

Autistic Play

Play is important for well-being and mental health, as well as social, cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development.

Play is generally agreed to be:

- Self-chosen and self-directed
- Intrinsically motivated
- Rewarding

Play can be for all ages because play is about a mental approach to activities rather than the activity itself. If the person engaging in the activity is willingly engaged and feeling content, then it is play. Play is helpful for humans at any age and can relieve stress, improve brain function, boost creativity, and offer opportunities for social connection.

Typically, autistic play has been described and understood through a **deficit lens** as it is compared to neurotypical norms. Certain play behaviours have often been labelled as negative e.g. stimming or solitary play. Autistic people's play is consequently frequently viewed as needing to be fixed or normalised.

There has been **limited attention given to autistic perspectives** (both children's and adults) on their own play. However, this is beginning to change as research and culture listens more to autistic voices.

There is a growing concern over the focus given to what is commonly referred to as "appropriate play." The worry is that clinicians could be encouraging autistic individuals to mask their interests and preferences by seeking to direct and change how autistic people play. Recently there has been a shift in thinking to reframe **all play as appropriate play.**

Recent research involving autistic people has highlighted:

- The importance of **solitary play** in helping autistic individuals to recover and recharge. For example, reading, playing with Lego, and playing computer games.
- Different types of social play that are often enjoyed by autistic individuals. These included preferences for **parallel play** which can be described as sharing a space with another person or people but doing individual activities. There was also a preference for **play within smaller groups** which often involves less complex social dynamics.
- The importance of **flow states** for autistic people. Flow states can be described as an intense focus that creates relaxation and joy.

How to support autistic play:

- Promote autonomy, regulation and skills building.
- Listen to autistic voices.
- Accept autistic play.
- Support autistic preferences whilst building on individual strengths.
- Consider when it may be appropriate to respectfully offer engagement with autistic individuals in their play experiences. For example, sitting close by and copying their play without forcing participation, imposing play, or disrupting their play. Look for possible invitations from the autistic person for joint play, but also be receptive to communications that indicate that they do not welcome joint involvement at that time.

Recommended resources:

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/aut.2023.0008>

Don't Change Autistic Play. Join In. (asha.org)

***Autistic Play is Appropriate Play - Speaking of Autism...
(wordpress.com)***