Play Skills

Why is play important?
- Young children use play to build new skills.
- Children use play to practice current independent skills.
- Kids vary play and try creative ways to use toys and objects.
- Children use play to practice social skills.
- Play and language skills go hand in hand.

Why is play sometimes difficult for a child with an ASD?
- They tend to repeat actions/motions more than peers.
- They spend an unusual amount of time with favorites, doing things over and over again.
- They may play with toys/objects in an unusual way.
- They tend to be less interested in pretend play.
- They are often more content to play alone than with others.

Why does it matter?
- Repetitive, simple play with very few items limits new learning opportunities.
- Playing alone limits opportunities to learn language and social skills from play partners.

What can we do to improve play skills?
- Set up play opportunities that follow your child’s interests, capitalize on his/her motivation for specific toys/materials. For example, if your child likes to spin things, teach him/her to play with toys that are designed with a spinning component, such as a See N Say.
- Develop a play routine, which involves joining in with your child, taking turns with the materials, and establishing a main theme (the way in which a toy or item will be used). The turn-taking aspect should include brief turns for the adult, so the child doesn’t get frustrated by having to wait too long. The adult should make the toy/item look interesting and fun!
- Use variation, showing your child how to play in new ways with an item, helping him/her to imitate you while practicing new ways to play. For example, if your child likes to line up blocks, teach him how to stack them vertically and then crash them back down. Sound effects encouraged!
- Finish the activity when your child’s interest starts to fade, and encourage him/her to assist with putting the item away. Ending on a positive note makes it more likely you’ll enjoy that toy together the next time.
- You can increase play skills by increasing the number of toys/items your child plays with, and/or by gradually increasing the complexity of play.
How can I increase the complexity of my child’s play?
- Teach your child to do more than one thing with a particular toy.
- Add more pieces, actions, or phases to certain toys. Adding a phase may include involving your child in the set up and/or clean-up of a play activity. A phase may also include combining one toy with another to create a whole new kind of play routine. For example, if sometimes your child likes to push a truck, and other times your child likes to stack blocks, you can combine the two activities. You can teach your child to load up a truck with blocks, drive it somewhere, and dump it out.

Important tips for playtime:
- Use simple language to describe actions and items used during play. In this manner, play can be used as a vehicle for vocabulary exposure and language development.
- Allow your child some time to do their own thing. He/she may need a break from the action. Remember to stop an activity if you sense your child might be losing interest. It’s best not to let a meltdown end the activity for you.
- Developing routines is important, even in play. Adjusting those routines by adding novelty is just as important.
- Have fun when playing with your child and don’t get discouraged if your child isn't thrilled about the modifications you are making to their manner of play. Change can be difficult, but keep trying!