time to complete the game.

At the organizational level, understaffing can affect the efficacy of the game. If there is not available staff on hand to mediate the game, then the potential for the game to be misplayed is increased. As well, improper staff training could mean staff may monitor the game incorrectly and therefore lower the efficacy of the teaching elements of the game.

Ethical Considerations

There are a few potential ethical considerations with the use of this board game. If the game is left in a common area at a group home or day program for adults with developmental disabilities, it is possible for participants to take the board game and play it without supervision. There is then a potential to play the game incorrectly and therefore diminish the usefulness of the game. There is also a potential for questions to become too personal and distress participants depending on the content, such as a question asking what to do when someone does not want to be friends. There is also the possibility for misinterpretation of questions, and may lead to physical contact that is inappropriate to the environment. For example, if the question asks to roleplay asking for a hug, a participant may physically hug another individual, which could be
inappropriate in a group home environment. There is potential for this game to be misused and cause emotional distress, and it is recommended that it be utilized with appropriate caution.

**Practical Applications**

Practically, this thesis can be used as a model for those who work with adults with developmental disabilities to create their own social skills board games for their own use in day programs, residential programs or other programs for adults with DD. Day programs may have the modified game as an option during free time, with a staff helping to supervise, or can be a facet of a games/recreation room in a residential program. Professionals may know about this project may use it in their own practices, possibly playing the game with their own clients with developmental disabilities.

**Further Implications**

This project provides some information regarding games as learning tools and suggests implications of this information in the teaching social skills to adults with developmental disabilities. It can also be used to stimulate more research regarding board games as teaching models, as there are not many studies of the use of board games for teaching.

Further research may include replication of the board game using data collection methods, comparing the success of this board game with another social skills board game, or the creation of a board game that teaches different skills that follows the same method as this thesis. Recommended data collection methods could be naturalistic recording of defined pro-social behaviours pre-test and post-test, or a skills-based assessment like a social skills quiz in a pre-test and post-test.
References


## Why use a social skills game?

It can help in multiple ways!

| Playing a game with educational content can help people learn about the topic in a fun and engaging way, and test their knowledge about the subject. | When people play any sort of game with others, they can learn how to start conversations, cooperate with others, take turns and ask for help. |

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## How can this board game be used to help adults with developmental disabilities?

- Played during free time in day programs
- Kept in a recreation room for free use
- Used as a fun teaching tool by staff

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## Do I need to be trained to be able to use this game in my program?

No! This game does not need you to know how to take data or use any special behavioural skills: all you need are the rules of the game!

Players are naturally rewarded for correct answers by placing more tokens on the board, and the social skills they may learn by playing with others are naturally rewarded!
Cranium Cadoo® Instructions

Set-up

1. Take out the game board, SOLO and COMBO cards, tokens, pad of paper and pencil, timer, clay, decoder mask and dice and set them all on the table
2. Unfold the game board
3. Each player chooses a colour of token to use

Your Turn

1. Roll the dice to see if you answer a SOLO card or COMBO card
2. Pick up your card and read it out loud, and then do what the card tells you to do
3. When you’re ready to start, flip the timer and start the challenge
4. If you beat the timer, place a token
5. Pass the dice to the person on your left

How to Win

1. Be the first person to get four tokens in a row!
Appendix B: Images of Game Contents

Figure 1-3: The contents of the game

Figure 4: Tokens, paper, dice, clay, pencil, timer and decoder mask
Figure 5-6: Samples of solo and combo cards, with and without decoder mask

Figure 7: Game board with sample gameplay with tokens
## Appendix C: Social Skills Questions

### SOLO Questions (Multiple Choice)

**Q:** When should you hug someone?
1. When meeting someone new
2. After asking if it is okay
3. When someone has not noticed you

**A:** After asking if it is okay

**Q:** What should you do if someone wants to sit with other people?
1. Follow them around
2. Tell a staff member
3. Find someone else to sit with

**A:** Find someone else to sit with

**Q:** What should you do if someone is sad?
1. Ask if they are okay
2. Hug them without asking
3. Ignore them

**A:** Ask if they are okay

**Q:** What should you do if someone tells your secret?
1. Tell their secret to someone else
2. Tell a staff member
3. Hit them

**A:** Tell a staff member

**Q:** What should you do if you don’t like someone?
1. Be mean to them
2. Talk about them to other people
3. Try to get along with them

**A:** Try to get alone with them

**Q:** What should you do if you’re upset with someone?
1. Hit them
2. Yell at them
3. Ignore them and do something else

**A:** Ignore them and do something else

### COMBO Questions (Charades)

Act out with someone else...
- A handshake
- Greeting someone
- Solving an argument
- Asking a question
- Asking for help
- Saying hello
- Buying something
- Getting someone else’s attention
- Apologizing
- Getting on a bus
- Cooperating with someone
- Helping someone
- Asking for a hug
- Asking to play a game

Act out feeling...
- Sad
- Angry
- Happy
- Tired
- Frustrated
- Nervous