



## Pretend Play Should Be Fun, Not Work

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You've probably heard the expression "Play is children's work". What this means is that children aren't just keeping busy when they play – there are many important things children learn while playing, and their time spent playing is essential for their development. This is especially true of pretend play, which helps children practice their thinking, communicating, and interacting skills.

But there's one problem with this expression when it comes to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Pretending doesn't come easily to this group of children, and the task of learning to pretend often becomes work. Imagine the following:



*Tim is sitting across the table from his therapist. He is looking across the room at some toy cars he likes that are on a shelf. The therapist gets Tim's attention, holds a toy cup up to a teddy bear's mouth and says "Tim, give your bear a drink". Tim takes his bear and cup and proceeds to give his bear a drink. "Good job!" applauds the therapist, putting a check mark on her clipboard. Tim puts his bear down and waits for more instructions.*

Is Tim playing? Or does this seem more like work? He certainly does what his therapist expects of him and performs the pretend action. But what's missing from Tim's pretend play?

Researchers Kasari, Chang, and Patterson (2013) would probably answer that what's missing is Tim having fun and enjoying the play.

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Teaching children to do pretend actions isn't enough, they explain. Pretend play needs to be fun, creative, and spontaneous. But many intervention programs for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder treat play like work. These methods are led by the adult, who selects the toys and directs the play. The child is asked to do several actions with toys and is rewarded when he is successful (usually with praise, food, or access to a toy).

But Kasari and her colleagues argue that:

“This teaching approach, which treats play as work or tasks, may inhibit creativity, flexibility, and pretense in the play of children with autism” [p.132].

Studies of this type of approach show that children are able to learn pretend actions in this way, but they are not able to use these skills with new toys or in new situations [1].

## Putting Some Fun into Pretend Play

Here's another scenario to consider:

*Sarah sits on the floor with her mom, surrounded by her favourite dolls. Mom watches as Sarah smiles, picks up a doll and hugs it. Mom copies Sarah, picking up a doll herself and giving it a hug, and then waits to see what Sarah will do next. Sarah keeps hugging the doll and smiling. Mom continues to hug her doll but also pats its head, saying “Shhh...the baby's sleeping.” Sarah looks at her mom, then at her own doll, and then starts to pat her doll's head. She looks up at Mom and smiles. Mom says “Oh, your baby is sleeping too”. Sarah smiles and brings her finger to her mouth and says “Shhhh”.*

What's the difference in this example? Like Tim, Sarah is learning how to pretend. But Sarah enjoys playing with her mom and pays attention to her mom's actions. She is motivated to play and has fun because Mom uses toys Sarah loves, copies Sarah's actions, and responds to Sarah's interests. We call this “Following Your Child's Lead”. Following your child's lead means responding with interest to what your child is doing. When you Follow Your Child's Lead, the play is naturally fun because you are using your child's interests and playing in ways he or she enjoys.

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Approaches that encourage the adult to follow the child's lead and use the child's interests are referred to as “Naturalistic”. Kasari and her colleagues explain that:

“Interventions using ‘naturalistic’ methods may prove more effective in improving play outcomes for children with autism” [p.132].

Several studies have looked at this type of approach for teaching play and found that it helps children with autism play in more advanced ways and use a greater variety of play actions [1].

## Why Follow Your Child's Lead?

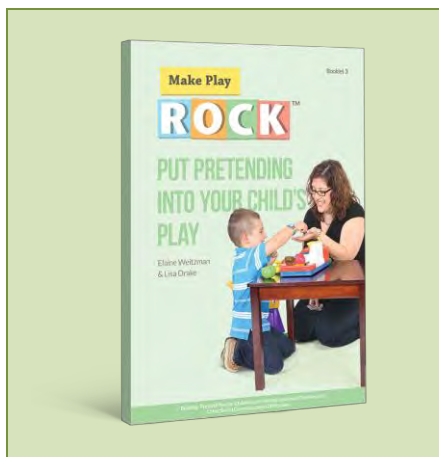
Naturalistic approaches that encourage parents and caregivers to follow the child's lead are effective because:

- **Children with autism have difficulty shifting their attention** – It's difficult for them to stop paying attention to something they are interested in and shift their attention towards something an adult is showing them. Therefore, it's easier for them to pay attention and learn new things when adults follow their lead and join them in what they are already playing with.
- **Children are motivated to interact and learn when they are doing things they like** – If you join in an activity your child is already doing (instead of starting something new), he'll probably want to interact with you because he is doing something he enjoys.
- **Using children's interests ensures the play will be fun!** If it's not fun and enjoyable, then it's not truly pretend play.

## Include Your Child's Interests

The first step in helping your child learn new ways to play is to follow his lead by **Including His Interests**. This means:

- **Be Face-to-Face with your child** – This allows you to see what interests your child.
- **Observe what your child is doing** – Notice what your child is looking at or playing with.
- **Join in and play with your child** – Be sure not to change the play. Try to play the way your child enjoys playing. You can join in by:
  - doing what your child is doing – Copy what your child does with his toy. Sarah's mom noticed that Sarah was hugging her doll, so she did the same thing with her own doll.
  - helping your child do what he is doing – If your child is gathering cars to put through the car wash, help him collect cars.
  - making a comment about what you or your child are doing – Sarah's mom made a comment about her own actions by saying "Shhh...the baby's sleeping". She also commented on Sarah's actions, saying "Oh, your baby is sleeping too".



Once you've joined in your child's play, you need to wait to see what your child will do next. This allows you to ensure that your child is still having fun and is motivated to continue. If you keep playing in this way, you will end up taking turns back and forth with your child, and your child will have fun while learning new ways to play with his favourite toys. By following your child's lead, you can ensure that it's fun when you play together, not work.

*The ideas in this article are from the Hanen guidebook, Put Pretending into Your Child's Play. This book shows you how you can expand your child's pretend play skills during fun, everyday play activities.*

## References

1. Kasari, C., Chang, Y. & Patterson, S. (2013). Pretending to Play or Playing to Pretend. *American Journal of Play*, 6(1), 124-135.

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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