

Developing Play skills in a young child with ASD

Why Play?

- Play and social development go hand-in-hand.
- Play helps children develop and prepare for adult hood.
- Social interaction during play helps child form a sense of their own identity and social awareness leading to understanding others' perspectives.
- A child learns the social skills of co-operation, respect and empathy.

During play children:

- Develop symbolic understanding using toys – learning about the real world and environment.
- Test how things work – cars on a ramp.
- Try out frightening situations safely - 'wolf coming to get you!'
- Work out relationships between people and how to behave in certain situations – family, shops, doctors etc.
- Re-enact everyday situations and apply different solutions – going to the park, falling over.
- Express imagination and creativity through art, play dough, music, dancing, which increases their self-esteem and sense of pride.

Children with ASD often:

- Play with toys in unusual ways or get pleasure from handling a range of objects, not just toys.
- Get 'stuck' at certain stages or 'skip' them.
- Don't learn incidentally during play.
- Need support to develop play skills

What affects the child's development of play?

Exploratory play

- Lack of interest in environment.
- Difficulties with sensory feedback.
- Fixation on minor elements.
- Liking "sameness"

Physical play

- Often physically very active
- Difficulty in understanding and interpreting where they are in space.
- Developing physical skills early but without any sense of safety.

Constructional play

- Being very active during the constructional stage depends on co-ordination and understanding of cause and effect.
- Not passing through the exploratory stage, which leads onto combining materials.

- Becoming “stuck” on one aspect e.g. knocking towers down - as this effect is more rewarding than the building.

Symbolic play

- Lack of awareness of “pretend” and unable to substitute objects in play.
- Using an object one way initially prevents it being used differently because of the desire for sameness.
- Lacking the shared understanding with another person.

Imaginative play

- Lack of understanding of pretend so they “are” a character.
- Enjoying learned scenarios, but finding it hard to deviate or develop them.
- Difficulties in understanding other people’s intentions or co-operating in play.
- A desire to control their environment.

Games with rules

- Often this is a strength, if the rules can be learned and do not change.
- Finding waiting for their own turn difficult.
- Negotiation is difficult.
- The desire to win may be overwhelming.
- Lack of empathy for other players

Developing play routines

Remember that play has to be enjoyable for all parties. It is important to join in your child’s play and value their interests. Use your child’s interests as a starting point to build relationships and develop their skills.

Play with the child on an individual basis, before involving peers and siblings. Try to provide good role models.

Good play routines need:

- Motivating toys and activities for children. At times, these may seem a little unconventional or not age appropriate to an adult, but if plastic containers, number cards, shiny paper etc are motivating for your child think of how you can use them in different ways.

For adults to:

- Give structure, gradually developing ideas – possibly combining favoured toys/scenarios with new activities, E.g – reassuring a child that it is ok for Thomas to go off the track and be used with other toys, go down a slope or through a tube. Cars or favourite figures can go in sand or water.
- Keep control – gradually introducing new ideas such as turn-taking, but also number of peers in the group. Adult deciding when activity will finish. If a child is reluctant to carry on, try ‘one more turn’.
- Provide good role models – providing children with a script to cope with change or losing a game – ‘Well done, you might be the winner next time’.
- Share in the fun!

Children who are reluctant to engage with other people may benefit from **Intensive Interaction** techniques (Dave Hewett and Melanie Nind) see www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk