

Toys & play for children with: Autism



What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong disability that affects the way a person communicates with, and relates to, people around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that although many people with autism share certain difficulties, it affects each individual in a different way. Nevertheless, all children with autism have difficulties with social imagination. They therefore can have difficulty understanding other people's emotional expressions and relating to others in a meaningful way, which can reduce their ability to develop friendships.

Typical behavioural patterns include obsessions, fears, a lack of awareness of danger, ritualistic play and behaviour, eye contact that could be deemed inappropriate, hypersensitivity to sound, light etc, spinning objects and hand flapping. A child does not need to show all these signs to be diagnosed as having autism and some children who do not have autism may exhibit some of these behaviours.

Play and development

Participating in play-related activities can help children on the autistic spectrum by teaching them to communicate more effectively. Play is also a great vehicle for helping parents to engage with their child and to understand the condition better.

Research has shown that for young children with autism, *sensory motor play* (eg. mouthing objects) dominates beyond the verbal mental age at which it declines in children without autism (Jordan and Libby (1997)¹). They may also use objects in an inflexible way, for example spinning the wheels of a toy car rather than playing a racing game. Often they will prefer to play by themselves (*solitary*



play), but sometimes – especially children with Asperger syndrome – want to play with other children, but do not know how. Adult assistance may help these children greatly to engage in *interactive play* such as singing games. Sherratt and Peter (2002)² give a wide range of practical strategies for teaching play, depending on the child's level of functioning. Some of these can be used on a one-to-one basis or involve other children. Moor (2008)³ also has a wealth of practical advice to offer on play ideas.

Imaginary play (eg. doctors and nurses) is a challenge for children with autism and is therefore rare. Often when it does appear, it is in fact an enactment of something they have seen on television and they will repeat the same scene over and over again.

During free-time (*unstructured play*), an autistic child may find it very difficult to choose what to do. He or she may stand on the perimeter engaging in self-stimulatory activity, such as flicking his fingers. It is important to engage with the child and slowly build up the choices that are available to them. Initially offer them a favourite activity together with something they do not enjoy and then gradually build up to two desired activities.



It is worth trying to engage children in simple games. Some children reach the level at which they can play picture-matching games or simple board games. Some of the most able children learn to play chess and do well because of their excellent visuo-spatial memories. Board games give the opportunity of teaching the concept of winning or losing.

Computers and mobile tablets

Computers and mobile tablets play an increasingly prominent role in the lives of today's children. Parents should, from the start, limit the amount of time spent playing with these devices. However, as part of a varied play diet, they can play an important role.

Some suggested software for children with autism includes:

- character software (i.e. involving children's cartoon characters)
- factual software such as the online encyclopedia Encarta
- software to develop vocabulary.

Resources

For comprehensive information and advice about autism along with advice for parents of children with autism visit the NAS website (www.autism.org.uk).

References:

- ¹ Jordan R. and Libby S. (1997) *Developing and using play in the curriculum*. In S. Powell and R. Jordan eds. (1997) *Autism and learning: a guide to good practice*. London: David Fulton
- ² Sherratt, D. and Peter M. (2002) *Developing play and drama in children with autistic spectrum disorders*. London: David Fulton
- ³ Moor, J. (2008) *Playing, laughing and learning with children on the autism spectrum: a practical resource of play ideas for parents and carers*. 2nd ed. London: Jessica Kingsley
- ⁴ Wing, L. (2002) *The autistic spectrum: a guide for parents and professionals*. London: Constable and Robinson

Toys and development

Many young children with autism have limited self-occupancy skills and lack the imagination to truly experiment and examine toys. Because of their rigid behaviours they may not want to try new toys or experiences. One-to-one teaching of how to use functional toys may not necessarily teach a child how to 'play' but, through routine, they may learn to occupy themselves in a more constructive way. The child's range of toys could be systematically increased, thus increasing the child's ability to make choices. The more familiar a child becomes with a range of toys, the more they are likely to use them.

Children with autism tend to prefer toys that involve visuo-spatial skills such as shape and colour matching, jigsaw puzzles or constructional materials.

Toys, games and play activities

- Blowing bubbles
- Shape and colour matching, or sorting
- Formboards and jigsaws
- Jack-in-the-box
- Construction toys
- 'Marble run'
- Train toys from push 'n' go versions to full train sets
- Drawing, colouring and painting.

Books

Rather than just a book with plain text, try looking at some of the following for variation:

- board books
- books with flaps
- books that encourage readers to touch and feel different textures and fabrics in them
- word books (often with pictures or photos of familiar objects)
- factual books
- puzzle books.

It is useful to encourage physical activities that are enjoyable without the need for imagination and understanding or use of language. Physical exercise is reported to diminish inappropriate behaviour and such activities are also helpful for improving problems of motor co-ordination (Wing (2002)⁴).

Examples of physical activity toys

- swing
- slide
- trampoline
- rocking horse
- climbing frame
- football
- toys which children can ride: bicycles, toy tractors, etc
- paddling pool
- sand pit
- basketball net.