



THE BIG FOUR: PLAY & LEISURE SKILLS

A PARENT RESOURCE TOOL

About this Toolkit:

Strong play skills give individuals the ability to joyfully engage in activities alone and with others. As identified by research, play & leisure skills are one of the four essential skill areas that are critical for individuals with ASD to learn (Ala-Rosales et al., 2018). The purpose of this toolkit is to help you explore your child's current play & leisure skills and help you identify areas to further develop these skills.

Included in this resource:

- Definition and examples of play & leisure skills and why they are important.
- Questions to consider as you prioritize how to help your child develop play skills.
- Considerations for when and how to teach play skills.
- A sample of a completed Play & Leisure Skills Goal Form with examples of teaching play skills.
- A blank Play & Leisure Skills Goal Form Template for you to personalize and organize the goals for your child.

The content included is general information and is not specific medical or behavioral advice. The information provided may not work for every child with autism or their family. We recommend working closely with your child's doctor(s), therapist(s), and/or educator to discuss how the ideas shared may be individualized to meet your child's needs. If you have an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

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INTRODUCTION

Each of the Big Four Toolkits provided on our website, okautism.org, focus on one of the four skill areas identified by Ala'i-Rosales and colleagues (2018) as skills that individuals must master in order to prevent challenging behavior and have more opportunities to successfully participate in their community. As you make goals in each of these four areas, you may start to see how they are connected and tie together. For example, having coping skills, such as tolerating waiting for a turn or losing a game, can influence play and leisure skills. Additionally, play routines provide a lot of practice for expanding communication. Flow back and forth between each of these Big Four skills to help you further develop your Master Plan and pinpoint skill areas you want to prioritize.

While this toolkit primarily gives tips and provides examples of how to improve play and leisure skills, you may begin to see how these skills can influence or be influenced by the other areas of the Big Four. As you read through this toolkit there will be opportunities to think through and answer similar questions to help guide you as you identify and determine what play skills to help your child develop. Developing additional skills in coping, communication and/or appropriately gaining attention can also assist your child in experiencing more success as they build communication skills.

By continuing to build and expand on your child's skills in these four areas, you increase their ability to effectively navigate their learning environments in a way that can contribute to their overall quality of life over time, as well as prevent future problem behavior.

Article referenced: Ala'i-Rosales, S., Cihon, J. H., Currier, T., Ferguson, J. L., Leaf, J. B., Leaf, R., McEachin, J., & Weinkauff, S. M. (2018). The Big Four: Functional Assessment Research Informs Preventative Behavior Analysis. *Behavior analysis in practice*, 12(1), 222–234.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-018-00291-9>

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

For individuals with autism, it is common to have limited social skills. Social skills and play skills can improve when they are intentionally targeted. These skills are important because they give the individual a sense of belonging and are steps to gaining friendships. Being able to joyfully engage in activities directly impact our quality of life. When we do not develop play skills, we are limited in how, when, and at what level we can be included or participate, and we can potentially end up losing opportunities to learn from our peers and have a sense of belonging in our community. Additionally, expanding on a child's play skills can help develop more potential reinforcers.

WHAT DOES PLAY LOOK LIKE?

Play time should be a time full of rich learning opportunities; however, play in children with autism can look differently and sometimes becomes a challenge. For example, a child on the spectrum may not have the skills to initiate play with siblings or peers, or they don't know how to engage with others yet. Play can also be challenging for a child on the spectrum because of underdeveloped imitation skills.

Play is a time in childhood where children learn lifelong skills such as how to engage with others and how to safely occupy their time. Play also provides daily opportunities to expand a child's communication skills. For example, a child learning how to request for specific toys or directing adults and peers on how they want to play. For children on the spectrum, play can look differently and may not come as naturally. Therefore, play skills must be taught intentionally. Ala-i Rosales and colleagues define this skill area as, "Joyfully engaging in activities alone and with others in ways that increase in number, duration, and complexity and do not cause harm to self or others."

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Prioritize Teaching These Skills

Now that you know why play skills are important, let's take some time to think about your child and their current skill level within this skill area.

ASSESS YOUR CHILD'S CURRENT SKILL LEVEL

When you think about your child's current play skills what comes to mind? How do you see yourself expanding on the skills they already have? As you think about this, consider answering the following questions:

- How do I know when my child is enjoying themselves in play? What activities bring them joy?
- How often does my child continue to play when others enter their play area?
- How could my child increase their engagement with others? Does my child trade or share toys with others? What does my child's play look like one-on-one with adults, peers, and in social groups?
- How long does my child engage in play activities? How could my child's play increase in duration or complexity?
- How could my child increase their play skills around independent play?
- What does it look like when my child loses a game or has to play by someone else's rules?

As you answered the above questions, you may have started to see a pattern. Some specific areas of play may be sticking out as areas you want to write targeted goals around. As you continue to focus on goals you wish to work on around play, it is important to remember that all children learn differently and at their own pace.

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Now that you have answered some questions about your child’s communication, you may be able to use a similar framework as you see below to make specific communication goals that are unique to your child.

Sample Play Goals		
Current Skill (Type of Play)	Next Step	Desired Outcome-Goal
Sensory Motor/ No interaction: child is not playing with toys in functional way; maybe mouthing objects and self-stimulatory behavior may occur with objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jimmy will practice imitation skills during play routines. 	Jimmy will be able to imitate 3 play actions such as building blocks during a 10 minute play interaction.
Solitary Play: child has not shown interest in playing with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rosie will tolerate being near peers and siblings when playing during a 5 minute play interaction. • Rosie will independently play up to 10 minutes. 	Rosie will continue to play when others (siblings/ school mates) are nearby for 10 minute play routine at school.
Parallel Play: child plays alongside peers, but not with peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elliot will tolerate mom and dad taking 3 back and forth turns with trainset during a 10 minute play interaction. 	Elliot will take turns and give up a preferred toy to a peer during a 10 minute play interaction.
Symbolic/ Pretend Play: pretending to be someone or do something	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Olivia will be able to increase the duration of pretend play to 10 minutes. 	Olivia will engage in pretend play for the entire center time (15 minutes) at school.
Games with Rules: child is able to play games with rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sam will learn how to tolerate losing with parents and siblings. 	When playing with his peers, Sam will learn how to lose games without him hitting himself or others.

Figure 1. Chart with sample goals with different play stages.

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MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT DURING PLAY ROUTINES

Once you have identified a play goal for your child, you can then determine what time of day would work best to work on play skills.

The first step in meaningful engagement during play is to limit distractions. By limited distractions, such as the TV, you increase the likelihood that your child will be focused and engaged with you or peers during playtime. Having your child's attention will provide opportunities to model and prompt new ways of playing.

Next, you want to use your child's motivation to follow their lead in play. How do they choose to engage with a toy? Take a few moments to watch your child's play. This will help guide you as you determine how to start engaging in play with your child or alongside them depending on what stage of play your child is currently.

When it comes to teaching play skills, imitating your child and using animation can help increase their engagement in play activities with you, siblings, or other peers. When and how you use these strategies will depend on your child and their unique skill levels and preferences. You may find that your child responds to some strategies better than others. For example, they may respond better when you imitate them than when you use animation. Animation includes making big expressions while imitation refers to you following your child's lead and doing the same thing as them by imitating how they choose to use the toy or activity. For example, if they are playing with a beaded necklace by swinging it around, you would also have a beaded necklace and copy their actions. Your goal when joining into play is to make play more fun when you are present. By using imitation and animation, you are able to build that trust with your child.

Often times as adults, when it comes to play, we naturally talk a lot and may ask a lot of questions without realizing. This can come off as placing more demands on a child than they can tolerate. Make sure the language you are using during play is at the level that works best for your child. For example, if they use single words, you would model single or two word phrases. This way what you model for them is at their level or one step above. It is okay to still sprinkle in questions, but make sure you pace yourself. If you find that your child plays great by themselves but doesn't stay engaged when asked to play with you or others, you might assess this area and see how often demands such as questions are being placed on them.

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In figure 2, you can see how mom is able to work on modeling and expanding language during play routines.

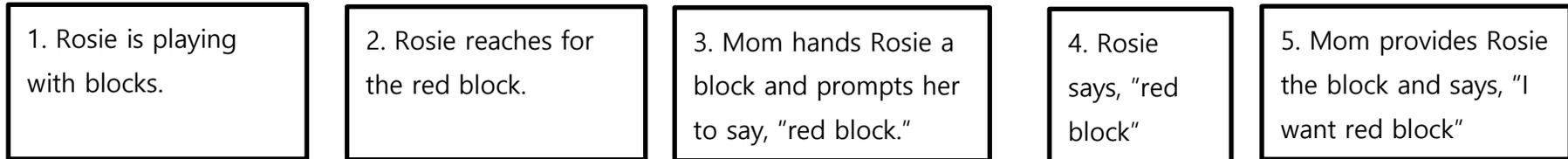


Figure 2. Flow chart example of modeling and expanding language.

When reviewing the sample charts, remember these are only examples. The context of when the behavior happens, the intensity and severity of the behavior, what your child is trying to communicate with the behavior, the stressor triggering the behavior, and your child's current skill level and age will help you determine what is appropriate. What may be an appropriate example of a replacement skill for the behaviors shown in the chart above may not be an appropriate replacement skill for your child based on all the above factors. Again, ***this must be individualized to the child for it to be an appropriate and effective replacement skill.***

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IMPORTANT TIPS TO REMEMBER

- **These skills do not develop on their own.** Help your child develop these skills by intentionally creating opportunities for them to practice to gain play skills.
- **Remember to consider your child's current skill level, age, and a reasonable next step** for them to take to make progress towards reaching their goal. Autism Spectrum Disorder covers a broad spectrum of abilities; consider what supports, prompts, and strategies to use as you make progress towards helping them experience success to get desired outcomes.
- **Identify when to practice:** When introducing new communication skills, select times to practice when the child is calm and engaged.
- **Follow your child's lead:** Use your child's motivation during play. Watch your child and move with them in play. Remember to also use strategies like animation and imitation when following their lead.
- **Don't ask too many questions:** It is important to keep your language simple and avoid too many questions. Initially, when engaging your child in play you want to avoid asking questions as this can be perceived as a demand and your child may then lose interest in playing with you.
- **Assess your progress:** Take some time to reflect what is working well, and any areas you may want to tweak to experience more success. Remember to provide praise during the learning process and celebrate progress that comes with practice.
- Remember the definition that Alai-Rosales and colleagues (2018) give for play skills as, "**Joyfully engaging in activities alone or with others in ways that increase in number, duration, and complexity and do not cause harm to self or others.**" Remembering this definition can help as you continue to make progress with your child and expand on their play goals as other goals are met.



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RESOURCES

AFIRM Modules: The AFIRM Modules go over evidence-based practices for individuals with autism. It is free to access these modules and they have two related to social skills and play groups. Both can be found here <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/>

Helping Kids with Autism Make Friends: This article from the Marcus Autism Center breaks down 6 ways to help your child learn the skills to make friendships. <https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources/helping-kids-with-autism-make-friends>

Planning a Playdate:

- This Autism Speaks article talks about considerations when planning a successful playdate. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/how-can-we-help-our-child-have-successful-play-date>
- How to ABA also breaks down tips when planning a playdate <https://howtoaba.com/plan-a-play-date/> and teaching social skills needed for play <https://howtoaba.com/teaching-play-skills/>
- Family Education also has an article with helpful tips when thinking about planning ahead and practicing things by role playing situations. <https://www.familyeducation.com/planning-playdates-kids-autism>

Play Date Social Story: This resource by Autism Speaks gives a sample of a social story for your child around planning a playdate. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/worksheet/personalized-teaching-story-play-date>

Promoting Early Play Skills & Playing with Others: the Marcus Autism Center has several articles to help you continue thinking about how to teach play skills to your child
<https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources/promoting-early-play-skills>
<https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources/promoting-play-with-others>
<https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources/improving-interest-in-toys-and-games>



OKLAHOMA AUTISM NETWORK
The University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

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SAMPLE #1: PLAY & LEISURE SKILLS GOAL FORM

Child's Name: Elliot

Date: April 7, 2022

If your child is developing language or a communication system, you may find Elliot's example helpful.

Describe your child's current play skills:

Elliot will play independently for 15-20 minutes. He ignores or walks away from others during play interactions. He will push you away or take his toys and continue playing with them somewhere else if you approach his play space. He sometimes will tolerate us playing near him for 1-2 minutes before he takes his toys and moves somewhere else to continue playing. He does not engage with others during play so practicing turn taking and sharing is hard/ does not occur.

What would progress look like? Write your goal(s) for your child here:

Elliot will increase the amount of time he engages in parallel play to at least 3-5 minutes. When familiar adults attempt to join in his play, he will stay engaged/ remain in the same play area and tolerate their involvement for 3-5 minutes. Eventually Elliot will allow siblings and peers to join, and be able to take turns.

When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?

Elliot needs some time to unwind after a half day at pre-k, therapy, or picking up sister from school. We can focus on practicing during our after dinner playtime, or after bath when he might tolerate us engaging in his play a little more. We could target this more on Sunday afternoons or Saturday evenings.

How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.

Have a toy in sight but out of reach to create opportunity for communication. I will also join in play with Elliot by sitting next to him and attempting to join in play once he tolerates me playing next to him.



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SAMPLE #2: PLAY & LEISURE SKILLS GOAL FORM

Child's Name: Joseph

Date: April 7, 2022

If your child has more complex communication, you may find Joseph's example helpful.

Describe your child's current play skills:

Joseph joins his neighbors and peers for play, but typically for short periods of time. If peers are playing a game he doesn't know, he does not join them to learn the game.

What would progress look like? Write your goal(s) for your child here:

Joseph will increase the amount of time he engages in play with peers (siblings, neighbors, peers at school). He will join games, even if he is not familiar with them, and ask an adult or peer for help to learn the rules of the game.

When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?

Family will set up times to play games at home, preferably on the weekends when everyone has more time. Once Joseph is more comfortable joining an unfamiliar game, he can join neighbors playing outside in an unfamiliar game.

How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.

After practicing playing board games, I will set up play date with a peer who will come over and practice.



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COMMUNICATION SKILLS GOAL FORM

Child's Name:

Date:

Describe your child's current communication skill level:

What would progress look like? Write your goal(s) for your child here:

When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?

How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.



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