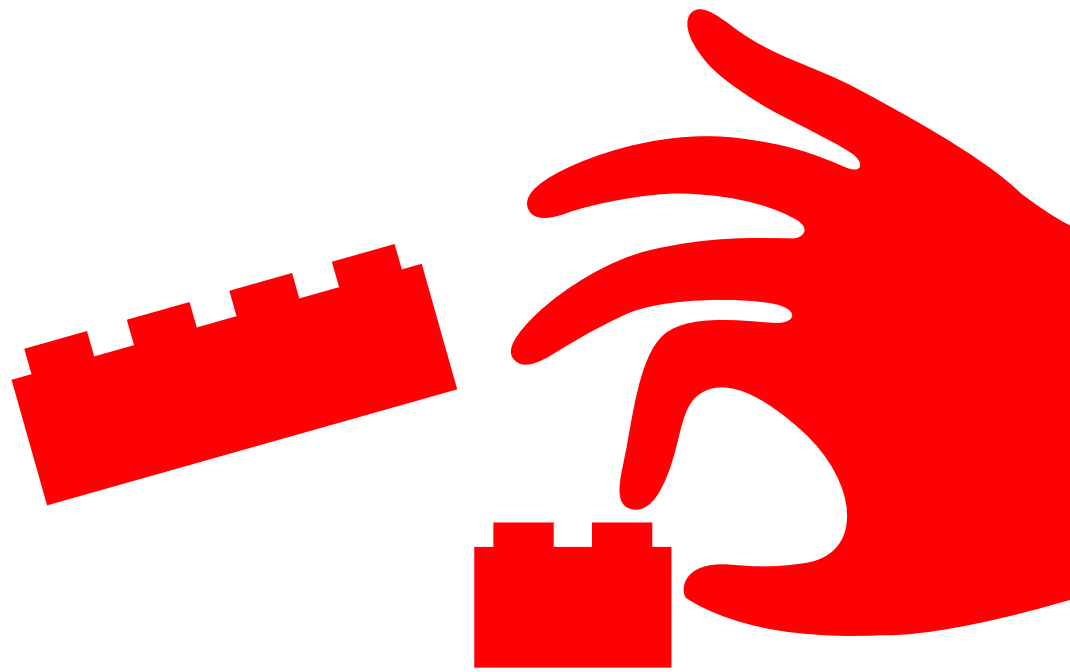


PLAY
INCLUDED



Building confidence and communication skills Brick-by-Brick®

The Social Mind Center supports autistic children and young people's social, emotional, and cognitive skills development in Florida. As a learning community for children and their families of all ages, the Center offers both individual and group support to help children connect with others.

Daniel Cuesta, a volunteer at the Center, discovered Play Included's Brick-by-Brick® programme when he was researching LEGO®-based therapy for a research project. He immediately knew that the Brick-by-Brick® programme would benefit the children and young people he worked with.

An emphasis on the importance of play underpins both the Center's and Play Included's missions. "In the United States of America, children are entrenched in academics and don't have many opportunities to explore the arts", says Daniel.

"We are always looking for activities that interest the children, but that are creative at the same time. LEGO is a perfect fit."

However, while it is imperative that the children enjoy the group activity, Daniel explains that it is also important that parents embrace the programme and highlights: "The clinical and research background that Dr Gómez de la Cuesta and the Play Included® team have is important to our parents; they understand it is a credible programme."

PLAY INCLUDED

Introducing the Brick-by-Brick® programme

Even though the Center is based in Florida, Daniel appreciates that the Play Included® team has always been “accessible and extremely supportive.”

After meeting with the Play Included® team, Daniel and Ana Anselma, Administrative Director of the Social Minds Center, completed their Brick-by-Brick® programme Level 01 Initiate and Level 02 Facilitator training, enabling them to deliver the methodology.

The Brick-by-Brick® programme aids children and young people to develop their communication and confidence skills and form friendships with their peers through regular participation in the programme. To begin with, Daniel and Ana held just one after-school session per week, known as Brick Club, which quickly evolved into two.

Forming friendships

“Initially, we hoped that the children would build their organisation and communication skills, but we realised that the value for the children was the feeling of belonging that they gained from taking part in Brick Club”, says Ana.

“They are able to have conversations and open up about the challenges they face in their daily lives. In fact, three boys have grown really close with each other, and others invite their peers to their birthday parties or to playdates outside of the Center.”



Not only do the children develop friendships and a sense of community at Brick Club, but Ana and Daniel note that the children feel a sense of pride in their constructions. Daniel shares that: “the children look at their [LEGO] sets with pride because they are displayed on the wall. We keep adding shelves!”



Social skills development

At the beginning of the Brick Club launch, Daniel used questionnaires to further measure the impact of the Brick-by-Brick® programme, using a visual rating system to understand how children and their parents felt about the children’s progress. At the end of just four weeks, Daniel found that both children and their parents had noticed improvements in social development and wellbeing. As well as the social and emotional benefits of the programme, Ana is keen to highlight that “it has been a lot of fun for the children too.”

Future plans

There are now 19 children regularly taking part in Brick Club at the Center, with a waitlist of many more who would like to join and benefit from the Brick-by-Brick® programme methodology. Daniel emphasises that the Center “would like to add more groups and offer more children the opportunity to experience Brick Club.”