A Parent-Child-Sibling Perspective on the Importance of Play

Austin Lieber  
Karsyn Lieber  
Darleen Lieber  
with Lynn Anderson, Ph.D.

Abstract

The research is clear that play, recreation, and leisure are important to well-being and a high quality of life. But what would a family say about play? What would a child with a disability say about play and leisure in his life? This article presents an interesting dialogue with Austin, a child with autism, his older sister, Karsyn, and his mother, Darleen. The interview gives a rare insight into what matters to Austin and his family and how they have, as a unit, adapted their lives to allow Austin to flourish as a young person.

Keywords: play, inclusion, family, siblings, joy, adaptation

Austin Lieber is in the 10th grade at Homer Central Schools and has autism. Karsyn Lieber is a student at State University of New York at Cortland and is Austin’s older sister. Darleen Lieber is the mother of Austin and Karsyn. Lynn Anderson is a Distinguished Service Professor in the Recreation, Parks and Leisure Studies Department at State University of New York at Cortland.
A Parent-Child-Sibling Perspective on the Importance of Play

The research is clear that play, recreation, and leisure are important to well-being and a high quality of life. But what would a family say about play? What would a child with a disability say about play and leisure in his life? What follows is an interesting dialogue with Austin, a teen with autism, his older sister, Karsyn, and his mother, Darleen. The interview gives a rare insight into what matters to Austin and his family and how they have, as a unit, adapted their lives to allow Austin to flourish as a young person. The interview took place in Austin’s home, with Darleen and Karsyn conducting the interview. This allowed Austin to be himself and focus on the questions versus the presence of a stranger. What follows is the actual interview responses.

What do you love to do?

Austin:
“I love to be chased by an elephant!
I love to watch TV, play baseball, play hide-n-seek tag, and bowling.”

Darleen:
“Austin loves to watch TV. That is how he spends the majority of his time, especially in the winter. He also does a lot of puzzles, and he is very good at them. He can easily do a 1,000 or 1,500 piece puzzle by himself.

He does not like cold temperatures. In the spring, he loves to play basketball by himself, swing, and jump on his trampoline. Spring and fall are his favorite seasons due to the cooler days. He will jump on the trampoline, then lay down and talk to himself, then start jumping again.

He likes to swim in the summer, but only if his cousins are in the pool. One of his favorite things to do in the summer is to play hide-n-seek tag with his cousins. However, he usually stays inside during the day because the heat bothers him. He hates to sweat. He will come outside to play near dusk when the temperature is cooler.
We often have board game nights, and Austin picks the game. It is usually Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Candy Land, or Trivial Pursuit. I will not let him win or cheat – he has to play fair. He can usually handle it when Mom beats him. He will not allow anyone else to play – that is time for Mom and Austin only!

Austin has really enjoyed his bowling and swimming excursions through school. He swims once a week; bowls once or twice a month.

Austin’s favorite vacation spot is Darien Lake’s amusement park. We have to go every year. Austin is 16 years old, and we have gone to Darien Lake every summer for 15 years. He has our days all planned out. We rent a cabin, which has a TV. He gets up in the morning, watches TV, then tells us when the park opens, we will ride on four certain rides, go to Hooks Lagoon, get his chicken, and go back to the cabin. He watches more TV, back to the park to ride a few more rides (the same rides as before), back to the cabin for a campfire, watch the laser light show, cook marshmallows (which he doesn’t eat), then go to sleep. He gets a bit agitated when we are with other people who want to ride other rides, but he can usually cope.”

Karsyn:

“Whenever I had friends over when I was younger, Austin loved to hang out with us. He was always wanting to come in my room to see what we were doing. He loved to get attention from anyone who came into our house who was not part of our immediate family. Otherwise, he is in his room because he is almost always working on a puzzle. Austin loves to read *I Spy* books. He brings them with him when we go out to eat so he can look through it while we wait. Austin loves to watch TV. If he is home, he is watching TV.”

**Why do you love to do these things? What do you like about them?**

Austin:

“Because they are fun things to play. I like three TV shows. I like to hit a ball and run the bases.”

Darleen:

“Austin plays baseball during PE in school, but he doesn’t at home. We had him in a baseball league four years ago, but he had trouble committing himself at least twice a
week. Baseball sometimes got in the way of his television. He loves to shoot baskets by himself. He will tell himself he has to shoot at least 5 or 10 baskets, and he can’t stop until he makes those baskets. He does that throughout the day.”

Karsyn:
“Mostly everything Austin does revolves around his television. He usually works on his puzzles while he watches TV.”

What is your very favorite activity to do by yourself? Why?

Austin:
“I like to run and jump – it is exciting.”

Darleen:
“I believe Austin’s favorite solo activity is his trampoline. He can spend so much time just jumping, talking to himself, and just sitting on the trampoline when he tires or gets overheated. He likes to put a scarf over his head and pretend it is his hair while he jumps. He always tells me his heart is “beeping” when he jumps too much.”

Karsyn:
“I think Austin’s favorite activities to do by himself are puzzles and jumping on the trampoline. Every time I go to help him with a puzzle, he tells me no and pushes my hand away. During the summer, he goes out on the trampoline constantly and jumps and then lays down on it throughout the day. Also, Austin loves to memorize things. When I graduated high school, Austin memorized the full names (first, middle, and last) of everyone I graduated with. I used to always quiz him and ask him what so-and-so’s middle name is and he always got it right.”

What is your very favorite activity to do with other people? Why?

Austin:
“Play hide-n-seek tag and soccer. I like to play with my cousins and I like to score goals. It is fun to play soccer with other people.”

Darleen
“Soccer is another activity he does in school during his PE class. He talks about it and about scoring goals. I have never seen him play soccer.

During the summer, we invite his cousins to go to a local park to play. Again, he loves to play hide-n-seek tag, not the typical sliding, swinging, climbing, etc. on all the park apparatus. He likes the thrill of racing, although he is not a fast runner. His cousins are
gracious to him and let him win often. But they also make him be the “chaser,” which he doesn’t like to do.”

Karsyn:
“Austin loves to play hide and go seek. Whenever our cousins come over to our house, he always asks them to play with him. He will also only go swimming if there are other people in there with him. He never goes in our pool alone.”

When you play, what is it like? What are your feelings when you are playing?

Austin:
“I like to play with my cousins. We run and have fun. I try to win.”

Darleen:
“Austin doesn’t have any friends that come over to play with him. He relies on his cousins. When asked if he wants to invite someone over, he always mentions his cousins. He gets invited to birthday parties, but he usually doesn’t like to go. If he does go, he tends to be a loner. If it is a swimming party, he swims alone. He will sit at the table with the other children, but he usually doesn’t talk much. He is much more involved with family gatherings; he feels more comfortable.”

Karsyn:
“Austin loves it when our family comes over. He loves to play with our cousins and he always has a smile on his face when they’re playing together. Austin does not have any friends come over to our house, he mostly just associates with our family.”

What helps you have more fun? What helps you play better?

Austin:
“We need a baseball, and I do better if I keep my eye on the ball.”

Darleen:
“Austin can get easily discouraged if he can’t hit a ball, and he will give up easily. We tried so hard to teach him to ride a bike, but if he started tipping, he was finished. He liked rollerblading until he fell about six years ago, and he has not been on rollerblades since.”

Karsyn:
“I think for Austin, what helps him have more fun is when he does well in whatever he’s doing. He gets upset very easily, so if he messes up, he usually gets very angry, and he eventually just quits if he can’t do it right.”
What might get in the way of you having fun when you play? What things bother you and make play less fun?

Austin:
“We need balls to play. If my cousins don’t come, I can’t play hide-n-seek tag. I don’t like to fall down when I’m running.”

Darleen:
“Again, Austin likes to play at dusk. He comes outside to play when the sun goes down, but that’s about the time his cousins have to leave. He gets upset he can only get a game or two in before they leave. He also has trouble playing fair. His cousins let him get away with a lot!”

Karsyn:
“Like I said before, when he doesn’t do well to his standards, then he gets very aggravated, and that gets in the way of him having fun.”

When you feel like there is too much going on, how do you calm down? What helps?

Austin:
“Count to 10 and think happy thoughts.”

Darleen:
“During holidays, our home is the gathering spot. All family members come to our home, at my request, because Austin has his bedroom or basement to be alone if need be. He has small cousins who bother him by talking too much, too loud, and crying. He doesn’t like it when they mess up his puzzles. When he starts getting agitated, I can tell, because he gets louder and anxious. He knows he has to go to his bedroom or the basement for some “alone time.”

Karsyn:
“When we have a lot of family over, it tends to get extremely loud at our house. Austin gets very overwhelmed at times, but whenever he does, he knows to just go upstairs to his room where it is quiet and where no one will bother him.”

What doesn’t help? What makes things worse?

Austin:
“I hate it when my friends laugh at me.”
Darleen:
“I have never witnessed anyone laughing at Austin, but perhaps it happens in school. He knows his cousins are “safe,” which is why he loves to play with them. They would never laugh at him. He has one cousin in particular, Leo, who is his absolute favorite. Leo would probably say the same about Austin. Leo is 17 years old and has always been somewhat of a “protector” of Austin.”

Karsyn:
“I know our family would never treat Austin poorly or laugh at him. I do not know if people do at school, but he never talks about it when he’s home.”

What do you love to do ……

-To move around and be physical?

Austin:
“Jumping on my trampoline and running.”

-To be creative, to make things or express yourself?

Darleen:
“Austin does not like to do crafts. He goes to an after-school program on Mondays and Wednesdays. He will make a craft, but he will not take it home. He has to throw it away before he gets home. He cannot explain why. He does like to draw, and he is pleased by his drawings. He likes it when the staff makes him pictures. He will take those pictures home and hang them up on the refrigerator.”

Karsyn:
“Austin loves to draw. There are pictures all over our house of his drawings. Ever since I can remember, Austin has been drawing pictures of everything, and he also loves to write things out.”

-To think hard, to learn something new?

Darleen:
“Austin does not like to learn new things. He gets agitated, especially with a new board game or new rules to a game. He likes to play the way he thinks it should be played. He has many new games he has received for Christmas or birthdays that have never been opened.”
-To feel relaxed and happy?

Austin:
“I like to think about summer vacations.”

-To calm down?

Austin:
“TV and puzzles and my trampoline.”

Closing Thoughts

Though, at first glance, the interview results seem descriptive and simplistic, several themes emerge. First, the role of the family in Austin’s leisure is of critical importance. It is with Austin’s family members that he experiences the most enjoyable and meaningful play in his life. It is where he feels safest and has the most self-determination.

Family adaptation is another strong theme. Darleen and Karsyn mention frequently how the family has developed routines and rituals that support Austin in his play. Instead of judging Austin’s choices, they both talk of embracing and celebrating his interests. When characteristics and behaviors associated with autism are displayed, the family has learned ways to help Austin and his circle of support cope with these. In fact, some of the best family traditions appear to have evolved from these coping strategies.

Last, it is obvious that Austin loves play! For Austin, play is fun, physical, and repetitive in a reassuring way. It brings him joy daily. And, as Fredrickson (2009) stated, “You have within you the fuel to thrive and to flourish… Where is this fuel within you? You tap into it whenever you feel energized and excited …. whenever you feel at one with your surroundings, at peace. You tap into it whenever you feel playful, creative, or silly. You tap into it whenever you feel your soul stirred by the sheer beauty of existence. You tap into it whenever you feel connected to others and loved. In short, you tap into it whenever positive emotions resonate within you.”

References