

# TIPS FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROVIDERS

## Simple Concepts to Embed in Everyday Routines



Some of the top researchers in the country offer helpful tips and concepts to help you work with young children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The tips are based on concepts of learning and development that can be worked into everyday routines. Each tip describes a concept, why the concept is important, and a step-by-step description of how to work these simple concepts into everyday routines. The concepts include:

- Engaging Children in Play
- Using Children's Interests in Activities
- Promoting Child Participation with a Shared Agenda
- Using Visual Cues to Make Choices
- Playing Together with Objects: Practicing Joint Attention
- Learning Words During Joint Attention
- Book Sharing
- Uncovering Learning Potential
- Peer-Mediated Support: Teaching Children to Play with Each Other
- Predictable Spaces
- Predictable Routines
- Distracting and Redirecting Children to Engage in Appropriate Behavior

Although these tips were developed to help children with ASD, they can help all children grow and learn. We hope these concepts are useful in supporting all the children in your care.

*Publication compiled by:*

# CONCEPT

## Engaging Children in Play

### WHAT:

Social play with objects involves playing with toys in a way that encourages talking, looking, or engagement between a child and a caretaker and/or a peer. The child engages with the adult or peer and with the object, usually taking turns that build on or keep the activity going. This type of play is usually marked by shared enjoyment between partners and includes smiles, laughs, and continued interest.

### WHY:

Social object play is an important developmental skill that increases social engagement and communication between partners.

### HOW:

Adults can engage children in socially-mediated object play by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Provide developmentally appropriate toys at the child's current play level.

**Step 2:** Follow what the child is looking at to see what interests them.

**Step 3:** Once the child begins to play with the toy, join in the play by imitating what the child is doing.

**Step 4:** Build the play activity by taking a turn with the child and following what the child does. Balance the turns so that neither partner is taking more turns than the other.

**Step 5:** Once the play routine is solid, expand the routine. Bring in other toys or items to extend the activity. Here's an example:

- If the child is building a tall tower with blocks and you are helping to build the tower by taking your turn, encourage the child to knock the blocks down when all the blocks are used. The crashing of the blocks should be fun and motivate the child to repeat the activity (rebuild the tower and crash again).
- Expand the activity by adding a toy figure to the tower that falls down, or add a truck to the game that knocks the blocks down.

**Step 6:** Look to the child's attention, active involvement, and enjoyment of the activity to see if the play routine is motivating. The more motivated the child is, the longer the play routine will last and the greater the opportunities for practicing social and communication skills.

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# CONCEPT

## Using Children's Interests in Activities

### WHAT:

When you are planning activities to do during the day, use the interests of children with autism to guide you. When transitioning to an activity that is not preferred by the child, use favorite interests to help motivate the child during the activity.

### WHY:

Children with autism often have special interests. They are more likely to engage in an activity that includes their special interests. So, it may be easier to help a child engage or transition into an activity if that activity uses their interests.

### HOW:

Adults can use children's special interests in activities by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Make a list of the special interests of the children with autism in your care. They may include:

- toys or objects, such as trains, vacuums, light switches, certain books, or movies
- topics, such as dinosaurs, maps, or the alphabet
- characters, such as Dora the Explorer or Thomas the Tank Engine
- activities, such as bouncing a ball, spinning, or singing
- certain colors, numbers, or songs

**Step 2:** Make a list of the activities during the day that are difficult for the child to do or transition to.

**Step 3:** Think about different ways that you can include the child's interests in activities.

Here are some examples:

- If a child with autism does not like playing with blocks or other manipulatives, tape pictures of their favorite cartoon character to the blocks.
- If a child has trouble doing art projects, create an art project based on their favorite book or song.
- If it is hard for you to get the child to wash their hands, try singing a favorite song only when they are washing their hands or have them wash their hands and a dinosaur (or another favorite toy) at the same time.



Courtesy of The Shield Institute

Using Interests – A teacher took a photo of the child's favorite toy to begin to teach the child with autism how to put together a puzzle.

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Jessica Dykstra, Ph.D., Investigator, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

# CONCEPT

## Promoting Child Participation with a Shared Agenda

### WHAT:

Any everyday activity can be improved by making it fun and motivating, giving the child a clear and predictable role or a “job,” and talking about what the child is looking at or engaged in. This creates what is called a “shared agenda” which helps to build social and communication skills.

### WHY:

Children with autism often do not understand what they are supposed to be doing. Because of that, they miss out on important learning opportunities. By creating a shared agenda, early care and education providers can support more active participation, create opportunities for social play with the child, and make more moments for learning. When given a specific “job,” children are able to (1) pay attention to what’s important, (2) have something meaningful to do, and (3) know exactly what is expected of them in a given situation. This can help a child know what to do in an activity with others, which can lead to sharing enjoyment and interests.

### HOW:

Adults can promote child participation with a shared agenda by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Notice what the child is paying attention to and doing. Talk to the child in simple sentences about what they are doing or looking at. If the child needs help knowing what to do, suggest a simple “job” that the child might be interested in or can do with little help, like knocking down a tower of blocks or putting a napkin in the trash.
- Step 2:** Add small steps to the activity to make it predictable. For example, you can give the child a role in building the tower of blocks and then knocking it down. Offer more roles for the child within activities. Here are some examples:
- looking for hidden puzzle pieces with a friend
  - passing out napkins
  - turning on lights
  - collecting books and putting them away
  - holding a musical instrument and marching in a parade with peers
- Step 3:** If needed, offer extra help for the child to complete their “job.” For example, if the child does not respond the first time to your instruction of throwing a napkin in the trash, you can try:
- getting closer to the child
  - repeating the instruction once
  - pointing to the trash can
  - asking a peer to walk with the child to the trash so they can drop in the napkins together
- The early care and education provider should be very clear about what they expect and make sure the child understands. It is important that the child learn to take on a simple “job” with less and less help over time, so that the child can actively participate with more independence.

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# CONCEPT

## Using Visual Cues to Make Choices

### WHAT:

When it is time for children to move to centers or play areas in the room, offer the child a choice of where to go. If a choice of location is not available, offer a choice within an activity, such as “Do you want the red cup or the blue cup during lunch time?” Using pictures to inform the child of their choices is a good way to help them understand.

### WHY:

Giving choices that you select can help with transition difficulties. Making the choices visual, such as showing the child a photo or an object that represents the areas or activities, helps them to understand their choices. Giving choices instead of directing children can help those who resist transitions. Offering choices can also help children who do not know which activity to choose and tend to wander.

### HOW:

Adults can give children visual cues for making choices by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Take photos of the favorite areas, centers, or activities within the setting. Include different play spaces, like the art area, book area, eating area, and the outside space. You can also choose an item from each space that the child recognizes as a symbol of that space. Here are some examples:
- a favorite book can be a symbol of the book area
  - a paint brush can be a symbol of the art area
  - a train can be a symbol of the train table
  - a sippy cup can be a symbol of the snack area
- Step 2:** Put all of your photos and objects in a specific location so it is easy for you or other staff to find them when it is time to move from activity to activity.
- Step 3:** When it is time for children to transition, pull out two photos or objects that represent two desirable activities or locations. Go to the child and get down to their eye level, so they can see the photos or objects clearly.
- Step 4:** Offer the choices to the child. For example, while holding up the toy train and paint brush, ask, “Kate, do you want trains or art first today?” The child may need help making a choice as they learn what the photos or objects represent.
- Step 5:** If all of the children need to go to the same location, such as the playground, also offer a choice. For example, while holding up a shovel and a piece of chalk, ask, “Sam, do you want sand or chalk first today?”
- Step 6:** Praise the child for making a choice! Give a high-five or say, “Great job making a choice!”



Courtesy of Division TEACCH

Each object represents a favorite toy at different centers – farm table, music center, table top play, art

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# CONCEPT

## Playing Together with Objects: Practicing Joint Attention

### WHAT:

Joint attention is a social exchange, usually between a child, caretaker, and an object that interests the child. A child engages with an adult, usually by pointing to, sharing, or showing an object. Joint attention also can happen when a child is looking back and forth between an object and the caregiver, often sharing enjoyment, such as smiling, laughing, or showing and maintaining interest.

### WHY:

Joint attention is an important skill that predicts language development and social outcomes. Adults can make play more beneficial for children with autism by playing *together*, instead of only playing *next* to each other.

### HOW:

Adults can engage children in joint attention by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Find an object or activity that interests the child.

**Step 2:** Engage the child in a game or activity using this object, making sure that both players (you and the child) are necessary to play the game. Here are some examples:

- rolling a truck back and forth between partners
- bouncing a ball back and forth between partners
- building a tower, taking turns adding blocks
- taking turns flipping the pages in a book

**Step 3:** If the child shows interest and enjoyment, keep practicing the activity. Keep track of all the two-player games the child seems to enjoy and practice them daily.

**Step 4:** If the child does not share enjoyment with you (is only looking at the toy and not at you), hold the toy up to your face and wait for the child to look at you. When the child looks at you, offer praise and return the preferred item to them, continuing the game.

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# CONCEPT

## Learning Words During Joint Attention

### WHAT:

Joint attention is when a child shares an object or activity with a caretaker. A child might point to an interesting object, look back and forth between an object and a caretaker, or show interest by holding up or giving you an object. Adding words during periods of joint attention can help children pair words with objects and activities and help them learn new words.

### WHY:

Placing words during joint attention can help children learn new words and further their language development.

### HOW:

Adults can use words during joint attention by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Follow the child's lead so that you use words about objects that the child is interested in. Following the child's lead means joining the child's activity or playing with an object that interests the child. Paying attention to what the child is looking at or reaching for can give you a good idea of what interests the child.
- Step 2:** Add a playful action to extend the child's activity, like making objects move in new and interesting ways. Make sure you and the child are taking turns with the object. Combine yours and the child's actions with words that match the action, object, or activity.
- Step 3:** Use simple and animated language. Avoid long sentences that narrate what the child is doing. It is better to insert single words and short phrases about the shared object or activity. If the child continues to show interest in the shared object, repeat the same words and phrases. Here is an example:
- If a child likes playing with a toy frog and makes it jump, you can say, "Frog is jumping!" When it is your turn, you can make the frog do a different action, like flying, and say, "Flying frog!"
- Step 4:** If the child does not start using the new word ("frog"), encourage them to use it in a different way. You can ask them to do something with the object ("Make the frog hop!") or ask a question about the object ("Who's hopping?"). Even if the child does not say the new word right away, continue to insert words into joint attention during play and other activities.

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# CONCEPT

## Book Sharing



**WHAT:** Book sharing is not just “reading a book” to children. Rather, by sharing time together while looking at and talking about books, children and adults have fun and children learn.

**WHY:** Children like books. Books have fun pictures. The pictures, and the related words and events, can help children learn new words and cause-effect relationships.

**HOW:** Adults can engage children in book sharing by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Pick a book with pictures that are colorful. Avoid books with abstract pictures and pictures that show many small characters and objects. Those will be too complicated and distracting.
- Step 2:** Talk about the picture on one page, then ask the child to point to the picture you name. Make it fun and interactive. You do not have to read the text on the page. Keep your language simple.
- Step 3:** Give the child a turn to say something and to turn the page.
- Step 4:** After sharing the book, be sure that toys related to the book are available for play. As you and the child play with these toys, repeat the words you used when you shared the book. This will help the child learn that the words apply to both pictures and objects.

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# CONCEPT

# Uncovering Learning Potential

## WHAT:

Children with autism are capable of learning. They often need more support from their providers than other children do. To promote learning, you can get the children's attention, provide clear instructions, persist in your request, and help them respond appropriately.

## WHY:

Children with autism miss out on hundreds of learning opportunities every day because they are not paying attention to what others pay attention to. Missed learning opportunities can hold them back in their learning. Over time, lack of progress may lower adult expectations. This can be prevented.

## HOW:

Adults can help children reach their learning potential by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Expect that children with autism can learn.

**Step 2:** Give clear instructions. Here are a few tips:

- Get close to them and at their eye level to get their attention.
- Tell them and show them the instructions. Using pictures or demonstrating can help.
- Use simple and clear language.

Always be sure the child understands what is expected. If your instructions are clear, the activity will result in a more positive experience.

**Step 3:** Help them complete the task after you have made sure they understand your instructions. Provide as much help as needed for the child to participate, but make sure they make an effort, as well. Do not just move them through the motions.

**Step 4:** Give many opportunities for practice throughout the day, reducing your help as the child learns the routine. Your goal is for the child to participate with less and less help over time.

**Step 5:** Engage them throughout the day in what you and others are doing. Letting children with autism occupy themselves or wander for long periods, rather than engaging in social learning with adults and other children, deprives them of needed learning opportunities and can slow their progress.

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# CONCEPT

## Peer-Mediated Support: Teaching Children to Play with Each Other



**WHAT:** Peer-mediated support means teaching children specific social skills to help them play with friends who have social difficulties, including children with autism.

**WHY:** Autism affects social development. For this reason, many children with autism have fewer friends than other children. Research tells us that early social skills and friendships predict positive social and academic outcomes for all children. Teaching children how to initiate play with their peers with autism encourages friendships and allows children to bond by socializing.

**HOW:** Adults can help children with peer-mediated support by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Teach all children basic social skills during large group times, like circle time. Some skills may include:

- getting a peer's attention, such as tapping a friend's arm or saying the child's name
- sharing by giving an object to a classmate, such as a toy or snack
- sharing by asking for an object
- giving compliments
- giving a play instruction

After teaching these skills, have children practice and show you the skills.

**Step 2:** Encourage children to use these skills with each other during daily activities, including free play, outdoor play, meal time, and transitions.

**Step 3:** If a child with autism is playing alone for a period of time, ask a peer to practice one of the social skills they have learned, such as sharing or asking the child to play.

**Step 4:** Praise children every time you find them practicing their social skills with peers. This will call positive attention to the child and the behavior and will motivate other children to practice their social skills too.

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# CONCEPT

## Predictable Spaces

### WHAT:

Predictable spaces are spaces in your setting that are used for the same purpose on a regular basis. For example, you may have an area for snack time and another area for circle time. Predictable spaces give children information, like “what am I doing?” and “where am I doing it?”

### WHY:

Most children like predictability. This is especially true for children with autism. Predictable spaces provide consistency in the child’s environment and give cues about what the child is supposed to be doing.

### HOW:

Adults can arrange predictable spaces by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Separate the caretaking environment with furniture to create clear boundaries where the same activities happen from day to day. Here are some examples:

- block area
- dramatic play area
- reading area
- eating area
- art area

**Step 2:** For multi-use areas, such as table tops which could be used for art, lunch or other activities, use visual cues to tell the child what to expect. Here are some visual cues for different activities at the same table:

- A visual cue for art could be placing paint cans on the table.
- A visual cue for lunch could be a plastic table cloth, placemats, or simply placing lunch boxes on the table before inviting the children to come to lunch.



Courtesy of The Grove School of Cary

Predictable Spaces are clearly divided: dramatic play, block area/circle time space, math/sensory, table top construction

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# CONCEPT

## Predictable Routines

**WHAT:** Predictable routines answer questions for children, such as “what am I doing?” “where am I doing it?” “how long will I do it for?” and “what will I do next?”

**WHY:** Young children with autism like predictability. They often need to know what is expected of them and what they can expect throughout the day. Predictable routines provide this information clearly and consistently.

**HOW:** Adults can develop predictable routines by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Make a list of activities that occur in the program on most days, for example, toileting or diaper changes, lunch, snack, free play, outdoor play, and circle time.
- Step 2:** Sequence these activities so that they happen in the same order most days. There may be small changes from day to day. For example, different materials may be used for art, or there may be different visitors each Wednesday, but most activities should occur in the same sequence.
- Step 3:** Warn children when there will be a transition from activity to activity. Here are a few tips you can try:
  - Use a visual or ringing timer.
  - Say, “Two more minutes, and we will clean up.”
  - Use a transition song, such as a clean-up song.
- Step 4:** Alert new staff to the importance of staying consistent with routines.



Courtesy of The Grove School of Cary

Predictable Routines: A daily schedule may be broken down into smaller predictable routines.

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# CONCEPT

## Distracting and Redirecting Children to Engage in Appropriate Behavior



**WHAT:** Distract and redirect a child from one activity to another or away from challenging behaviors.

**WHY:** Sometimes distraction or redirection is all that is needed to change a child's challenging behavior and make them forget about whatever was causing the behavior. When children are upset, you can show them a toy, lead them to another activity, or choose a new playmate to help focus attention away from undesirable behavior. These strategies can lead to a "reset" in behavior, for the better. This works best when the child really likes the distraction and redirection object or activity.

**HOW:** Adults can help redirect children to more appropriate behaviors by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Be aware of settings (time of day or activity) where children are more likely to show challenging behaviors. For example, a child may engage in more challenging behaviors during certain group activities, like snack or circle time. A child also may show more challenging behaviors at certain times of the day, such as in the morning just after arrival, or in the afternoon before going home. During these times, stay close to the child so that you can step in immediately, if needed.
- Step 2:** Make a list of the child's favorite activities and objects. Have pictures of these objects or activities or the actual objects or activities together in one place.
- Step 3:** During each activity or interaction, state clear expectations, such as, "Lilly, we use nice hands."
- Step 4:** If distraction or redirection is needed, show the desired object or activity or its picture.
- Step 5:** Verbally guide the child toward the new object or activity. "Lilly, look! Let's give your favorite doll a bath!" If needed, hold the child's hand as you transition to the new activity.
- Step 6:** Praise the child for transitioning and support them in playing with the new object or activity.

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