

This guide lists toys and activities that parents of children with autism have found particularly useful. It is intended as a starting point to give you some ideas for playing and interacting with your child. You know your child's likes and dislikes best, but there may be some suggestions here for widening the scope and variety of activities your child might enjoy.

## Getting active

Exercise is good for all of us; physically, mentally and emotionally. It improves our physical health, stamina and appetite, reduces stress, calms anxiety, and helps us sleep. It makes us more alert and increases our capacity for learning. The release of endorphins during physical activity induces a 'feel good factor' that makes us happy.

For children with autism it may help reduce inappropriate behaviour and improve motor co-ordination. It can be a good way of providing opportunities for having fun and releasing tension that are not dependent on skills in the use and understanding of language and imagination.

Physical activities that do not involve learning game rules can be enjoyed alone as well as with others. Those that utilise rhythmical, repetitive movements are very popular. Many children with autism enjoy walking, running, jumping, bouncing, climbing and swimming and the following equipment may be useful:

- Swing
- Slide
- Climbing frame
- Trampoline
- Bouncy castle
- Rocking horse
- Pogo stick
- Ride-on toys: bikes, trikes, tractors, scooters, pedal cars, go-karts
- Basket ball net or goal net for football
- Paddling pool
- Punch-bag
- Large exercise ball and soft play equipment
- Swing-ball
- Ball pool
- Sand pit

## Sensory-motor Play

Many children with autism enjoy activities that make the most of using their senses, although some do not. They often prefer activities that make use of visual skills such as colour and shape matching and sorting. For sensory seekers, provide toys and activities that are visually interesting or have novelty elements (flashing lights, musical sounds).

This will help develop an understanding of cause and effect, e.g. a bell rings every time they strike a lever, and build on their liking for repetition.

Opportunities for basic, exploratory play will often be enjoyed by children with autism long after the age when most other children will have moved on to more intellectually challenging pursuits. It can be a challenge to adults to strike a balance between allowing them to continue to enjoy what they already like, and creating opportunities for them to develop more age appropriate activities. Gradual extension of favoured activities is the best way forward and the following toys and activities can be enjoyed at many levels of skill and understanding:

- Tactile play like sand, water, playdough or fingerpaints
- Construction toys like Duplo, Lego, Knex, Megabloks or Meccano
- Arts and crafts
- Shape sorters and 'posting' activities
- Formboards, puzzles and jigsaws
- Picture/word lotto games
- Marble runs
- Colour torch
- Bubbles and bubble blowers
- Pop-up toys like a Jack-in-the-box or Pop-up Pets
- Transport vehicles. Especially trains like Thomas the Tank Engine or push along trains (Brio type) to full train sets
- Pegboards
- Beads or cotton reels for threading
- Nesting and stacking beakers like Billie's Barrels
- Bricks and blocks for building towers

## Books

Some children with autism find stories too complicated to follow and many books too 'busy', with too much information on a page. Books with photos are more accessible than line drawings, which are visually confusing. Board books, books with flaps or sound effects and other novelty elements are appealing to people with autism.

Disney characters can be a useful halfway house between photos and more detailed line drawings because they are colourful and simply drawn. Older and more able people with autism may prefer puzzle books, factual books, dictionaries and/or maps to fiction.

## Technology

Computers, TV, radio, videos and DVDs all hold great fascination for many people with autism and they may have very advanced skills with computer games. It is useful to remember that all of these may become a dominant obsession if their use is not kept

within clear boundaries from the outset. Set clear time limits and stipulate when and where the activity is allowed.

It can be useful to use the phrase "First ....., then ....." when insisting that chores, homework and so on have to be completed before the fun activity follows as a reward. For example "First get dressed, then you can play on the computer for 10 minutes" This gives the young person with autism clear guidelines of what is expected and s/he is more likely to cooperate in following adult instructions when the favoured activity follows. It also helps individuals with autism understand that none of us can do exactly what we want, whenever and wherever we want. However, it acknowledges the need to be allowed to indulge in repetitive, stereotyped activities some of the time as a comfort when the world and its demands become too much.

## Games to Play Together

Board games and card games are very useful for teaching the concepts of winning and losing, taking turns and following rules. They can be played at a very simple, or at a more sophisticated level, depending on the age and ability of the individual with autism. The most able may be very good at playing games like chess because of their excellent visuo-spatial memory.

Some suggestions to get you started:

### Picture matching and lotto games

Any non-competitive activity that encourages turn-taking and sharing can help develop the joint attention skills that are often missing in individuals with autism. Try to focus on games that aren't as much fun on your own like ball play, see-saw, skittles, skipping or parachute games. The aim is to help them understand that interacting with other people can be fun.

You could also try:

- Memory games where each player turns over 2 cards at a time to find matching pairs
- 'Kim's game' when you look at a selection of items on a tray then cover them and try to remember what was there
- Snap
- Connect Four
- Guess Who?
- Bingo
- Ludo
- Snakes and Ladders
- Draughts
- Chess

## Musical Activities

Many individuals with autism seem to enjoy musical activities. This varies from toys with a musical element, to playing real instruments. Listening to music may also bring enjoyment and this might range from ice cream jingles and nursery rhymes to Beethoven.

Rhythmical and melodic sounds often capture the attention of someone with autism much better than speech. Lap rhymes, action songs, tapes of singing and dancing games may all encourage interaction with other people in an enjoyable and non-threatening way. The words and tune can be varied to suit the individual and to develop specific vocabulary in everyday situations. There are many to choose from and you will quickly identify individual favourites, but these are some of the tried and tested ones you may know:

- Round and round the garden
- Ring a ring a roses
- The farmer's in his den
- The wheels on the bus
- Row, row, row your boat
- Wind the bobbin up
- Heads, shoulders, knees and toes
- See saw, Margery Daw
- Here we go round the mulberry bush
- We're going on a bear hunt
- This little piggy went to market
- The grand old duke of York
- Simple Simon says
- Five little ducks went swimming one day