

TIP SHEET

Developing Interests and Play Skills for Children with Autism

Children with autism spectrum disorder often exhibit a restricted or limited range of interests and play materials. They may show a persistent preoccupation with parts of objects (the spinning wheels of toy cars), an attachment to unusual objects (a toy wheelbarrow), or fixation with a narrow interest (such as numbers or letters). Often, children with autism will demonstrate a great and odd knowledge in remembering locations, places, numbers, or letters. These very specific interests will make it difficult for the child to engage in purposeful play alone or with peers, as well as adjust to changes in routines or changes in the physical environment around them. The goal is to assist the child in expanding his interests as well as incorporating his strong interests into a more appropriate adaptable play style.

Some play behaviors of concern:

- Lining up, spinning or stacking objects
- Excessive feeling of textures
- Lack of imitation
- Need for perfectionism
- Insistence that the environment or routine remain unchanged
- Lack of safety awareness with play materials (climbs too high)
- Does not understand 'cause and effect'
- Repetitive play

Developing skills:

To assist in the development of play skills and expand children's interests in other activities the child must improve his ability to imitate adult play, to increase the variety of toys a child will use, and increase the spontaneity of play materials. Some ideas to assist in enhancing play skills and interests include:

- Model appropriate ways to approach peers (i.e. approach a group of peers with a food item in a dramatic play grocery store, or say, "Hi, can I play too?"). Give the child the words to use.
- Assist child verbally or hand over hand to show him/her new ways to play with materials.
- Pair a new toy with a familiar toy and alternate turns.
- Introduce new toys gradually, and play with the new item a bit longer each day.
- Encourage use of sensory materials to expand flexibility with play (i.e. play-dough or shaving cream can be used with cars or other favorite items).
- Encourage child to explore many objects by structuring play (i.e. give child choice to play with two new materials – they must pick one).
- Incorporate child's favorite toy into other play activities.
- Imitate activities that are motivating for the child, and then encourage reciprocal imitation of an adult's activity (i.e. zoom cars on a table with the child; then have the child zoom pens on paper with you).
- Give child choice within limits.
- Create social stories depicting play situations.

These tips were compiled from a variety of sources. For more tip sheets, visit www.fraser.org.