



# Autism Spectrum Disorders

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## What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability. The causes of autism are unknown; however, there are researches and hypotheses that several genes as well as environmental factors, such as viruses or chemicals contribute to the disorder. There is no known cure, however, there are therapies and interventions that help people who have autism lead as productive a life as possible. Additionally, there are educational, behavioral and medical interventions that can lead to substantial improvements. Symptoms of autism generally emerge in the first three years of life.

Always consult a physician with the concerns you have about your child. This information is to be used as a reference; not for self diagnosis.

## Play and the Child with Autism

Play for a child who has Autism or other PDD-NOS disorder can be difficult. Independent play is often lacking, and as stated previously, problems with social play are prevalent. Children who have autism may not enter into imaginary play and toy play is often undeveloped. There are several well-known researchers who have developed programs to assist children in functional, appropriate play.

The following are some ideas to think about while playing with your child and during your day-to-day interactions:

- Establish structure and routine so that your child's environment is as predictable as possible. Have a definitive beginning, middle and ending to each activity. Additionally, use consistent cues and prompts so a child can begin to anticipate the activity.
- Have a picture communication system. For example, have a board with three pictures – one of each of the toys or activities you will do. Once the child is done with one of the three, take the picture off the board and place it in an "all done" folder.
- Have activities that are short from start to finish. You can do more repetitions, but the child has a higher rate of success if the activities are not long, drawn out and complex.
- Have a signal to emphasize when a change will be happening. For instance, sing a short song or say a particular phrase at the end of a child's turn in a game to cue the child that a change will be happening.
- Limit the number of things to see and hear that may be distracting to your child. For example, if you are reading a book, do not have the television playing in the background. If you are listening to music together, have the toys put away. Try playing or reading in the dark using a flashlight. This will put the focus on what you are using and lessen the distraction of the rest of the room.
- Select toys that are interesting to your child. For the child who plays with one particular toy for an extreme amount of time, have other toys readily available which will help expand on that play.



Additionally, try to place the desired item within view, but out of reach to give the child an opportunity to interact with you in order to get help to reach the item.

- Use singing and rhythm activities with your child.
- Distract your child from unusual or disruptive child behaviors by having favorite toys at hand or by playing simple games. If this is not successful, a simple verbal reminder may help your child control some of this behavior.
- Try to anticipate and redirect before your child loses control. Tell your child what is going to happen before you change the activity.
- Make every attempt to have even fleeting eye contact with your child. Praise your child for even the slightest effort at looking at you. Ideas for positive reinforcement are smiles, hugs, and soft touches. Note: Not all children like the same reinforcement, so try different rewards until you find one that works for your child.
- If your child is very sensitive to noise and touch, approach slowly and touch your child when he or she seems ready to tolerate it. Some children like to be touched with soft materials or rubbed with hand cream while sitting on a parent's lap.
- Do drills at the table with toys. Do an action with a toy, such as hug a baby doll or push a car down the ramp, and then give that toy to the child to imitate your action. Over time and through much repetition, that child will understand that action. The next time the child is faced with that toy, s/he will be more apt to interact appropriately.
- Insert obstacles in the play. For instance, place a block on the train track. The child will have to physically move the block to continue his play. This helps create opportunities to practice thought processing, motor planning and sequencing skills.
- Through observation, learn what sensations the child enjoys and what s/he has an aversion to. Provide the child with opportunities for the former and lessen the situations with the latter.
- Present things or activities more than once. The first time s/he is approached with it, s/he may hate it. But, the second time they understand it and may like it.
- Use things that are secured, such as a matching/lotto game in which the pieces have been velcroed on. This provides organization for the child.
- Use timers – this helps relieve stress and anxiety as well as prepares a child for transitions or changes.

### **Types and Features of Toys for Children with Autism**

- Moving parts: Children with autism are often drawn to moving parts, such as the wheels on a toy car, gears, the spinner of a game. Use the child's interest as a stepping-stone to more advanced play. Add to the play to assist the child in changing perseveratory movement into functional play. For example, if a child is interested in wheels on a car, use train cars that link together and a train track to extend the



play. If a child is interested in gears, create a structure with the gears that the child must dismantle in order to get to the desired gear.

- **Pictures:** When using pictures to play or to communicate, remember that a child with autism may find one type of picture easier to understand than others. There are many different types of pictures; for instance, color pictures, black and white pictures, line drawn pictures, shaded pictures, and real photographs. Also, the background may make the difference (black on white or white on black). When using flash cards or lotto games, try different types of pictures. Real photographs are not always easier than line drawings. Line drawings are sometimes more concrete and simpler to understand.
- **Ride-On Vehicles and Gross Motor Play:** Children with autism are often more able to attend to a task after they have had a chance to move their entire bodies and receive proprioceptive input. Vestibular action, such as swinging and bouncing, is stimulating and helpful for many children.
- **Blocks:** Blocks are wonderful toys for children with autism. They can be used independently or can invite social play. There are many types of blocks. When using blocks with children who have autism, keep the play structured. Many block sets come with pictorial instructions to build a specific structure. This assists children in understanding the purpose of the blocks, in sequencing the steps necessary to build the structure as well as in matching the blocks in the picture with the real blocks. Additionally, be organized with how the blocks are stored. If there are blocks to build a particular set, such as a Lego set to build a boat, keep all the pieces and the instruction booklet in a plastic container or resealable plastic bag\* so that the entire set is easily retrievable and used.
- **Sensory Play:** Sensory play is so different for each individual. Some children may be drawn to different tactile experiences, such as play dough, shaving cream, finger paint, or dried sand/rice/beans. Other children may be quite defensive when it comes to playing with various textures. In those instances, try placing the tactile material, whether it is dried beans and rice or finger paint or etc., in a resealable plastic bag. Tape the resealable edge with tape to ensure that end will not open. Because of the nature of this play, holes cannot be punched in the bag, so adult supervision is required. This allows a child to experience the play without having it actually touch their skin. Over time and through repetitive play, a child may become more willing to try the play without the plastic bag.

\* When using plastic bags, always punch holes throughout the bag with a hole punch to lessen the risk of suffocation. Keep all bags out of the reach of children.

For ideas on specific toys on the market for your child, please contact our Toy Resource Helpline at 1-800-366-PLAY to get individualized assistance.