

Porchlight

Autism Education Series

Independent Play Skills

Introduction

For children with autism, playing independently can be challenging because they have limited social and communication skills, and often engage in repetitive behaviors that restrict their ability to play creatively and with other children. While **independent play** skills is a broad topic and may require input and planning from your child's therapist, we'll discuss a few things you can do to encourage your child to develop these skills. Children play in many different ways. The first is **solitary play**, the type of play children engage in alone. Examples include playing with their toys, imaginary play or even playing outdoors on their own. The second type of play is **parallel play**. These skills are seen in children who are learning to play beside other children, but without directly engaging with them. An example of this would be a child who is sharing a sand box with another child. The third and fourth types of play are **associative and cooperative play** which involve playing with others and will not be addressed here.

Why are Independent Play Skills Important?

It is important for you to teach your child how to play independently for several reasons. Firstly, play is a way for a child to learn new skills and develop themselves. Children develop their interests, and gross and fine motor skills through play. They also learn how to solve problems for themselves, and how to appropriately interact with others through play. Secondly, children who can play independently develop a sense of confidence in their own abilities and are more independent in other areas of their daily life. Children with autism often times will not engage in independent play until they are taught how to. Therefore, you may need to spend time teaching them how to play with the toys or activities you give them.

How to Teach Independent Play Skills

A great way to begin teaching a child how to play independently is to teach them what to do with their toys. You can begin by picking toys that interest your child, such as a puzzle, or a truck. Show your child how to place a puzzle piece in the right spot, or how to move a truck along an imaginary road. Encourage your child to follow your lead and use prompts when necessary.

You can start with simple games such as bouncing a ball, and then move on to more complex games such as feeding and then bathing a doll. If your child does not enjoy playing with a certain toy, switch to a different toy and see if that is more engaging. Be careful to pick a toy that suits their particular skill and development level. For example, a puzzle with very small pieces may not work for a child younger than 7 years old. You can start by playing for a few minutes at a time and then allowing your child to decide how long they want to play with a particular toy.

Once you are able to leave them to play with toys for a few minutes, you can try other kinds of play, such as cause and effect play, where a child will need to do something for an action to happen. An example of this is a wind-up toy that moves only when the child winds it up. This allows them to learn that their actions can have a predictable and consistent reaction. You can also teach them constructive play, where they can build something unique with blocks, or Lego, or other construction toys. Finally, you can teach them pretend play, where they dress up as a character or pretend to have a tea party with a tea set.

When you are comfortable with a number of different choices for play, you can create some structure around independent play time by creating a busy box and an independent play schedule.

Busy Box

A busy box is a box full of toys or other items that your child likes to play with such as a kaleidoscope, tangrams, sorting toys, a coloring book and pens, putty or Play-Doh, a stuffed animal, construction blocks and more. Five to ten items is a good start. To start out, you might want to use toys where there is a clear end in sight, so once they are done with the activity they can move on to another.

To teach your child how to use a busy box, pick a reinforcer for them; something that they like. You can tell them that if they play with the items in the busy box for 3-5 minutes, they will get access to their reinforcer. Use a timer to time them and let them know that they will hear it go off after 5 minutes. As they begin to play, **offer praise every 30-40 seconds**. If your child tries to engage with you, redirect them back to the activities and remind them that they will hear the timer go off when 5 minutes are over. Once they are used to the busy box, you can gradually increase the time on the timer.

Independent Activity Schedules

Independent activity schedules are visuals or text that act as cues for children to follow certain steps or a routine. These can be used to foster independence with daily routines such as getting dressed, or to give structure to free time. Independent activity schedules can vary in how specific the visuals or the text are. You can create simple schedules with single pictures of what activity to do and in which order, or you can create more complex activity schedules with detailed pictures or text for each step that your child needs to follow.

To set up an independent play schedule:

1. Select activities that your child will like - preferably closed ended activities with a start and a finish.
2. Pick a reinforcer activity for the end so that your child is motivated to complete all the activities.
3. Use pictures or icons with or without words to order the activities, ending with a reinforcer activity that your child really likes.
4. Set up all the activities on the schedule using a busy box, or within reach of your child.

To begin using the independent play schedule:

1. Present the schedule to your child and say something like "Now it's time for your play schedule".
2. If you have set up a busy box, allow your child to begin playing with the toys. If not, then guide your child to the first activity on the schedule.
3. Allow your child to complete the activities with as little prompting as required.
4. Ensure that your child is moving from one activity to the next as per the schedule.
5. Offer your child the reinforcer activity at the end.
6. You can use a timer to signal the end of play time.

By encouraging your child to play independently, you will help them to gain confidence in doing things on their own and you will encourage and reward positive behaviors. Talk to your child's therapist for more information on having your child develop independent play skills.