

## 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 increasing sophistication of skill development helps the child grow and learn.

This does not seem to happen so readily for children with autism. Their play tends to be repetitive, obsessive and non-changing. For example, the same toy played with in the same way over and over again – lining things up, putting objects in and out of containers, spinning or flapping items. The same with books, videos and games.

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 when the child is developmentally young. Even if the child does do some functional playing, it is not as frequent or varied as you might expect.

There may be extreme fear or fascination of some objects. 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 past the age that you would expect this to happen.

## Why do they not learn play skills like other children?

Because of the nature of autism, some children may lack communication and imaginative skills. They may have sensory differences and difficulties and they may find the world confusing. This means that 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.

They may 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 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 sometimes have difficulty in pointing and following the direction of your gaze too.

## How can we help people with autism develop play and social skills?

Children with autism 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.

### Here are some 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 obsessed with the detail of a toy, flicking, flapping, spinning, try playing with it functionally yourself to teach the person 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 ignores you completely. This may be because you came too close. Children with autism have good peripheral vision and may be taking in more than you think of this parallel play.

- Start by playing alongside with your own set of toys and get attention by exaggeration of 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 or pushing another child in a cart and so on.
- Try 'cliffhangers'. Do something different or build up anticipation in games like 'Peepo' or stamping games.
- Watch them, then slowly imitate and wait to see their reaction – they may imitate you!
- 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. Comment on play. React to it, or even interrupt it, from across the room. e.g. "Let Mummy see"; "Do another jump"; "Ready, steady, go" from a step or across the room.
- 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 ....'

## Being around other people is fun – this is what we want the child to learn.

Try physical contact and lap games with young children. Start with their back towards you, then sitting at the edge of your knees, then face to face. Don't expect eye contact or co-operation at first. Gradually increase time spent, closeness and eye contact. You can also try floor games, rough and tumble, chasing, tickling or piggy back games. However try to avoid over-excitement.

Some repetitive activities look imaginative at first but are learnt responses, like video sequences for example. Teach 'let's pretend' so the child understands the concept. Start with the 'real' objects e.g. baking a cake. Then move to a toy version, and eventually an imaginary version. Be prepared for the child to think you have gone mad when you pretend to drink imaginary tea from an imaginary cup.

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.

To help concentration use water play, with different containers to fill and empty. A small teapot is especially good for

pouring with direction.

To help imagination, teach dressing up – you will have to demonstrate at first. Some children do not like hats, but a bag to carry or letters/parcels as a postman. A crate for milk bottles as a milkman, and a hose for a fireman putting out pretend fires may go down well. Props such as a cape for superhero play may be accepted too.

Make use of finger and hand puppets, cuddly toys and figures associated with their special interests. Children with autism often take more notice of these than they do of a human being e.g. Teddy says "Jump", "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. Children often love it if you put a paintbrush in each of their hands, and taking hold yourself; make their hands paint circles and figure eights.

## Developing positive social interaction

Young people with autism need to understand these concepts before they can develop positive social interaction:

- What time are we doing the activity, when will it be finished and what is next?
- Social timing (pauses) and waiting
- Personal space, appropriate body contact and being comfortable in close proximity to other people
- Friendship
- Making choices
- Turn-taking and sharing

They also need to be able to understand how other people behave, how to respond appropriately to social cues from others, how to express themselves and how to manage their own behaviour. These skills are important and need direct teaching at home, in school and in community settings:

- Recognising invitations to join in with activities
- 'Meet and greet'
- Shared attention skills
- Empathy
- Understanding and responding to inferred meaning
- Acknowledging that other people have valid opinions
- Distinguishing fact from fiction
- Initiating and ending interactions
- Expressing own likes and dislikes
- Expressing requests
- Understanding and following social rules

- Adapting own behaviour to suit social situations and recognising how own behaviour impacts on others
- Understanding cause and effect, consequences, and being able to reflect and learn from experience
- Organising and sequencing thoughts and actions and remembering and using coping strategies
- Problem solving

Teaching social skills in isolation is not enough. Skills have to be practised in a range of real life situations if they are to be properly learnt.

## Useful websites for more information on social skills include:

[www.nfer-nelson.co.uk](http://www.nfer-nelson.co.uk)

[www.human-emotions.com](http://www.human-emotions.com)

[www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com)

[www.tonyattwood.com](http://www.tonyattwood.com)

[www.oaasis.co.uk](http://www.oaasis.co.uk)

## Further reading and bibliography:

G.Beyer: 'Autism and Play'

Leicester CC and NAS: 'Autism, How to Help Your Young Child'

Cumine et al: 'Autism in the Early Years'

NAS: 'Play With Me'

Plimley et al: 'ASD in the Early Years'

Plimley, Bowen: 'Social Skills and ASD'

Diana Seach: 'Interactive Play for Children with Autism'