



Autism Society
Inland Empire



Play & Grow

HELPING YOUR
CHILD THROUGH
PLAY

“Play is the work of childhood.”

- JEAN PIAGET



**Welcome
to the
“Play & Grow”
Collection!**

We've curated this collection of play-based activities and resources to help kids develop essential skills—all while having fun! While supplies last, we also include a small toy at our monthly events tied to each developmental area.

Safety First: Please supervise your child closely while playing with toys to ensure there are no choking hazards.

This resource is designed with inclusivity in mind, supporting children with different developmental needs, including Autism. Activities offer multiple ways to engage and encourage every child's unique journey in emotional and developmental growth. The age range is 0–5 years, including children who may be chronologically older but developmentally within this stage.

Each resource focuses on a specific area of child development, making it easy for families to choose activities that fit their child's needs.

If you have any questions, the Autism Society Inland Empire is here to help!

Email: info@ieautism.org

Call: 951.220.6922

We hope this collection brings joy, growth, and understanding to your family—helping your child thrive through play!

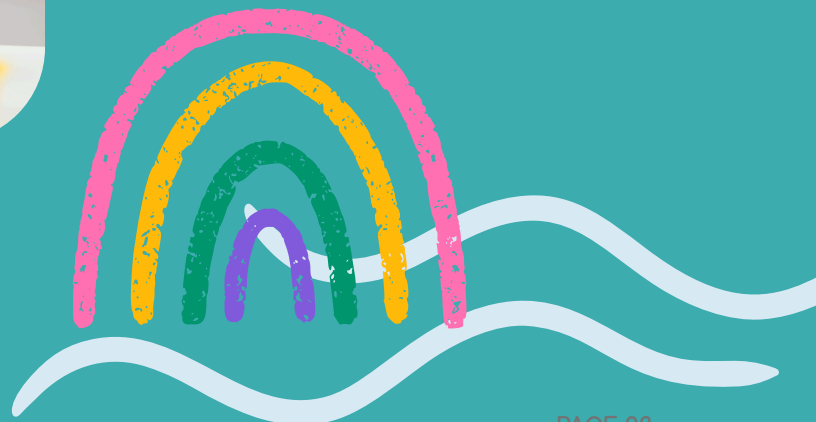
Why Play Matters



Play is essential for early development. It helps children build communication skills, social interaction, motor skills, emotional regulation, and problem-solving abilities. For children with Autism, play may look different, but it's still a powerful way to connect and support growth.



For many parents, observing their autistic child engage in repetitive play rituals or shy away from interactive games can be worrying. Play is meant to be fun and social, so when an autistic child deviates from "normal" childhood play patterns, it can feel like something is wrong. However, these differences do not mean that autistic children don't want to play or engage with others. Rather, the way they play is a reflection of the unique ways in which Autism impacts development.





Why Autistic Children Play Differently

Children with Autism often play differently because of differences in several key areas. Understanding these differences helps parents support more interactive and creative play.

Imitation Differences: Most children learn new play skills by watching and copying others. Autistic children may imitate less naturally, making it harder for them to pick up play cues.

Symbolic/Pretend Play Differences: Around age 3, many children start pretending —using objects as something else or creating imaginary scenarios. Autistic children often show less interest in pretend play and may focus on sensory experiences, such as spinning wheels or lining up blocks. Without guidance, they may miss out on the benefits of symbolic play for creativity and social skills.

Social Communication Differences: Play usually involves sharing, turn-taking, and talking with others. Autistic children may struggle with these skills, finding it hard to read social cues or stay engaged in back-and-forth play. They might want to connect but need extra support to do so.

Emotion Regulation Differences: Play can be unpredictable, and changes in routines or interruptions may lead to frustration or emotional outbursts. Autistic children often rely on structured, repetitive play to feel safe and regulated. Predictable routines and calming strategies during play help reduce stress and build confidence.

Sensory Differences: Sensory sensitivities strongly influence play choices. Some children avoid messy play or loud environments, while others seek sensory input like spinning, bouncing, or tactile textures. Providing sensory-friendly options and respecting preferences makes play more enjoyable and less overwhelming.

Limited Interests: Some children with Autism may only play with one or two favorite toys or repeat the same action over and over. This narrow focus can make it harder to explore new activities or learn varied play skills.

Focus on Toy Parts: Instead of using toys as intended, children might fixate on specific parts—like spinning wheels or opening and closing doors. This type of play is often sensory-driven and can limit opportunities for imaginative or social play.

Lack of Play Knowledge: Many autistic children don't automatically know how to play with toys. They may need explicit teaching and modeling to learn what to do, such as stacking blocks or pretending with dolls.

Developing Core Skills: Play depends on basic abilities like coordination, attention, and flexibility. When these skills are still developing, children may find it harder to join in activities—especially those that involve movement, sharing, or taking turns. Strengthening these skills can make play more enjoyable and successful.

By understanding these differences, parents can turn play into a learning opportunity—helping children build imitation, communication, and pretend play skills in a fun, supportive way.



The 6 Stages of Play

one

**0-3
Months**



Unoccupied Play

When a baby moves their arms, legs, hands, or feet, they're learning how their body works. These early movements help them discover what their body can do and begin to build important motor skills.

two

**0-2
Years**



Solitary Play

When a child plays alone and isn't interested in playing with others yet. During solitary play, they are exploring their own interests, practicing new skills, and building independence.

three

**Around
2
Years**



Spectator/Onlooker Behavior

When a child watches other children play but doesn't join in, this is called onlooker behavior. During this stage, they learn by observing how other children play, interact, and use toys.

four

**2 +
Years**



Parallel Play

During parallel play, children play next to other children but are still focused on their own toys or activities. They may use similar materials or be interested in what another child is doing, but they don't yet play together. This stage helps children get comfortable being around peers while still enjoying independent play.

five

**3-4
Years**



Associate Play

During associate play, children begin to interact with one another in ways that go beyond simply playing side-by-side. Unlike the previous stage (parallel play), they now show interest in what other children are doing and may even get involved—just not in a coordinated way yet.

six

**4 +
Years**



Cooperative Play

During cooperative play, children actively play with others rather than simply alongside them. They are interested in both the activity and the other children involved. This stage includes working together, planning, and sharing ideas to create a shared play experience.

Why Autistic children often stay longer in the parallel play stage..



Studies show that children with Autism may stay in the parallel play stage longer than neurotypical children. Joining in play can feel challenging because social communication takes extra effort, and playing side-by-side feels safe and comfortable. Parallel play also offers predictability, which many children prefer, and helps avoid the sensory overload that group play can bring. Cooperative play requires big skills like planning, flexibility, and negotiation—skills that develop at different times for every child.

How Parents Can Support Interactive Play:

- **Start Where They Are:** Parallel play is an important stage! Set up activities where your child and another child can play side by side with similar toys (like blocks or play-dough).
- **Add Gentle Interaction:** Introduce simple turn-taking games, such as rolling a ball back and forth or stacking blocks together. Keep it short and fun.
- **Use Visuals and Clear Language:** Show pictures of what's next and use simple phrases like: "Your turn!" or "Let's build together."
- **Create a Calm Environment:** Reduce noise and distractions. Offer a quiet space for breaks if your child feels overwhelmed.
- **Celebrate Small Steps:** Praise every effort toward interaction—even if it's just looking at the other child or sharing a toy.
- **Follow Their Lead:** Let your child choose activities they enjoy. Comfort and confidence come first.

Remember, parallel play is an important step, and with gentle support and patience, your child can build confidence and move toward more interactive play at their own pace.



Fun ways to support your child's play skills

By engaging in playful activities, you can help your child develop creativity, confidence, and connections with others. Whether it's through imaginative games, sensory experiences, or interactive toys, there are countless ways to make play both enjoyable and meaningful.





Before you start: Think about reinforcement

Reinforcement is one of the most powerful tools for teaching and encouraging play skills—especially for Autistic children. It simply means rewarding a behavior you want to see more often.

Key points to keep in mind:

- **Positive Reinforcement Works Best.** Praise, smiles, high-fives, or a favorite toy can motivate your child to keep playing.
- **Be Immediate and Specific.** Give the reinforcement right after the desired behavior and say what you're praising: "Great job stacking those blocks!"
- **Use What Your Child Loves.** Reinforcers can be anything your child enjoys—stickers, bubbles, music, or extra time with a favorite activity.
- **Start Small and Build Up.** Reinforce even small steps toward the goal. For example, if your child touches the play-dough, celebrate that before expecting them to make shapes.
- **Fade Over Time.** As your child becomes more confident, gradually reduce reinforcement, so play becomes rewarding on its own.

Let your child's interest lead..



- **Build On Their Interests.** Watch what your child gravitates toward and build on it. Example: If they love a police car with lights or a flashlight, introduce other light-up toys like a Lite-Brite or a light-up yo-yo. This makes play feel familiar and exciting.
- **Join Their Play.** Engage with what they're doing—even if it's repetitive. Introduce new actions slowly to expand the play without overwhelming them.
- **Use Their Favorite Things.** Incorporate their favorite characters, colors, or themes into play. If they love cars, start with lining them up, then model driving them on a track.





Match Sensory Preferences & Respect Sensitivities

Because Autistic children often have unique sensory needs, matching preferences is critical in making play enjoyable.

Strategies:

- Offer toys that match sensory interests (soft textures, light-up toys, water play). Example: If your child loves lights, try a Lite-Brite or light-up yo-yo.
- Avoid overwhelming sounds or flashing lights if your child is sensitive to them.
- Create a calm play space with minimal distractions. If they dislike loud noises, choose quiet toys.



Model & Narrate

Introduce new toys and show your child how to play with them. Remember to label toys and talk about what you are doing, so you can model new words and create opportunities for your child to use language.



- **Use simple language to show what you are doing. This helps connect words with actions. For example: "I'm stacking blocks. Look, the tower is tall!" or if you are rolling a ball back and forth, "my turn", "your turn."**
- **Consistently labeling toys and actions helps build language while playing.**





Play ideas: Toys and Activities

Discover simple, engaging ways to spark creativity, connection, and joyful learning through play. This collection offers practical ideas using everyday toys and activities that encourage exploration, build skills, and make meaningful moments together. Whether at home, in therapy, or in the community, these suggestions are designed to inspire fun, support development, and celebrate each child's unique way of playing.



Toys and Activities: Cause & Effect Toys

These toys teach children that actions lead to predictable outcomes, building attention and problem-solving skills.

Examples:

- Pop-up toys: (push a button → character pops up)
- Rolling balls: (roll → ball moves)
- Musical toys: (press → sound plays)

Tips:

- Sit with your child and demonstrate how the toy works.
- Use simple language: "Push the button—pop!"
- Encourage turn-taking: "Your turn, my turn."



Toys and Activities: Sensory Activities



These activities help children explore textures, sounds, and movement while supporting regulation and engagement.

Examples:

- Water Table or Bin: Add cups, spoons, and floating toys for calming and cause-and-effect play.
- Textured Play Dough: Offer different scents or textures (soft, grainy) for tactile input.
- Sensory Bottles: Fill clear bottles with glitter, beads, or colored water for visual soothing.

Tips:

- Start with short sessions and let your child lead.
- Use descriptive language: "The water feels cold!"
- Offer choices to build independence: "Do you want the blue bottle or the green bottle?"

Toys and Activities: Movement & Pretend Play



Movement Activities

Begin with active play. Movement supports motor planning, coordination, and sensory input.

Examples:

- Animal Walks: Hop like a bunny, crawl like a bear—great for imitation skills.
- Mini Obstacle Course: Use pillows and tunnels for safe climbing and crawling.

Tips:

- Demonstrate each movement and encourage copying.
- Use fun prompts: "Can you slither like a snake?"
- Allow breaks if your child feels overwhelmed.

Structured Pretend Play

Begin with familiar routines. Pretend play builds imagination and social skills, especially when based on everyday activities.

Examples:

- Simple Role Play: Pretend cooking or feeding a stuffed animal—keep steps short and predictable.
- Picture Cards for Choices: Use visuals to help your child pick what to play next.

Tips:

- Model the play first: "I'm stirring the soup—your turn!"
- Praise participation, even small steps.
- Keep props simple and familiar.

Toys and Activities: Music and sound

Calming Music & Rhythm

Begin with musical play. Music can soothe, engage, and encourage movement.

Examples:

- Instrument Exploration: Drums, shakers, or xylophones for auditory input.
- Movement to Music: Gentle dancing or swaying to favorite songs.
- Pair toy animals with their sounds, "moo" for cow or "baa" for sheep.

Tips:

- Start with soft, predictable tunes.
- Encourage imitation: "Shake with me!"
- Use music as a transition or calming tool.





Tips for Play Dates

- **Keep It Short and Predictable:** Start with 30–60 minutes for the first playdate. Share a simple schedule with the other parent (e.g., snack → play → goodbye).
- **Choose a Comfortable Environment:** Host the playdate in a familiar space, such as your home or a favorite park. Reduce sensory overload by limiting loud noises and bright lights.
- **Prepare Activities Ahead of Time:** Offer structured, parallel play options (e.g., building blocks, water play, coloring). Have a few backup activities in case your child loses interest.
- **Use Visual Supports:** Show pictures or a short story about what will happen during the playdate. Use visual cues for transitions (e.g., "Next: Snack Time").
- **Practice Social Skills in Small Steps:** Start with turn-taking games like rolling a ball back and forth—model simple greetings and sharing.
- **Respect Sensory Needs:** Provide a quiet space for breaks if your child feels overwhelmed. Have comfort items available (a favorite toy or a weighted blanket).
- **Communicate with the Other Parent:** Share any triggers or calming strategies that work for your child. Encourage understanding and flexibility.
- **Celebrate Success:** Reinforce positive interactions with praise or a favorite activity. End on a positive note—even if the playdate was short.



For more help...

Early delays in play skills often coincide with delays in language, social interaction, or motor development. If you notice a persistent lack of imaginative play, imitation, symbolic toy use, or social connection through play, it's a good idea to discuss further evaluation or early intervention with your child's healthcare provider. Seek professional support if delays persist.

Consider consulting the following:

- Early Intervention programs (for children under 3 years old)
- Occupational or Speech Therapist
- Pediatrician for a referral for an evaluation



We can help you navigate through healthcare and other services. Call us at 951.220.6922 or email info@ieautism.org





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