



Understanding how children learn to interact and play with others

- In the first three years of life, most young children learn how to interact and play with their parents, caregivers, siblings and peers in everyday activities and social situations.
- Most children appear to learn to play and interact with others effortlessly or *without* much direct teaching or guidance from adults.
- A closer look at **how** young children learn to interact and play reveals that they acquire some **basic, essential social and play skills** (see below) during everyday social experiences.
- Once they develop these social and play skills, young children appear to **greatly enjoy** interacting and playing with others, and do so **frequently** and **spontaneously** (i.e. *without* being *told* or *prompted to*).

Basic, Essential Social and Play Skills

- **Watching** people in social and play situations
- **Responding** to others
- **Initiating** interaction with others
- **Participating** in back-and-forth social **exchanges**
- **Spontaneously** watching and **imitating** others' actions, sounds, and play behaviors
- **Shifting their focus** back-and-forth between people and toys or objects
- Allowing others to play **close to them** without moving away
- **Approaching** & playing **close to** others
- **Persisting** or **staying** in social interactions and play situations
- Allowing others to **touch** and **use their toys** or objects in play (i.e. **sharing**)
- Given their neurological differences, children with ASD struggle greatly to develop these **basic, essential social and play skills**.
- Without these social and play skills, children with ASD:
 - **Can appear uninterested** in interaction or play with others
 - **Often avoid** or **disengage quickly** from social interactions
 - Tend to play **by themselves**
 - **Wait** for others to initiate interaction or play with them
 - **Focus** their attention on **toys or objects** rather than people
 - **Observe** and **imitate** others' social and play behavior **very little**
 - Play in "unusual", rigid, repetitive, and "developmentally younger" ways (e.g. spinning or lining up objects, repeatedly singing the same song) that can **interfere with more interactive play**
 - **Resist sharing** toys or objects with others

- Without these basic social and play skills, everyday social experiences can be *overwhelming* and *confusing* for children with ASD, often resulting in:
 - Significant social distress and anxiety
 - Persistent Social avoidance or withdrawal
 - Reduced motivation to communicate, interact and play with others
- Without the ability to interact and play ***spontaneously*** with others, children with ASD will have significant difficulties developing friendships and independently participating in family, school and community life
 - “***Spontaneously***” = independently initiated or *without* prompting and directing from others
- Learning to communicate and interact *spontaneously* is therefore the most critical educational priority for children with ASD (National Academy of Sciences, 2001).
- In order to interact and play *spontaneously* with others, children with ASD must *voluntarily choose* to watch, interact and play with other children because they **want to, not** because they are **prompted or directed to**. In other words, they must be able to *independently use* each of the **basic, essential social and play skills** outlined above.
- Helping children with ASD develop these essential social and play skills will allow them to have more spontaneous, enjoyable and successful social experiences
- ** To help your child develop the **basic, essential social and play skills** outlined above, please see the following handouts:
 - **Understanding How Adults Influence Children’s Communication & Interaction**
 - **How to Help Your Child Interact and Play with You**

Additional Resources

- Koegel, Robert L., Koegel, Lynn K. (2006). Pivotal Response Treatments for Autism: Communication, Social & Academic Development. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing
- MacDonald, J., Stoika, P. (2007). Play to Talk: A Practical Guide to Help Your Late-Talking Child Join the Conversation. Madison, WI: Kiddo Publishing Co.
- Mahoney, G., MacDonald, J. (2007). The Responsive Teaching Curriculum for Parents and professionals. Austin, Texas: PRO-ED, Inc.
- National Research Council. (2001). Educating children with autism. Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism. Division of Behavioral Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Prizant, B. M., Wetherby, A. M., Rubin, E., Laurent, A. C., & Rydell, P. J. (2005). The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with autism spectrum disorders. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Quill, K. (2000) Do-Watch-Listen-Say: Social and Communication Intervention for Children with Autism. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Wolfberg, P.J. (2003) Peer play and the autism spectrum: The art of guiding children’s socialization and imagination. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

Medical Review:
Garrett Watanabe, M.D.

Author:
Andrew Shahan, M.A.
ASD Regional Health Educator

Last Updated:
September 2009