

# **Exploring social connections in pre-school settings between children labelled with special educational needs and their peers.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a small scale study of the social interactions between six children labelled with special educational needs and their peers in their respective early years settings. Data from play observations, photographs and staff interviews is used to examine the dynamics of the connections that they make with other children. The position of these six children as active agents in making decisions about their peer interactions is highlighted and the ways that this agency is expressed is analysed. By focusing on the personal strategies that the children use to make social connections the findings contribute to the developing understanding of children's relationships within inclusive early years settings. In particular compatible play interests and personalities are identified as significant factors that attract children to one another in this case study. It also emerged that recurrent playmates did not feature consistently in the social exchanges involving this group of children. This factor is considered in the context of it being indicative of the social connections that children labelled with special educational needs pursue. Suggestions for further investigation are proposed and key practice messages offered around developing awareness and facilitation of social connections between children.

**Key Words:** special educational needs; early years; friendships; social interaction; child agency.

## **Introduction**

It is widely accepted that young children's experiences at pre-school contribute fundamentally to their social development (Dunn 1993; Corsaro 2005) and build their confidence in exercising some control in an environment outside of their home (Kington, Gates and Sammons 2013). Consequently early years settings can be seen to function as 'socialisation agencies' (Monaco and Pontecorvo 2010, 193) in which children can: explore their interest in one another (Kington, Gates and Sammons 2013); learn how to respond to other children's idiosyncrasies (de Groot Kim 2010); develop participation skills (Lillivist 2010; Monaco and Pontecorvo 2010); and negotiate their first friendships (Dunn 1993; Sebanc et al 2007; Van Hoogdalem et al. 2013). However, for some children these experiences remain elusive and unpredictable (Deegan 1996) with a potential impact on their well-being (Engle, McElwain and Lasky 2011) and ongoing capacity to adjust to social situations (Quinn and Hennessey 2010).

Past research often identifies children labelled with special educational needs<sup>1</sup> (SEN) as being liable to encounter difficulties and complications when socialising with their peers. Guralnick found that young children categorised with 'developmental delay' faced gradual exclusion from play interactions with their peers over time and assumed a significantly subordinate role in any short term exchanges (Guralnick 1999). Hestenes and Carroll's generally concluded that children labelled with 'pre-school developmental delay' engaged in less social exchanges with their non-disabled peers although such interactions might be more frequent if adult support was available (Hestenes and Carroll 2000). Other studies have found

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<sup>1</sup> The language used in this paper referring to children and young people has been informed by the social model of disability. When labels are used they are connected to the phrase 'labelled with' or 'identified with' in order to emphasise their socially constructed nature. The term 'disabled child' is also used as this is the description preferred by the Disability Movement and self-advocacy groups. This draws from the social model definition of disability as the social structures and attitudes that exclude people with impairments (Oliver 1996).

that young disabled children in pre-school may be more frequently overlooked as play partners by their peers (Diamond, Le Furgy and Blass 1993; Skinner, Buysse and Bailey 2004) and a connection has been drawn between children's unorthodox or unpredictable behaviour and such rejection (Lindsey 2002; Odom et al. 2006). Dyson (2005) attributes the lack of social connections to a mismatch of social and play competencies rather than negative attitude towards disability or difference. Correspondingly a further suggestion is that the development of friendships for children identified with SEN depends on their partners being at a comparable developmental level (Skinner, Buysse and Bailey 2004; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009) although some studies remain sceptical about the stability of any peer relationships for this group of children (Guralnick et al. 2006).

Whilst a large number of studies focus on the problematic nature of the development of relationships between disabled and non-disabled children, others focus on the factors and facets of the friendships that do flourish (Webster and Carter 2007). Such research, often drawing from a socio-cultural perspective, has sought to gain an understanding of emerging relationships by considering factors beyond the impact of the child's perceived developmental difficulties or deficits (de Groot Kim 2010; Bal and Radke 2013). The influence of children's preferences and the processes affecting their choice of peer relationships have been the focus not only of research with young people in inclusive secondary schools (Bentley 2008; Naraian 2011; Rossetti 2011, 2012) but also in the small number of studies looking at the social connections between much younger children in preschools. De Groot Kim's (2005) case study of one child's experience in an inclusive nursery found that he was active in selecting his own playmates but only when free of the constraints of his individualised adult support and activity programme. Dietrich's more extensive investigation involving six friendship pairs of disabled and non-disabled children

identified key components that underpinned such partnerships: similarities in play styles; shared enjoyment of particular activities; and the fact that ‘the friends identified needs in each other and were able to address those needs’ (Dietrich 2005, 213).

This paper aims to contribute to the developing understanding of the early relationships between young children with and without the label special educational needs in their preschool settings. The focus will be on two of the four variables that Meyer proposed shape such social connections: the disabled child’s own repertoire of communication and interaction in play situations; and the skills, attitudes and expectations of the disabled child’s peers (Meyer 2001). The study concentrates primarily on the social interactions between six children labelled with special educational needs (SEN) and their non-labelled peers within their pre-school, rather than the physical organisation of the setting or the impact of adult support. Following Corsaro’s emphasis that children are not passive recipients of their surrounding culture but co-contributors in its ongoing production (Corsaro 2005), this research recognises that children labelled with SEN, can be as active in decision making and choice taking as their peers (Nind, Flewitt and Payler 2010). By fore-fronting the children’s agency the aim was to consider the more ‘optimistic’ question of the dynamics of their successful and emerging peer relationships as opposed to concentrating on the barriers to their making social connections or friendships (Rossetti 2011).

## **Methodology**

The methodology was trialled during a pilot study in a single nursery school (Parry 2014) and extended in this research to three different pre-school settings in the south-east of England. Setting A was a combined nursery school and children’s centre located in an urban city environment. As designated specialist provision a third of the 110 places at the nursery were allocated for children labelled with SEN, a higher proportion than is typically found in

nurseries in the mainstream sector. Setting B was a pre-school offering places for up to 52 children per session aged between three and four years old, located in a large town with a diverse multi-ethnic population. Similarly Setting C offered pre-school provision in the same town as Setting B but in a different neighbourhood. It provided for up to 60 children between three and four years old, around 20 children per session. Both Setting B and Setting C had considerable experience of including disabled children and children labelled with SEN in their provision but the number of children identified with additional needs attending at any time was usually below five.

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the researcher's university. This followed scrutiny of the protocols for seeking ongoing consent from parents (on behalf of their children) and staff to participate in the study. Two families in each of the three settings agreed for their children to take part. All six children had been identified by their setting as being at 'Early Action Plus' within the SEN Code of Practice (DfES 2001)<sup>2</sup> and had been attending the setting for at least two terms. A summary of the participants' descriptive information is provided in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 near here)

Throughout the study Lee, Karen, John, Sam, Yusef and Dan were referred to as the 'lead' rather than the 'target' or 'focus' children, in order to be sensitive to 'the power

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<sup>2</sup> All early years settings in England were required to follow this Code, which set out a graduated process of assessment of special educational need. Children identified at the 'Early Action Plus' stage in the framework would be receiving external support in addition to their pre-school provision in order to meet their educational requirements

dynamics of the research' and emphasise that they were not 'passive objects of clinical interest' (Nind, Flewitt and Payler (2010, 667). The research methodology was adapted from the 'In the Picture' approach developed by Paige-Smith and Rix (2011) in their study of home-based early intervention programmes for pre-school children with SEN.

Acknowledging the 'Mosaic Approach' (Clark 2004) and drawing from the 'listening to children' paradigm, 'In the Picture' aimed to foreground the child's story 'and include a narrative that would assist in the understanding of the child's experienced world' (Matthews and Rix 2013, 242). This potential, to focus on very young children's agency and recognize that 'all children and young people-whatever their communication and/or cognitive impairment-have something to communicate' (Morris 2003, 346), made 'In the Picture' an appropriate methodological framework for this research. The key components used were: recording observations of children's peer interactions as a first person narrative; using photographs to make a visual record of the observed interactions; and sharing the visual record with the child and other people involved at the end of the observation session.

In each of the three settings a series of four observations were carried out with each child during a week-long research period. These sessions were designated times within the nursery routine when the children engaged in free undirected play which involved open access to both indoor and outdoor activities. By taking this focus the research acknowledged that such play interactions act as platforms upon which children's collaborations and peer relationships become established (Svinth 2013; Engdhal 2012; Bertran 2014). The observation strategy was to describe any interaction involving the lead child and at least one peer whether or not an adult was present or subsequently joined the interaction. The observations were recorded on a small hand-held Dictaphone with the researcher describing

any social exchange between children as it happened using a first person narrative. The following example is a transcript of an observation for one lead child:

‘The boy comes and drives around the track I’m building. He’s got a train. He points to the train. He drives the train near to mine and knocks it off the track. I hold my hand out. We touch hands. I touch his train and then start to drive my train along the track towards his’. (Recorded observation of Yusef)

As Paige-Smith and Rix assert, using the first person narrative to record observations is not an attempt to reflect ‘the child’s truth’ more closely but ‘a tool for engaging with their activity’ (Paige-Smith and Rix 2011, 30). All observations inevitably contain an element of subjectivity (Rolfe and Emmett 2010) but by using the first person narrative the aim was to help the observer be more focused on what the lead children was doing during interactions with their peers rather than interpreting events. Detailed observation is recognised as being central to listening to young children, particularly those with learning difficulties or communication impairments (Clark 2005; Dickens 2011) and so using the first person narrative represented an attempt by the researcher to be a more effective and attentive listener.

In conjunction with the narrative descriptions, photographs were taken by the researcher capturing the lead children’s social exchanges whilst they were being observed. At the end of each observation, time was allocated to share these photographs with the lead children in a quiet area of their nursery or pre-school room using a small digital picture screen. These ‘sharing’ sessions were facilitated by a practitioner who knew the child well whilst the researcher acted as an observer noting the child’s reaction to each photograph shown and audio-recording their vocal responses. Reviewing the photographs provided the

lead children with the opportunity to make connections between the researcher's activity and their own experience (Smith, Duncan and Marshall 2005) as well as enabling them to participate in research by giving their own responses to the phenomenon being investigated (Stephenson 2009). At the end of each week semi-structured interviews were conducted with key staff members including the practitioner who had facilitated the photograph sharing sessions, exploring their perception of the lead children's peer relationships in nursery.

The data from the observations, photograph sharing sessions and staff interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis derived from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Initially 'open' descriptive codes were used to break down and organise the data according to categories of interaction for example: play solely with recurrent partners; interaction with recurrent partners with other children joining in; interaction by lead child with others; and attempted interaction by another child. At this stage, as the focus of this study was child to child interactions, any observations involving adult interjection were shelved and not included in further thematic analysis. Deeper analysis of these open codes identified connected common subthemes across the range of data regarding the lead children's encounters with peers, for example using toys to engage other children and factors influencing choice of playmates. The findings are presented as a collective case study and reported under subsections drawn from the second stage data analysis themes. As a small scale study the research makes no attempt to generalize findings to other contexts. However the intention is that the information may encourage reflection on the peer dynamics in any inclusive early years setting from 'the perspectives of the children who are involved in the relationships' (Dietrich 2005, 213).

## **Findings- the lead children making social connections**

### *Using toys and activities to engage other children*

A theme to emerge from the study was the use of specific toys by the lead children as props to initiate play and social contact with other children. The chosen toy was often offered, such as Lee holding out a cup to a playmate, or positioned close by, such as Dan moving small trains next to someone playing with the track. Sometimes there was more the subtle use of demonstration by the lead child to develop the engagement with a peer:

‘A girl’s watching what we’re doing. I stand them all up in a line. A girl comes and gives an animal to me. I don’t look at her. I knock all the animals down. A girl picks up the horse makes a horse sound and drops it down on top of my pile. I hold on to lots of the animals and wiggle them around on the table’. (Recorded observation of Yusef)

Some of the toys used by the lead children to initiate play with others appeared to have particular significance. This was demonstrated by their animated reactions, often reaching out, smiling, laughing or vocalising when seeing the toys in the photographs during the ‘sharing’ sessions. Staff interviewed confirmed that the particular toys were amongst the lead children’s favourites suggesting the strong social significance of their offers to ‘share’ the toys with others. However staff reflected that using favourite toys to initiate social connections had emerged as mutual understanding between the lead children and their peers grew:

‘Sam himself has actually come round a little bit more to sharing with them, where there was a time where he would just not let . . . if there was 10 balloons there he’d have all ten...’ (Staff interview from Sam’s group)

It was also evident from the observations that the lead children recurrently initiated interactions with their peers in certain activity areas, for example: the soft play room for Lee; the water play area for Dan; and the garden for James. This may have been because the lead children were more liable to choose to go to these areas as they were their favoured activities but some staff suggested that there could be a social dimension to the choices that the children made:

‘He obviously enjoys the animals and books. I don’t know whether that’s because it is something he likes or whether it’s nice for him to use them with a group of children if that makes sense.’ (Yusef’s key-worker interview).

Significantly the most extended observations of peer interactions for all the lead children revolved around these preferred play locations and pursuits. Social interactions with their peers outside these familiar activities appeared to be much more fleeting.

### ***Using routines to engage other children***

The lead children also appeared to use personal routines to engage with their peers for example James often enticed others to chase him whereas Sam regularly positioned himself in the centre of a group of children who were already playing together. Karen’s strategy to start an interaction was dropping toys or objects down in front of other children as they were moving around the outside play area. Staff in her setting had also noticed this recurrent approach and its social intent:

‘...sometimes she knows if I behave like that, or I behave in that way that the children will come and support me and help me.’ (Staff interview from Karen’s group)

Those working with Dan identified that he tended to resort to spoiling games or taking toys to initiate an exchange and attempt to join in with his peers. They also suggested that this

more forceful social behaviour had an overriding effect on how other children responded to him:

‘...they perhaps find him a bit too much... They’re not quite as accepting and welcoming shall we say’. (Dan’s key worker interview)

However there were indications from the observations that compromise and negotiation were developing aspects of his peer relationships:

‘The boy looks at my train, points at it and I look up. The boy comes over to look at my train and I look at him. Then he goes back to the other train..... The boy goes back to the farmyard box. I put my hand in and he looks at me and I take my hand out then go back to the train box...’ (Recorded observation of Dan)

Otherwise disputes and conflicts as a characteristic of the social exchanges between the lead children and their peers did not emerge as a prevalent theme from the research data.

### ***Keeping control of the exchanges***

The degree of control that the lead children could exert during peer exchanges emerged as a key factor in their sustaining interactions. Whether an interchange was initiated by the lead child or their peers, more prolonged and reciprocal play was most likely to result if the lead child’s agenda was followed, for example:

‘I pick up some more discs and throw them on the floor. A girl comes. She throws me the discs that I’ve got. Waves it around and she throws it as well. I go back to get another disc. I’m looking behind the trolley there’s some more discs. I get it and bring it back. A boy picks up a disc and throws it. I pick up another disc and throw it in the air. I put the discs on the floor’. (Recorded observation of Sam)

In contrast exchanges were often noted to break down if an attempt was made to introduce a toy or activity that differed from the lead child's focus at the time. The apparent significance of remaining in control of exchanges was highlighted during several of the photo-sharing sessions with Yusef, Sam and Lee. These consistently ended prematurely when the other children present began to make their own demands about which photographs to show, prompting the lead children to withdraw from the activity.

The tension between maintaining control and positivity in social exchanges was raised by several staff when interviewed, in particular the perception that some children were attracted into making connections with the lead children because they could dominate the relationship. The reference to the lead children being seen as a 'baby' or being 'mothered' by some peers recurred in several of the interviews and was described as having been an issue for Lee, Sam and Karen. In general staff felt that social connections based around such an unequal dynamic had rarely been a positive experience for the lead child and had required ongoing adult mediation to support the children to adjust their relationships. Significantly during the observations in the settings for this study domination of the lead children in their peer exchanges did not emerge as a key theme, suggesting that such interventions had been largely successful.

### ***Recurrent playmates***

A clear theme within this research was that the majority of the lead children's social exchanges did not consistently involve the same playmates. Notable exceptions to this finding were Lee and Karen who both played recurrently with the same peers: Lee being frequently accompanied in his play by Laura; and Karen by two other girls, Sally and Ashleigh. Lee and Karen's reactions during the feedback photo-sessions suggested the significance of these relationships to them. They touched or vocalised when seeing the pictures of these familiar peers more consistently than for the other photographs that they

were shown. Staff interviewed in Lee and Karen's setting also recognised these particular relationships, recalling that they had been established for several months. These more frequent playmates appeared to be tuned into Lee and Karen's favourite play activities, using such awareness to initiate interactions with these two lead children. For example Laura often engaged with Lee through an opening song or rhyme whereas Sally and Ashleigh would present Karen with a doll or pram whenever she first ventured into the outside area.

One additional finding relating to recurrent playmates emerged during review of the series of photographs taken during the sessions by the researcher. There was pictorial evidence of certain peers who were consistently in the background, watching or playing in the proximity of the lead children. Interviews with the staff showed that they were also aware of these children on the periphery of lead child's play and of the potential role they had in developing more consistent relationships:

'I'm thinking of one boy in particular, he's not very loud but he's not totally, totally quiet but he will often go up to him and try and sort of interact with Sam.' (Sam's key worker interview).

### ***Factors influencing the choice of playmates***

Staff across the settings felt that they had developed some understanding of the 'types' of children that the lead children were drawn towards. For example they felt that Sam preferred boys or children who were established attendees whereas John gravitated towards those peers that chose boisterous or physical play. However those interviewed were also struck by the unpredictable and unexpected nature of the connections. Karen's teacher typified such views when she noted:

‘I don’t know how she does it, particularly with some of the more able mainstream children, or the older mainstream children but she does something, she has something that she connects with, or they connect with her...’(Karen’s teacher interview)

Additionally it was apparent from the observations that children perceived to have the same approaches to communication or similar developmental characteristics were not necessarily drawn to one another. Both Lee and Karen’s recurrent playmates used more conventional language than they did and in Lee’s case they were much more independently mobile and physically active. John, Yusef, Dan and Sam engaged in social exchanges with a varied range of peers in their settings. Clearly the demographic of the children in the settings influenced these choices and connections as their pre-schools did not at the time have a significant number of children labelled with SEN attending. However a strong theme that emerged from the data was that individual personality was an underpinning influence on the social exchanges the lead children explored:

‘Dan is wanting to get into the other children’s space and wanting to be alongside them, or wanting to start speaking and copying their words.’ (Dan’s group staff interview)

‘Naturally whether she had any delays or not I think she’s just naturally a very shy child. If you took everything else away she’d still just be a shy child.’ (Karen’s teacher interview)

## **Discussion**

The pilot study linked to this research highlighted the significance of the decision and choice making of children labelled with SEN with regards to their developing peer relationships (Parry 2014). This extended investigation provides further insight into the ways that such agency is expressed. The importance of maintaining control over the play agenda during

exchanges with peers exemplified the lead children's roles as active rather than passive participants in social interactions (Nind, Flewitt and Payler 2010) and highlighted a level of assertiveness often overlooked by practitioners (de Groot Kim 2005). Additionally the strategies that they used to engage with others appeared to be more intentional and negotiated than the indiscriminate interaction often seen to characterise the exchanges between children labelled with SEN and their playmates (Guralnick et al. 2007).

For the lead children in this study the use of specific toys and physical actions could be regarded as key components of the 'entry strategies' that young children develop when testing and exploring mutual interests during play (Ramsey cited in Bal and Radke 2013). The idiosyncratic routines they utilised, for example Karen dropping toys in the path of other children or Sam sitting amongst a group, also represented personal access rituals used to broker social exchanges (Corsaro 2005; Engdhal 2012). Additionally the lead children appeared to be motivated by the social potential of using larger toys or communal activities (Bertran 2014). As engagement with such shared play activities is connected to development of collaborative activity with peers (Svinth 2011), a clear theme emerging from this study was that all the lead children were beginning to explore these early collaborations albeit at different levels of intensity and intentionality.

Such mutual interest in others' play has also been seen to indicate 'a sense of *we-ness* that, in glimpses, transforms the individuality of an activity and open up the opportunity for children's formation of friendships' (Svinth 2011, 7). The potential for the development of more robust relationships was highlighted in this study particularly in the case of Lee and Karen. However this finding itself raises two further questions: to what extent could such recurrent interactions be indicative of the formation of an ongoing friendship; and, as the majority of lead children in the study did not appear to have recurrent playmates, to what extent does this align with other research suggesting that children labelled with SEN

experience difficulty in sustaining more intimate peer relationships (Guralnick 2006; Guralnick et al. 2007; Webster and Carter 2013)?

Bertran points out that there is some variance amongst researchers about when recurrent play between young children can be indicative of friendships but concludes that reciprocity and 'joint creation of activities' are distinctive elements of being a friend (Bertran 2014, 4). Similarly Dietrich notes that 'a distinguishing factor between friendship and another type of relationship, such as a playmate, is to repeatedly seek one another to spend time engaged in a variety of activities' (Dietrich 2005, 208). In this study both Karen and Lee were consistently observed seeking out and being sought by the same key peers whilst their engagement with these children spanned a range of play activities. Additionally the play with these familiar peers involved the reciprocity, consistent positivity, physical affection and appropriate interpretation of behaviour that further signifies friendships between pre-school children (Odom et al. 2006; Sebanc et al. 2007; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Van Hoogdalem et al. 2013). In particular the provision of help by the lead children's familiar peers seemed to reflect 'a local understanding' that is often found in friendship groups (Rossetti 2011, 31), an understanding which is qualitatively different from other helping relationships in which the motives may be for one child to dominate another (Dyson 2005; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009). On this basis there are strong suggestions that Lee and Karen's recurrent interactions with certain peers could be seen as developing the 'mutuality of friendship' (Engdhal 2012, 86).

The significance of the paucity of recurrent playmates in the social exchanges of the other four lead children is difficult to ascertain in the context of this short term study. Although all the children were active in engaging with a range of their peers in a variety of circumstances, the potential for these connections to develop into more sustained relationships cannot be presumed. However it was apparent that the lead children were drawn

to others to make social exchanges through shared interests and similarities in play styles, factors that Dietrich suggested were key precursors to the friendship pairings in an inclusive nursery (Dietrich 2005). Furthermore Dietrich's study highlighted the importance of compatible personalities between children if they were to develop sustained relationships, a factor that the staff interviewed in this research also identified. Therefore the seemingly indiscriminate social activity of the lead children who had not yet established recurrent playmates could be seen in the context of searching for such compatibility.

The range of social connections apparent in this relatively short term study, from tentative exchanges to some established relationships, also raises the question about what underpins the development of one to the other and adds weight to the call for more longitudinal studies in this area (Webster and Carter 2013). One finding related to this issue that emerged from this study was the significant presence of certain peers who consistently played alongside the lead children without seeking more direct interaction. Rossetti identifies 'initiating time spent together' as being one of the first enactments of friendship towards disabled children undertaken by their peers (Rossetti 2011, 29). Therefore the motives of those children, who were showing such initiative and choosing to take recurrent steps to make a connection, would be an appropriate focus for future investigation.

A final theme to emerge from this study was that the sophistication of play or communication skills of peers did not appear to be an over-riding influence on the lead children's choice of potential playmates. This runs counter to other research in this area (Skinner, Buysse and Bailey 2004; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009) and suggests that the decision making about who to approach for play is likely to be affected by 'a complexity of circumstances of which the children's special educational needs is only one component' (Parry 2014, 20). One of the circumstances highlighted in other research is that children can actively avoid or reject other peers whose behaviour is seen as confrontational or challenging

(Dyson 2005; Odom et al. 2006; Howell, Hauser-Cram and Kersch 2007). This did not emerge as a key theme for the children in this study and even Dan's use of spoiling or refusing to share when engaging with his peers did not result in immediate rejection or breakdown of the exchange. It follows that disregarding such unconventional social exchanges could narrow the study of early peer relationships by failing to acknowledge that 'many friendships, like many marriages, fail to achieve the ideal.' (Kerns 2000, 321).

### **Conclusion-Developing practice**

Whilst the role of the adult was not the focus in this study, the research raised some points to consider when developing support for emerging relationships between children in inclusive settings. Firstly it seems important to develop an awareness of the personal significance of play resources for individual children as they may be central to the social connections that they pursue. Secondly it could be helpful to build an understanding of the particular routines that the children use to engage others and, particularly where these routines might test usual tolerances, re-evaluating the boundaries that shape established adult responses. Finally it is important that practitioners recognise that children labelled with SEN are active in contributing to the relationships they make with their peers. Overlooking the preferences and choices that disabled children make in terms of playmates can lead supporting adults to construct social partnerships for them that will be one-sided and benevolent rather than reciprocal in nature (Rossetti 2012). Overall practitioners should consider the value of stepping back to watch children engage in uninterrupted social exchanges and then pausing to reflect on what these mean. The 'In the Picture' approach utilised in this study could have some real potential to be adapted for practitioners' use. It could support them in reflective practice and in developing their understanding of 'the dynamics of interactions so that (children) with and without disabilities know how to interact with the people they want to' (Rossetti 2011, 32).

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