

PLAY SKILLS

GOAL

Expand your child's play skills to include a variety of activities that she enjoys.

BACKGROUND

Play skills are important for a number of reasons. Children learn best through play because it makes learning fun and teaches problem solving skills.

Play skills reduce challenging behavior by providing your child with alternative enjoyable activities to fill her day. All play involves exploring, being creative and having fun.

There should be no objective posed from the outside (yeah, that's you). It's a child-driven activity.

6 STAGES OF PLAY

There are 6 stages of play that children go through as they develop.

- Unoccupied play
- Solitary play
- Onlooker play
- Parallel play
- Associative play
- Cooperative play

Understanding these stages helps you determine your child's current stage of development and set realistic goals for play. If your child only engages in solitary play, she likely won't be successful if you try to teach her cooperative play skills.

Use the stages as a general guide rather than a set rule. Be flexible when teaching play skills and let your child take the lead.

STAGES OF PLAY

Unoccupied Play

The first stage begins to develop in infancy and involves simple play through movement. This type of play helps children understand their place in the world around them. A child jumping and spinning is engaged in unoccupied play. She is moving her body and exploring how it feels.



Solitary Play

The next stage also begins at birth and usually develops until the child is about 2 years old. Children involved in solitary play can engage in play with objects but have not developed an interest in including others in their play.



Onlooker Play

Onlooker play usually develops around 2 years of age. The child will watch others play but still doesn't play with them.



Parallel Play

Many autistic children struggle to develop play skills beyond the first few stages of play without a little help. Parallel play occurs when the child plays next to her peers engaged in the same activity but doesn't play with her peers.



Associative Play

Associative play occurs when the child begins interacting with her peers, but these interactions are still pretty limited.



Cooperative Play

The final stage of play is cooperative play where children work together toward a shared goal.


HOW DOES YOUR CHILD PLAY?

Play develops gradually and should be fun for you and your child.


The first step in teaching play skills is to identify how your child currently plays. What are some of the things she likes to do? How does she engage with toys, objects or other people? What type of play does she engage in most often? What are her favorite items or objects? Answering these questions will help guide you in expanding her play.

Rather than thinking about teaching play skills, focus more on gradually expanding on the play she already engages in. Remember that play should be fun for her so teaching or expanding play should also be fun for her, and you.

HOW DOES YOUR CHILD CURRENTLY PLAY?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray border, intended for the user to write their child's current play habits.

WHAT OTHER ACTIVITIES IS SHE INTERESTED IN?

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TEACHING PLAY SKILLS

Follow these steps for helping your child develop play skills: join, imitate, expand.



JOIN

Join your child in play. Position yourself so that your child can easily make eye contact or look at you if she chooses by sitting slightly in front or across from her. Have your own toys that are similar or the same as her and just join in what she is doing without making her share with you. You can model different ways to play with the toys she likes. Try being unexpected or funny.



IMITATE

Once your child accepts you joining in her play, start to imitate the things she does. Jump when she jumps. If she spins the wheels of a car, spin the wheels of a car with her. Help her see value in engaging in play with you. If you notice your child move away or shut down when you do this, back off. Imitate small actions she makes and see if she gradually becomes more accepting of you imitating her play. Allow her to control and direct play.



EXPAND

Very gradually work to expand the play she enjoys. Include items or objects of special interest when adding new elements to play. This step takes a lot of creativity and patience but also produces the results you've been waiting to see. Include her special interests in as many activities as she will tolerate without overwhelming her or detracting from her enjoyment of those interests.

DEVELOP A PLAN

Plan each step of the process

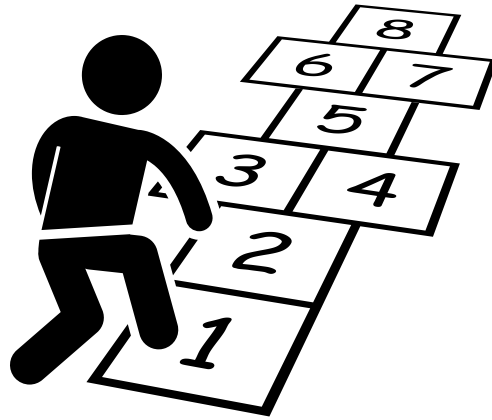
A plan will help you prepare for engaging with your child. Don't lock yourself into the plan you create but use the plan to determine if there are any materials or resources you might need available.

HOW CAN YOU JOIN YOUR CHILD IN PLAY?

WHAT PLAY ACTIVITIES CAN YOU IMITATE YOUR CHILD DOING?

HOW CAN YOU GRADUALLY SHAPE THIS PLAY TO EXPAND IT?

MAKE PLAY FUN



Remember the goals of teaching your child play skills. You want to help her explore the world around her, spend time engaged in enjoyable activities and learn through those activities. The goal is not to teach a rigid, structured play routine. Be flexible and creative. Avoid placing your values on her play. If you don't enjoy crushing leaves and watching the pieces float in the wind, recognize that she's acting as a young meteorologist. Encourage play and exploration even when it doesn't look like how you played when you were young.



PLAY SKILLS

Many children develop play skills on their own. Often autistic children need a little support and guidance. Although their play may always look different than their peers, expanding play skills should be about helping your child discover more enjoyable ways to interact with the world around her.

Images are of models for demonstration purposes and do not depict children with autism.