

Play



Access to reliable and useful information is important for understanding the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum. Not only are individual's lives dramatically affected but the lives of their families, friends, schools and colleagues are too.

Based on our knowledge and understanding of common challenges that arise, we continually develop our information resources on a range of day-to-day topics and issues. Our fact sheets help many to understand, develop practical skills and build confidence when interacting with someone on the autism spectrum.

Play is such a fundamental part of child rearing, and one that comes so naturally to most babies, children and parents that we often don't stop to think about the importance of play on so many parts of a child's development.

As parents, most of us are naturally motivated to play and interact with our children. It can come as a surprise therefore if a child isn't responsive to these attempts, and we may not know what to try next. For many children with autism, play may be different and

more difficult to achieve. As parents, our attempts to engage may sometimes falter. However with understanding and support it should be possible to progress their play, including their 'social play', and for this to support other areas of their development too.

Scottish Autism's Autism Support Team have been involved in developing the play of many pre-schoolers with autism and often advise on play to parents. Here are some key strategies to think about if you are trying to develop your child's play.

As a starting point, it's helpful to have an understanding of the different stages play goes through in typical development. The following chart shows the recognised stages of play, in the order that they usually occur in typical development. The second chart shows the stages of social play:

Stages of Play: Typical Development

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Sensory Motor Play | The baby or child is primarily occupied with the way things taste, look, sound, feel, smell, etc. For example he or she not only shakes a rattle but sucks it; feels its texture; examines the way it looks; smells it and plays with other items in a similar way. |
| Organising play | The baby or child is concerned with organising the play items but hasn't acquired an understanding of their purpose. So for example they may line up their toy cars but not actually drive them around. |
| Functional Play | The child has an understanding of the actual purpose of the toys and uses them accordingly. For example they may now drive the toy car around the floor. |
| Pretend Play | <p>Pretend, or imaginative, play incorporates several levels. Initially the child will use items in a very functional way such as pretending to stir and drink from a toy tea cup. This could be called 'functional imaginative' play.</p> <p>The next stage is using one item to represent another (e.g. they don't have a cup so they pretend something else is a cup).</p> <p>Imaginary play then develops into increasingly symbolic play such as projecting real life qualities onto a doll or toy animal (e.g. pretending dolly is a person); pretending something or someone is there that isn't (e.g. an imaginary house) and taking on imaginary roles (role play).</p> |

[Source: Adapted from Beyer & Gammeltoft, 1999]

Stages of Social Play

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Solitary play | Playing by themselves |
| Spectator play | Spectating as other children play but without interacting |
| Parallel play | Playing alongside but with minimal interaction |
| Associative play | Playing closely together with associated activities but without sharing their play ideas |
| Co-operative play | Ability to play together in a co-operative way |

[Source: Adapted from Sheridan, 1999]

By looking at these charts it can be seen that many children with autism do show some of these types of play, but this is often different to their typically developing peers. There may be many reasons for this. For example:

Play is often predominantly social; uses communication and requires imaginative ability. In children with autism there can be a tendency for play to be solitary and limited to exploring sensory aspects or lining toys up in a rigid manner for much longer than in typical development. Imitation may be difficult.

Playing imaginatively may not be achieved to the same extent or in the same types of scenarios seen in typical development. In some older children, ability with memory and imitation can enable them to engage in imaginary scenarios however for some children this comes about as a result of rote copying of an activity they have seen other children engaged in; or that they have seen on TV, or in a film or book, rather than being self generated. Of course, some typically developing youngsters will generate play scenarios based on these sort of experiences but are more likely to be able to deviate and develop them rather than adhering to the original format or content.

Planning to develop your child's play

First of all, become familiar with your child's developmental level around play. This is key to playing with them and developing their play.

Use the brief outlines of levels of play/social play in the previous charts. Which is/are your child predominantly interested in? Knowledge of his or her play level will help you to identify what strategies and playthings to use to engage with your child and try to develop their play.

To help with the previous exercise, watch your child in a range of play settings with a range of play and 'sensory' items, as well as other people/other children. See what your child does; what items/toys/people he or she is drawn to and what he or she does with them.

Here are some suggestions for types of playthings, although be guided by your knowledge of your child's preference, any sensory sensitivities and safety issues:

Bubbles; balloons; toys for blowing; strings of beads; fabric or other materials with different textures or patterns; colourful, contrasting, shiny and reflective items; spinning tops; moving toys; vibrating toys; musical toys; balls; books; stacking cups; blocks; empty boxes/containers; large dominoes; cause and effect toys (e.g. Jack in the Box); jigsaws; train set; toy figures/ animals/ dolls and accessories; tea set; crayons and paper; play dough; pots and pans and toy food; dressing up clothes; hats; toy money, toy phone ...

Please note that many of these items could be used at various levels of play: for instance dolly could be used imaginatively or in a sensori-motor way (such as the feel of its hair) as well as in a functional way.

Try not to worry if your child's play is different to that of other children you know. The important thing is to find out what level your child is at and use this as a starting point. We have found that many children with autism can and do develop in their play if the nature of their differences is understood and suitable play approaches and strategies used.

Play should be fun! What really motivates your child? This may not actually be toys but may be non-toy items; parts of items, or repetitive behaviours. Whatever the motivator, it will be key to success in trying to play with your child and developing their play.

Get down to your child's level – if they want to play on the floor, do this. If they need the structure of playing at a table, this is fine. Do ensure, though, that you are at the right level to catch any eye contact that's going!

Think about the play environment. Are there aspects which might distract or disturb the child, especially if they have sensory sensitivities? What 'messages' is the environment sending out to the child? For example if you're playing in the kitchen do they think its time for a meal? Can they smell food cooking that might mislead them or upset them? Is the TV or radio on? Try to make the environment as neutral as possible so the focus is on play only.

'Set the scene' for play. Something like a play mat or blanket on the floor can help the child's expectations by visually showing where to play. He or she may be able to learn that next time when the mat is laid out this means play, helping them to predict events. Having the playthings in a box also helps to signal what is about to happen and adds structure.

How long can your child play for and why might this be? Keep your expectations open and feel confident in your instincts of when to stop. One or two minutes of positive play or tolerance from your child will be far more productive than a painfully drawn out session.

A difficulty often described by parents, actually engaging with their child in a playful manner, is more likely to be achieved if these areas are taken into account. Try to be relaxed about what you are trying to achieve and remember that even a brief or fleeting response from your child is a success and something to learn and develop from. The next section suggests some tactics for engaging.

During play with your child

Strategies for gaining attention are very individualised, but some of the following may suit your child – the aim of each of these activities would be for you to pause and wait for some acknowledgment from the child before continuing:

- Games like 'Peek-a-Boo' using a textured or patterned fabric that they like
- Singing a familiar nursery rhyme, song or jingle
- Playing a repetitive musical instrument/ tapping out a rhythm
- Rough and tumble or tickling, again pausing and waiting for a signal to continue
- Blowing bubbles
- To help your child understand the difference between these play sessions with you and other play times, try keeping the toys and playthings you use in these sessions separate to the ones your child uses at other times.
- Try videoing your play session – often a child's interaction may be so fleeting that it is easily missed. However if you can see it on video, and what you did to achieve this, then you have something to focus on next time.

Try following your child's play instead of trying to lead it. Later you can look at adding in your own motivating changes.

Once your child's initial interest is captured, use your knowledge of your child and your instincts to try to develop the interaction. To ensure that you are able to keep things flowing, it is helpful to have a range of motivating props (e.g. toys; sensory based items) close to hand so that you can feed in new activities. Remember to stop as soon as you feel your child has had enough.

Another technique that has been found successful is using matching sets of toys for the child and the adult (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 1999). The reasons for having matching items include the interest this may create in the child; the ability to copy the child, letting him or her experience taking the initiative; and the ability to guide the child using a matching toy.

Marwick (2005) developed the use of appealingly decorated 'paired boxes' of toys with slight differences. The rationale for this is that the child will be drawn to the boxes' decoration and then you can imitate any initiatives the child makes to explore the boxes or toys, using your own version. Because the toys are broadly the same, you can then pick up on what interests the child, using your own matching toy. Furthermore the child may pick up on, and be further interested by, your items having slight differences. In addition, you can 'scaffold' the child's exploration/play by demonstrating new ways of using whatever item they have picked up, using your matching item.

- You might want to make up a song along the lines of 'play is finished...we're putting the toys away' – your child may enjoy the musical aspect to this and singing it can become a routine to help herald the end of the play session.
- If the child has a visual schedule, use this to show clearly that play is finished, it is time to tidy up, and what will happen next. This information can also be communicated by showing the toy box/singing the song and by giving them an item for what is happening next (e.g. coat for going outside)
- When possible, spend some time reflecting on the play session (and watching the video if you were able to take one). Think about what felt good for you, and what seemed enjoyed by your child; what wasn't so successful; what the child responded to; how long this lasted, etc. What can you learn from this session to take to the next one?
- Visual supports such as a 'story board', photos, video clips or a 'Social Story'™ could also be useful to reflect later with your child on what has happened during the play session. This may encourage their recall skills and also help them to understand what happened and what fun it was.
- A visual schedule showing what is going to happen during (and after) the play session, and who will be involved.
- Visual supports for any turn-taking. This will give predictability and understanding.
- A 'Social Story'™ to set the scene for what will happen in the play session; the other adult or child's perceptions and expectations, and what to do.
- Scripts to support a play scenario. These could be made using photos or even video clips.

Other Suggestions

Just as the child with autism requires structure in many aspects of their life, so their play, too, may gain from being structured. The following strategies may help your child:

Remember that you are also providing structure by the way in which you 'set the scene' for play and finish the session, and this may be all that your child needs.

- Make sure that any such visual supports used are easily understood by your child, and not a challenge in themselves.
- Bear in mind that toys designed for typical children of your child's age may not interest or motivate your child. This could be because they are pitched at a specific play level. Or it could be that the sensory aspects of the toy are off putting. If the toy is designed to be used socially (e.g. a game) or imaginatively, this again may not be appropriately pitched for your child.
- Develop your child's social play – this could be starting at the level of simply being able to tolerate you sharing in their activity, or developing two way 'joint play', playing together with another person. Perhaps your child has reached these stages and you can look at ways to develop peer play with other children? (see the Reading List, overleaf)
- Help your child to become more flexible in the way they use their toys and other items. Do this in a positive way by drawing on their motivators. Remember that if you are doing things differently this might be challenging for them as it requires skills of flexible thinking and 'seeing the bigger picture'. Using your own matching plaything rather than the child's own item may help.
- It can help to let relatives and friends know the type of toys, items and experiences your child is interested in so that they are more likely to get it right when buying him or her presents. So much more enriching for both the giver and the child.
- Play involving more than one other child/adult is so complex for the child with autism. Focus initially on developing their play with one adult only, and then gradually extend it to one additional person. Introducing another child or children will bring a whole different dynamic. Try to structure this as carefully as possible so that the child with autism still has some control and predictability. It will of course help if the other child is empathic and supportive.

Remember!

- Is your child motivated by the play activity?
- Is the toy or play item motivating?
- Is the 'scene' (environment) set for play?
- Does the child know its play time?

The play needs of each child and the way they respond to their play routine being developed will vary considerably. If you would like to discuss your child's play in more details with an Autism Advisor please contact our Autism Helpline on 01259 72 00 44.

Our Advisors have been involved in delivering play interventions to children with autism and have received training specific to play and autism.

*Through the JPIAM partnership project.

Information on this can be accessed at:

http://www.isec2005.org.uk/isec/abstracts/papers_m/marwick_h_2.shtml

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Suggested books/reading material:

Autism in the Early Years: A Practical Guide

V Cumine, J Leach & G Stevenson [Authors]
London: David Fulton [Publishers]

Autism and Play

L Gammeltoft & J Beyer [Authors]
London: Jessica Kingsley [Publishers]

Autism, Play and Social Interaction

S Nordenhof & L Gammeltoft [Authors]
London: Jessica Kingsley [Publishers]

Child Development: An Illustrated Guide

C Meggit [Author]
Oxford: Heinemann [Publishers]

Play in Early Childhood: From Birth to Six Years

Md Sheridan [Author]
Updated by J Harding and L Meldon Smith
Oxon: Routledge [Publishers]

A Social Play Record: A Toolkit for Assessing and Developing Social Play from Infancy to Adolescence

C White [Author]
London: Jessica Knight [Publishers]