

Understanding and supporting play in autistic young children and/or children with social communication and interaction differences

Advice Sheet



The EYFS and Foundation Stage states

'Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults ...'

What is play?

- Play describes an activity that a child wants to take part in.
- Play could include activities, games, songs, or rhymes.
- Play can be: Independent, alongside others, with others, or, adult guided.
- There may be differences in play between individuals and play may be different for boys and girls.

Why is play important?

- Play develops cognitive skills including experimentation, flexibility, meaning, problem solving, creativity, spatial awareness, and categorical thinking.
- Play develops social skills including understanding others, intimacy, subtle social clues, compromise, awareness of others, negotiation, shared attention, affection, and testing ideas.
- Play develops emotional skills and the ability to: suspend reality, explore meaning, deal with stress, deal with difficult times and experiences, and to pretend.
- Play supports language including, interpretation understanding and making sense of the world, it helps understanding of concepts and new skills, it supports the ability to communicate, express ideas, use vocabulary, use a narrative and to develop imagination.

Autism – the areas of difference we are likely to see and how this may influence or impact play

1. Social communication and interaction differences
2. Sensory processing and integration differences
3. Flexibility, information processing, and understanding differences

Some strengths in autistic children's play

- They may have excellent attention to detail and be very observant,
- They may be very focussed on activities they enjoy.
- They may often be good at practical activities.
- They may often be good at physical activities.

Differences in play and possible impacts

Social interaction and communication differences

- Autistic children may be unsure of the rules and differing roles in play.
- They may prefer to play on their own if they are unsure how to join in or are not motivated to join in.

- They may be unsure how to respond or connect with the other children. Therefore, they may mimic other children's play.
- They may find it difficult to share resources and to take their turn if the situation is not structured.

Flexibility, information processing differences

- They may find it difficult to shift their attention and they may become engrossed in an activity or need to complete an activity before moving on.
- They may need to feel in control and may only play with safe, familiar activities.
- They may be unmotivated by activities that are not a special interest, and play may be somewhat restricted to favourite items.
- Their play may be repetitive as it feels nice, safe and interesting to them.

Sensory processing differences

- They can become overloaded and overwhelmed in busy, noisy, cluttered environments and they may be unable to focus on playing.
- They may attempt to block sensory input out. This may limit their exposure to a variety of play opportunities.
- Play preferences can be centred around sensory-seeking activities such as seeking visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, proprioceptive, and/or vestibular stimulation and/or play preferences can be centred around avoidance of visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, proprioceptive and vestibular activities.

The types of activities that may interest the autistic child



- Any toy/resource that ties in with their interests
- Sensory—sounds, music, lights, smells, tactile, rocking
- Toys—cause and effect, wheels, characters
- Hiding objects activities to create suspense and anticipation eg in sand or under a blanket
- Anticipation games - Peek-a-boo, blowing a balloon and waiting to let go
- Turn taking – rolling items, building towers, spinning tops, throwing items into a bucket, rolling favourite toys eg. Balls to one another
- Tactile play with pasta, cornflour, sand—wet/dry
- Use familiar action songs—row the boat
- Chase and catch—tickle 'reward'
- Posting pictures or objects in a posting box
- Blow and catch bubbles
- Hiding objects of interest in sand
- magnetic fishing game activities

Starting points and techniques to develop:

- Strategies for developing and extending play include providing suitable resources; joining in but not taking over; and, enabling self-directed play and adult guided play as well as providing the opportunity for children to play alongside and with each other.
- As a starting point, observe a child's play and identify key strengths and differences.
- Note their interests and their type of play, how did they play, what were they enjoying, what did they find difficult. Build on rapport and relationship.

- Use the child's interests and preferences to motivate them. Make it fun and interesting.
- Grab their attention - with name, sound, interest and make the game fun and exciting.
- Create a regular play time and space. Repeat the game the same way over and over if they are enjoying it and responding to it.
- Follow his/her lead by using their interest. Echo their gestures sounds and phrases by copying them. Narrate and comment on their play without trying to direct it.
- Model what to do with equipment and resources.
- Add a narrative "we're going across the bridge" "Teddy says biscuit please"
- Use structure, make it predictable and introduce one thing at a time. Show them what to do and use visuals to support.
- During play interactions, gain attention and have a shared focus. Use surprise and imitation and link new play to preferred activities.
- Build on extending play through imitation, suggestion and modelling. Build in parallel play and with time structure turn taking into play. Develop a play dialogue as you are playing alongside.
- Build in turn taking, anticipation, independence requesting in small steps and join in with what he or she is doing.
- Build joint attention by following the child's lead, using people games and pause, wait and expect approach. Examples include, hide and seek, peek a boo, one two three..... Provide an opportunity for the child to communicate something to make the game continue or to repeat the game.
- Develop playing alongside and sharing resources with an adult first. Set up two play trays to begin with. Practise playing alongside first and mirror the child's play to see if they notice.
- Support joining in and turn taking with the adult starting first. Support using turn taking language, using phrases such as: "A's turn," "B's turn. Use a visual to mark the length of a turn/ to indicate whose turn it is. Keep turns short to begin with.

Summary

- Play is universal and develops lots of skills in a young child. Identify the child's play preferences. Note that all children have a right to play and to choose how they play. Just because a child's play is different it doesn't mean it is less.
- Understand how the three areas of difference in autism can impact on the development of play skills.
- Understand that children should be encouraged to engage in independent self-led play, adult supported play and playing alongside and with other children.
- Create and deliver a plan to support progress in play skills, consider how to engage the child by following their interests, removing barriers and making reasonable adjustments.

Links and signposting

- Autism Education Trust – play module [Developing Play in the Early Years | Autism Education Trust](#)
- Intensive interaction [Intensive Interaction - Fundamentals of Communication](#)
- Attention autism [Home - Attention Autism Ltd | UK & Ireland](#) and <https://inclusiveteach.com/2023/09/14/attention-autism-a-comprehensive-guide-for-teachers/>
- [Play | Scottish Autism](#)
- [Developing Play In Autistic Children March 2020.pdf](#)
- [Supporting Autistic Children through Structured Play - Autism Awareness](#)
- [Understanding Autistic Play: An Evidence Based Guide](#)