

Play and children with autism spectrum disorder

Play helps children develop gross and fine motor skills, language and communication skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, and social skills. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can affect how play develops, but there's a lot you can do to help develop your child's play skills.



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How autism spectrum disorder can affect play

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) enjoy playing, but they can find some types of play difficult. It's common for them to have very limited play, play with only a few toys, or play in a repetitive way. For example, your child might like spinning the wheels on a car and watching the wheels rotate, or might complete a puzzle in the same order every time.

Because ASD affects the development of [social skills](#) and [communication skills](#), it can also affect the development of important play skills, like the ability to:

- copy simple actions
- explore the environment
- share objects and attention with others
- imagine what other people are thinking and feeling
- respond to others
- take turns.

But **your child can learn and develop the skills needed for play**, and you can help. Playing with your child is also a great way to connect with her at her level.



It's OK if your child has only a few play interests at the moment – you can use your child's favourite toys and topics to expand his play. For example, if your child enjoys Thomas the Tank Engine, use Thomas-themed toys to gradually introduce new toys and activities – for example, you could introduce a drawing game or activity involving Thomas.

Types of play skills for children with autism spectrum disorder

Young children engage in six main types of play, which develop in stages. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) might need extra help at each stage.

Exploratory play

This is when children explore objects and toys, rather than playing with them – for example, feeling a teddy bear, mouthing a block or looking at a doll's hands. At this stage of play, children are learning about their world through different shapes, colours, sizes and textures.

You can help your child with ASD by modelling this type of play and by encouraging her to explore objects around her. For example, you could encourage her to splash water in the bath and rub soap between her fingers.

Cause-and-effect play

This is when children play with toys that need an action to produce the desired result – for example, pressing a button to play music, or winding up a jack-in-the-box. This type of play teaches children that their actions have effects and gives them a sense of control in their play.

Your child with ASD might learn to operate toys on his own, through exploratory play, or you might need to show him. Praising your child when he does the right action will encourage him to keep doing it. It will also encourage him to interact with other toys in a cause-and-effect way as well.

This is also a good opportunity to teach your child how to ask you for help, and to play by taking turns. For example, you could take turns pressing a button to make something pop up and take turns pushing it back down again.

Toy play (or 'functional' play)

This is learning how to play with and use toys in the way they were designed – for example, pushing a toy car, bringing a toy phone to the ear, or throwing a ball.

If this is an area of challenge for your child with ASD, the following ideas might help:

- Sit in front of your child so she can look at you, communicate with you, and see what you're doing. This also makes it easier to engage her in play.
- Offer two or three toys your child enjoys. This gives your child a choice without overwhelming him.
- Join in with what your child is doing, rather than trying to guide her play. You can start by copying what your child is doing, then add to the activity. For example, if your child is spinning the wheels of a car, you could spin them too. Then turn the car the right way up and run it along the floor saying, 'Brrm, brrm'. Or if your child likes opening and closing doors on toys, start with this and then add toy figures walking in the doors.
- Encourage your child to play if he doesn't copy you. You could do this by saying, 'Your turn to drive the car', taking your child's hand and placing it on the car, then moving it across the floor together.
- Reward your child. Use [praise](#) and positive feedback like 'You've built a big tower. Good job!'. You could also add other rewards, like a couple of turns of blowing bubbles.
- Knowing when to stop or change is also important, so look out for signs of boredom or lack of interest.
- Show your child short videos of people playing. This can give her ideas of what she could do with those toys.
- Look out for signs that your child is getting bored or losing interest – knowing when to stop or change is important.



The ability to play with toys – and to play with you – is an important stepping stone towards the types and stages of play described below.

Constructive play

This is when children build or make things. It involves working towards a goal or product – for example, completing a jigsaw puzzle, making a tower out of blocks, or drawing a picture.

Some children with ASD might have delays in this area of play, whereas others will progress much like typically developing children. Sometimes children with ASD excel at a skill like completing jigsaws, building Lego or drawing.

For children with ASD, you can encourage constructive play by showing your child what to do. You could try building a tower with blocks to show your child how to do it, or you could use pictures or photographs that show how to build a tower.

Physical play

This is [rough-and-tumble play](#), running around, and other physical play that provides whole-body exercise and helps your child develop [gross motor skills](#).



Physical play gives all children the experience of interacting with other people and objects in their surroundings. You can find information about how to encourage this kind of play in our articles on [outdoor play](#), [movement for toddlers](#), [movement for preschoolers](#) and [movement for school-age children](#).

Pretend play

This is when children pretend and use their imaginations during play. Examples of this type of play include pretending to feed a teddy bear, dressing up like a superhero, pretending to be driving the car, or pretending the couch is a sailing boat.

Pretend play happens later in development – usually around two years of age in typically developing children. It's the most sophisticated form of play.

Pretend play is particularly **important for developing the skills needed for social relationships**, language and communication. This type of play is often delayed in children with ASD, but many children with ASD can and do ultimately develop pretend play.

There are lots of simple, everyday pretend actions your child can learn to use in pretend play, like driving a car, riding a horse or banging a drum.

Once your child can do some pretend actions, you can develop his imaginative and pretend play skills by **breaking the pretend play activity into steps**. You can also use written or picture instructions to help your child understand what to do. You might want to make it funny – for example, try using a hair brush instead of a spoon to feed a teddy bear. You can also encourage your child to join in with a fun game of 'let's pretend'.

This type of play also includes **role-play**. You can encourage role-play by taking your child's favourite story and getting her and others to act it out. You can give the children costumes and suggest changes to the characters' voices and gestures. By slowly introducing new themes and gradually changing parts of the play, you can guide your child towards independent creative dramatic play.

Social play skills for children with autism spectrum disorder

Along with the six types of play above, there is social play – the **ability to play with others**.

Social play also follows developmental stages, but playing with others can be particularly challenging for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). You can help your child by noting what stage of social play he's at and by providing opportunities, support and encouragement for him to progress to the next one. The stages are outlined below.

Note that even as children develop through the stages of social play, they're likely to want to spend time playing by themselves as well as playing alongside others. It's OK if your child wants to play alone some of the time.

Playing alone (solitary play)

This is when children play alone and independently, when they don't try to get close to other children and don't pay attention to what others are doing.

For children with ASD, you can encourage solitary play skills by starting with activities that have a clear goal and ending. Keep the play short to begin with, so your child can finish the activity quickly and feel successful. For example, you might choose a simple jigsaw puzzle.

Playing alongside (parallel play)

Children at this stage of play start to play alongside other children, and might use the same or similar toys as those around them.

You can promote play in this stage by encouraging your child with ASD to play at an activity – like trains – on her own but alongside other children. You can encourage your child to imitate the other children's play while she's playing on her own.

Playing and sharing with others (associative play)

In this stage of play, children interact with other children – giving, taking and sharing play materials. This usually starts at around three years of age in typically developing children.

You can help your child with ASD learn skills for associative play by encouraging him to swap things while he's

still playing on his own – for example, swapping bikes, trikes or scooters when cycling or scooting with other children.

Playing and cooperating (cooperative play)

Playing cooperatively with others includes playing games with rules, making up rules, and working together on something, like building a cubby house or making a sandcastle. Cooperative play can become quite complex and involves communication skills.

Many of the social rules in this stage of play can be difficult for children with ASD to understand. You can help your child by using clear instructions to simplify the rules of games. For example, 'First you hide somewhere in the house. Then Sam counts to 10. Then Sam comes to find you. When Sam finds you, it's your turn to count while Sam hides'.

It can also help to explain the rules using pictures or [Social Stories™](#). Making games more visual can also help – for example, you can mark the person who is 'it' with a special hat.

Encouraging play with others for children with autism spectrum disorder

Once your child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has a range of play skills or is beginning to play with and take notice of other children, you can help her learn how to interact and play with others.

Simple games are a good way to build social interaction in play as well as turn-taking skills. Games like peek-a-boo, pat-a-cake and ring-o-rosies are all social. Playing interactive games like snap or memory with cards can also be helpful because they're structured and have a defined end.

Here are some other ideas to get your child interacting and playing with others:

- Use **play dates** or visits with friends or family whose children are around the same age as your child. You could also ask your child's siblings or cousins to help with showing your child how to play games, take turns and so on.
- Teach your child how to join in. Again, siblings, friends and cousins might be able to show your child how it's done.
- If other children ignore your child, watch carefully and see whether you can work out why. Does your child need to work on a skill that you can help him learn? You could speak to your child's school, preschool or early intervention teacher if you're not sure. Early childhood workers have lots of skills for helping children learn to play together.



Like typically developing children, children with ASD have a range of [thinking and learning styles and strengths](#) that they can build on. For example, they're often visual learners, so you can work with this strength and help your child by taking pictures of the different steps in a game or activity.

Making the most of play with your child with autism spectrum disorder

Once your child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can play with you and is playing with toys, you can use play to build skills in other areas. For example, you might focus on rewarding certain skills like taking turns, playing for longer periods of time, or choosing a variety of toys to play with.

Here are some tips for making the most of play in this way. These tips apply to all kinds of play – toy play, playing with others and pretend play:

- Talk about what's going on while your child plays. If you're playing a pretend game like a tea party, use the names of objects, like cup, spoon and plate. You can also give words to the things you and your child are doing, like 'pour drink' or 'feed teddy'.
- Help your child build longer sentences. If your child is speaking only in single words, you could try using two words. If she's using three-word sentences, you can use four words, and so on. This way you're not using language that's too hard for your child, but you're building her language and vocabulary.
- Encourage play skills in different environments. For example, if your child likes playing with Lego at home, encourage him to play with Lego at a friend's house. Reward your child for using his play skills in different places and with different people.

- Use everyday activities as opportunities for play. Any time there can be joint activity between your child and another person is a potential chance for play. You can also build playtime into everyday routines like bath time.
- Use play to help your child respond appropriately to social situations that she might find challenging, like understanding sharing, turn-taking, and compromising. For example, you could use a tea party game to help your child understand sharing food and taking turns to pour a drink with the jug.
- Use play to help your child develop everyday skills. For example, dressing a doll or changing in and out of dress-ups can help your child learn to dress himself.

Watch your child throughout the day and try to 'catch' the times when she shows interest in an activity, however mundane it might seem to you. These are the perfect times to teach and learn.

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Web links

- Learning for Life – Cooperative Games (PDF, 16kb)
- Watch Me Learn – Video Modeling

Last updated or reviewed

07-07-2017

Acknowledgements

This article was developed in collaboration with Caroline de Fina and Angelika Anderson, Faculty of Education, Monash University.
