



# Early Years Autism Support

## Support with play

### Key Points

- Children on the autism spectrum 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.
- There are a range of ways you can support your child to help them to play.

### Play Challenges

#### Children on the autism spectrum may:

- dislike turn taking/sharing
- only enjoy limited and repetitive play
- have a very intense interest in specific objects or topics
- be distressed by certain noises, lighting, colour, tastes or smells
- may seek out visual stimulation by staring at objects from unusual angles or spinning and flicking objects under a light
- may seek 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
- may lack imitation skills, and do not look to an adult for a demonstration of how an object works
- not see being with other people as fun
- lack joint attention skills, which would help them develop their play
- 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 play



**Play (Scottish Autism):** <https://www.scottishautism.org/services-support/support-families/information-resources/play>

**Learning to Play, Playing to Learn (Autism Cymru):**

[https://www.wrexham.gov.uk/assets/pdfs/social\\_services/asd/28161\\_autism\\_play\\_lfl\\_t.pdf](https://www.wrexham.gov.uk/assets/pdfs/social_services/asd/28161_autism_play_lfl_t.pdf)

## **Strategies for developing play skills**

Work towards shared attention and interest by paying close attention to what the child is 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.

- 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 your child may find interesting and bring what you are doing close to the child to get his/her attention. Do not be upset if they get up and walk away or ignore you completely. This may be because you came too close. Children with autism have good peripheral vision and may be taking in more from this parallel play than you think.
- Start by playing alongside with your own set of toys and get attention by exaggerating your 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/her in their activity than if you try to change things or introduce something completely new.
- Encourage turn-taking, build up play routines and involve other people. 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.
- 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.

### **Developing play and social skills (Autism West Midlands):**

<http://www.aetraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/West-Midlands-Fact-sheet-Developing-Play-and-social-skills.pdf>

### **Developing play in children with autism (Autism West Midlands):**

<https://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Developing-play-skills.pdf>