

Know Your Child's "Play Stage"

The way your child plays with toys and the way he communicates during play depend on his stage of communication. You can know what to expect at each stage by answering the following two questions:

1. How does your child play with toys?
2. How does your child communicate during play with toys?

How Does Your Child Play with Toys?

No play with toys

Especially at the Own Agenda stage, your child may not play with toys at all. He may be more interested in exploring toys by chewing them or rubbing them against his face.



Rebecca is only interested in the way toys taste and feel in her mouth.

Unconventional play

Your child may not play with toys in the way you'd expect. For example, he may line up his trains instead of moving them along a track or bang his blocks instead of building a tower. Unconventional play can usually be explained by your child's sensory preferences – he may like the pattern that his trains form or the sounds of the banging blocks. This kind of play may occur at all stages, but most often at the Own Agenda and Requester stages.

Instead of moving his trucks along the floor, Carl likes to line them up and look at them.



Functional play

Your child can play with toys the “right” way. Placing a peg in a pegboard, shovelling sand into a pail or fitting a puzzle piece into the puzzle board are all examples of appropriate, or “functional” play.

Functional play can begin at the Requester stage when your child performs one action on a toy, such as pushing a lever or taking objects out of a container. Towards the end of the Early Communicator stage, your child may learn how to perform many more actions on a variety of toys, but he may still prefer certain kinds of toys, like puzzles or shape sorters.



Jake can do his puzzles in record-breaking time.

Constructive play

In constructive play, your child uses materials to create something. For example, he builds a tower with blocks or uses paint to make a picture. Constructive play is different from functional play because it involves planning ahead and working towards a goal. A child at the Early Communicator or Partner stage who's very interested in building things may work on making something out of blocks or Lego.

Symbolic or pretend play

In symbolic play, your child pretends to do or be something imaginary. He might drink from an empty teacup or get down on all fours to act like a puppy. This kind of play is linked to language, because both words and pretend actions symbolize or stand for real things. Some children develop pretend play on their own; many others can be taught how to pretend. Pretend play helps your child develop his imagination, understand how others feel, learn to solve problems and practise communicating.

At the Requester stage, your child may perform one pretend action on himself, using real objects or realistic-looking toys. This is called self-pretend play. Your child may pretend to drink from an empty cup or hold a toy telephone to his ear.



Your child may start to pretend on himself.

At the **Early Communicator** stage, your child may perform one pretend action on toys or other people, copying something that he has seen you do. He may pretend to cook with a pot on a toy stove or give his teddy bear a drink from his cup. To play this way, your child needs to use objects that look like the real things.

At the **Partner** stage, your child may act out a short sequence of pretend actions, copying his everyday experiences or scenes he has seen on television. For example, he may feed his bear with a spoon, give it a drink and then put it to bed. Or, like Darren in the picture below, he may cook a pretend soup and then set the table for a pretend dinner. In pretend play, a Partner can use objects that look similar to but not exactly like the things they represent: for example, a big red ball can stand for an apple, or a piece of string can represent spaghetti.

In the final stage of symbolic play, your child makes up stories from his imagination and acts them out, sometimes pretending to be someone else. This type of play is challenging because it relies on talking and the ability to plan and carry out many pretend actions.



At preschool, Darren likes to play in the drama centre. He pretends to stir soup on top of the stove, just as he has seen his mother and father do at home.

Games with rules

Children at the **Early Communicator** and **Partner** stages may start to play games with rules, like Hide-and-Go-Seek, as well as different board games. These games require players to take turns and do or say different things in order for the game to progress. Unlike most play, games with rules cannot be improvised as you go along, but must always be played in a specific way. For this reason, many children with ASD enjoy games with rules. After they have learned how to play the game, they know exactly what to do every time they play.

How Does Your Child Communicate during Play?

Almost no communication

At the **Own Agenda** and **Requester** stages, your child is just learning how to play with toys and how to send messages directly to you. But he has a long way to go before he can do both of those things at the same time. Yet even though your child isn't communicating intentionally, he may do something, like reaching for or pushing your hand away from a toy, that you can interpret as communication.

Through actions and body language, Benjamin lets his father know that it's hard to concentrate on both him and his train at the same time.



Nonverbal communication

At first, your child communicates only to get what he needs. For example, if you are holding a puzzle piece that he wants, he may pull your hand to ask you to give him the piece. Nonverbal requests start at the **Requester** stage and continue into the **Early Communicator** stage.

Verbal communication

Verbal communication during toy play may start when your child is an **Early Communicator** or **Partner**. At first, your child may communicate with a single word to request toys that he needs or to ask you to help him. Then, he may be able to answer simple questions, such as "What is the name of that toy?" Later, he can make comments, ask questions or let you know when he doesn't want to play. Some children communicate verbally all on their own while others need to be taught scripts to use during play.

Choose the Right Toys

The kinds of toys that you offer your child depend on his interests and on what you want him to learn. Hard-to-operate toys, like music boxes and other People Toys (see Chapter 2, pages 71–73), lend themselves quite naturally to interaction and communication, while others, like puzzles, games with rules and computer games, develop different skills and need more adaptations to make the play interactive.

Kinds of Toys

The toys discussed below are useful for children at all stages.

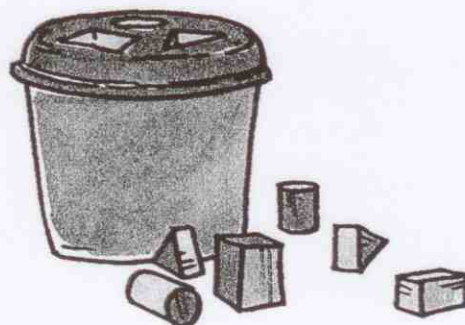
Cause-and-effect toys

The easiest toys for your child to use are cause-and-effect toys. These toys require your child to push a button or pull a lever in order to produce a sound or make a pop-up toy appear. Some examples are See and Say Wheels, a toy that lets your child pull a lever to hear animal or musical sounds; Busy Boxes, toys that have balls to spin or bells to ring; and Jack-in-the-boxes. Lots of things can be used as cause-and-effect toys – flashlights, tape recorders, computers, light switches and even the VCR!



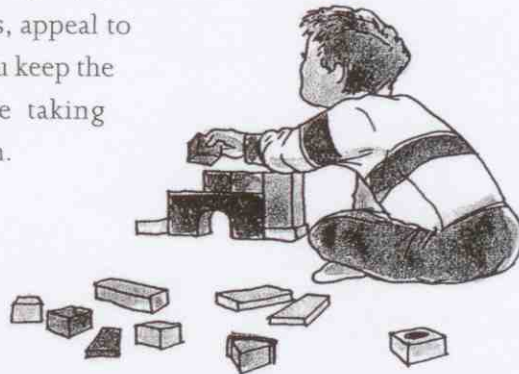
Visual-spatial toys

Visual-spatial toys have a built-in structure that is easy for your child to figure out. These toys, like puzzles, nesting cups, stacking rings, shape-sorters, pegboards and marble works (marbles speed down a ramp), are toys that your child may understand just by looking at them.



Construction toys

Lego, building blocks and connecting toys, like beads for stringing or pop-it beads, appeal to the hands-on-learner. Make sure you keep the containers for children who like taking things out and putting them back in.



Exchange toys

One of the ways that your child first learns to include you in his play with toys is by giving you an object and then taking it back. This is called an exchange. Small hand-held objects, like beanbags, plastic keys, Koosh balls, Nerf balls, hand stress relievers, blown-up balloons or silly putty, make good exchange toys that you and your child can pass back and forth. When your child is ready, you can turn the exchange into a game of catch.



People Toys

Toys that are easy to operate are the best ones to use when teaching your child how to play. However, when your goal is to set the stage for interaction, you need to create a problem that your child can't solve on his own.

People Toys, like wind-ups, music boxes, bubbles, balloons, hand-held air pump toys, pinwheels and spinning tops are lots of fun to watch but hard to work. Your child will have to ask you to help make them go. You can create your own People Toy by putting something that your child likes in a hard-to-open clear container or simply turning the water tap on and off. (See Chapter 2, pages 71–73 for a list of People Toys.)



