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All About Early Toy Play

Early toy play begins with **exploratory play**, which involves infants and young children using all their senses to explore objects. Exploratory play is followed by **functional play**. When children engage in functional play, they perform “expected” actions on toys and objects, such as putting shapes into a shape sorter and stacking blocks to make a tower. In this section, you’ll learn about the development of exploratory and functional play and how the play of children with ASD differs from that of typically developing children. You’ll also discover just how important functional play is to the development of later communication and language skills.

The Importance of Early Toy Play for Children with Autism

Play is an activity that fuels children’s learning. As children play, they actively build new knowledge by integrating what they are learning with what they already know. The more a child plays with toys, and the more, different play actions and combinations of play actions he performs on these toys, the more experiences he has on which to build his understanding of the world. So, the more a child plays, the more he learns about playing. And the more play experiences he has, the better his language and thinking skills become.

The play of children with ASD isn’t as complex or creative as that of typically developing children. However, studies show that children with ASD who have better play skills at a young age, go on to have better play and language skills later on. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the early play skills of a child on the autism spectrum and to understand the critical role parents play in building these skills. On the following pages, you will learn about the development of early play skills, which is the first step in learning how to support them.

“ Studies show that children with ASD who have better play skills at a young age, go on to have better play and language skills later on. ”



How Does Your Child Play?

To get a clear idea of how your child plays and his stage of play, fill in the checklist below.

Check the box beside the description that most closely describes how your child plays.

How My Child Plays

My child does the same actions on all toys or objects – he mouths, bangs, drops, shakes or throws whatever he plays with. ☐

- He does not play with toys in the way they were intended to be played with. For example, he bangs toy cars, blocks, spoons and toy animals on a surface.

My child does only one “expected” play action at a time on a toy ☐

- He might have a number of different “expected” single play actions that he uses on different toys, but he does not combine multiple actions on the same toy. For example, the only action he does with a toy car is to drive it along the floor. He doesn’t put the car on a track or make it crash into another car.

My child combines two or more “expected” play actions on a toy(s) ☐

- He combines two or more “expected” play actions so his play is more creative. For example, he 1) puts objects into the dumper of a truck; 2) drives the truck along the floor; then 3) dumps the objects onto the floor.



If you said that your child...	Then your child is at the following stage of play...
does the same actions on all toys or objects – such as mouthing, banging, dropping, shaking or throwing them	Exploring
does only one “expected” play action at a time on toys	Single Action Functional Play
combines two or more “expected” play actions on one or more toys	Multi-action Functional Play

Guidelines for Deciding on Next Play Steps

There are some simple guidelines to help you choose the next step for your child and the best toys to help him imitate that step.

Alex's Toy Play Plan (see page 57 for more detailed descriptions)

My child is at the following stage of play: Exploring

The next play step for my child is to: Imitate one functional play action

(For children at Exploring and Multi-action functional play stages)

My child will perform this play action by: Performing an existing exploratory action on a toy in the "expected" way

My child enjoys playing with or doing the following with toys or objects:
throwing toys and objects onto the floor

My child can achieve his next play step by learning to imitate the following
"expected" play action/s: throwing a ball into a laundry basket

This is his "opportunity."

What I will do first...

When my child is playing with a toy/object, I will:

- get down on the floor so we are face to face
- put the toy/s I plan to use beside me, with duplicates for my child
- **O**bserve what he is doing with the toy/s
- **W**ait to see what else he will do; and
- **L**isten to what he says

Then, I will R.O.C.K. my child's play...



I will Repeat (imitate) my child's actions with toys or objects.

When he does the following actions with toys/objects: throws them onto the floor, I will throw a toy or object onto the floor, using my own toy.

Once we have imitated each other back and forth a number of times...

I will then Repeat (model) the following new play step: throw a soft, small ball into a laundry basket

I will comment on the play action by saying: "I'm gonna throw the ball into the basket," or "The ball is in the basket!"

I will repeat the play step and comment 3 times in a row.



I will offer my child the opportunity to imitate the new play step
(write down the new play step) Throwing the ball into the laundry basket



I will cue my child to imitate the play step by **waiting** for about 10 seconds.

If my child doesn't imitate the play step when I wait, I will provide a stronger cue by: Giving him hand over hand help so he throws a ball into the laundry basket

Once my child imitates the new play step (with or without a cue), I will reward him by: being excited and saying, "Yay! You threw the ball into the basket!"

I will not say, "Good job" or "Good boy."



I will **Keep the play fun** by: being playful, animated and making sure he is having fun

I will **Keep the play going** by: playing with him often using R.O.C.K., getting other family members to R.O.C.K. his play with the balls and the laundry basket and by introducing him to other throwing toys (bean bags, balls of different sizes) and different containers (garbage can, cardboard box).