



A stack of colorful blocks with letters

Description automatically generated **AUTISM AND PLAY**

**Introduction**

The way that children with autism play is often called unusual because it’s different to what you see in typically developing children – there’s

less role playing, they can become obsessed with a particular type of toy or just one part of it, and often play with objects that aren’t traditionally considered to be toys. But is that a problem? Spinning the propeller on a toy helicopter over and over might seem boring and purposeless to you, but for some children it’s really exciting.

## **So where do they need help?**

The goal for helping children with autism in their play isn’t necessarily to change the things they play with or teach them to play in the same way that their peers do, but to help them use the way they play and the things they find engaging to progress through the developmental stages to develop other more complex skills.

**How can you help children with autism develop their play?**

**Join in -** Let the child know that what they're doing is interesting to you. Get down on the floor and make your own line of cars, talk to them about what they’re doing at an appropriate level of language.

**Forget what you know about toys -** Be accepting of the things that they find engaging. There’s no point in trying to encourage joint attention and social interaction without showing respect for the things that they choose to play with. How can they feel safe enough to explore in a space where the things they find interesting are wrong?

**Widen *their* horizons -** Instead of trying to replace the objects they want to play with, show them new ways to play with those things. Show them what the correct function of the object is, and then expand on that. If they enjoy sorting, provide lots of things that they can group and show them different ways to do that (by size, colour, shape). Make a picture book of all the different things that they can make from play dough or blocks, help them with ideas that build on what they've already discovered. Give them as much support as they need to risk moving out of their comfort zone.

Children with autism can and do play, and doing so in a way that's different to other children or uses unusual objects doesn't automatically make it dysfunctional. Just like all children, they need support and encouragement to progress and get better at playing so they can develop more complex skills. And as is the case with other types of learning, this help might need to be provided in a comprehensive and structured way.