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# Video Modelling Interventions for Functional Communication and Social-Play Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Given the importance of developing functional communication and social play skills for children with ASD, the amount of research on interventions targeting such skills has increased exponentially. This review examined numerous interventions targeting functional communication and social play skills. However, few studies have considered functional communication and social play skills together. This systematic review included studies from academic, peer-reviewed journals that used experimental designs, targeted children aged 2-14 years, were published in English, used video modeling as the intervention, and measured functional communication and/or social play skills as outcomes. Keywords included video modelling, functional communication, social play skills, and children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Initially, 27 studies were identified. After screening against the inclusion criteria, the final review included only 12 studies. The synthesis used narrative/thematic analysis. The findings revealed that video modelling can be effective in acquisition of functional communication skills such as requesting for attention and requesting for assistance, use of spontaneous word/gesture, social inclusion and social communication skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The findings also revealed that video modelling is effective in acquiring and improving social play skills such as reduced latency to social initiation and increased reciprocal play and language use, sociodramatic play skills, modeled actions and scripted verbalizations, traditional and musical play, symbolic play skills, game play skills and reciprocal imitation in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study concluded that video modelling is effective in the acquisition and improvement of functional communication and social play skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study recommended that therapists, teachers, and parents should consider the use of video modelling intervention in addition to other forms of interventions for functional communication and social skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study also recommended customizing video modelling interventions based on the children's demographic characteristics. Moreover, different types of video modelling should be tried on the children in order to determine the most effective type for each individual child with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

**Keywords:** *Video Modelling Interventions, Functional Communication, Social-Play Skills, Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

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## 1. Introduction

Many individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience delays in the development of functional communication and social play skills, which can limit their opportunities in life. Therefore, developing functional communication and social play skills in individuals with ASD is a lifelong objective, and acquiring these skills can have a lasting impact on other critical areas of need that define this population. Communication and social skills are associated with cognitive, physical, and emotional development (Özerk & Özerk, 2015). As a pivotal skill, targeting these skills produces broad improvements in other areas, such as pro-social behavior, appropriate communication with both peers and adults, and cooperative and functional play (Silveira-Zaldivara, Özerk & Özerk, 2021). Through social skills instruction, individuals with ASD may be taught to appropriately communicate and initiate interactions, participate in turn-taking, make requests, and ask questions instead of resorting to less preferred behaviors, such as tantrums and aggressions (Bawakid, 2022). Social skills instruction would therefore increase acceptance from typically developing peers and broaden opportunities for an individual with ASD to practice social interaction and communication and build meaningful friendships with peers (Çınar & Duman, 2025).

Functional communication refers to the most basic of communication skills. It is a person's ability to communicate their basic wants and needs (Doedens & Meteyard, 2022). The term describes the level of communication skill characteristic of people with severe communication disabilities (Sigafoos, Lancioni & O'Reilly, 2025). Alzahrani (2026) also defines it as basic communication behaviors that allow individuals to express their needs, wants, choices, and feelings. Communication is functional when an individual can produce sounds, symbols, or signs that others can understand. In turn, people achieve functional understanding by processing a message that is heard, seen, or received tactilely (Doedens & Meteyard, 2022).

Functional communication is important for children in many disability populations. Children who have complex communication needs due to developmental and intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder may require supports to attain functional communication (Biggs & Meadan, 2018). They may have limitations in their ability to comprehend and express language; formulate speech; use sight, hearing, and touch effectively; perform self-care functions; and complete daily living tasks independently (Qi et al., 2018). Individuals with communication disorders, often neurogenic in origin, that result in severe cognitive, language, or speech motor deficits may require significant supports to achieve functional communication. Persons with progressive or degenerative disorders whose communication abilities are declining may need interventions targeted to assist themselves and their families (Basri et al., 2024).

Play is an important activity for young children because it supports social, cognitive, physical, and emotional development. It also provides a context in which children explore and learn how to interact with their environment (Abd Aziz et al., 2026). Play and social interaction provide a natural and powerful context for ongoing learning and development throughout childhood. Practitioners and researchers in education, developmental psychology, applied behavior analysis (ABA), and related disciplines have long recognized the importance of skill acquisition in these areas (Luqman, Khalid & Fatima, 2025). This widespread and long-standing recognition is due to a robust body of research linking proficiency in play and social skills to physical, intellectual, and emotional functioning as well as research demonstrating that interventions that improve children's play and social skills may also occasion collateral gains

in other areas such as language, academics, and motor skill development (Stankova et al., 2026).

Play supports a child's development and learning, including social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Delayed or abnormal play behaviors can influence the lifelong development of these skills. Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) cannot often understand and produce play actions (Gibson, Pritchard & de Lemos, 2021). Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) often experience substantial delays in developing appropriate play skills. They may instead engage in rote, repetitive, or stereotypic nonfunctional play such as lining up toys (Robinson & Nohelty, 2024). Additionally, global difficulties in imitation, expressive and receptive communication skills often complicate the development of appropriate play. Without intervention, these challenges are often pervasive (Petursdottir & Gudmundsdottir, 2023).

There are a number of behavioral interventions used to target play skills with children with ASDs. These include pivotal response training, reciprocal imitation training, differential reinforcement, in vivo modeling, play scripts, video modeling and milieu training (Dzenga & Krystal, 2025). Video modeling, in particular, is a popular intervention used with individuals with ASDs to teach a variety of new skills. Video modeling interventions have been successfully used to teach new skills with this population (Johnston, 2020). During video modeling, the individual watches a video of a person (or people) modeling the desired behaviors and is then asked to imitate the video (Elhaddadi et al., 2022).

Video modelling involves presenting demonstrations of target behaviours or skills through video recordings that learners can observe and imitate. Video modeling is a technique in which children watch video clips demonstrating the behavior they are expected to exhibit (Luqman, Khalid & Fatima, 2025). Video modeling (VM) has been identified as an intervention strategy for teaching communication and social skills for children with ASD, because the strategy takes advantage of the visual learning skills that should be present in most children with ASD (Ergin & Kocaoz, 2026). This approach has also gained prominence because many individuals with ASD demonstrate relative strengths in visual processing compared with auditory or language-based instructional modalities (Abd Aziz et al. 2026). As a result, video modelling has been widely applied as an instructional and intervention strategy across educational and related applied contexts.

Different forms of video modeling exist, and each can benefit different target behaviors and children, depending on which type of video modeling they prefer. In video self-modeling, the child watches video clips of the target behaivor being performed by his or her own self (Bellini & Akullian, 2007). This form of video modeling is preferred as it enhances self-efficacy, motivation and again there is favourable reinforcement of success behaviours. VSM has been shown to improve social skills, including turn-taking, greeting, and conversational skills (Gelbar et al., 2012). Peer video modeling involves showing children videos of other children performing acceptable social practices. Studies have also shown that this kind of modelling enhance communication skills since children with ASD have been found to be motivated by interaction with their age mates. Peer video modeling has been observed to enhance both social communication and play for children with ASD (Oh-Young et al., 2018). In adult video modeling, children watch videos of adults demonstrating the desired behaviors. This may be less relevant than peer modeling, but general video modeling is beneficial when peer models are unavailable or when teaching novel and difficult behaviors (Bellini & Akullian, 2007). Video modeling is frequently paired with other evidence-based practices, such as task analysis, prompting, and reinforcement (Wynkoop, Robertson & Schwartz, 2018). Video modeling is an

evidence-based practice effective for teaching communication, social, play, school readiness, academic, adaptive, and vocational skills to children ages 3 to 14. (McCabe, 2020).

Video modeling is thought to promote learning through social cognitive theory and observational learning (Ismail & Brown, 2026). Video modeling aligns with social cognitive theory by providing vicarious reinforcement through observing success, whether another person's or one's own. Video modeling also relies on observational learning, which posits that individuals learn by observing and imitating others. With individualized video models, this form of observational learning can be directed toward learning behaviors valued by the individual. In addition, video modeling allows consistent skill teaching through repeated exposure to the modeled context and behavior (Wilson, Valazza & Price, 2024). Autistic individuals may also have visual processing strengths that align with video modeling's format. Video modeling reduces attention, language, and social demands and is implemented through commonly appealing and accepted forms of screen media (Mitsch, Riggleman & Buchter, 2021).

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Given the importance of developing functional communication and social play skills for children with ASD, the amount of research on interventions targeting such skills has increased exponentially. Researchers have examined numerous interventions targeting functional communication and social play skills. However, few studies have considered functional communication and social play skills together. For instance, Law, Neihart, and Dutt (2018) examined behavior modeling training in a mobile app parent-training program to improve functional communication in young children with autism spectrum disorder. Frolli et al. (2020) studied video modeling and social skills learning in ASD-HF. These studies only focused on functional communication. Similarly, Petursdottir and Gudmundsdottir (2023) assessed the effects of portable video modeling on social interactions in four children with autism, focusing only on play skills. Bawakid (2022) also investigated the use of video modeling (VM) in improving play-related social skills for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Saudi Arabia. This review hence focused on assessing the effect of video modeling interventions on the two outcomes, that is, functional communication and social-play skills, together in children with ASD.

### 1.2 Study objectives

1. To determine the effect of video modelling on functional communication in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder
2. To determine the effect of video modelling on social play skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

## 2. Methods

This was a systematic review. The researcher gathered studies from academic, peer-reviewed journals using keywords such as video modeling, functional communication, social play skills, and children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Inclusion criteria required primary interventions with experimental designs, targeting children aged 2-14 years, published in English, using video modeling, and measuring functional communication and/or social play skills. Initially, 27 studies were identified. After screening against the inclusion criteria, the final review included 12 studies. The synthesis used thematic analysis.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Video Modelling and Functional Communication in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Several reviewed studies met the selection criteria for assessing the effect of video modelling on functional communication in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Generally, the studies revealed that video modelling is effective in improving functional communication skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Functional communication outcomes included requests, spontaneous word and gesture use, social initiations, and communication during everyday social activities.

Plavnick and Ferreri (2011) investigated 4 children with autism to examine a methodology for teaching recognizable mands based on environmental variables known to evoke participants' idiosyncratic communicative responses in the natural environment. The research revealed that Results showed that gestures functioned as requests for attention for 1 participant and as requests for assistance to obtain a preferred item or event for 3 participants. An alternating treatments within multiple probe design showed that participants repeatedly acquired mands during the function-based condition but not during the non-function-based condition. The response generalized during the function-based condition. This suggests that video modeling is useful in teaching functional communication, specifically mands.

Law, Neihart and Dutt (2018) conducted a multiple-baseline single-case experimental design across three parent–child dyads to examine the use of behavior modeling training in a mobile app parent training program to improve functional communication of young children with autism spectrum disorder. Results indicated that children showed increases in spontaneous word/gesture use. The results showed that video modelling through mobile applications can be a promising means for improving efficiency and effectiveness in improving functional communication for autism intervention.

Frolli et al. (2020) compared self-video modeling and peer video modeling strategies to enhance communicative/social skills in High-Functioning Autism (ASD-HF) across three activities: interacting with a salesperson while making a purchase, initiating and maintaining a conversation with peers, and starting and maintaining an enjoyable activity with a peer. Self-video modeling procedures led to faster and more accurate execution of the three proposed tasks than peer video modeling. The study concluded that self-video modeling speeds skill acquisition for communicative/social tasks, compared with peer video modeling's slower performance in subjects with ASD-HF. This suggests that the type of video modelling used may have an influence on the functional communication outcome.

Özerk and Özerk (2015) used Video Modeling and achieved positive results in teaching social communication skills and target behavior to an eleven-year-old bilingual boy with ASD. The study also revealed that through Video Modeling, children with ASD can learn desirable behavioral skills as by-products. Video Modeling can also contribute positively to the social inclusion of bilingual children with ASD in school settings. This suggests that video modelling is effective in transferring the social communication skills and targeted behaviors children learn through second-language at school to a first-language milieu.

### 3.2 Video Modelling and Social Play Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Reviewed studies also revealed that video modelling is effective in modelling social play skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Social-play outcomes included reciprocal play, cooperative play, functional play, symbolic play, sociodramatic play, and play-related social interaction.

Petursdottir and Gudmundsdottir (2023) assessed the effects of portable video modeling on social interactions of four children with autism, aged 4 to 5 years, in preschools in Iceland. A multiple-probe-across-participants design showed that video modeling reduced latency to social initiation and increased reciprocal play and language use per 5-min play sessions. Improvements also generalized to other peers, a larger group, and to the main classroom and were maintained post-intervention. These findings suggest that video modeling with a handheld device could support the acquisition and generalization of social play of preschool children with autism in natural settings.

Bawakid (2022) investigated the use of video modeling (VM) in improving play-related social skills for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Saudi Arabia using a single-subject multiple-probe, multiple-baseline across behaviors design replicated across two participants. The participants were two children with ASD, ages 6 and 12. Results indicated participants improved their social play skills (i.e., playing tag, Who can sit on the chair?, and colored coins) as a result of the intervention. Visual inspection of the graphs indicated a functional relationship between VM use and the ability of two elementary students with ASD (level one) to improve their social play skills. This suggests that video modelling is an effective tool in improving play-related social skills for children with autism spectrum disorder.

Ozen, Batu, and Birkan (2012) examined whether video modeling effectively taught sociodramatic play skills to individuals with autism in a small-group arrangement using a multiple-probe design across behaviors. The study included three 9-year-old boys with autism. Results showed that participants acquired their roles through video modeling. They also maintained the skills they learned two weeks after the training sessions were completed. Observational learning data were also very positive with all participants. This suggests that video modeling effectively taught sociodramatic play skills to children with autism.

Boudreau and D'Entremont (2010) used a single-subject design with multiple baselines across subjects to examine the efficacy of a video modeling intervention for teaching play skills to two four-year-old boys with autism spectrum disorders. Both children showed rapid increases in modeled actions and scripted verbalizations during the video modeling phase compared to baseline levels. Adding reinforcement sessions during the video modeling phase increased the frequency of modeled actions and scripted verbalizations but appeared to suppress novel play. Both children achieved generalization and short-term maintenance; however, only one child showed long-term maintenance. This suggests that video modelling is effective in social play skill acquisition as well as the development of novel play.

Hwan Ra (2018) examined the effect of video modeling on social initiations by children with ASD to engage in traditional versus musical play. Results indicated no significant difference in the mean number of participants' social initiations between the baseline condition and engagement in traditional and musical play. However, the musical play condition resulted in the highest mean number of participants' social initiations. This suggests that video modelling can produce different outcomes in the type of play skill.

Çınar and Duman (2025) investigated the effectiveness of point-of-view video modeling in enhancing the symbolic play skills of 3 children with autism spectrum disorder. The research found that point-of-view video modeling effectively improved the symbolic play skills of the participants with autism spectrum disorder; participants maintained these skills, and the study had high social validity.

Ergin and Kocaoz (2026) investigated the effectiveness of a video modeling– based intervention package for teaching physically active cooperative playground games to preschool children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) using a multiple probe design. The dependent variable was the number of correct task-analysis steps performed during gameplay while the song/chanted rhyme was ongoing. The independent variable was a teacher-created video modeling–based intervention package featuring age-matched peer models and including visual supports, prompting, and reinforcement. Results indicated that all three children increased the number of correct steps for each game after the intervention package was introduced. Furthermore, during the maintenance phase, each child maintained performance, and generalization probes suggested transfer of the learned routines to different settings and peers. This suggests that video modelling can effectively teach gameplay.

Elhaddadi et al. (2022) conducted an experimental study to measure the effectiveness of video modeling and reciprocal imitation in teaching play skills to children with ASD. The sample consisted of 18 children with ASD aged 5 to 8 years old. The results showed that both methods improved play skills, with progress varying by age, autism level, and program type. The post-test showed statistically significant differences favoring the video modeling group. In general, video modeling was more effective than reciprocal imitation in developing play skills. It was found that learning by modeling the behaviors of peers (reciprocal imitation) is one of the effective methods in teaching and training most children with ASD in many skills; however, video modeling is more effective because it is based on the regular teaching of measurable behavioral units, and each skill is reduced to small steps. This suggests that video modelling can be more effective in learning social play skills in children with autism spectrum disorder than other training methods.

## 4. Discussion

The findings revealed that video modeling can be effective in acquiring functional communication skills such as requesting attention and requesting assistance, using spontaneous words/gestures, and social inclusion and social communication skills in children with ASD. Additionally, findings revealed that the type of video modelling applied may have an influence on the speed and magnitude and nature of functional communication skills acquired. For instance, self-video modeling was found to speed up the acquisition of skills to perform communicative/social tasks, compared to peer video modeling in the study by Frolli et al. (2020). Moreover, video modelling was found to be effective in transferring the social communication skills and targeted behaviors children learn through second-language at school to a first-language milieu.

The findings also revealed that video modelling is effective in acquiring and improving social play skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Specifically, the social play skills acquired included reduced latency to social initiation and increased reciprocal play and language use, sociodramatic play skills, modeled actions and scripted verbalizations, traditional and musical play, symbolic play skills, game play skills and reciprocal imitation. The findings further revealed that different video modelling tools, such as a handheld device,

could support the acquisition and generalization of social play in preschool children with autism. Furthermore, video modelling can produce different outcomes in different social play skills such as traditional versus musical play as demonstrated by Hwan Ra (2018). Additionally, video modelling was found to be more effective in the acquisition of social play skills than other training interventions.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that video modelling is effective in acquisition and improvement of functional communication and social play skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Video modelling can be used to acquire different types of functional communication skills such as spontaneous word and gesture use, social initiations, and communication during everyday social activities. For social skills, video modelling can improve reciprocal play, cooperative play, functional play, symbolic play, sociodramatic play, and play-related social interaction. Different types of video modeling can be used, including self-video modelling and peer video modelling, which can produce different outcomes. Moreover, video modeling can produce different outcomes in children of different demographic characteristics. The outcomes of video modelling can also be different in terms of magnitude, speed and nature of the outcome.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the finding that video modelling is effective in acquisition and improvement of functional communication and social play skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the study recommends that therapists, teachers and parents should consider the use of video modelling intervention in addition to other forms of interventions for functional communication and social skills in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study also recommends that the video modelling interventions should be customized based on demographic characteristics of the children. Moreover, different types of video modelling should be tried on the children in order to determine the most effective type for each individual child with ASD.

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