

# Playful Learning Environments for Autistic Children

A way to strengthen social access in society in the long run?

CollaboLearn is a free inspiration material for teachers, pedagogues, and children who work with social learning in school settings. The aim of CollaboLearn is to scaffold playful learning environments that motivate children and educators to engage in and reflect on the learning that they construct together.

## Why & Who?

In learning processes, especially autistic children need 'a hook' to hang their attention on. Otherwise, we perceive them as fluttering, disengaged, and disruptive as a result of lack of meaning and relationships. The CollaboLearn project explores playful learning environments that offers all autistic children a hook so they become motivated participants in group learning processes.

## Theory & Research-Based Practice

Learning is the process where we update our mental models to interpret and navigate in the world. According to the Predictive Minds Theory and studies within this field, autistic people find it hard to process social cues and communication in time to generate an appropriate response because their internal models of how people behave are not well-formed. They are less bound by prior expectations and need more solid internal models of the social world to be able to navigate. In the process of exploring how to support the development of more solid internal models in autistic pupils, the CollaboLearn project have adapted insights from i.a. constructivist learning theory and constructionism, playful learning, tinkering, Reggio Emilia pedagogy, TEACCH principles, autistic sociality and combined these with video analyzes from classrooms, observations, interviews, and educators' experimental actions. A wickerwork where research, theory, and best practises are weaved together though co-creative processes.



## Key Findings & Insights

Our preliminary findings suggest that...

1) The children participating in the playful learning environment...

- safely expresses feelings and thoughts.
- are motivated to participate and practice social skills.
- manage to reflect on their own experiences through reflection routines with special pedagogical considerations.
- forms friendships and social communities.
- develops social communicative competencies.

2) The educators facilitating the playful learning environments experience higher quality in their practice. They...

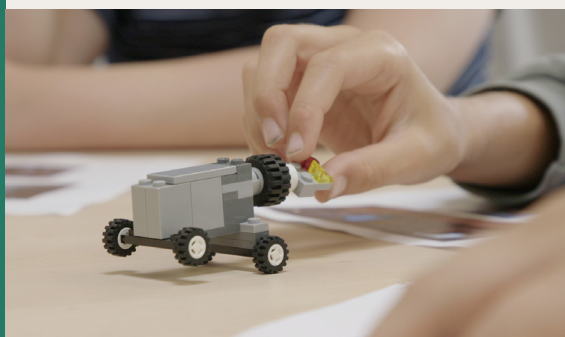
- show engagement and motivation towards scaffolding social learning with autistic children in a playful way.
- have gained new tools and insights on how to make the abstract in social situations more concrete, visual, and tangible.
- have acquired a qualified common language for social learning which makes the learning more systematic and measurable.

## Scaffolding Learning

Designing a motivating and playful learning environment and facilitating ownership, curiosity, and joy will support learning in most children. However, when dealing with autistic children, we need to scaffold the entire social learning process from experience and concrete reflection to the important iterations that makes the foundation for generalization to other contexts.

## Facilitated Reflection

Reflection is typically abstract and verbal but we have found ways to make the social dynamics visible and tangible for the children. Together with the children, we build learning metaphors through which we facilitate object-mediated reflection that supports autistic children in exploring and sharing their learning. Reflection through concrete, visual, and tangible objects makes it easier for the children to reflect on their learning because it maintains their attention, is meaningful, and easier to comprehend and thus, more likely to return to it. This, we believe is a basis for transfer learning and the development of more solid internal models.



## Learn More

[www.collabolearn.dk/en](http://www.collabolearn.dk/en) is the product of a co-creation process between Aarhus University and Langagerskolen, a special school for autistic children in Aarhus. The website gathers examples from practice on ways to scaffold group learning activities and object-mediated reflection with autistic children. It is open source.



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