

Developing independent play skills

Independent play is when a child engages in one or multiple activities by themselves. Independent play skills sometimes don't occur naturally to autistic children and young adults.



Why the need for independent play skills?

Independent play skills teach children how to occupy their time without needing other people to be involved. Having these skills builds confidence and reduces the need of always having to play with another person. Independent play encourages problem solving and self-management skills. Independent play time can be used to keep children occupied while their caregivers are busy. It is also a great way of redirecting bored children during school holidays or weekends.

Getting started

There are a few skills that will help children acquire independent play skills more easily.

Here are skills that are considered necessary for a child to have:

- Sit and remain in a location for different amounts of time.
- Be able to attend to an activity until completion.
- Does not engage in dangerous behaviours when left alone such as self-injurious behaviours.
- To be able to understand and follow simple instructions such as 'come here' or 'sit down'.
- Can engage in a variety of activities such as puzzles, flipping through books or peg boards.
- Has an effective communication system to be able to indicate 'finish' or 'help'.

Here are good skills for a child to have, but aren't considered the most necessary:

- Understand the use of a timer.
- Can match a picture to its corresponding object and vice versa.
- Understand an activity schedule. See our **Visual supports** factsheet for further guidance.

How do we teach independent play?

In the beginning, start out with one easy and short activity. You can start by sitting next to them while they play with the activity independently, if they need encouragement staying at the activity. They might not be used to playing the activity independently yet, so you may have to encourage them to play by themselves. As they get used to the activity and are beginning to engage independently, begin to fade your support. This could be increasing space between you, standing next to or behind them or walking around in the same room. The key is to appear like you are busy; this indicates that you are unavailable and will push your child to engage in the activity more independently.

You may have to teach your child how to play by themselves. You can prompt them depending on how much support they need.

Level of support	Needs a lot of help	Needs some help	Needs a little help
	Teaching by placing your hand over their hand and leading them to engage in the activity.	Teaching by guiding your child by the wrist or the elbow.	Gesturing or pointing to show the child what to do.
Example: Picking up a puzzle piece	Parent holds child's hand and picks up a puzzle piece with child's hand	Parent gently nudges child's elbow and child picks up the puzzle piece	Parent points to puzzle piece and child picks up puzzle piece

The aim is for your child to be able to engage in an activity as independently as possible. Avoid teaching them using your words as they can become reliant on your words showing them what to do. Instead, use physical guides to keep them on task. For example, instead of saying “pick up the puzzle piece” you can point to the puzzle piece. This simulates how the independent activity should be. Once they are getting the hang of the activity, fade off your support; you might not need to teach them as much. Let them try and do it themselves.

Once they understand the concept and remain on task, you can gradually increase the number of activities and the complexity. Once your child can complete activities with a clear end e.g., puzzles, you can introduce open ended activities such as sand play or water play. With open ended activities, a timer should be introduced to indicate the end of each activity.

Remember to reinforce appropriate independent play. Give praise and reward at the end of the activity and not while they are engaging in the activity. Praise should be specific, for example, “good job doing the puzzle all by yourself”. You can also add a favourite or preferred toy as the last item on the independent play activities.

Different types of independent play

There are a few variations of how an independent play session can be run.

Activity stations: This is where the activities are placed in an activity drawer and the child is expected to go through each drawer one after the other.

There are different ways in which the station can be set up:

- Each drawer can have pictures of the activities in them
- An activity schedule could be set up to show the order of the activities.

Activity station example:

1. Sits at table with activity station
2. Pulls out drawer 1
3. Takes out activity
4. Completes activity
5. Puts activity back in drawer 1
6. Pulls out drawer 2
7. Takes out activity
8. Completes activity
9. Puts activity back in drawer 2
10. And so on...

Activity bins: The activity or activities are placed in order and the child goes from one activity to the other until completion of all the activities in front of them. They can either be in boxes, bags or on their own.

Activity bins example:

1. Sits at table/on floor with activity
2. Pulls activity 1 towards them
3. Takes out activity
4. Completes activity
5. Puts activity back into box or pushes back
6. Pulls activity 2 towards them
7. Takes out activity
8. Completes activity
9. Puts activity back into box or pushes back
10. And so on...



Free flow: Child gets each activity from where they are kept. The child will have an activity schedule which will tell them which activity is first and next.

Example of free flow:

1. Sits down at table
2. Takes out activity schedules
3. Puts activities in order
4. Gets materials needed for activity
5. Sits back down
6. Completes activity
7. Tidies up activity
8. Gets materials needed for next activity
9. Sits back down
10. Completes activity

Independent play can look different for each child, and they can also progress to different types over time. To make independent play fun for your child, ensure your child has a lot of different activities they can choose from. Introduce your child to lots of new toys or activities and assess what their preferences are. If they don't like a particular activity, you can switch it to a different activity. Choose toys and activities that suit your child's ability and skills; nothing too easy that will bore them and nothing too hard that they will not be able to complete.