

Lego Therapy: building language and communication skills

Amy Smith describes how Lego Therapy is used at Mary Hare School

Lego Therapy has been quite the 'buzz word' in social communication over the last few years, with many Speech and Language Therapists and teachers creating Lego Clubs in their settings. Daniel LeGoff and his colleagues created the programme in order to provide effective social skills therapy for children with autism and other related conditions. The basic idea of the approach is that young people work in pairs or threes to build Lego sets, with social communication skills being facilitated and scaffolded by an adult at first, with the young people then developing greater independence in their ability to use social communication skills/strategies and solve problems between themselves. The approach has evolved over time and is evidence-based – research shows that pupils who participate in Lego Therapy make sustained progress in a range of social skills.

Mary Hare School is a specialist residential school for deaf pupils in West Berkshire. There is both a secondary and a primary site; around 250 pupils aged 5-19 are educated across both sites. Mary Hare follows an auditory aural approach, so the emphasis is on talking, listening and developing spoken and written language. The core values are based around preparing deaf children for life in a hearing world and providing them with the tools they need to communicate effectively in this world. Pupils receive on-site support



from Teachers of the Deaf, specialist Teaching Assistants, Educational Audiologists and Speech and Language Therapists specialising in deafness.

The Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) team at Mary Hare is always looking for new therapy approaches to use with our pupils. After reading LeGoff's book and hearing about Lego Therapy's benefits from other professionals, the team decided it would be a fun and engaging way to develop social skills, language concepts and expressive language skills with their deaf pupils. Not only is it an evidence-based approach, but it also encourages team work and joint accomplishment for the pupils. It capitalises on the reward of playing with Lego and crucially promotes communication and language development.

In 2016 Lego Therapy was launched in both the primary and secondary school. One therapist was tasked with organising the introduction of Lego Therapy, and given the role of Lego Co-ordinator. A Lego Therapy programme was created, which was designed to run in English lessons over a 6-week term. At Mary Hare our pupils who have additional language needs over and above their deafness receive Speech and Language Therapist support in English lessons each week. These lessons are jointly taught by the Speech Therapist and Teacher of the Deaf, and are designed to develop many





areas of speech, language and communication. The Lego Therapy programme was designed to include a large element of language teaching alongside the social communication work from LeGoff's original idea – the team felt that many of their pupils wouldn't have the necessary language skills to engage fully with the programme to begin with. For example, they may not have the language needed to describe the bricks effectively or to explain where the bricks need to be placed. Therefore, a test was devised for pupils to complete before and after the programme, testing knowledge of descriptive language and prepositions. This enabled progress in certain areas to be measured quantitatively. Social communication checklists were also created to monitor use of various communication skills throughout the programme, for example eye contact, turn taking and asking for clarification.

The Mary Hare Lego Therapy programme combines whole class teaching, practical activities and games to practise the language skills taught, and Lego building in pairs or threes. A typical session follows the format below:

- Introduction to the aims of the session, and a recap of the previous week's work
- New language teaching/modelling – whole class teaching, discussion and questions/answers
- Activities and games to practise new language taught – whole class, paired or individual work. Activities include a describing bricks board game, brick bingo, and paired building tasks involving flashcards (where one pupil looks at an image of a structure and needs to explain to their partner how to build the structure)
- Lego building in pairs/threes, with adult supervision. Groups take it in turns to act as the Engineer and the Builder, so they can experience both roles and practise both their receptive and expressive language skills
- Tidy up time and session 'wind-up'.

There are many skills targeted during the Mary Hare Lego Therapy programme, including both language-related and social communication skills. The main skills focused on are:

- 1 Listening/speech-reading
- 2 Understanding and responding to verbal instructions
- 3 Giving verbal instructions
- 4 Understanding and using prepositions and descriptive language
- 5 Following visual instructions
- 6 Turn-taking/cooperation/collaboration
- 7 Eye contact
- 8 Managing communication breakdown
- 9 Managing frustration – how to stay calm if something goes wrong
- 10 Problem solving.

One of the major language elements of the programme is teaching the pupils how to describe the Lego bricks. A system was developed for this, which is detailed below.

The pupils are taught to use colour, size, type of brick. For example:

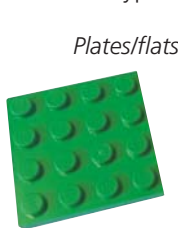


Red – 2 by 4 brick



Blue – 1 by 2 brick

Different types of bricks are taught, for example:



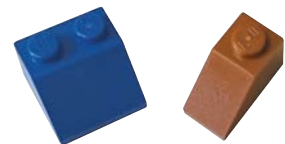
Plates/flats



Arches/bridges



Studs/circular pieces



Slopes/wedges

There are so many types of Lego bricks around today that it is impossible to teach all of them! Pupils are taught the basic bricks, and then for the more complicated ones they are encouraged to use the colour, the size and the rough shape to 'cue in' their partner. Creativity is encouraged – if they think a brick looks like a particular object, then they can say this as part of their description!

For example:



Looks a bit like a first aid box (with the green colour and the cross shape in the middle!)



Looks like a window/door/bird cage

The team has found that overall their pupils have really enjoyed the Mary Hare Lego Therapy programme, and it has worked well in developing many areas of speech, language and communication which were identified as

areas of need for these pupils. Their baseline test results have improved, in both descriptive language and understanding of prepositions, and observations/videos have demonstrated improved social skills and better communication skills in general. The pupils have also learnt strategies they can generalise to other areas of school life, for example clarification techniques when they haven't understood someone or been understood, and techniques to calm themselves down if they feel frustrated in class.

A weekly Lego Club has also been introduced at the school, which runs over a lunchtime and can be accessed by any pupil in the school. The pupils work on Lego sets in pairs or small groups and are supervised/supported by a Speech Therapist and two Teaching Assistants, but there is less structure and organisation than in the English lessons discussed above. Lego Club is more of a relaxed affair – a time to unwind and chat with friends whilst also still developing language and social communication skills!

In conclusion, Mary Hare has found that adapting Lego Therapy for use with deaf students has worked really well. It takes some work to begin with, to prepare all of the resources and activities needed for teaching the language and strategies required for pupils to effectively access Lego Therapy, but the rewards and benefits are well worth the preparation. The enjoyment and improvement of the pupils taking part are great to observe, and progress is

easily evidenced through pre and post tests, checklists, observations and videos. Lego Therapy is also easy to adapt for different group sizes – from working 1:1 with a young person to working in groups of up to 10.

Below are some quotes from Mary Hare pupils about their experience of Lego Therapy:

- "I like seeing the Lego being built"
- "It helps me to think more"
- "It's good for communicating"
- "It shows me how to read instructions"
- "I practise speaking in proper sentences"
- "I learnt how to keep calm if things don't go right first time"
- "I like working with a partner".

So, we recommend that you try Lego Therapy with the young people you work with – the Mary Hare team is confident you will reap many rewards from this excellent approach!



Amy Smith is a Speech and Language Therapist at Mary Hare School.

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