

TIPS FOR FAMILIES: PLAYING WITH CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Creating the Right Environment for Play:

- **Timing**
 - Find a time to play with your child when they are alert and happy, not hungry or tired, and when you have time, energy and enthusiasm to devote to them
- **Noise**
 - Having a TV, radio or music on while doing other things makes it more difficult to concentrate. If you are trying to play constructively with your child it is a good idea to turn everything off and let them concentrate.
- **Distractions**
 - Keep out only the toy your are playing with-- too many toys at a time may be confusing
 - Playing at a table may help because it will be more difficult for your child to see other distractions or run away
 - Toys should be appealing but not to the extent where your child loses interest in other things
 - Create a child-friendly environment where your child can reach many toys. It may also be helpful to put some of his or her favorite toys just a little beyond reach to encourage your child to communicate their desires
- **Seating**
 - A child who is poorly positioned so the they feel uncomfortable, insecure or unsupported will be concentrating on stability rather than doing other activities
 - A child who is extremely fidgety may benefit from proper seating as they will be encouraged to sit still and be less likely to run off
 - Many children will play and concentrate very happily while sitting on the floor
 - Sit directly opposite your child when playing and talking with them -- it is easier to make eye contact, for your child to see your face, mouth, eyes and expression, and for your child to see what you are doing and copy it

Adult's Role When Playing with Your Child:

- **Follow your child's lead**
 - Follow your child around the play area and join in whatever activity your child is engaged in
 - Use your child's interests. You can use your understanding of what interests and excites your child to provide motivation and imitation
 - Have FUN!
- **Give your child longer to respond than you think they need**
- **Repetition and perseverance**
 - Repeat words, actions and gestures
- **Adopt a multi-sensory approach**
 - Remember the phrase "hear, see, do." For example, if you're talking about fruits, handle them, feel and touch them, smell them, shake them, taste them.
 - Using visual cues (e.g., pictures, actual object, sign language) along with verbal language encourages language development

- Use a very animated voice and facial expressions when interacting with your child
- **Respect your child's need for routines and predictability**
 - Children thrive on routines and structure because they enable children to understand what is going on around them and to recognize and eventually predict situations, creating a feeling of understanding and security.
 - Routine does not mean rigidity. Routines can be predictable, but do not have to be at the exact same time. Some children get fixated on routines and need some variation within the routine to prevent fixations from occurring.
- **The importance of generalizing skills**
 - Give your child lots of opportunities to experiment, explore and be creative with toys and objects
 - Utilize different materials in a variety of situations so that they can learn to experiment and explore and expand their knowledge and understanding
 - Allow your child to play with things the wrong way as well as the right way, because that is how they will learn
- **Completing tasks**
 - You want your child to feel that it is important to complete an activity or game. If you ask your child to do something and they do not want to or cannot do it, you should complete the task yourself saying perhaps, "Mommy put the piece in then."
- **Make activities achievable**
 - Break skills down into small steps
 - Start by making things easy—introduce any new skill by using toys that are easy for your child to use and understand; as your child becomes more competent, gradually make the games more challenging
 - Be aware of where your child's play is developmentally. Follow your child's developmental progress and see what sort of skills she should be working toward. If you give your child something to do that is way beyond them, he or she will have little chance of success, quickly lose interest and become frustrated and angry.
- **Motivation**
 - Praise and encourage your child. Children with autism often need exaggerated praise and encouragement because they may not readily pick up on adult pleasure and approval. Use words, smiles, laughter, clapping, touch.
 - Concentrate on successes and ignore failures
 - Use intrinsically related rewards, including playing with an object they are most interested in, physical touch such as tickling or a game of chase
 - Keep rewards small, immediate and under your control (e.g., drinks, food, cuddles, reading a book, a favorite toy)
 - Use rewards slightly randomly so your child sometimes gets one for free and sometimes gets none—this will prevent him or her from getting totally fixated on the reward. You want the child to learn to enjoy the task for its own sake.
 - Young children need to see an immediate connection between their behavior and the reward
 - You eventually want praise and success at an activity to be enough motivation by themselves and the rewards be less crucial
- **Rotate and Vary Toys**
 - Children get bored with toys that are around all the time
 - Keep ½ of your toys put away and change them around every few months

References:

- “Autism & Play,” Jannik Beyer and Lone Gammeltoft
- *Neuroscience and Play Therapy: Working to Help Children on the Autism Spectrum*, Darci Feifer, M.Ed., LCPC
- “Play & Imagination in Children with Autism,” Pamela Wolfberg
- “Play Helps: Toys and Activities for Children with Special Needs,” Roma Lear
- “Small Steps Forward-Using Games and Activities to Help Your Pre-School Child with Special Needs,” Sarah Newman