

How One Parent Built her Child's Play Skills while Reducing His Self-Stimulatory Behavior (Cristin Millen)

The recent discussion concerning the challenge of keeping a four-year-old engaged really got my attention. I remember that when I first joined the *CT FEAT Parent Discussion Group* I posted a similar question: "Would my child EVER stop lining up and spinning toys and ACTUALLY play with them?" So, in honor of all the wonderful moms, like Beth Lambert, who shared their stories with me, I'd like to share my journey towards how I FINALLY got my kiddo to play.

As many of you know, I have a 7-year-old with PDD-NOS and a NT 8-year-old. I remember being excited to learn that I would have two boys so close in age, thinking they would always have a playmate.

So, here I was. I had two children just 19 months apart and prime ages to be playmates. In addition to being a mom, I was an educator who had taught preschool. So I knew how to engage young children in play. And yet my child couldn't play. It must mean I didn't have the right toys, right?

Well, I now own every toy in America because, like all of you, I was dead set on getting him to play. But the problem wasn't the boys or the toys, or my inability to be fun; it was that my child with autism needed to be taught to play. Like many skills in autistic children, play had to be programmed and practiced. Painfully, my beautiful little boy needed to be taught and trained how to play; another exciting part of AUTISM no one tells you about.

With all of that said, here are tips that worked for us on our journey towards play!! I should also say many of these came from a very patient BCBA at school who worked play into the goals of our IEP, communication with school on how playsets were programmed and our work at home.

1. I took all the toys and put them in bins in the closet. They were grouped by playset type. For example our "Pirates" set consisted of the ship, an island, a map, a spyglass, and some pirate people. "Outer space" was a rocket and a lunar vehicle and plastic astronauts, with Bionicles playing the part of aliens.
2. Each day I would take a playset from each category, a building toy (e.g. magna tiles, wedgits or a bin of Legos), Pretend playsets (ie pirates) and some transportation toys (e.g. cars, tracks, airplanes) and put out one set of each kind.
3. Provided I knew my son wasn't hungry or over stimulated, I would let him pick the TV or the computer or a video game to "work for." Yes, the reward for playing was a video game or TV which, for a normal child, might be considered just another form of "playing." But those kinds of electronic entertainment had to be very restricted for my child who, if permitted, could go all day "gaming" without any real contact with people.
4. I would sit with him and set the timer for five minutes and engage him to play, with the picture of the computer, wii and TV reminding him of what he was working for. If he did five minutes

of play (build with blocks, race cars, play astronaut toys) he got TV or computer for 15 minutes-then back to the play area to pick another toy and play for five more minutes.

5. You may need some support and follow up with babysitters, family and school. During our quest for engaged play school put “contextual play” as a goal for time in the preschool. I sent a set of each kind of toy each week. The teachers would script play and have my son act it out with the toys.

For example: when I sent in dinosaurs and a volcano, the teachers developed play schemes to teach him that “THE DINOSAURS RAN AWAY.” They would hide the dinosaurs around the classroom and my son, along with the typical peers in the preschool, would go on a dinosaur hunt. The teachers also targeted other related skills, such as “sharing” and appropriately initiating or “entering” play. They could incorporate these activities into the Center Time play period when my son was among typical peers in his preschool.

6. I also used a visual schedule and actually scheduled toy time. SO the schedule had 1-Play toys with mom; 2- dinner; 3-bath; 4-story; 5-bed.

7. Another thing that I think helped (we learned this from his functional assessment at school) is that my kiddo shuts down when there are too many demands. So I had to pick and choose my goals. If we were working on dressing, I might need to let the play scripts go for a bit and go back to them.

8. DO NOT LET KIDDOS STIM WITH TOYS YOU WANT THEM TO PLAY WITH. For example, Aiden loves to line things up. So if we had the dinosaurs out and were playing “rescue the dino from the mountain” and he started to line them up I would give him his cars and say “you want to line up, here are cars. Dinosaurs are for playing rescue.”

Have a whole box of stim (self-stimulatory) toys they can stim with but make it clear that those are the only toys that can be used for that purpose. Keep the toys you want them to learn to play with for CONTEXTUAL PLAY ONLY. IF I WERE TO HAVE LET MY GUY LINE UP ANY PLAYSETS OR SPIN THE BLOCKS THEN THAT IS ALL HE WOULD HAVE DONE. SO NOW HE CAN GO TO THE STIM BOX AND PICK SOMETHING BUT HE CAN'T USE HIS TOYS TO “STIM ON” (IF THAT MAKES SENSE). You can certainly have that toy that they stim on. I would say: “You want to stim ? OK, here is your music laptop.”

Success will come and then you will be able to stretch play toys into games like tag or hide and seek. For example, during our dinosaur play sessions I would play “hide and seek” with the dinosaurs; then we would play “find the dinosaur;” then we faded the dinosaur and did “find Aiden” just under a blanket; eventually we got to “full house hide and seek” and now, at age seven, he can play with his cousins without getting distracted and walking away.

Another success occurred just the other night after dinner. My two boys were outside and I could hear and see them from the kitchen window. My NT boy grabbed the football and said, “come on Aiden, football, touchdown, tackle, ready?” Aiden ran to the middle of the yard and yelled “hut, hut hike.” FINALLY.

I tell my typical son and his friends, "it takes Aiden 100 times to practice something until he can do it, even though it only takes you maybe 3 times at most."

The other day one of my typical son's friends said to me "Cristin, how many times have we played baseball with Aiden?" I replied, "I am not sure Jack, why?"

He, in his 8-year-old wisdom, said, "Well I am trying to figure out how many more times we have to play baseball with Aiden before he figures out how to run the bases in order..."

It is heartbreaking when your child is not able to play BUT you can make progress. I have been there. You just need the right mix of toys, patience and, most important, a reinforcer- whether it is TV or a straw to chew on or anything your child finds reinforcing. If they want it they can play for 60 seconds then 90 seconds and on and on.

I always cringe when people say "we tried that and it didn't work." Sometimes you try something and discover it's not the optimal time to teach that skill. Maybe the kiddo is already taxed by the effort to acquire some other important skill - like potty training or learning to feed themselves. In that case, you may need to shelve that play goal for the moment while you concentrate on the other skill. BUT ALWAYS COME BACK TO IT!! I tried and retried these play scripts many times and some days met with failure. But in the end we stuck with it and we got there. In all honesty, there are times now when he says "play mommy" and after 15 minutes I am thinking "geez is he ever going to want to stop?"

Of course, it's not just in teaching play skills that self-stimulatory behavior can interfere with the development of more appropriate behaviors. It's also true with language skills. So, just as with his play-related stim behavior, I've tried to teach my son to recognize when he is stimming vs. communicating.

As my son's language evolved I learned that he wasn't scripting as out of context as I had thought. At first I didn't know what to make of some of his bathtub babbling but over time, as the words became clearer, I realized he was saying "and now Marlin saves Nemo." So I would take those opportunities to label verbal stim. If he is in a verbal scripting stim I will say "mommy comes back when you are ready to talk to me."

The verbal scripting was really bad after school. So now I let him go for a while and then say: "are you talking to mommy or scripting?" At school one day he told the speech pathologist to "stop talking to me, I am scripting." A short while later, he went back over to her and said "I talk now." I got the phone call that day- "Did you teach Aiden that he is scripting at times?" UM, YUP!!!!!! If you can't beat it label it and work with it.

I have a short attention span and love to talk so I became a teacher. We all need to know our strengths and we all learn to deal with our shortcomings. I think it helps with these kiddos to help them understand themselves.

I haven't posted in a while and I don't mean to sound like I have the cure for the "I can't play bug." All I am saying is don't give up, try things, shelve things, retry, get frustrated, try again. You will get there and your kids will develop. This play stuff was at least 18 months in the making for us!! I cringe when parents say "we tried that." We tried many of these things and

failed and tried again and failed bigger, but we stuck with it and tried again. Sometimes you have to try and try and try but eventually it gets better and better and better. Hope this helps!!!