How To Help Autistic Kids With Play

by Bec Oakley

Image: Microsoft

The way autistic kids play is often called unusual because it's different to what you see in typically developing kids - there's less role playing, they can become obsessed with a particular type of toy or just one part of it and often play with objects that aren't traditionally considered to be toys.

But is that a problem? When should we be lending autistic kids a hand with their play, and how do we do that?

What's the point of play?

We play for a lot of different reasons - learning, exercise, stimulation, entertainment - and it’s no different for autistic kids. They’re learning and exploring the world, testing out ideas and plain old having a good time - but it’s just not always in the way that we might expect.

Spinning the propeller on a toy helicopter over and over might seem boring and purposeless to many kids, but for others it's really exciting. It feels good and sparks their curiosity about stuff like air currents and the patterns of sunlight through the dust... to them it’s a functional, purposeful way to enjoy and explore the world.

So finding enjoyment and stimulation in things that most people consider odd isn’t the bit where autistic kids might need help.

How do we learn to play?

Like language, play is a skill that develops in stages.

Sensory play

In the beginning, kids experience objects through their senses - they stare at them, pick them up, taste and sniff them, rattle them around to make noise. These objects aren't just limited to toys - fingers, hair, animals or food may all be equally if not more fascinating to some kids, and are all a part of early play activities.

Exploratory play

The next stage moves on from these experiences to figuring out the functions and limitations of objects. Theories are formed which are tested and re-tested. *Hey cool, this rubber hammer makes the pegs go in! Hmm, will it knock down this wall too... nope, it’s just good for pegs.* Using objects in an odd way is still exploratory play when a function is discovered and applied consistently. *Hey, this tea cup makes a really cool sand scoop.*

Symbolic and imaginative play

The pinnacle of play skills, this stage is the one that is most often considered to be difficult for autistic kids, who are often assumed to be unable to pretend. But this stage isn’t just about role playing, it’s about learning to substitute one object for another or coming up with a new function for an object - a teddy bear that fills in for prince charming, a hairbrush that doubles as a microphone or a ruler that becomes a catapult.

How do play skills develop in autism?

Just like the echolalic stage of language, sometimes autistic kids can get stuck or delayed at one of the stages in their play development for different reasons:

- Sensory seekers often really enjoy sensory play and can find it hard to move on
- Sensory avoiders might not enjoy manipulating objects to discover their function
- Exploring all the possible functions of objects requires a bigger picture view which can be tricky when you're focused on details
- A preference for routine and fear of change can make exploring seem daunting
- Communication difficulties make it hard to get help if you get stuck
- Rigid thinking and perseveration can be a barrier to finding new ways to use objects
- It's easy to miss feedback or ideas about the correct way to use objects if you're hyper-focused or easily distracted

Sorting and categorizing are normal parts of exploratory play for example, and kids who have an intense need to create order often find this phase of play development particularly enjoyable and satisfying. This can result in stereotypical behaviours like lining up cars instead of driving them around a track, but this is just a sign of immature rather than defective play skills.

So it's important to remember that a delay in this area of development doesn’t mean that they can’t or won’t ever develop more complex play skills - it simply means that they’re not there yet.

So where do they need help?

The goal for helping autistic kids with their play isn't necessarily to change the things they play with or teach them to play in the same way that their peers do, but to help them use the way they play and the things they find engaging to progress through the developmental stages to develop other more complex skills.

One of the most important functions of the later stages of play is the opportunity to learn and practice social skills like cooperating, sharing, taking turns and participating in a group. These are areas that autistic kids often find

tough to navigate, and being stuck in the earlier stages of play means they're missing out on opportunities to strengthen the development of these skills.

Engaging in symbolic play also goes hand in hand with language development - both require the ability to use one thing to represent something else. Words substitute for ideas, objects and events in much the same way that a banana substitutes for a phone or daddy fills in for Batman. The relationship between symbolic play and language is complex and not yet fully understood, but there's no doubt that time spent engaging in one helps the development of the other.

What about kids who 'don't play at all'?

A lack of engagement with toys is often one of the first things people notice about the play behaviour of autistic kids, yet it isn't always a good reflection of the level of play skill development. That's because we make some pretty big assumptions when describing and defining what appropriate play looks like.

Assumption #1: This is a toy

In theory a toy is any object that you can play with, but in reality we have a very prescribed view of what that should look like. We consider it odd behaviour for a child to bang his shoe on the floor repetitively, yet applaud the child next to him for doing the same thing with a rubber hammer.

Assumption #2: This is fun

How many times have you read that the best toys for toddlers are brightly coloured things that make noise? We assume that these kinds of toys are inherently attractive to all kids, so choosing not to interact with them must indicate defective play skills. But many of the things that we designate as appropriate and fun play objects are a sensory nightmare for hypersensitive kids (noise-makers, smelly plastics, bumpy or textured toys), or frighteningly unpredictable for those that are stressed by sudden changes (pop-up toys, blocks that could fall down).

Assumption #3: This is appropriate

Kids are surrounded by the toys that we have pre-selected as being interesting based on their developmental stage, and when they don't seek these out or play with them in the expected way it's flagged as a concern. But

what if they don’t find these choices engaging? What if they don’t yet have the level of cognitive or physical skill to operate them?

So before we jump in and conclude that a kid isn't interested in play, we really need to think about the kinds of things that might be impacting their ability to do that:

- Can they identify which objects are toys?
- Is the toy fun for them?
- Is the toy comfortable for them to use?
- Do they know how to use the toy?
- Can they physically operate the toy?
- Do they know when it’s time to play?
- Do they know where to play?
- Are they able to physically access something to play with?
- Are they able to choose something to play with?
- Are they able to independently transition to and start a play activity?
- Are they able to communicate when they need help?

How can you support autistic kids with their play?

Join in

Let your kids know that what they're doing is interesting to you. Get down on the floor and make your own line of cars, chat to them about what they’re doing or make up a song about it.

Forget what you know about toys

Be accepting of the things that they find engaging. There’s no point in trying to encourage joint attention and social interaction without showing respect for the things that they choose to play with. How can they feel safe enough to explore in a space where the things they find interesting are wrong?

Widen their horizons

Instead of trying to replace the objects they want to play with, show them new ways to play with those things. Teach them what the correct function of the object is, and then expand on that. If they enjoy sorting, provide lots of stuff that they can group and show them different ways to do that (by size, colour, shape). Make a picture book of all the different things that they can

make from play dough or blocks, help them with ideas that build on what they've already discovered. Give them as much support as they need to risk moving out of their comfort zone.

Widen your horizons

Expand your ideas about what play looks like. Incorporate all sorts of daily activities into 'play time' - get them to help you with jobs that involve sorting or order like putting the cutlery away in the drawer, sorting the laundry into different baskets or stacking DVD covers. After all, everything is play in the eyes of a child.

The bottom line

Autistic kids can and do play, and doing so in a way that's different to other kids or uses unusual objects doesn't automatically make it dysfunctional. Just like all kids, they need support and encouragement to progress and get better at playing so they can develop more complex skills. And as is the case with other types of learning, this help might need to be provided in a comprehensive and structured way.

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