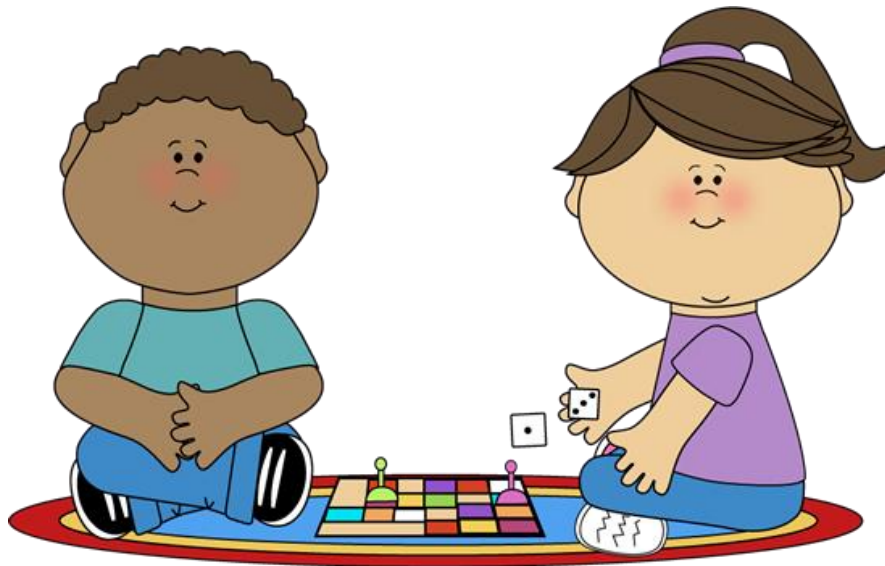


**SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING PLAY
WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WHO HAVE
SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES
OR
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**



A RESOURCE PACK

**SWALE SPECIALIST TEACHING & LEARNING
SERVICE**

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CONTENTS

1. Types of play

2. Factors affecting play in children with social communication difficulties or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

3. Features of play in children with social communication difficulties or ASD

4. Developing play skills

Nursery and Reception education is built on developing strong play foundations so that young children form the characteristics of effective learning needed for lifelong learning. Our duty is to scaffold their learning by providing enriching resources and experiences and to allow children the time and space to explore, experiment and lead their own learning. Young children’s cognition and learning is inseparable from their play.

The above is true for all children but the presentation and progression of their play will be different in relation to their stage of development and any difficulties they are experiencing.

1. DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF PLAY

Sensorimotor Play	The child uses all their senses to explore items. They look at, touch, smell, lick and shake things.
Organising Play	The child has not yet worked out the purpose of items but does begin to group and line them up.
Functional Play	The child has discovered the purpose of items and begins to use them in accordance with their basic function.
Pretend Play	Functional Imaginative The child starts to use resources functionally, often representing real life experiences, for example talking on the telephone, feeding the baby.
	Representational The child uses one object to represent another, for example a banana is used as a telephone, a bowl is used as a cup.
	Symbolic The child applies real life experiences and qualities to their play for example giving the baby doll a name and creating scenarios such as: the baby is ill and needs medicine/is going to the doctors, the car is dirty and is going to the carwash/has broken down.

SOCIAL STAGES OF PLAY

Solitary Play	The child plays alone.
Spectator Play	The child watches others at play but does not interact.
Parallel Play	The child plays alongside other children with their own activity. They may sometimes pause and watch others but there is little to no interaction.
Associative Play	The child plays near or within a group of other children using the same or similar resources, however they are focused on their own play and do not share ideas.
Co-operative Play	The child plays with other children sharing thoughts, ideas and resources.

Source: Scottish Autism.org

The first step in supporting the development of a child's play is to know the stage their play is at.

2. Factors affecting play in children with social communication difficulties or ASD

Communication

Attention and listening difficulties may lead to a child insisting that other children follow their narrow and rigid interests often leading them to retreat so that they can continue their play. Reduced attention may lead to missing important information when instructions are given.

A child who cannot communicate verbally may experience frustration at not being able to make their message known or may give up trying to interact with others. Sometimes a child with ASD or social communication difficulties wants to engage with others but their attempts are misunderstood because they have neither the language nor the social understanding to do so in an appropriate way.

Children with social communication difficulties or ASD may use learned language that leads others to over-estimate their language skills.

Difficulties with understanding spoken language can have considerable impact on developing co-operative play skills. A child may not understand what is being said or struggle to remember and retain information, especially if there are lots of distractions. Many children with social communication difficulties or ASD will not understand social context and cues, e.g. that we do not always mean what we say.

Difficulties with use of spoken language can lead to long pauses in response to comments and questions, resulting in adults leading play and asking more questions. This can leave a child feeling anxious/worried or put on the spot. Not being able to express what they want can quickly lead to isolation.

Some children will be so sensitive to the proximity of other children and adults that they consistently move away from any attempt by others to interact. Their eye contact may be poor and their attention single channelled.

Sensory Sensitivities

A child's level of sensory sensitivity at any given time will have an impact on how their play develops. They may have preferences for, or aversions to, visual, tactile, auditory or kinaesthetic stimulations in play and in the environment.

Some children may have Pica, a condition where they consume non-edibles and this will need to be risk assessed and some resources may need to be removed or limited to prevent choking or illness.

Special Interests

A child may have particular interests that can become all-consuming, they may want to continuously repeat an action and be very reluctant to stop. However, these special interests can be helpful in developing play if they are managed within a clear structure.

A Focus on Detail (central coherence)

Poor central coherence is one of the possible underlying deficits in autism spectrum disorders. Central coherence allows us to 'see the big picture' before the detail. Without this skill a child focuses on detail rather than 'the whole picture' and it can be evident in play where their interest is on one small part of an object e.g. the wheels on a car or a particular pattern/configuration made with blocks.

Planning & Organising (executive functioning)

Poor executive functioning is another possible underlying deficit in social communication difficulties or ASD. Executive functioning allows us to plan, organise and complete a series of events. Without this skill, children may know the task they are to do but struggle to plan and organise the steps to achieve the outcome. They may also be easily distracted and unable to suppress impulses.

Rigid and Inflexible Behaviours

Some children develop rigid routines that are repeated over and over again and they can become anxious if these are interrupted or stopped.

Anxiety

Many children with social communication difficulties or ASD will experience high levels of anxiety and this can be evident in their reactions. Some children will see the approach of other children to their play as a threat and may hit out or gather the resources and move away. Child initiated play can therefore be a stressful time.

Theory of Mind

This allows us to view situations from another person's perspective and is one of the possible underlying deficits in ASD. We use theory of mind to adapt our interactions and responses and manage the nuances of communication and interaction with others; we understand that other people can think differently from ourselves.

During play this can mean that a child with social communication difficulties or ASD will insist the play is done in a particular way, their way, and they fail to respond to the ideas of others. They will not understand concepts such as taking turns, waiting and sharing (things all young children struggle with!) and often see what they want and take it even if another child has the item.

3. Features of play in children with social communication difficulties or ASD

A study of 4 to 8 year olds with autism in free play concluded that:

'...the most frequently observed play behaviours included parallel-functional play, adult interactions and solitary functional play.'

Play Behaviour of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Elizabeth Holmes & Tina Willoughby. The Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability 2009 p.156-164 2009.

The play may present as having a focus on a particular sensory element. For example:

- Visual stimulation – bubbles, spinning toys, throwing, scattering, shiny surfaces and materials, glitter and bubble tubes, turning lights on and off
- Auditory stimulation – vocalisations, talking books, sound toys, computer programmes
- Tactile stimulation – mouthing, feeling textures on the face, sand, water, foam and thick paint, all of which may be put in the mouth
- Kinaesthetic stimulation – seeking movement: bikes, jumping, climbing, spinning, climbing frames

The play may be restricted to rigid repetition of functional elements. For example:

- Spinning wheels on vehicles or rolling a vehicle back and forth while watching the wheels
- Building with blocks in a particular configuration
- Lining up or grouping resources in a particular way
- Completing and repeating one element of a computer game/program
- Moving things around in the role play kitchen in a certain sequence, for example, opening the cupboard putting something in, shutting the cupboard then repeating the sequence

Socially, a child's play may present as:

- Solitary with no apparent joint attention
- Actively solitary, taking themselves away from others
- Solitary in the presence of others
- Solitary, sometimes shifting attention to what others are doing
- Having a focus on the resources another child has (sometimes mistaken as interest in other children)
- Anxious and fearful

4. Strategies for developing play skills

Every time I approach the child moves away

Work out how close you can be before the child moves away and start any involvement at that distance.

OBSERVE the items they appear to like and make a collection.

Be interesting! Sit at the appropriate distance with the motivating item and try to catch their attention on the item. If it is an instrument play it, if it is playdough then stretch, squash and roll it with exaggeration.

If the child is not yet handling any items but wanders and vocalises try copying their vocalisations. This may feel unusual to do but frequently the result is that the child recognises the sound and you can quickly move to taking turns with vocalisations. This also works where a child likes to bang things to make noise.

The child does not yet give joint attention

At the early stage of developing attention, a child will be able to attend to an object or a person but not both.

Two-way attention with an adult involves simple but motivating games with no toys, such as action songs and rhymes.

Three-way shared attention introduces a toy, another person or an activity. This could be blowing bubbles, rolling vehicles, building and knocking down towers of bricks.

Adults need to make themselves “irresistible” by working out what motivates the child they are working with and creating opportunities to share attention.

Activities that could be tried are anticipation games and attention buckets.

The child does not take turns

Being able to take turns requires joint attention so this must be achieved first.

Your activity will need to be structured with the adult keeping control of the resources only giving the child the thing they need when it is their turn. Language will need to be minimal, simple and repetitive e.g.

‘Jenny’s turn, Bobby’s turn’. Types of activities include:

- Stacking blocks
- Pouring water from a jug into a water wheel
- Filling and emptying
- Rolling cars or balls down a ramp or to each other
- Playing an instrument
- Posting activities

Play these games little and often and finish them before boredom sets in.

The child has no functional play skills

If young children with social communication difficulties or ASD are at the solitary or parallel functional play stage they are likely to need support to help them progress. Direct teaching of play skills will be required so that they build a repertoire of play which in turn will give them the tools to interact in play with their peers.

To do this you can use a mixture of strategies.

1. Backward chaining

This is best used for a sequential activity such as a puzzle. The adult completes all but the last step of the sequence with the child watching and then supports the child to do the last step. Over time the process is repeated with the adult doing less steps and the child doing more steps.

2. Extending play with a resource they prefer

This is useful where a child has a very limited preference of resources. For example, you have a child who only ever chooses a car with which they wander the setting pushing it along surfaces. Ensuring you have achieved two-way attention introduce a ramp and model how to drop a car down it, this can then be extended to different types of ramps and then different rolling objects or put paint or foam in a tray and wheel the car through it.

3. Introducing a new resource

If a child has achieved three-way attention they may be ready for direct and structured teaching of a new activity. To reduce distractions and keep focus, try sitting opposite each other at a desk. The only items on the desk should be those needed for the task and to begin with the adult will use them and the child will watch.

For example, your aim is to teach a child how to play with Mr Potato Head.

- The adult has the resources and says what they are going to do e.g. 'I am going to make Mr Potato Head'.
- Keeping language simple (at the child's level) say what you are doing e.g. 'body' as you pick up the body, 'hat' as you pick up and attach the hat.
- Continue until your potato is complete. Give the child a set (only the pieces needed) and leave your potato on the table as an example.
- If the child struggles to start the activity try handing them a piece and helping them to attach it.

- ❖ Make sure the new activity is then available at child initiated time and observe if the child uses it.
- ❖ Once some basic skills are developed you could introduce and manage turn taking with another child.

Some examples of sensory resources for play

Visual	Auditory	Tactile	Kinaesthetic
Glitter toys/balls	Instruments	Fans	Swing
Bubbles	Keyboards	Feathers	Slide
Fibre optics	Cause & effect	Chiffon	Climbing frame
Shiny paper and fabric	sound toys	Fur	Bikes & scooters
Running water/sand	Clackers	Texture books	Trampoline
Paint	Rainmakers	Sand, water, foam	Rocking horse
Kaleidoscopes	Sea drums	Child safe gels	Football
Torches	Talking books	Brushes	Large bean bags
Lava toys	Music	Vibrating cushions and other resources	Rocking seats
Rainmakers		Cooked and raw pasta	Hoops
Sea drums			Jack-in-the-Box
Pop-up and flap books			Spinning tops
			Marble runs
			Ramps

Some examples of structured activities

- Mr Potato Head
- Construction – these often come with picture examples graded in difficulty
- Dressing the baby, washing the baby
- Threading
- Making shapes with wet sand using moulds (this can be done in a small tray at a desk)
- Playdough – teaching each skill one at a time
- Inset puzzles and shape boards
- Pattern making

The child does not say much

- Model simple language about what the child is playing with e.g. objects they are using, actions they are doing etc
- Reduce questions, only ask those you do not know the answer to
- Give choices
- Interpret what the child would say
- Repeat vocabulary over and over again
- Use alternative means of communication in your language, e.g. Makaton signs/symbols/objects. This gives opportunities for a child to use these if speaking is hard for them.
- When a child does say a word, interpret it, model it again and extend it, e.g. if they say “car” you could say “car driving”

The child does not seem to understand what I am saying

- Simplify your own language so that you are not giving too much information at once
- Identify the key words the child needs to understand-those that **MUST** be understood for an instruction to be carried out correctly
- Use Makaton signs when saying these key words
- Use visuals to support the child to understand spoken language
- Only give 1 instruction at a time and in the order you want it carried out
- Give direct and clear instructions, **SAY WHAT YOU MEAN!**
- Allow up to 10 seconds of processing time



Golden Rules

A note about child initiated play and choosing what to do

Children with social communication difficulties or ASD are likely to need support to:

★ Manage the play environment

You will need to consider and manage any sensory sensitivity including noise levels, movement and distractions. Also consider if there is a quiet space to play for any children who cannot yet cope with the proximity of others. This could be sitting at a desk to play or using a cloth to define an area for their play.

★ Know what is available and understand how to make a choice

A choice board of the day's activities can help a child by narrowing the choices, therefore making it easier for them to focus their attention and choose an activity. When using a choice board ensure that you take the child to their chosen activity, they may abandon it quickly in which case you should offer the choice again.

★ Know when they can choose and for how long

Do you have a method of visually representing the sequence of events and passing of time so that ending play is managed? Teaching a child to use a visual timetable and using timers will help structure the play. Make sure you have a visual method to countdown to the end of the play session and remember that some children will not be able to stop until they have completed their routine.

★ Know how to communicate their choice

If the child is non-verbal, how are they going to indicate their choice or ask for the resources they want?

Putting the above adaptations in place will provide the foundations to enable the teaching and development of play for children with social communication difficulties or ASD.