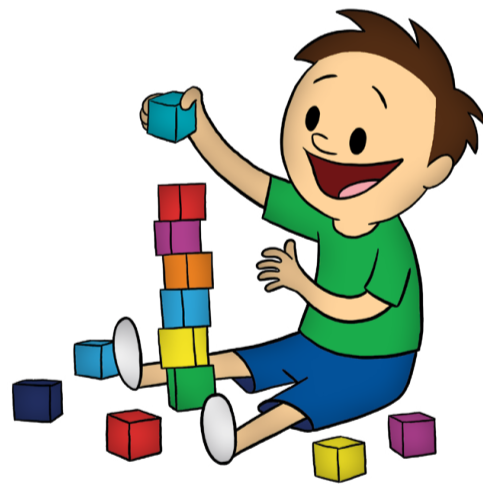
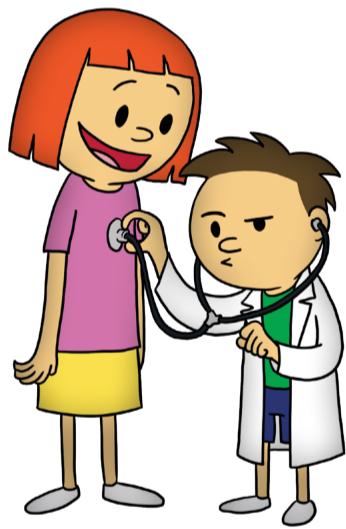


A guide for developing play skills



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What is play?

Play is the answer to how anything new comes about."

- Jean Piaget

For children, play is essentially spontaneous and voluntary, undertaken by choice rather than as a result of direction by others. Play involves exploration, imagination and motivation and supports the development of decision-making, communication and socialisation.

Play with people

In 1933, Mildred Parten identified a series of stages children pass through as their play skills develop. While these stages are considered chronological in nature, it is important to consider that these can also be fluid and not fixated to any particular age. In addition, all children differ in their presentation within and across each stage, especially children on the autism spectrum.

Unoccupied play

This stage of play begins early in infancy with lots of arm, leg, and hand movements as a baby begins to explore their body in space.

Solitary play

Children from a very young age may engage in solitary play. During this stage, they entertain themselves independently, with their focus centred mostly on their own activities.

Parallel Play

As children become more aware of others, they move on to parallel play. In parallel play, children play alongside others at a similar activity. Thus, parallel play promotes the beginnings of more interactive play development.

Onlooker Play

Children engaging in independent parallel play may show interest by looking at another child's toys or activities. This is onlooker play and may involve making eye contact and copying another child's play actions.

Associative Play

Children then begin to engage more interactively in associative play. Children play together at a similar or identical activity. There is some sharing of equipment and early turn-taking. The children may interact because of a common interest in the activity, but they are not dependent on each other.

Cooperative play

As children develop imaginative or pretend play, they become more social and play interactively with others in cooperative play. Play participants take on roles such as pretending to be a doctor, parent or fireman. This play involves taking turns and some competition or rules. There is cooperation and dependency between the participants.

Play with toys and activities

Children play with toys and engage in activities in a wide variety of ways. The following are some of the most common types of toy and activity play.

Sensorimotor, Exploratory and manipulative play

Early sensorimotor play and the exploration and manipulation of objects help children to create opportunities to learn about the objects and the world around them. As children explore the physical attributes of an object, such as its taste, feel, and the actions that can be performed on them, the child learns more about the relationship of the object to their environment. This can also develop their understanding of the effect they can have on the environment, including other people. For example, a child pushes a button to hear music or throws a toy from their highchair to watch their parent pick it up.

Functional play

Functional play follows this early exploration of objects where the objects begin to take on a functional meaning, using a toy in the way it was intended. For example, using a spoon to feed a doll or driving a train around a train track.

Pretend (make-believe) play

Pretend play, also known as symbolic play, is where children can be assigned roles, engage their imagination, and use an object to stand for another. For example, two children playing doctor and patient and using a piece of string as a stethoscope. Pretend play with a friend helps children learn about relationships, trust, compromise and negotiation.

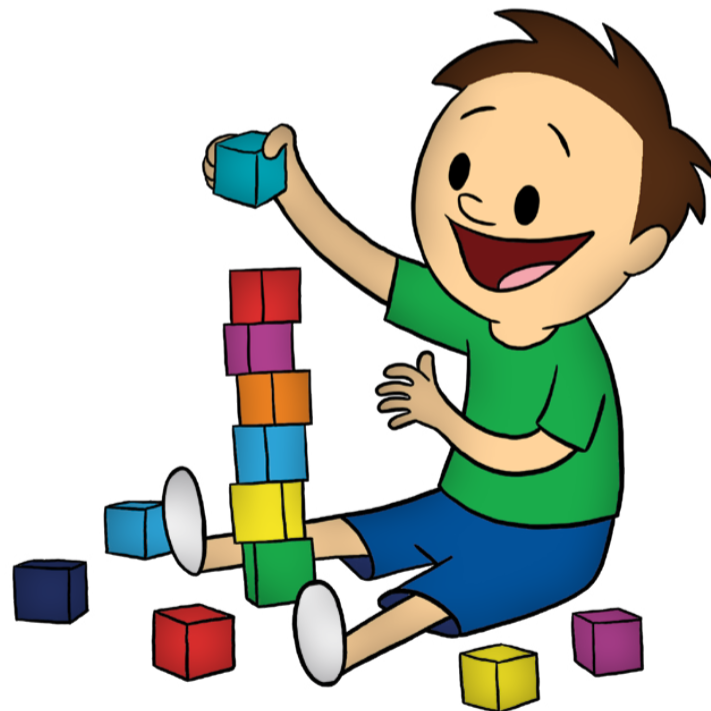
Which toys are right for a child?

All children differ in the way they play, and there is no right way to play with toys and engage in activities. The child should be free to explore and pursue their own play interest, rather than it being determined by others around them.

The appendix provides a list of suggested toys and activities to give you some ideas.

Remember the following for playing with toys:

- Allow the child to use toys with minimal adult input or direction
- Sit alongside the child and watch to see what they will do
- Copy their actions. This may help them to become more aware of you, increase the duration of the play interaction and encourage them to imitate your actions
- Leave one or two new and interesting toys or activities lying around at home or at preschool where the child likes to play for them to notice
- Model how to use each toy, for example, push a button or pour some water into a water wheel. This may help to attract the child's attention as well as showing them how to use the toy
- The suggestions in this manual are a guide only. Ensure close supervision of children when using small objects in play. Especially for children who may regularly place objects in their mouth.





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Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) is Australia's largest autism-specific service provider, with one of the biggest evidence informed autism-specific schools programs in the world. A not-for-profit organisation, we work in partnership with people of all ages on the autism spectrum and their families to deliver positive, practical supports, services, practices and research that recognise *a different brilliant*[®] - *understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths and interests of people on the autism spectrum.*

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