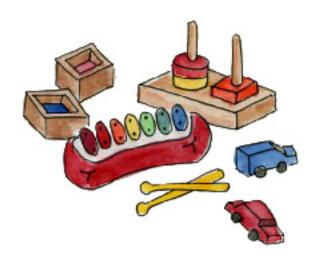


Parent Workbook

Our Special Playtime: Finding ways to improve play time with my young child with autism

Michael Siller

Focused Playtime Intervention



Michael Siller

illustrations by Alex Rozga

special thanks to

Amanda Bundy & Ted Hutman

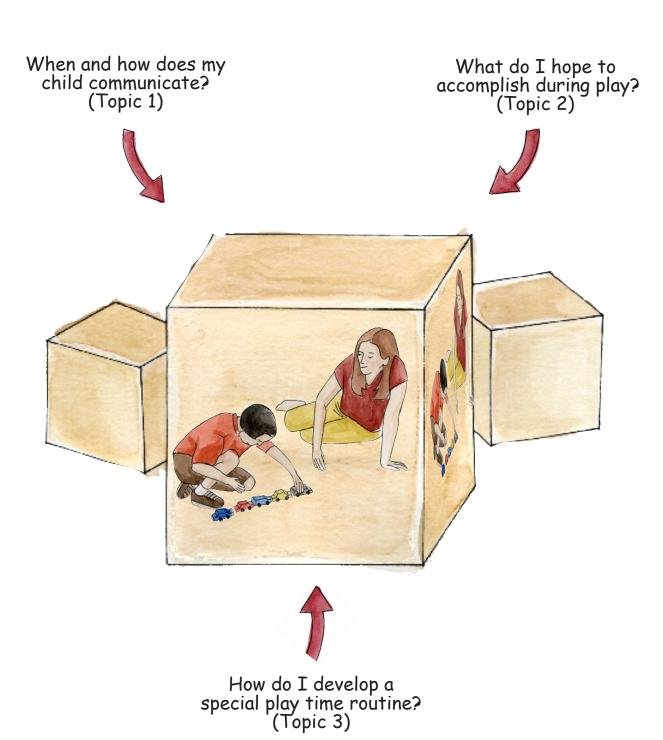
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Before you bring out the toys...





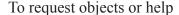
WHEN AND HOW DOES MY CHILD COMMUNICATE?

Children always communicate for a reason. In young children these reasons are plain and simple and usually involve one of the following.



To connect with another person emotionally







To share their excitement about an object or event

For a long time, it was believed that children with autism are simply not interested in other people. We now know that this is not the case. Children with autism communicate with their parents in some situations. Other situations, however, are more difficult. For example, many children with autism enjoy playing "people games" with their parents. Some children with autism also develop simple strategies to request objects or help.



Even though children with autism communicate in some situations, they usually find it difficult to include their parents when playing with a toy. Children with autism rarely:



- approach their parents to show them the toy they like best
- interrupt their activity to see if mom enjoys the toy as much as they do

To connect with another person emotionally



Bobby loves playing the 'tickle game' with his mom. When they play, Bobby and his mom get very excited – he likes looking at his mom's face and sometimes touches her arm asking her to tickle his belly one more time. Besides playing the 'tickle game', Bobby also likes to play chase, peek-a-boo, and sometimes rolling a ball back and forth. His mom calls these games *people games*.



Does my child like to play people games?

To request objects or help



Miguel loves the squeaky noise that you can make with a balloon. He hands the balloon to Brent to let him know that he wants to hear the noise one more time. Actually, Brent is very good at figuring out what Miguel wants. Sometimes, Miguel just needs to look at Brent or reach for something that is up on the shelf to let him know what he wants.



Does my child let me know when s/he needs help with something?

To share their excitement about an object or evenx



Miguel is really excited about the yellow triangle and wants his mom to be excited as well. To make sure she can see the triangle really well, he holds it right in front of her face. Sometimes, when he is reading a book he uses his pointing-finger to show mom what he is looking at. And when he is playing blocks, every now and then he looks at his mom's face to see if she likes the tower he is working on.



When my child likes a toy, does s/he try to share her/his excitement with me?



When I act excited about a toy, does my child try to find out what I am excited about?

2

WHAT DO I HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH DURING PLAY?

When young children play with their parents they have many opportunities for learning: children may learn how to pay attention to toys, how to use the toys properly, how to share their excitement about the toys with other people, how to control their own behavior and emotions, etc. It is no wonder that parents have a lot of ideas and goals when they sit down to play.



Children with autism need support in many different areas – EVERYTHING SEEMS IMPORTANT! So it is only natural that their parents often juggle many different goals at once. For example, a mother may prompt her son to request a toy, teach him how to use it, encourage him to include her into the game, and at the same time prevent him from wandering out of the room. It is no surprise that play seems overwhelming to many parents of children with autism.



It is important that you set priorities. Juggling too many goals at once easily becomes overwhelming, both for you and your child.

It is important that you and your child find a shared activity before you start to teach him/her something new.

Here are some things you might hope to accomplish when you sit down to play:



Prompting my child to make choices and request objects or help





Connecting with my child emotionally





Controlling my child's challenging behaviors





As long as my child is enjoying himself I try to stay out of his or her way





Making sure that my child and I find a toy that we can both be excited about





Teaching my child how to use the toys properly





Prompting my child to use spoken words





Is there anything else you hope to accomplish?

3

HOW DO I DEVELOP A SPECIAL PLAY TIME ROUTINE?

For most children, the success of play interactions varies from day to day, and moment to moment. This is especially true for children with autism. Sometimes, when the conditions are right and a child is having a good moment, play can be successful and gratifying. At other times, play can be tough and you as the parent will have to work hard to keep your child engaged.



I know that play is successful when my child...



I know that my child is struggling when s/he...

How can I help my child to succeed during play?

A play session can succeed or fail for a variety of different reasons. Some of these reasons have to do with events that happen before you and your child even sit down. For example, your child may be tired; he may be unfamiliar with the play situation; the play room may contain objects or people that distract your child's attention; or your child may be preoccupied with challenging or dangerous behaviors.





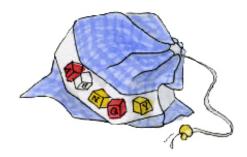
A *special play time* routine allows you to:

- plan ahead
- learn from previous mistakes
- anticipate your child's behaviors
- develop routines that help your child to be at his/her best behavior

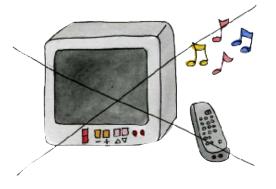
A *special play time* routine also helps your child to:

- become familiar with the play situation
- learn which behaviors are expected
- get to know the toys
- learn that playing with other people is fun

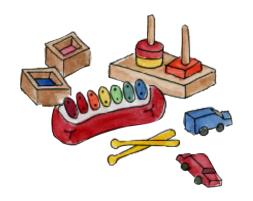
To develop a play time routine that is truly special, it may help to consider the following rules:



A *special play time* should have a ritual for when and how it starts.



A *special play time* benefits from a familiar location with few distractions. Remember, you and the toys need to be the most interesting parts of the room.



A *special play time* benefits from a familiar set of toys. Also, choose toys that encourage your child to play with you rather than by himself.



A *special play time* benefits from a play environment that does not bring about challenging or dangerous behaviors



A *special play time* should end on a happy note whenever possible.

Date	



	How did the <i>special play time</i> start?
2. C	Overall, was your child in a good mood?
3. V	Vas there anything that distracted your child?
4. V	Which toys did you play with? Were there activities that did not involve toys
5 Г	Did your child do anything dangerous or challenging?
J. L	
6 Г	Did the <i>special play time</i> end on a happy note?
0. L	on a nappy note:



2. Overall, was your child in a good mod 3. Was there anything that distracted you 4. Which toys did you play with? Were to 5. Did your child do anything dangerous	r child?
4. Which toys did you play with? Were t	
4. Which toys did you play with? Were t	
5. Did your child do anything dangerous	
	or challenging?
6. Did the <i>special play time</i> end on a hap	py note?
6. Did the <i>special play time</i> end on a hap	py note?

4

HOW TO TACKLE PLAY ONE STEP AT A TIME?

Being able to include other people when playing with a toy is an important milestone of early childhood. For many children with autism, it is also a difficult one (see Topic 1). During this intervention, we will help your child to move towards this milestone by breaking it down into small steps.



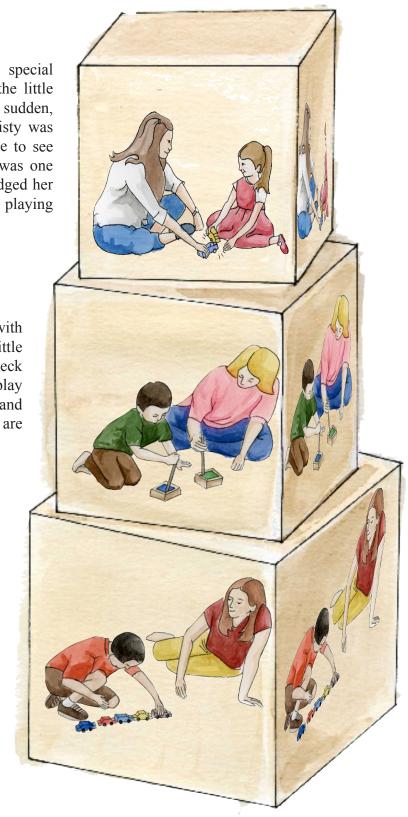
Sometimes, Sean and his mom have a hard time finding a toy that they both like playing with. At times, Sean gets stuck on a toy and his mom wants to move on to something else. At other times, Sean wants to play on his own and doesn't let his mom join him. This is too bad because little communication happens when they are both playing with different toys.

Building play time from the bottom up

Christy and her mom are sharing a special moment. They started out by driving the little cars on the floor – and then, all the sudden, mom's car crashed into Christy's. Christy was surprised and looked at her mom's face to see whether she shared her surprise. This was one of the first times that Christy acknowledged her mom's involvement when they were playing with the cars.

Bryan likes to stir inside the block with the mallet. At first, Bryan's mom is a little baffled but then she thinks "What the heck – maybe this is a game that we can play together". So she decides to join Bryan and -- believe it or not -- for a moment they are engaged in a shared activity.

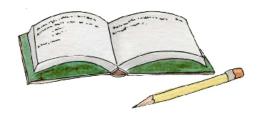
Eric and his mom both like to play with the cars. Things are still difficult though. Eric is making this long line of cars and his mom doesn't quite know how to get into the game. Earlier she showed him how the little school bus could drive around and pick up the children – but Eric didn't respond.



Let's have a closer look at today's play interaction. Were you and your child able to find toys that you both liked to play with?

	1. Which was the first toy that you and your child played with?
1st	
toy	2. How long did you and your child play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4. How did you use the toy?
	1. Which was the second toy that you and your child played with?
2nd	
toy	2. How long did you and your child play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4 11 11 1 4 4 9
	4. How did you use the toy?
	1. Which was the third toy that you and your child played with?
3rd	
toy	2. How long did you and your child play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4. How did you use the toy?

Date			



	1. Which was the first toy that you and your child played with?
1st	
toy	2. How long did you play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4. How did you use the toy?
	1. Which was the second toy that you and your child played with?
2nd	
toy	2. How long did you play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4. How did you use the toy?

Date		



	1. Which was the first toy that you and your child played with?
1st	
toy	2. How long did you play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4. How did you use the toy?
	1. Which was the second toy that you and your child played with?
2nd	
toy	2. How long did you play with this toy?
	3. How did your child use the toy?
	4. How did you use the toy?

The toys are out -- now what?

How do I make play more balanced between me and my child?

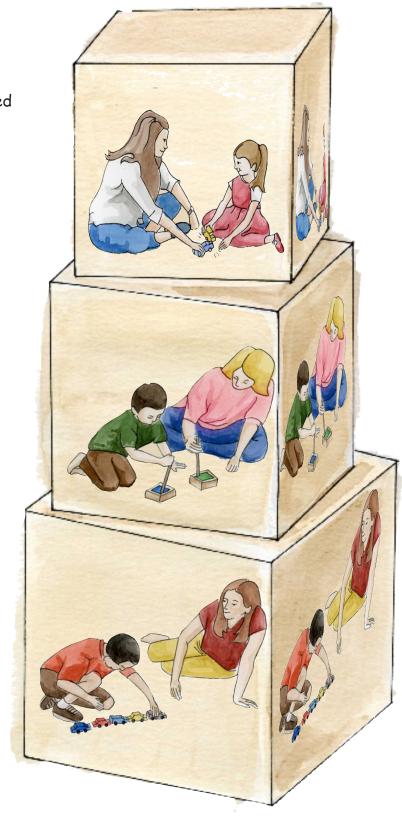
(Topic 8)

How do I speak to my child during play?

(Topic 7)

Who decides the 'correct' way of using the toys?
(Topic 6)

Who gets to pick the toys?
(Topic 5)



5

WHO GETS TO PICK THE TOYS?

Working together to choose the toys is an important part of play. Unfortunately, very often, this is easier said than done.



Today Paul is very excited about playing. He went straight for the stacking toy and now he is trying really hard to figure out how to put the pieces on.



Eric has been playing with the cars for a while now. In fact, he plays with the cars a lot. He likes to line them up, look at them, and line them up again.

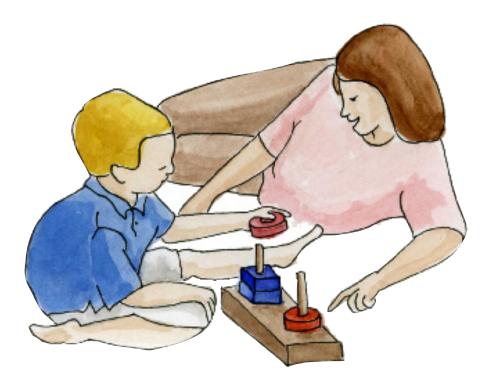


Jennifer seems hyper today. She jumps from one toy to the next and never really seems focused.



Today Anna is not interested in any of the toys. To tell you the truth, she doesn't even want to stay in the play room.

What if my child is using the toys correctly,



Moments when Paul uses a toy appropriately are rare. But whenever these moments happen, his mom doesn't have to think twice: She just wants to join him and make it last as long as possible.



What if my child is using the toys correctly?

What if my child is playing repetitively,



Today, Paul had the idea of sticking blocks in the tubes of the xylophone. "What a strange idea for a five year old" thinks his mom – but then she decides to go with it and join her son anyway.



Johnny has been playing with the stacking toy for a while now – and he doesn't really do much beside putting the sticks in and taking them out again. His mom is out of ideas and wants to direct Johnny to a new toy.



What if I join my child's repetitive play?

What if I try to direct my child to a new toy?

What if my child is jumping from one toy to the netxo



Today Jennifer is in a strange mood. It feels as if she is playing with all the toys at once — without really focusing on any of them. Jennifer's mom doesn't quite know what to make of this behavior. Sometimes, Jennifer gets this way when she is tired. At other times it feels like she is just overwhelmed — by the many different toys in the room, her mom's attempts to initiate play, and her own inability to focus.



What if my child is jumping from one toy to the next?

What if my child is not interested in the toys,



During toy play children have to pay attention to the toy and their mother at the same time. Elena's mother knows that this is difficult for her daughter and starts out by initiating a "people game". She looks at Elena, tickles her, and waits for her to take a turn. Once Elena participates with enjoyment, her mom starts to incorporate objects into the game.



What if my child is not interested in the toys?



1st toy	Which toy did you play with first?
	If your child picked the toy, how did s/he use the toy?
2nd toy	Which toy did you play with first? If you picked the toy, what was your child doing before you brought it out? If your child picked the toy, how did s/he use the toy?
	If your child picked the toy, now did s/lie use the toy!



1st toy	Which toy did you play with first?
	If your child picked the toy, how did s/he use the toy?
2nd toy	Which toy did you play with first?
	If your child picked the toy, how did s/he use the toy?



1st toy	Which toy did you play with first?
	If your child picked the toy, how did s/he use the toy?
2nd toy	Which toy did you play with first?



1st toy	Which toy did you play with first?
2nd toy	Which toy did you play with first?

6

WHO DECIDES THE 'CORRECT' WAY OF USING THE TOYS?

Once you have found an interesting toy to play with, you and your child face a number of new challenges:





Christy has very specific ideas on how to play with the stacker toy. She likes to stick the pieces on her finger and to spin them around, and around, and around. Christy gets easily irritated when her mom tries to show her a different way of playing with the toy. She may ignore her mother or turn her back towards her, start to undo her mother's actions, or lose interest in the toy altogether.





To establish a shared activity, it is important that you join your child's way of playing before you attempt to introduce change.

When you join your child, pause every now and then to observe.



How does your child use the toys? Are you and your child playing the same game?



How would you describe your child's pace? Are the two of you in sync?

Let's have a closer look at today's play interaction. Which toys did your child play with? How did s/he use them? How would you describe your child's pace?

Date	

Which toys did you play with? How did s/he use them? How would you describe your child's pace?
1st toy:
2nd toy:
3rd toy:

Date	

Which toys did you play with? How did s/he use them? How would you describe your child's pace?
1st toy:
2nd toy:
3rd toy:

Date	
	A

Which toys did you play with? How did s/he use them? How would you describe your child's pace?
1st toy:
2nd toy:
3rd toy:

Date	
	3

Which toys did you play with? How did s/he use them? How would you describe your child's pace?
1st toy:
2nd torr
2nd toy:
3rd toy:



HOW DO I SPEAK TO MY CHILD DURING PLAY?

As long as children speak little themselves, it is difficult to know exactly how much language they are able to understand. Even if a child is able to respond to a command such as "It's time to take a bath now", it is not clear whether s/he really understands the words. So, how do we talk to a child who might understand very little language?





Even if your child doesn't understand your words, talking to him/her during play will establish a friendly atmosphere and make you and your child feel connected to each other.





Play provides excellent opportunities to learn about language. To make this learning as easy as possible, parents can help their children by simplifying their language.



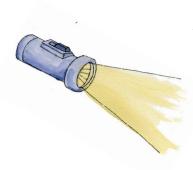
Using simple language comes naturally to parents of young infants. However, when speaking to a five year-old with language delay, many adults have to make a conscious effort to continue to use simple language. So let's think about it, what does it mean to use simple language?



Use language that sounds friendly, warm, and exciting – after all, communication should be fun.



Keep the balance – try not to talk too much, but don't be too quiet either.



Use short sentences, and try to highlight important words.



Use language to describe something your child is looking at.

How did I use language during today's interaction?

Making a suggestion or telling my child what to do next	
Asking my child a question	
Telling my child s/he did something wrong	
Describing something that my child is doing or looking at	
Describing something that I am doing myself	
Praising my child or saying something nice	
Using fun words	

Date	
	3

During this week's *special play time* we would like you to do a little experiment. Play like you normally would, but try to be conscious of the language you use. As much as possible, try to describe your child's actions. On the other hand, stay away from suggestions and demands.

Did you find it difficult to stay involved without making suggestions or demands? What kinds of suggestions did you make?
Was it difficult to find something that you could describe? What did you describe?

Data	
Date	

Did you find it difficult to stay involved without making suggestions or demands? What kinds of suggestions did you make?
Was it difficult to find something that you could describe? What did you describe?

8

HOW DO I MAKE PLAY MORE BALANCED BETWEEN ME AND MY CHILD?

During the last few weeks we talked a lot about:

- being responsive to your child's attention to and interest in toys;
- being responsive to the way your child likes to play with the toys;
- adjusting your language to your child's level, etc.

Without any doubt, being responsive to a young child with autism is difficult and takes a lot of practice. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort. By being responsive you can help your child to succeed during play. In turn, play may become a more enjoyable experience for both of you.





Sharing enjoyable interactions is precious. Now you can finally teach your child new behaviors. Now it is time to encourage your child to:

- also be responsive to you
- include you when s/he is playing with a toy

During today's play time, how did your child include you when s/he was playing with a toy?



Was there a moment when your child observed what you were doing?



Was there a moment when your child joined you while you were playing with a toy?



Were you able to get your child interested in a new toy?



Did your child try to imitate something you did?



When your child was playing with a toy, did s/he ever make eye-contact with you?



Did your child point to or show you something s/he liked?

Every parent uses different strategies to get his/her child to respond. Here are just a few ideas that might be helpful:

Elaborate with care



Earlier, Paul and his mom came up with an activity they enjoy doing together – they found out that some of the colored blocks fit neatly into the metal tubes of the xylophone. Now, Paul's mom wants to add something new to the game – but what? Obviously, she could bring out the mallets and show Paul how to play a little tune, but she is worried that this might be a turn-off for Paul. On the other hand, maybe she could show Paul that you can also use the mallets to push the blocks all the way through the metal tube. Maybe Paul would get a kick out of that.



Showing your child a new way of playing with a toy is a good idea as long as he or she is able to follow along. Remember, your child will be more responsive to small changes than to big ones.



Capitalize on unexpected events



Oh no, what is happening? The shapes are falling off the stick. With every shape that drops on the floor, Elena's mom pretends to get more and more excited – her eyebrows rise and her eyes widen. Elena likes to look at her mom when she makes one of her funny faces.



If you want your child to share his/her excitement about something that happened, exciting things need to happen. It is fun to make a big deal about small things.



Imitate your child



Christy discovered a new way of playing with the 'stacker toy' – she sticks the shapes on her finger and keeps spinning them around, and around, and around. Even though she seems very focused on her game, she notices when her mom starts imitating her.



Children with autism often seem to get lost in their activities. If you want them to look up at you, you need to do something to attract their attention. A powerful strategy to attract your child's attention is to imitate his/her actions.



Create openings so your child can join you



Johnny has been watching his mom for a while now – he watched her taking out the blocks, and he watched her starting to build. All along, his mom felt like she was putting on a TV show for her son. But, as the tower got higher and higher, and almost tipped over several times, the temptation was too much for him – he just had to join his mom and knock the tower over.



Sometimes, children with autism are rather passive. They watch what other people are doing but find it difficult to join into their game. It is important that you create opportunities that allow your child to join in.

- Create enough suspense to draw your child into the game.
- Every now and then, back away from the toy.
- Bring out an identical toy.
- Start an activity that your child likes, (e.g. lining up the cars) but stop before the task is completed.

Play pointing and showing games



Olivia rarely uses her pointing finger to show her mom something she likes. In turn, Olivia's mom came up with a little pointing game to encourage her daughter to do so. Today they use the animal dominos to play this game. Every time Olivia puts a domino piece down, her mom points to it and tells her what the animal is called.



Pointing games can be played with many different toys beside dominos: books, shape sorters, pop-up-pals, magnet boards etc. The most important rule is to point at objects that your child is already looking at. Similar games can be played to model and practice the showing gesture.

To begin with, offer only your child's favorite toys



When Brandi is playing with a toy she likes, it is really difficult to get her interested in something new. Very often, she just ignores her mom when she is offering her a new toy. But not today – today, Brandi's mom chose to bring out the bells because her daughter liked them in the past.



It is not unusual for a child with autism to ignore another person who offers them a new toy to play with. You can help your child to be more responsive if the toy you are offering is one of the child's favorites.

Date	
	3

Was there a moment when your child observed what you were doing?	
Was there a moment when your child joined you while you were playing with a toy?	
In which situation were you able to get your child interested in a new toy?	
Did your child try to imitate something you did?	
When your child was playing with a toy, did s/he ever make eye-contact with you?	
Did your child point to or show you something s/he liked?	

Date	
	3

Was there a moment when your child observed what you were doing?	
Was there a moment when your child joined you while you were playing with a toy?	
In which situation were you able to get your child interested in a new toy?	
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Did your child point to or show you something s/he liked?	

Date	
	5

Was there a moment when your child observed what you were doing?	
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Did your child try to imitate something you did?	
When your child was playing with a toy, did s/he ever make eye-contact with you?	
Did your child point to or show you something s/he liked?	

Date	

Was there a moment when your child observed what you were doing? Was there a moment when your child joined you while you were playing with a toy?	
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