

Enhancing Play for Autistic Children



Play is an essential part of a child's life. Every way of playing is meaningful, and can provide rich learning opportunities from which a child can develop many skills. Autistic children may play in ways that are different from their neurotypical peers. For example, they may:

- Have a strong preference for one way of exploring or using objects.
- Focus on certain parts of toys.
- Engage in more sensory or logic-based play ideas than pretend play.

There is no right or wrong way to play. As educators, our role is to notice, respect and support each child's unique way of playing, even if we may prefer to play another way.

Ways to enhance an autistic child's play might include:

Building on a child's strengths, interests, and experiences:

- Selecting activities based on a **child's preferences or familiar experiences** can capture their attention for longer and create more learning opportunities.
- Notice what **elements they enjoy most** about their preferred activities to help choose new activities to introduce (e.g. if a child enjoys the sensation of throwing a ball, they may enjoy other activities that involve throwing, such as scarves and velcro darts).
- Following a **child's lead** by imitating their play actions shows them you are interested and engaged in what they are doing. This is a great way to engage in their play.

Mine's going fast!

Extending a child's current play:

- When the child is visibly comfortable with you in the play, gently offer a new play idea through modelling (e.g. they may be driving a car up a wall and you may imitate driving up and then model a new action of driving down).
- Consider starting with a small variation on the child's play action, instead of a completely new play idea (e.g. if their preferred play action is driving and parking a toy car, you might make your car go faster).
- Alternating between the new play action and the child's preferred action can help keep the child motivated. It might take many repetitions before a child starts to imitate your play idea. You may otherwise notice this play is not matching their interests and try something else.
- You can add sound effects and language to extend the child's play and learning (e.g. when the child is driving their car up the wall, you might model "Up, up, up!". When you model the car driving fast, you might make a sound like "Vroooooom!" and model language like "Mine's going fast!")



Being responsive to a child's feelings and responses during play:

- Notice the child's responses in different learning spaces. Are there certain environments that support their engagement? (E.g. some children may prefer quiet spaces, whilst others may prefer a lively playground). This is an opportunity to model choice making to develop children's ability to advocate for their preferences in play.
- Consider how each child might communicate their emotions or ideas during play. Do they tend to use speech, gestures, or other means to express themselves? Discussions with colleagues and the child's family can help build a comprehensive picture of the child's communicative cues so we can tune into these during play.

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- Narrating, commenting, and interpreting a child's play actions using short phrases and sentences to validate their play ideas and build their communication skills.
- Reflect how they are feeling (e.g. "You're happy. Banging is fun!" If they're showing signs of frustration with a toy, you might model, "that's tricky," or "it's really hard!"



At the end of the day, play is about fun. When we are present in the moment and having fun together, it opens many windows of opportunity for naturalistic learning.



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