

THE WESTBY PLAY SCALE-REVISED IN 2000

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[| Abstract: Overview of Play and Autism:](#)

“In no evaluation has a child's meaningful use of language been above his/her cognitive play level...Unless the child possesses the cognitive prerequisites for the linguistic structures she/he is learning, she/he will not use them in actual interpersonal situations.” - Carol Westby (1980)

Carol Westby is, in our estimation, a brilliant woman who connected language use (aka pragmatic language--a huge deficit in our learners) in children with the development of their symbolic play skills. What she connected, in her assessment of children, is that children's ability to **use** language coincides with the emergence of predictable symbolic play schemes. To put it roughly, children don't use language fully until they can play in symbolic ways. She proposed that simple stimulus response paradigms (i.e. ABA without symbolic play development), aren't enough to build the symbolic cognitive skills necessary to promote your learner's full language development. Therefore, teaching language use and symbolic play skills should go hand in hand.

Other things we like about *The Westby Scale*: We like how she organized her information clearly and briefly by developmental level--the whole scale is two pages long. We like her explanation that play reflects cognitive consciousness (awareness of other's state of minds, etc). It seemed to lend itself to teaching **Theory of Mind (TOM)** skills at very early ages.

On a personal note, we have noticed that language development in our learners, including using words to request or demand, label and use of WH-questions (interrogative conversation) can precede symbolic play. Symbolic play and improved social attention skills has preceded acquisition of declarative conversational speech. Our experience has been that the acquisition of symbolic play skills has not in itself caused conversational speech to develop, but it has marked a level of social awareness that allowed teaching of declarative conversation (e.g. “I like hotdogs. No, I like hamburgers) to be successful.

☑ Per usual, we are going to highlight what we feel are the most relevant points to be gained from evaluating The Westby Play Scale, and interpret them for you in as jargon-free language as possible. As always, we encourage you to read the original source and draw your own conclusions. The Westby Play Scale is found in the following journal:

1. Westby, C.E. (1980). *Assessment of Cognitive and Language Abilities Through Play*. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 11, 154-168

2. On pages 303-305 in the book *Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism: A Manual for Parents and Professionals*. Edited by Maurice, Green and Luce.

[II Summary of The Westby Play Scale-Revised in 2000](#)

[A Closer Look at An Informal Assessment Tool of Speech Therapists:](#)

* Edited online by Mareile Koenig MA/CCC-SLP from chapter 7 (by Carol Westby) in the following book:

IW. O. Haynes & B. B. Shulman (1998) (Eds.) *Communication Development: Foundations, Processes, and Clinical Applications*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins.

It contains a chart that is an extension of the ***Symbolic Play Scale***. It illustrates correlated developments in the following areas for ages 18 months to 6 years:

🗨️ Props used in symbolic play

- 👉 Themes expressed in symbolic play
- 👉 Organization of pretend episodes
- 👉 Roles that are assumed by children as they mature
- 👉 The kind of language that is used during successive levels of play
- 👉 Pretend Play Skills

Stage I: 9 to 12 months:

PLAY:

Travels to get what want, stops mouthing everything. Finds toy hidden under scarf.

LANGUAGE:

Some appropriate toy use with performance words (woo-woo, sound effects, etc).

Communication Skills: Request AND command (implies child directing others--already some control over their environment)

Stage II: 13-17 months:

PLAY:

Purposeful exploration of toys--discovers how they operate via trial and error. Variety of motor schema with toys. HANDS TOY TO ADULT IF UNABLE TO OPERATE (this, in my opinion, represents an early TOM awareness that others may possess skills they lack--good target to teach).

LANGUAGE:

Context dependent single words (says car when riding in car, but doesn't label car when asked). Words come and go in vocabulary (this is NORMAL children). Uses language in the following ways: Request, command, call attention to self, establish interaction, greet, protest and label. At this stage (note the age), a child begins to ask for help, even if by gesture. According to Westby, this indicates that a child understands that adults are agents who can act on objects. Again, I think that cognitive awareness is directly related to TOM.

Stage III: 17-19 months:

PLAY:

Autosymbolic play--child pretends to fall asleep, or pretends to drink from a cup, or eat with a spoon. Playfulness/awareness of pretending emerge in relation to self. Uses tool to reach toy (e.g. Stick). Uses most common objects and toys appropriately. Finds toys invisibly hidden (put object in box, and dump out under a scarf).

LANGUAGE:

Functional and semantic development in language with the following uses demonstrated: 1. Recurrence (Again, Again!) 2. Existence (Here I am!) 3. Nonexistence (I am not!) 4. Rejection (No!) 5. Denial (Wasn't me.) 6. Agent and object (Billy took train.) 7. Action or state (Billy is hitting.) 8. Location (In the kitchen) 9. Object or person associated with object or location. (Mommy's in the kitchen). Additionally, there is a rapid growth in number of words USED. Will NOT refer to ABSENT situations (correlate this with request for things absent?)

Note: We attempted to interpret these language uses (all example in parentheses are our interpretation of these uses, but we fear we may have misinterpreted Westby's intent. If any SLP would care to define these for us more clearly, or give more relevant examples, please contact us.

Stage IV: 19- 22 months:

PLAY:

Symbolic play extends beyond self. For example, plays with dolls--brushes doll's hair, feeds toy, puts doll to bed. Combines TWO toys in pretend play--e.g. Puts spoon in pan, pours from pitcher to cup.

LANGUAGE:

Begins to use possessives, (my , mine). NO word endings. Makes reference to objects and people NOT present (which Westby indicates are consolidated sensorimotor concepts and internalized action schemas--a reflection of cognitive achievement).

Stage V: 24 months:

PLAY:

Pretends at activities of others--re-presents his daily experiences (play house, play acts as mommy, daddy, baby). Uses objects that are realistic and close to life size (won't use miniature action figures yet, apparently). Short events--no true sequences, except perhaps short, self-limiting ones such as puts food in pan, stirs and eats. BLOCK PLAY--consists of stacking and knocking down. Sand and water play consists of filling, pouring and dumping (now THAT takes some pressure off!). Child does NOT build representational structures. Blocks are not integrated into pretend play.

LANGUAGE:

All the same pragmatic language functions now extend to phrases and short sentences. Word endings: "ING" appears on words, plurals and possessives. Language functions extend to PRETEND, sharing information and questioning (NOTE--not answering questions--ACTIVELY questioning).

Stage VI: 2 1/2 years:

PLAY:

Represents events less frequently experienced or observed, particularly impressive or traumatic events--1. Doctor-nurse-sick child 2. Teacher-child 3. Store-shopping. Events are still short and isolated. Realistic props still required. Roles shift quickly. Parallel play predominates.

LANGUAGE:

Responds appropriately to the following WH questions in context: What, who, whose, where, what...do, ASKS WH questions, Responds to WHY questions inappropriately, except for well known routines. , ASKS why, but often inappropriately and does not attend to answer. TOM: child can use language to selectively analyze perception as seen by ASKING and ANSWERING WH- questions. Before age three, use of size occurs with respect to selves versus comparative.

STAGE VII: 3 years old:

PLAY:

Relates pretend schemas in a sequence. (e.g. Mix cake, bake it, serve it, wash dishes.) Sequence evolves unplanned (we'd of course need to teach this, requiring some planning on our part.) This demonstrates a cognitive basis for using past tense and future aspect (TIME). Still dependent on realistic props. Associative play increases. Reenact old play scenarios with new outcomes (spontaneous improvisation) that reflect what child would have LIKED to have happen in scenario (e.g. Doll hides at doctor's office, refusing to be examined).

LANGUAGE:

Past tense (I ate, I walked) describing past events. Future aspect: I'm going to, etc.

Stage VIII: 3 to 3 1/2:

PLAY:

Carries out play of earlier stages with doll house and fisher-price style toys (less realistic props--reflects child's ability to take another person's perspective --TOM). Blocks are used to make enclosures. One object is used to represent another (row of chairs is bus) aka play is not stimulus bound. Uses doll or puppet as participant in play--doll is a friend now and has own personality (TOM).

LANGUAGE:

Marked increase in descriptive attributes--reflects emerging understanding of perception (TOM). Concepts emerge in speech: shapes, size, colors, texture, spatial relationships . Gives dialogue to puppets and dolls. Metalinguistic language: "HE SAID...", Uses indirect requests "Mommy lets me have cookies for breakfast.", Changes speech dependent on listener (definite TOM).

Stage IX: 3 1/2 to 4 years:

PLAY:

Begins to problem solve events not experienced (e.g. Child builds enclosure for circus

animals and needs a roof. Looking at several objects, rejects some without trying by reasoning too big, small, heavy, etc. Plans ahead. Hypothesizes "what would happen IF...". Uses Dolls and puppets to act out scenes. Builds 3 dimensional structures with blocks that represent actual objects seen.

LANGUAGE:

Conceptualizes "this should", "this would", "This won't" "If I do this, then.." "This is big enough, but it's too heavy". Verbalizes intentions by using "can, may , might, could , would, will" and conjunctions: "and, but, if, so, because." These are emerging skills, not competent skills (that takes until age 10-12 in typical children). Begins to respond appropriately to why and how questions that require reasoning about perception.

Stage X: 5 years:

PLAY:

Plans a sequence of pretend events and organizes needs in advance--both objects and children. Can coordinate simultaneous events. E.g. Plan his role in a play situation and decide what others will be doing as well. No longer dependent on realistic props, can rely fully on imagination to set scenes. Full cooperative play seen.

LANGUAGE:

Planning coordinated events reflects the cognitive attainment of relative and subordinate clauses that relate two or more prepositions to each other. Uses relational terms such as "then, when, first, next, last, while, before and after", but doesn't develop full competence with usage until 10-12 years of age (typical children). To quote Westby's article more fully here:

1. " A cognitively based orientation to language acquisition implies that language training can never do more than assist the child in expressing what he/she already understands".

☀ **NOTE** : According to speech therapists' views, we are teaching cognitive comprehension if we teach language skills (verbal operants) in a **developmental se-**

quence in the **context** of cognitively relevant events (e.g. In the environment, or as part of activities).

2. "Remediation should provide experiences to facilitate development of the cognitive sensorimotor or pre-operational symbolic abilities rather than emphasizing language skills" **i.e. Consider this to be a subjective conclusion without basis--you want both, teach both--using context to facilitate comprehension.**
3. "Directive adult-led teaching has been shown actually to retard, rather than facilitate progress" **i.e. Child directed activities are important, over-prompting squashes acquisition, but let's not draw too strong a conclusion.**
4. " In no evaluation has a child's meaningful use of language been above his/her cognitive play level" **i.e. Teach cognition and symbolic play routines using the relevant lexicon (receptive language)to facilitate later language use!**
5. "Unless the child possesses the cognitive prerequisites for the linguistic structures she/he is learning, she/he will not use them in actual interpersonal situations." **i.e. This could be a missing piece for many treatment plans. This information may help facilitate language use.**

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