



Play in the Lives of Young Children with Autism

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Play is paramount in the development of young children. It impacts the cognitive, language and social aspects of any child's life. Since individuals with autism have challenges in the areas of language and social interactions, there may be challenges surrounding their "play" even in the best situations. It is not that children with autism do not play, it is more that the way they interact with their environment, materials, and others often do not match or fit with the way other children play. Play with toys or other materials may become less diverse and more ritualistic, spontaneous and imaginative play may be lacking, expressing interest in play materials or people may be challenging, and social interactions may be absent. Due to the manner in which young children may play with objects/materials and their lack of social initiation, they are often seen alone and isolated from others. It should be noted that although many children with autism tend to play in isolation, avoid or resist social situations or are awkward at attempting to approach peers, it does not mean they are not interested in those social aspects of play and peers. It is more a manifestation of the challenges of autism around communication and social cues. Their disability interferes in their ability to play as others play, it does not necessarily interfere in their desire to play or interact with others!

People who support these young children either at home or in childcare settings can enhance play opportunities for them. Support takes time and energy, as play patterns do not change overnight. Patience and persistence is needed. When children are very young, provide them with interesting objects to see, hear, and feel (sensory stimulation) just as you would any other child. As they grow older, there may be additional factors to facilitate their play.

Pamela Wolfberg, in her book *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism*, discusses many considerations for enhancing play through her concept of Integrated Play Groups. She bases her insights on personal studies she conducted over a period of time. In *Integrated Play Groups*, "children with autism participate in play activities with socially competent peers while supported by an adult." The adult's role is that of play "guide" or facilitator. The guide observes and interprets play by paying close attention to the social and communicative aspects of play as well as play preferences. Based on their observations, the play guide would then "guide participation in play by helping the children with autism and their peers participate in increasingly social and involved play activities." Methods to achieve this are monitoring play initiations, providing gradually decreasing support within the play group activities, guiding social communication by interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues of the child with autism for the peers as meaningful and purposeful, and encouraging shared interactions. Through play guidance, engage children in activities that may be slightly beyond their capacity.

Wolfberg stresses that the play environment influences the playgroup as well. The setting should be natural and integrated, or a location where children of various abilities would normally play. The spaces should be organized with regard to the number of children involved, size of the space, room arrangement, and accessibility of materials.

Clear boundaries are quite helpful. Play materials should be age appropriate and diverse in complexity and use. Playmates should be familiar and meet consistently over a period of time in order to develop relationships and the understanding needed to ensure shared play. It would be most useful for them to have a shared interest in the materials. Finally, Wolfberg recommends that consistent schedules and routines do enhance the advancement of play for all children.

Children with autism should be provided with the same opportunities for a variety of play activities as other children. What will be an additional need for them to enjoy their experiences and to grow will be the willingness of the adults (and peers) who support them to accommodate, understand, and consistently invite them to engage in ever increasing play engagements. Early intervention can be one sure way to promote greater interest in a variety of materials, environments, and individuals. It can also help avoid what is most commonly seen among children with autism, them standing alone



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merely watching their peers, not knowing how to join in with the group. Adult intervention at an early age can begin to change this pattern, and help all children begin to understand and enjoy each other.

Wolfberg, P. J. (1999). *Play & Imagination in Children with Autism*.
New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

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