

How do children with ASD play?

For most children without ASD, play evolves and changes naturally. Novelty and variety add interest to their play and increasing sophistication of skill development helps the child grow and learn, developing ever greater social awareness and interaction skills.

This does not seem to happen so readily for children with ASD. Their play tends to be repetitive, obsessive and non-changing – the same toy played with in the same way, over and over again – lining things up, putting objects in and out of containers, spinning or flapping items. Likewise books, videos, games etc.

Much more time is spent on simple manipulative play (mouthing, waving, banging, spinning) than on more functional and symbolic play (like pushing a car to and fro or dressing up as a fireman) even taking into account the fact the child is developmentally young. Even when it happens, functional play is not as frequent or varied as you might expect.

There may be extreme fear or fascination of some objects, odd ways of looking at things, such as twisting an object close to the eye, a lot of time spent scrutinising an object or part of it and much more use of touch, sniffing and mouthing to explore toys and everyday objects past the age when that would generally happen with young children.

Why do they not learn play skills like other children?

Because of the nature of autism, children with ASD may lack communication and imaginative skills. They have sensory differences and difficulties and find the world confusing, so they need to feel in control. They crave predictability and like to keep things the same, so change (even of a toy or a game) feels too risky, too scary for them.

They may lack imitation skills and don't look to an adult for a demonstration of how an object works. Because they do not see being with other people as fun, they have difficulty with joint attention, which would help them develop skills. Sometimes their own sense of order and logic may prevent participation in pretend play and they often have too much of an eye for detail at the expense of the 'big picture'. They may not realise other people are interested in what they are doing so they don't bring things to show you or get you to watch their game. They sometimes have difficulty in pointing and following the direction of your gaze too.

How can we help them develop play and social skills?

Children with autism need to be taught how to play, rather than through play. It is important to create opportunities to engage with the child at his level and find out what motivates him. Work towards shared attention and interest by paying close attention yourself to what he is doing, making your presence obvious and interesting and showing interest in what he is doing so he knows his choice 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. Here are some guidelines to help you get started:

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 function of toy

Choose things the child may find interesting and bring what you are doing close to the child to get his attention, but don't be upset if he gets up and walks away because you came too close or ignores you completely. Children with ASD have good peripheral vision and may be taking in more than you think of this parallel play.

Start by playing alongside with your own set of toys and get attention by exaggeration of facial expression, making a noise, blowing on him etc. Move on to exchanging toys. Then try sharing ONE toy – his turn will have to be much longer than yours. A child with ASD usually feels more secure if you join him in his activity than if you try to change things or introduce something completely new

Encourage turn-taking, build up play routines and involve other children. 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) or 'My turn, your turn' – he makes a toy move, you make a toy move. Encourage him to take the lead in games like 'Seesaw' and 'Row your boat' and use any activity that needs two for maximum fun or effect – ball, car, swings, holding something for you, moving a table together, household tasks, pushing another child in a cart etc.

Try 'cliffhangers' so he has to do something different and build up anticipation in games like 'Peepo' and stamping games.

Watch him, then slowly imitate and wait to see his reaction – he may imitate you!

Plays well on his own terms but won't follow your lead? Teach him how to give by taking an item from him and showing pleasure as if you've been given it, Give him things and then ask for a quick return. React as if he's showing you something, even if he's only holding or carrying a toy. Use 'where's the?' as a prompt. Encourage him to show others a completed puzzle.

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, 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.

