

This information sheet is designed to explore play in children with autism, and gives tips on how to encourage children with autism to develop their play.

How does a child with autism play?

For most neurotypical children, play is an important part of the development of their social awareness and interaction skills. Novelty and variety add interest to their play and helps the child grow and learn.

Play in children with autism looks different to play in neurotypical children. Their play seems to be repetitive and unchanging. For example, they may play with the same toy in the same way over and over again. They may line things up, move objects in and out of containers, spin or flap items. Much more time is spent on simple manipulative play (mouthing, waving, banging, spinning) than on more functional and symbolic play (like pushing a car to and fro, or dressing up as a fireman). Even if the child does do some functional playing, it is not as frequent or varied as what you might see in a neurotypical child.

Some children with autism play with objects in unusual ways. This may involve odd ways of looking at things, such as twisting an object close to the eye or a lot of time spent scrutinising an object or part of it. There may also be much more use of touch, sniffing and mouthing to explore toys and everyday objects.

Why is play different in children with autism?

Some children with autism may have sensory issues which can lead to them preferring some toys over others, or using toys in a different way. They may find the world confusing, so they may feel the need to be in control. They may crave predictability and may want to keep things the same, so change (even of a toy or a game) feels too risky or too scary to them.

Some children with autism lack imitation skills, and do not look to an adult for a demonstration of how an object works. They do not see being with other people as fun so they have difficulty with joint attention, which would help them develop play skills. Sometimes their own sense of order and logic may prevent participation in pretend play, and they often have a keen eye for detail at the expense of the 'big picture'.

They may not realise other people are interested in what they are doing so they do not bring things to show you or get you to watch their game. They may also have difficulty in pointing and following the direction of your gaze.

How can we help children with autism develop play?

Children with autism may need to be taught how to play, rather than learning through play. It is important to create opportunities to engage with the child at their level, and find out what motivates them.

Work towards shared attention and interest by paying close attention to what they are doing. Make your presence obvious and show interest in what they are doing so they know whatever they choose is ok with you.

Make regular playtimes part of the daily routine. Play and social interaction lead to learning, but the most important thing is to **enjoy** being with your child and **have fun together**. It does not matter what you are doing, as long as you are both enjoying the activity.

Guidelines to help you get started

- Start with lots of basic, manipulative play before moving on to functional, symbolic and social play. If the child is focussed on a particular detail of a toy, don't prevent them from doing this, but try playing with it functionally yourself to teach the child the function of toy.
- Choose things the child may find interesting, and bring what you are doing close to the child to get his attention. Do not be upset if they get up and walk away or ignore you completely. This may be because you came too close. Some children with autism have good peripheral vision and may be taking in more than you think.
- Start by playing alongside with your own set of toys and get attention by exaggerating your facial expression, making a noise or blowing on them, for example. Move on to exchanging toys. Then try sharing ONE toy – their turn will have to be much longer than yours. A child with autism usually feels more secure if you join him in his activity than if you try to change things or introduce something completely new.
- Encourage turn-taking, build up play routines and involve other children. Play 'one for me, one for you' and teach choice of food, clothes or activity (two only at first – limited choice is easier than free choice). Use 'my turn, your turn' to interact so that when they make a toy move, you make a toy move.
- Encourage your child to take the lead in games like 'Seesaw' and 'Row your boat' and use any activity that needs two for maximum fun or effect. This could include playing ball, car, swings, letting them hold something for you, moving a table together, household tasks, pushing another child in a cart etc.
- If your child plays well on their own terms but will not follow your lead, teach them how to give by taking an item from them, and showing pleasure as if you have been given it. You could also give them things and then ask for a quick return. React as if he's showing you something, even if he's only holding or carrying a toy. Use 'Where is the....?' as a prompt. Encourage him to show others a completed puzzle.

- Keep it simple, one thing at a time. Use gestures, touch and actions to show what you mean. Use pictures, objects and books too, not just speech.
- Keep language short and to the point, but **do** talk about what you are seeing, doing and hearing e.g. "Let Mummy see"; "Do another jump"; "Ready, steady, go".
- Encourage showing you what he wants. Teach pointing to aid this. Pretend not to understand so he has to gesture more clearly. Move from objects to pictures, to symbols (PECS). Demonstrate 'point' and 'touch'. When playing shops, hold your hand out for 'Give me'
- Make a model from Lego first for them to see what to do, or model cars or fruit from playdough for him to copy. Shape actions physically, hand over hand, to show your child how to use toys. For example, when playing with Lego, hold your hand over theirs to steady the activity and press down together. This helps them place the bricks correctly and exert sufficient pressure to push it into place.
- Use backward chaining with formboards and jigsaws. To begin with complete all but the last piece and then gradually leave more each time. This gives the child quick satisfaction and encourages another go. Gradually increase their share until he can complete it alone.
- Use water play, with different containers to fill and empty. A small teapot is especially good for pouring with direction.
- Teach dressing up, always being aware of the child's sensory issues. You will have to demonstrate at first. For example, you could use hats, bags, letters/ parcels (postman), a crate for milk bottles (milkman), a hose (fireman) or a cape (superhero).
- Make use of finger and hand puppets, cuddly toys and figures associated with their special interests. Some children with autism may take more notice of these than they do of a human being e.g. Teddy says "Jump" or "It's Dinosaur's turn now".
- Painting is also good. What might appear to be random blobs and blotches eventually turn into specific things in a child's mind. Try not to interfere with concentration by asking questions.

Useful resources

Autism and Play by J Beyer

Autism in the Early Years by V Cumine, J Dunlop and G Stevenson

Play with me: Including children with autism in mainstream primary schools by I Cottinelli Telmo

Autism Spectrum Disorders in the early years by L Plimley, M Bowen and H Morgan

Social skills and Autistic Spectrum Disorders by L Plimley and M Bowen

Interactive Play for Children with Autism by D Seach