



How to help your child interact and play with you – Part 1

The following are only **suggestions** and will not necessarily apply to all children. Determining **if** or **how** to apply these strategies should be based on the child's age, communication skills, cognitive skills, and ability to handle frustration and anxiety. Work closely with your ASD Case Manager and/or other professionals to determine which would be appropriate.

Encouraging Back-and-Forth Social Interaction

1. Help your child become more interested in playing with you by **imitating** their sounds, words and/or actions
2. Make it **easier** for your child to interact with you:
 - **Repeat** a familiar, preferred activity (e.g. a tickle game, favorite song, swing, or bouncing in your lap) two or three times THE SAME WAY (so child can *anticipate* what you're about to do).
 - **Pause & wait** silently and expectantly for child to continue game with a sound, word or action).
 - **Immediately respond** to child by continuing activity, then pause & wait again, etc.

Encouraging Social Play with Toys

The following “indirect interaction” approach can be a very effective strategy to increase your child's **social motivation** and **spontaneous initiation**, which is critical for their overall social and play development.

1. Start by playing *next to* your child in an area where they feel comfortable and are not highly distracted.
2. Get **your own** toys that are similar to your child's and play like your child is playing (i.e. use similar actions, words, sounds, etc.)
3. Resist the urge to talk and instead use **sounds** and big, repetitive **actions** to make your play more interesting and exciting to your child.
4. Resist the urge to immediately play directly with your child – just “get into” playing by yourself. *This can be uncomfortable for many adults, but is a very effective strategy to draw your child's interest and attention to you).*
5. Your child will likely become more & more interested in you. Slowly move closer to your child, but continue playing by yourself without directly staring at or facing them. *This allows your child to feel less anxious, pressured, and more “in control” of the situation, which allows*

them to **choose to move towards you**).

6. Once your child is clearly watching and/or moving towards you, start interacting directly by **briefly** joining and adding to your child's play (e.g. handing them toys, adding to their line of cars or block tower, etc.).
7. Continue by **interacting briefly** and **then pausing** to give your child a chance to initiate again. When you and your child are playing back-and-forth and doing about the same amount when interacting, your child is strengthening their social interaction "muscles."
8. As your play continues, show your child simple play actions (e.g. shaking a pom-pom, feeding a stuffed animal with pretend food or putting a baby to sleep), then pause and wait for your child to respond.
9. **Remember** - avoid doing a lot more than your child in play. This is very hard for most adults. Many children get overwhelmed and move away when adults "take over" and dominate the interaction.

Important Reminders

- Using these strategies will take focused **effort, patience, and persistence**
- Your child's development will be **gradual**, not immediate or rapid!
- Your general goal is to help your child interact with you **a little more often** for **a little bit longer** using these strategies!
- Many adults will have to *resist* the tendency to:
 - **Talk a lot** and/or significantly more than their child
 - Dominate interactions (especially with children who are passive or initiate very little)
 - Not give their child enough time to initiate or respond
 - Constantly direct and/or prompt their child to play "correctly" or "appropriately"
 - Play or interact in ways that are too difficult for their child
 - Play or interact in ways that are not interesting or motivating for their child
 - Become bored, frustrated or discouraged when attempting to play or interact with their child
 - Expect "too much" from their child (e.g. more than they are capable of at this point in their development)
 - Focus on what their child is **not yet doing** rather than recognizing the **small, significant steps of progress** their child is making
- ** To learn more about helping your child interact and play, please see the following handouts:
 - **How to Help your Child Interact and Play with You – Part 2**
 - **Understanding How Adults Influence Children's Communication and Interaction, Part 1 & 2 (Resources)**

Medical Review:
Garrett Watanabe, M.D.

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

Last Updated:
September 2009