



When kids are playing they are developing, using, and combining

How to...Get Play Going in Little Ones on the Spectrum

skills such as moving, attending, sensing, listening, thinking and, of course, communicating. Kids with a skill gap in any of these areas are going to have a harder time playing and learning. And that's where children with autism find themselves.

There is an increasing recognition that sensory differences are a part of autism. For kids with unusual sensory systems get them feeling, swinging, spinning things that are fun to feel, swing or spin. Create sensory corners that are fun to self-explore, and sensory-quiet zones too for when things get too much. Watch out for overload and visual clutter - make sure you are in control of the sensory aspects of your centre or school and not the other way around.

Youngsters with autism like a system. Having autism means you have an enhanced need for order, pattern and predictability. If your play opportunities are too chaotic or spontaneous it might be just too much. Break play down into bite size pieces with clear beginnings, middles and ends. Contain whole play "systems" in shoe boxes maybe. Let the child show you which shoebox they are ready for today. Take turns on who gets to select. Let's learn about waiting and choosing while we do it!

Autism often goes hand in hand with coordination difficulties. Try to use easy to handle shapes and objects. Create no-fail play using templates for painting or jigs to show what goes where.

If you have the kind of attention system that just has to process everything. If your mind likes to Hoover up every available bit of data. Imagine what the typical play environment, preschool or nursery setting does to your brain! Try just having one toy/play opportunity at a time in front of the child. Find a way to screen out most of the stimuli that is not part of the game. Frames are a great way of focussing attention. Put a hoop, line of wool or string round what you want the child to focus on and play with.

Watch your speed! Allow plenty of time for processing and the child getting ready to make his/her next move. Let the child lead. Don't be too directive with your language or ask too many questions. Try 'narrating' the child's play instead. Saying things like 'holding it this way, up-side down', 'bang, bang bang!' (i.e. echoing the sound of their play), or providing a soundtrack 'Wheeee, plop, zoink!'

Lot's of praise is the order of the day - show the child you will respond to and respect everything they try.

Children with autism like structure. Remember when Mom said "a place for everything and everything in it's place"? Use visual and sensory signposting. Try developing a signalling system for what game or toy is coming next. Announce the arrival of the elephant with the water squirter trunk by putting on a sou-wester. Use visual timetables, music cues or smell cues to flag up what's happening now and next.

Keep the flow of activities 'neat'. Clear beginnings, middles and ends really help children with autism understand activities and feel safe within them.

A child with autism may have a very solitary or independent play style. A mixed programme of play activities might be the way to start - some things for me, some things for you and some things for more than two. Maybe find ways that the child with autism can lead us all in a game.

And finally, act oddly. Capture attention by laughing at a toy, pointing at it, walking away from it and then letting curiosity 'get the better of you'. This will come as a shock to them. Big folk acting funny? Whatever that thing is it must sure be interesting! As with all things - practice and patience will pay off! Have fun.

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