Activities for Autistic Children

Incorporating activities for autistic children into a child’s daily schedule is essential to an autistic child’s mental and physical development. Autistic children need challenging, yet fun, activities that they can participate in on a daily basis. Should they be expected to participate in all of the activities that other children engage in? Of course not, but there are numerous activities for autistic children to enjoy. Before you expect your autistic child or student to jump right in to the latest activity, consider the following:

- **Participants** - Who else is participating in this activity? Is it the whole class, one or two students, or is this an individual activity? If you expect several students to perform the activity together, choose the group members wisely. Look for children that will be especially helpful to the autistic child. Be sure and monitor all of the participants, and be on the lookout for children who might try to ridicule the child with autism.

- **Activity level** - What type of activity will the child be participating in? Will the child need to have good coordination skills? Will it put him at a continuous disadvantage next to the other children? Does it require skills that he doesn’t have or hasn’t had the opportunity or time to learn?

- **Potential problems** - Are there any potential problems that might occur with the activity? For example, will the noise level be increased? Excessive noise can often be troublesome for children with autism. While the activity might be organized, will the intensity of it be a disturbance for the child, causing him a high level of stress? Is physical contact a necessary factor of the game? If so, this might also present a problem as some autistic people tend to shy away from or become extremely disturbed by prolonged physical contact.

Activities for autistic children should be fun and engaging, but if they become a source of frustration instead, the benefits of the action may be lost.

Selecting Activities for Autistic Children

Consider an autistic child’s capabilities, interests, and aptitude as you search for appropriate activities for him or her to enjoy.

- **Sensory activities** - Games that include the senses are often enjoyed by these children. For example, play the game “I Spy” with your children. Describe the object that you are looking at, and see if the children can find and name that object from your description.

- **Songs and poems** - Children often like the sing-song way in which a poem sounds, and they may also enjoy the repetition of certain songs. Choose several songs and/or poems to teach them, and use these every day. You can also incorporate some physical activities with these songs by jumping, skipping, hopping, etc. to the beat of the words.
• **Sports**-Discovering a child’s love of a certain sport can open another world up to him. In many cases, close physical sports like football are difficult for autistic children to handle, but more individualized sports like golf, baseball, or even fishing may become a favorite hobby.

• **Art**-Autistic children often find their niche in some form of the arts. This may be demonstrated through acting, drawing, painting, sketching, singing, and playing a musical instrument. Encourage this love as often as possible.

Finally, realize that an autistic child may not know exactly what his interests and favorite activities might be, so it is up to you to introduce him to several areas of interest. Once he discovers a new hobby, he probably won’t be shy about letting you know what he wants to do! Encourage him as much as possible, and let him participate with others when possible. This is an excellent way to not only encourage him to work on a particular skill or activity but to also hone his social skills as well.
**Imaginative Play Therapy For Autism**

Filed under [Children Mentally](#)

“The Joker has stolen the world’s biggest diamond, and it’s up to Batman and Robin to get it back. On a video monitor, hands move toy action figures through the paces of the story, as an off-camera voice speaks the dialogue.”

John, age 6, watches the monitor with rapt attention. He is autistic, and this is a technique called “video modeling,” used by educators at the New England Center for Children (NECC) in Southborough, Mass., where John and some 200 other autistic kids attend school.

When the video ends, Jen, his teacher, affectionately ruffles his hair and directs him to a table that holds the same Batman toys seen in the video. He is supposed to play with them in exactly the same way, saying the same lines, as he has just been shown.

Normally developing children play by imagining scenarios and acting them out with toys. Kids with autism do not. They have to be taught how to play this way. The goal is for them to understand the concept well enough to expand on their play, using their own imaginations.

**Learning New Behaviors, Changing Harmful Ones**

Teaching play with video modeling is something new that the NECC is studying. On the staff working with the kids are not only educators, but also researchers, and they report on what happens at the NECC to the scientific community. Video modeling is just one small part of the NECC’s whole approach, called “applied behavioral analysis,” widely regarded as the gold standard in autism treatment.

In the simplest terms, applied behavior analysis offers carrots, with no stick. Children are engaged in learning new behaviors and helped to change disruptive or harmful ones, by constant positive reinforcement. The curriculum at the NECC ranges from the most basic language and social skills to academics and vocational training. “We plug them into that wherever they’re at,” says Rebecca MacDonald, PhD, director of the preschool program, which includes kids aged 3 to 7.

Another new area she is studying is what’s called “joint attention,” an important early step in relating to others. If you were to turn and look at something, a typical child observing you would probably turn to look at it, too. An autistic child would not notice. “It’s one of the hallmarks of autism,” MacDonald tells WebMD. “They tend not to care what you are looking at or thinking.”

To encourage them to care, she will make something interesting or rewarding happen if the child follows her gaze. For example, she’ll activate an electronic toy by remote control if the child looks at it when she does. Improving joint attention behavior won’t
make all other social skills fall easily into place. Like video modeling, it’s just one tool used in the intensive work that the NECC does. Kids who attend the school go for 30 hours a week, all year long.

**Starting Early**
The earlier this kind of work can begin, the better the outcomes tend to be for autistic children. Autism can usually be diagnosed by 18 months of age, but some scientists hope that in the future, a blood test at birth might detect it.

In May 2005, researchers at the University of California, Davis MIND Institute announced that they had found remarkable differences in blood tests of autistic and nonautistic children. The children had different levels of certain proteins in the blood and more of some kinds of immune cells.

“The idea for early detection is not only that you can intervene early, which is beneficial, but there’s the notion that not all children who ultimately have autism are doomed to it at birth,” David Amaral, PhD, research director at the MIND Institute, tells WebMD.

Scientists have speculated that maybe something in the environment makes children who are susceptible to autism develop the disorder. If researchers could identify the trigger, avoiding it might prevent autism.

“In some cases the information might allow full-blown prevention, and in other cases more tailored treatment,” MIND Institute researcher Blythe Corbett, PhD, tells WebMD.

It’s too early, however, to say for sure what the differences seen in the study mean. “We don’t know whether our findings indicate a cause or an effect,” Amaral says.

It may be that the immune system plays a role in some children’s autism, but “there simply is not going to be a single cause,” he says. “In fact, we think of autism not as autism, but as autisms.”

What’s more, the differences may not be specific to autistic children. “You have to show, for example, that it differentiates kids with autism from kids with obsessive-compulsive disorder or attention deficit disorder,” says Eric Hollander, MD, director of the Seaver and New York Autism Center of Excellence at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.

Hollander’s own research has shown that a particular trait in the immune systems of autistic kids relates to the severity of repetitive behaviors, a common autism symptom. This same trait has been linked to Tourette’s syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

**Emerging Treatments**
Recently, Hollander studied the use of Prozac for treating repetitive behavior in children with autism. Those who took low doses of the drug in liquid form showed better
improvement than those who took a placebo. But selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) like Prozac are not stand-alone treatments for autism.

- “The treatment of choice for most individuals is an integrated approach,” Hollander tells WebMD.

At the University of California San Francisco, professor Michael Merzenich, PhD, is working on a computer program to teach language skills to autistic kids through what is called “neural retraining.” It may sound like science fiction, but it’s not all that speculative.

Scientists have come to understand that the brain is not hardwired, but very flexible, or plastic. There are software programs, such as one called Fast ForWord, that can train the brains of kids with impaired language ability to process speech better.

- “We have very strong documentation that this kind of brain-plasticity-based training can have an effect,” Merzenich tells WebMD.

But programs that exist now are too complex for many autistic kids to use. “The ways that these programs have been designed for nonautistic children just don’t apply to most autistic children,” Merzenich says.

Once Merzenich and his team finish building their program, they will have to put it through years of rigorous testing, which he says they hope to begin later in 2005.

Although its methods are state of the art, the New England Center for Children prides itself on only applying treatment that is backed up by solid research.

- “People are faced with a raft of alternative treatments that have no merit,” Vincent Strully Jr., the NECC’s founder and executive director, tells WebMD. He counts special diets, secretin treatment, and mercury detoxification among those.
- “We’re not claiming any cure,” he says, but the center’s approach makes a difference. “It’s advancing the lives of these kids dramatically.”
What Is Music Therapy

Few people understand the significance and importance that music therapy and music therapists contribute to our society. Music therapists help the needy in many ways. To some people, the phrase music therapy holds little significance. While we all recognize the influence that music has on our society it seems much more difficult to associate this influence with anything more than a recreational diversion. In truth, since its modern founding in 1944 at Michigan State University, the study and practice of music therapy has brought about a number of changes in the way we can help individuals with various conditions.

Music Therapy and Personal Wellness

The most widely used and most noticeable application of music therapy is the personal reduction of stress levels. Just as intense, driving music can increase a person’s awareness and anxiety levels, calming, soothing music can reverse it. Music therapists use such music along with other relaxation methods to get troubled individuals past their immediate issues and teach them to better control their anxiety in the future.

Music therapists work with a wide range of people from all social groups and ethnic backgrounds. Many hospitals now commonly utilize the services of music therapists to promote wellness, positive mental attitudes, and healing with the understanding that a happy, stress-free person will often get better more quickly than one that is depressed over his or her medical condition.

Music Therapy and the Mentally Disabled

In increasing frequency, music therapy is being used as a method to aid and educate those challenged by autism and other mental disabilities. Autistic children often have difficulty focusing due to an overloading of their senses. Music therapists will very often create individualized songs, motor activities, and verbal activities to help an autistic child work toward reaching an educational or social goal.

In older individuals suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease, music therapy is used quite often to help patients retrieve lost memories. Playing or singing along with personally significant music can help these individuals to remember memories that have been lost to the disease.