

Play is an essential part of a child’s life. Everyday play experiences provide rich learning opportunities from which a child can develop many skills.

Autistic children may play with toys 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. An autistic child’s play with objects might look different to that of their neurotypical peers, but is equally fun and meaningful to the child. It’s essential we, as educators, respect and value all forms of play, even if we may prefer to play another way.

Some ways to enhance an autistic child’s toy 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.
- Consider starting with a small variation on the child’s play action, instead of a completely new play idea. For example, if their preferred play action is driving and parking a toy car, you might make your car go faster and model the phrase, “Mine’s going fast!”
- Alternating between the new play action and the child’s preferred action can help to keep the child motivated. It might take many repetitions before a child starts to imitate your play idea.

Building up.
Up, up up!

Crash!

Oh, the car
stopped.

You're happy.
Banging is
fun!

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 in play? For example, some children may prefer to play in quiet spaces with fewer people around, whilst others may prefer the liveliness of a busy 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 in play. Do they tend to use speech, gestures, or other means to express themselves? Discussions with colleagues and the child's family can help to build a comprehensive picture of the child's communicative cues, so that we can tune into these during play.
- 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 with the child, it opens many windows of opportunity for naturalistic learning.

