

Pokemon Go and the child with autism

by Aaron Jackson



When confronted with a new phenomenon in society that is motivating for a large number of people, including children with autism, I am often interested to break down “why?” Minecraft, Thomas the Tank, Wiggles and currently Pokemon Go not only appeal to many children without autism but also those with autism. Of course not every child with autism will enjoy Pokemon Go just like every child doesn't love Pokemon Go. There have however been a number of [anecdotal reports](#) about children with autism engaging more effectively with their peers when using Pokemon Go.

This summary breaks down some of the reasons why Pokemon Go might click for children with autism. This list is by no means exhaustive, but is food for thought how we can create or tap into some of the features of Pokemon Go so the child with autism is included in other areas of the community. I have included some text hyperlinks to articles/websites that might be useful in explaining some of the concepts. It can be helpful to reflect on popular trends that appeal to children with and without autism so that we can develop inclusive ways of teaching.

There will always be debate about whether looking at screens is good for children. As an occupational therapist, I will always err on the side of less screen time is better, however this article is not for those debates. Let's focus on why Pokemon Go connects to the child with autism.

For the child with autism...

Pokemon Go is motivating. The game itself is motivating for many children (and adults) with and without autism. The great thing about the franchise Pokemon and the resulting game Pokemon Go is they are based on lists and facts. There are lists of different types of characters, the characters evolve into different levels, have different skill sets, egg incubation times etc. Often children with autism are drawn to a love of information or facts. They might be able to tell you about every steam train, it's manufacturing date, it's running years, where it ran, how long a trip took, why it was taken out of service etc. Over the years I have seen many different interest areas based on facts, such as animals, dinosaurs, train timetables, airplanes, models, transmission lines, bridges and the list goes on. While sometimes these facts are only interesting to small groups of the general population, Pokemon facts are currently the mainstream and children on the spectrum now have a strength which facilitates their involvement with many of their peers.

Another motivating point for all children is that Pokemon Go is digital (just in case you hadn't heard). It has been shown in research that electronic games activate the brain's pleasure circuits through dopamine release. Catching a Pokemon, adding to your collection or defeating another team possibly gives this dopamine release, adding to the drive to keep playing.

Pokemon Go creates obvious shared goals for participants. The main goals of Pokemon Go are to collect as many Pokemon and then battle them. The advantage of Pokemon Go is that we know we are all looking for similar things as we move around the world holding up our electronic devices. Children will either be finding a Pokestop, finding a Pokemon or something similar. The goal options are therefore quite limited for all participants and therefore the goals are more likely to be shared between participants. As a result it does not require in depth 'mind reading' of your peers as you participate to know what

other people might be doing. In other words, the great thing about Pokemon Go is that children can more easily know what to do in order to engage in cooperative prosocial behaviour. Children can engage in cooperative behaviours such as pointing out where a particular Pokemon is or by putting out a lure for others and the chances are this will have a positive effect on their peers. These cooperative behaviours have their basis in a concept similar to Tomasello and Carpenter's '[shared intentionality](#)' or 'we intentionality'. Shared intentionality creates enjoyment from sharing the Pokemon hunting experience with others and others receiving enjoyment from sharing the experience in return. Perhaps the fact children are moving around in the 'real world' creates greater opportunities for this cooperative behaviour to be practiced (i.e. you will run into someone else looking for a Pokemon in a similar places etc) as opposed to normal gaming where physical interactions are less available due to the static nature of the game. We often see this in the clinic where children find it easier to engage in a building activity of a fort together rather than a sit down game such as 'playing cars' although there are also other social role factors at work here as well.

The challenge for the child with autism may now be how much to share (the classic talking too much), but we must first have a social motivation before we can effectively learn other prosocial skills. Shared intentions also naturally leads to [initiating joint attention](#), declarative gestures and language (sharing-based communication) rather than imperative language (communication to make something happen). This basically means the child has something to share so they will show, point and talk about it. Which leads us to the next point ...

Pokemon Go makes interactions predictable. It's important to explore the concept of a shared goal further. When children with autism have a shared goal it appears they are often motivated to and can begin to predict the intentions of the people around them. They can anticipate how others will respond emotionally to new information (e.g. excited about a new Pokemon, disappointed about finding one they already have) or what they will do in a situation (i.e. look for a Pokemon, go to a Pokestop, hatch an egg, buy some resources, compare Pokemon's etc.). This ability to predict the intentions and behaviours of others reduces the stress of interacting for a child who has autism.

Pokemon Go is structured. Pokemon Go is very structured. The game even provides a visual structure to the chaos of the real world by overlaying the Pokemon digital world -a mini google maps if you like. This allows the child with autism to engage in more dynamic outdoor play environments with peers whilst giving them the structure to see the same things their peers are seeing. In essence, it reduces the challenges for many children with autism of seeing what everyone else sees, [drawing links about what is happening around them](#) or attending to the social information in the environment. Children are able to move through the real world and the important information is highlighted for them by the digital game.

Pokemon Go is visual. The visual object world is often more engaging or easily understood for children with autism rather than the social world and often children with autism are better at looking at visual information rather than processing verbal information. This is the basis of using [visual supports](#) for communication and is one of the most enduring and widely respected ways of helping children with autism understand their world.

Pokemon Go gets children moving. A real benefit for all children is that Pokemon Go gets children out and walking around. You have to walk certain distances (many kilometres actually) to hatch eggs and obviously you have to walk to find Pokemon. The benefits of exercise and mood regulation are well known through many areas of research. To have children moving around creates sensory and physical activation which can assist some children with emotional, cognitive, social and biological regulation.

Pokemon Go has reduced non-verbal challenges. The fact the game is about moving through the real world but is based around a screen means the child and their peers do not need to engage in long chains of reading non-verbal cues. The majority of interactions are filtered through the lens of the digital screen. This might challenge many people's perspectives as they debate whether it is a 'good' thing for society that children spend so much time looking at screens. Once again it is not the place of this summary to debate this point, but the digital screen does allow the child with autism to connect with other children through a reduced non-verbal/mind reading load. When screens are involved, children are often referencing information in the game rather than referencing subtle face to face interactions of the person next to them.