

This guide lists activities and toys that parents of autistic children have found particularly useful. It is intended as a starting point to give you some ideas for playing and interacting with your child. You know your child's likes and dislikes best, but there may be some suggestions here for widening the scope and variety of activities your child might enjoy.

Getting active

Exercise is good for all of us. It improves our physical health, can help to reduce stress, calm anxiety, and helps us sleep. It makes us more alert and increases our ability to learn.

For autistic children it may help reduce inappropriate behaviour and improve motor coordination. It can be a good way of providing opportunities for having fun and releasing tension.

Physical activities that do not involve learning game rules can be enjoyed alone as well as with others. Those that utilise rhythmical, repetitive movements are very popular.

Many autistic children enjoy walking, running, jumping, bouncing, climbing and swimming.

Sensory-motor play

Many autistic children enjoy activities that make the most of using their senses, although some do not. They often prefer activities that make use of visual skills such as colour and shape matching and sorting.

For sensory seekers, provide toys and activities that are visually interesting or have novelty elements (flashing lights, musical sounds). This will help develop an understanding of cause and effect (for example a bell rings every time they strike a lever), and build on their liking for repetition.

Opportunities for basic, exploratory play will often be enjoyed by autistic children long after the age when most other children will have moved on to other interests.

It can be a challenge to adults to strike a balance between allowing them to continue to enjoy what they already like, and creating opportunities for them to develop new interests.

Gradual extension of favoured activities is the best way forward and the following toys and activities can be enjoyed at many levels of skill and understanding:

- Tactile play like sand, water, playdough or fingerpaints
- Construction toys like Duplo, Lego, Knex, Megabloks or Meccano
- Arts and crafts
- Shape sorters and 'posting' activities
- Formboards, puzzles and jigsaws
- Picture/word lotto games
- Marble runs
- Colour torch
- Bubbles and bubble blowers
- Pop-up toys like a Jack-in-the-box or Pop-up Pets
- Transport vehicles. Especially trains like Thomas the Tank Engine or push along trains (Brio type) to full train sets
- Pegboards
- Beads or cotton reels for threading
- Nesting and stacking beakers like Billie's Barrels
- Bricks and blocks for building towers

Books

Some autistic children find stories too complicated to follow and many books too 'busy', with too much information on a page. Books with photos are more accessible than line drawings, which are visually confusing. Disney characters can be a useful halfway house between photos and more detailed line drawings because they are colourful and simply drawn. Board books, books with flaps or sound effects and other novelty elements can be appealing to some autistic people.

Some young autistic people may prefer puzzle books, factual books, dictionaries and/or maps to fiction.

Technology

Computers, TV, mobile phones, tablets, radio, videos and DVDs all hold great fascination for many autistic people and they may have very advanced skills with computer games. It is useful to remember that some autistic people may need clear boundaries about usage from the outset. Set clear time limits and stipulate when and where the activity is allowed.

Games to play together

Board games and card games are very useful for teaching the concepts of winning and losing, taking turns and following rules. They can be played at a very simple, or at a more sophisticated level, depending on the age and ability of the autistic person. The most able may be very good at playing games like chess because of their excellent visual-spatial memory.

Musical activities

Many autistic people seem to enjoy musical activities. This varies from toys with a musical element, to playing real instruments. Listening to music may also bring enjoyment and this might range from ice cream jingles and nursery rhymes to classical and contemporary music.

Rhythmic and melodic sounds often capture the attention of an autistic person much better than speech. Lap rhymes, action songs, tapes of singing and dancing games may all encourage interaction with other people in an enjoyable and non-threatening way. The words and tune can be varied to suit the individual and to develop specific vocabulary in everyday situations.