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From Marcus Autism Center:

## Helping your child with autism learn play skills can have lasting benefits.

Play in children with [autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#) can look very different compared to how their peers play. In some cases, these children may not play at all.

To help kids with autism learn to play, it helps to know the barriers that can affect play skills. For example, some children with autism may have limited interests. They may only play with one or two toys, doing the same action over and over, or only play with parts of toys. They also may:

- Not know how to play with toys
- Be unable to learn just by watching others because it's hard for them to imitate
- Not have the foundational skills play requires, like issues with coordination

It's important to help kids with autism improve their play skills, because play is a foundation for learning. During playtime, try working on:

- Foundational learning skills—like attention and flexibility
- Cognitive skills—like problem-solving
- Communication skills—like practicing new words
- Social skills—like taking turns, sharing and talking to peers
- Fine motor skills—like self-feeding and drawing
- Gross motor skills—like running and jumping

Playtime is also a great opportunity to encourage more [parent-child interaction](#). When kids with autism play with their parents, it can set the stage for them to play with their peers in the future. Parents play an important role in a child's development of all skills, and playtime is a chance to give your child attention and validation. You can also pair yourself with fun, enjoyable activities and create opportunities for learning in a natural environment.

To promote play in your little one:

- Get on her level. Position yourself on the floor or at eye level to promote interaction and make it more likely that your child is aware of your presence.
- Copy her actions when appropriate. Imitating your child's actions can show your approval and make it more likely that she will imitate you or be aware of your actions in the future.

- Make it fun. Being silly and modeling fun things to do with toys based on your child's interests can increase your child's interest in toys and help teach play.
- Expand interests by introducing new toys or games or incorporate preferred items into play activities.
- Work on foundational skills such as imitation and matching that may help with play.

Play should be fun for both you and your child. If you need more ideas, read about building [interest in toys and games](#).

## How to help your child with autism enjoy playing with more toys, in more ways. Her social and language skills are also likely to improve.

### Children with autism and play

It is common for some children with [autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#) to have very limited play skills. This can mean that a child plays with only a few toys, plays in a repetitive way or doesn't play with toys the way most kids do.

For example, there may be several toys in a child's room, but she only chooses to play with cars, or she may become fixated and do the same activities over and over again—like pushing blocks off the table. She may also focus on the wheel of the car or just drop it on the ground rather than rolling it across the floor. Parents often struggle with how to get their child interested in new toys and activities or break these routines.

### Why play matters

For children, **playtime is learning time**, and playing with toys and games is very important for developing new skills. Creating interest in toys and games can lead to opportunities for appropriate play instead of engaging in self-stimulating behavior.

During playtime, you can help kids with autism practice communication skills like asking questions and using new words. Some children with autism may not pay attention to others, and playtime is a great way for them to learn that spending time with others can be fun. It's also a good time to introduce social skills, like taking turns and sharing.

### Four strategies to engage your child in play

1. Let your child's interests lead you. Watch what she plays with and see if you can identify common themes. For example, if your child likes to play with a police car with lights or a toy flashlight, try introducing other light-up toys, like a Lite-Brite or light-up yo-yo.

2. Introduce new toys and show your child how to play with them. Remember to label new toys and talk about what you are doing, so you can model new words and create opportunities for your child to use language.
3. Rotate toys on the toy shelf. Kids can get stuck in a rut and may choose to play with the same things over and over if those are their only choices. Even if there are fewer choices, your child may begin to play more when the toys change.
4. Try including preferred toys or snacks in new play activities. For example, put your child's favorite chips on a table in a dollhouse. You can model feeding the chips to a toy Spider-Man and reward your child with chips while she learns to play with a new toy.

Play should be fun and rewarding for your child. Taking the steps to encourage your child's interest in various toys and games will help with [social skills](#) and [communication](#).

*We recognize that every child is unique and that the content of this article may not work for everyone. This content is general information and is not specific medical advice. We hope these tips will serve as a jumping-off point for finding the best approach to helping a child with autism. Always consult with a doctor or healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns about the health of a child. In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away. Some physicians and affiliated healthcare professionals on the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta team are independent providers and are not our employees.*