

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## More than a Role; More than Just Play: The Effective Use of Role Play for Direct Support Professionals in Working with People with Intellectual Disabilities

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As a Drama Therapist, I have a great deal of experience with role play. As a recently hired employee working with adults with intellectual disabilities, I have noticed that many direct support staff use role play with the people they support. This is fantastic! Role play can help an individual feel more confident and prepared to complete a task. Engaging in role play allows a lesson or new skill to be more deeply learned and easily remembered than if it were only talked about. Role play can allow an individual to make mistakes in a safe environment with no consequences. A person who takes on the role of another can gain empathy when they put themselves into the shoes of another. Role play can enhance creative problem solving and give the individual feelings of mastery over a task, thereby enhancing self-esteem.

Role play can be very useful in helping the people we serve navigate a wide variety of everyday situations. For example, role playing a job interview can help an individual feel more confident and prepared. This is especially true if the person has never previously attended a job interview. Some of the people we support feel nervous about day-to-day interactions with strangers. Some have never even conducted a seemingly simple transaction such as buying a pack of gum. If the individual is capable, this is definitely a valuable life skill, one that can be effectively taught using role play. Many people crave a romantic relationship but have no experience asking somebody out on a date. Role play can make this task less nerve-wracking. Standing up to others is another important life skill. Unfortunately, many of the individuals we serve have been conditioned not to stand up for themselves. Role play can be a helpful way for people to practice assertiveness, such as telling a housemate that they do not like the way they treat them, or telling a parent that they want more freedom.

Role play can also help an individual practice a way of being to get needs met. For example, informing a person you support that you do not want them to spit at you every time they feel angry can be a helpful way to communicate behaviour expectations. However, giving them an alternative behaviour and then having them practice the new behaviour repeatedly (e.g. stomping their feet) can be effective if verbal instructions are not producing the desired outcome.

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While role play can be a very positive tool, it can be used in a negative manner that is not helpful. It is easy to underestimate how real a role play can feel to anyone, including a person with an intellectual disability. Some of the individuals we serve may get confused if the line between real and imaginary is not clearly defined. It is important that role play never be detrimental to a person's well-being. I have compiled a list of suggestions to follow when using role play with the people we support.

- Conduct role plays around a positive behaviour. Having someone enact a negative behaviour could potentially reinforce that behaviour and/or cause the person to feel ashamed or confused. If you are trying to extinguish a negative behaviour, have the individual practice the desired behaviour instead.
- Encourage only one new strategy at a time. Trying to encourage more than one new strategy can become overwhelming and confusing. They will be far more likely to remember the lesson if you keep it simple and straightforward.
- Be very clear about where the role play begins and ends. Depending on the person, you may want to say something like, "Now I'm going to pretend to be \_\_\_\_\_ and you're going to pretend to be \_\_\_\_\_," at the beginning of the role play and something like, "Now the pretend is over and I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and you're \_\_\_\_\_ again," once it is finished. Drama Therapists often use a technique known as "*de-roling*" after an enactment. This technique may be helpful when working with the people we support. "*De-roling*" occurs when the actors physically pretend to "take off" the characters they have taken on. Some actors might brush off their shoulders to "*de-role*," while others might pretend to "step out" of the character. Make this a ritual.
- Talk about it first! It is very important that one gets consent before beginning. Role play can be an anxiety-provoking exercise. Make sure that individuals know exactly what is expected of them before engaging in the roleplay.
- Model the behaviour. If the individual is having difficulty with the behaviour, watching you perform the behaviour first may help. You could even have them take on the role of the staff! You could also break the behaviour into smaller steps if the person is struggling.
- Provide concrete, positive feedback after the roleplay. Statements like, "I really liked how you did/said \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_," provides clear expectations. Focus on the positive aspects of the behaviour as much as possible. The person will enjoy it more if positivity is incorporated into the exercise.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat! Repetition is one of the best ways to master a task and have it stick.
- Have fun with it! The individual will be far more likely to go along with the role play, and it will be a much more enjoyable experience for both of you if you include a sense of play. It will also make the person more likely to associate the desired way of being with positivity. Additionally, a staff and a supported person having a pleasant experience together can strengthen their bond.

To further illustrate, here is a step-by-step guide to completing a successful role play with a client:

**Step One:** Discuss the desired behaviour with the client. Talk about why it is important to them and how it will be beneficial. It is important that the individual agrees the behaviour is valuable before you begin the role play.

**Step Two:** Introduce the idea of role play. A good starting point may be if the person you are supporting has taken drama lessons, particularly if they enjoyed them. Encourage, but do not force the individual. If they are reluctant, discussing alternatives to a negative behaviour could be useful. If the behaviour is something they want to accomplish, e.g., asking an individual of romantic interest on a date) you could write a story together about someone who asks someone else on a date, using as much detail and as much of the individual's input as possible. Discussing the steps can make the role play seem less intimidating. If, however, the person is still reluctant after much discussion, you can always present the idea of role play again at a later date.

**Step Three:** Sketch out the scene. Decide who will play which character. Decide where you are and what is happening. Decide who will say what. Determine how the scene will begin and end. Keep it simple.

**Step Four:** Do the role play!

**Step Five:** De-role and discuss what happened and what was learned. Ask how it felt for the person to engage in that behaviour.

**Step Six:** Repeat steps 1 - 5 if necessary.

Now that the list of suggestions and steps has been presented, it is time to look at a positive example of a role play. Justin is an individual with an intellectual disability. Growing up, his family did everything for him, believing (incorrectly) that he was incapable of completing tasks for himself. His direct support staff are now working hard to help him become more independent. Justin does not like talking to strangers, but he enjoys buying occasional treats at the corner store near his group home. He would like to be able to make these purchases independently, without the aid of his worker.

One day, Justin has a bit of extra money and would like to go to the corner store to buy a chocolate bar. However, none of the staff in his house are available to accompany him. Justin wants to go alone and recognizes that being able to speak to a stranger to make a purchase is an important skill (Step One). However, the task feels daunting.

Rebecca, Justin's direct support worker, suggests they try role play to make the idea seem less intimidating (Step Two). Justin agrees and together they discuss the scene. They decide that they are in the convenience store next door and that they are a cashier and customer. Even after they have discussed the dialogue in this scene, Justin feels nervous about his lines. Rebecca asks another individual, Sara, who feels a little more confident talking to strangers, to play the role of the customer (modelling). Sara and Rebecca decide how the scene will begin and end and who will say what. They then enact the scene (Step Four).

At the end of the scene, Sara and Rebecca de-role and make it explicit that the scene is over and that they are not pretending anymore (obvious beginning and end). Rebecca, Sara and Justin then discuss the scene and Rebecca tells Sara how she liked the confident posture Sara used and how she used polite words such as “please” and “thank you” (Step Five) (concrete, positive feedback). Having seen Rebecca and Sara do the role play, Justin feels confident enough to do it himself. He and Rebecca perform the scene and talk about it numerous times (Step Six) (repetition). During one scene, Justin even uses a funny voice for his character and the two of them laugh (have fun with it!). The next day, Justin and Rebecca go to the corner store where he buys a chocolate bar with no help from Rebecca. A week later, Justin goes to the corner store without Rebecca and completes the transaction entirely on his own!

A few months later, Rebecca notices that Justin is not receiving enough change from some of his purchases. Justin understands that it is important to protect his money (Step One) but is nervous confronting a cashier about it. Rebecca suggests that the two of them do a role play around the issue and Justin agrees (Step Two). They discuss the scene and Rebecca helps Justin decide on some simple sentences to say that are assertive, but not hostile or argumentative. They also decide which character each is playing, how Rebecca’s character will respond to Justin, and how the scene will begin and end (Step Three). They then enact the role play (Step Four). After the role play, Rebecca asks Justin how it felt to assert himself with the cashier. Justin says it made him feel anxious (Step Five). Justin and Rebecca repeat the scene many times which boosts Justin’s confidence, but not enough for him to confront the cashier.

A few months pass and Rebecca and Justin continue to do the role play on occasion. Eventually, Justin feels confident enough to confront the cashier in Rebecca’s presence. The two of them go to the store and Justin recites the lines he has memorized. He never receives insufficient change from that store again. He gains confidence and recognizes that he has the right to stand up to people who do not treat him fairly.

Remember, when doing role play:

- Make it concrete
- Make it clear
- Make it simple
- Make it positive
- Make it fun

Now: Lights, Camera, Action!

### About the author:

Hayley is a Creative Arts Therapist with a specialty in Drama Therapy. Currently, Hayley is working as a Creative Arts Therapist at Vita Community Living Services. Previously, she supported adults with intellectual disabilities at the Centre for the Arts in Human Development and the Canadian Mental Health Association.

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