

Levels of Play

Each child with autism can have a certain level of mastered play and may show signs of starting to develop more complex play levels. Our goal is to enhance their skill development based on their motivation. To achieve this, it's important to identify their current strengths. What level of play are we starting from? What could be the next categories of play actions to target?

We group play into four main categories: simple, combination, presymbolic, and symbolic.

The first three groupings fall under functional (concrete) play, while only the last is symbolic (imaginative).

Each of these broad categories of play is broken up into more specific play levels. The list of play levels is adapted from the work of Ungerer and Sigman (1981) and Lifter et al. (1993). Although these four categories of play are presented as separated and ordered, the specific play levels build upon each other, often clustering and overlapping in the child's development.

Simple Play

In simple play, children begin to explore objects and their functions. They are either working toward or beginning to show purposeful acts. Some examples of simple play actions include banging a toy, squeezing a stuffed animal, rolling a ball, and dumping toys out of a bucket. The specific levels within simple play are indiscriminate acts, discriminate acts, and take-apart.

• Indiscriminate acts.

Children often first engage with objects indiscriminately. They may mouth, bang, and drop toys repeatedly. These play acts are not unique to the object and may rely on sensory aspects of play (e.g., the child mouths all toys in the same way). While this is the first level of object play, it is not one we explicitly target since most children will be at an age to at least learn actions at the next play level—discriminate acts.

• Discriminate acts.

Discriminate acts consist of single play actions with an object. This often involves cause-and-effect actions. In this play level, the child differentiates among objects. Some examples include dropping a ball down a ramp and rolling a car.

• Take-apart.

In take-apart play, items that were once together are separated. Some examples include taking puzzle pieces out of the board, removing a cup from a stack of cups, and taking shapes out of a shape sorter.

Early Combination Play

At the earliest levels, combination play involves putting one object into another in a way that is meaningful and logical. One object has a clearly designated place, such as a puzzle piece into its

corresponding spot on a puzzle board or a geometric shape into its correct shape-sorter slot. The child may stack blocks or place blocks into a bucket, but the combination does not “represent” anything in particular. Specifically, early combination levels include presentation combination and general combination.

- **Presentation combination.**

In presentation combination, items are combined or put together in their specific, designated spots. Some examples include putting pieces into a puzzle, nesting cups, stacking rings on a peg, and putting coins through a slot into a piggy bank.

- **General combination.**

In general combination play, items are combined in any fashion. There is no “correct” way to combine the materials. Some examples include stacking with blocks, stacking materials, and putting objects in a dump truck.

Presymbolic Actions and Combinations

In presymbolic levels, play begins to take on a pretend quality but is still considered functional rather than symbolic. This emerging pretense appears when play acts are taken to the self, when play acts are taken to another person or an inanimate object, and when objects are combined in 2.

- **Pretend self.**

In pretend-self play, the child engages in familiar actions directed toward himself or another person in the room. Some examples include pretending to eat a piece of toy food, extending a brush to one’s own or another person’s hair, holding a phone to one’s ear, and putting a hat on one’s own head or another person’s head. For example, the child pretends to take a bite of a toy strawberry.

- **Physical combination.**

Physical combination play consists of putting items together with a clear indication that the child is making “something” or creating a familiar object, place, person, or animal. The child may or may not verbally tell you what the item is but should show you in some way that he intentionally built something. Examples include using magnetic tiles to build a car or using blocks to make a chair or airplane. For example, the child constructs a house out of blocks.

- **Child as agent.**

Child as agent play consists of the child extending actions seen in the pretend-self play level to toy figures such as dolls, puppets, and animals. In this play level, the child is the agent taking action on the objects.

This is still a functional level of play, in contrast to the upcoming symbolic level of doll as agent in which the child pretends the doll is alive (e.g., child pretends that the dog is eating the strawberry). This is a subtle but significant difference in development.

- **Conventional combination.**

With conventional combination play, items are put together based on an awareness of customs, conventions, or experiences. Some examples include placing a cup on a saucer, placing pretend food on a plate, using a spoon to make a stirring motion in a cup, putting a chair next to a table, and placing a pillow on a bed.

- **Single-scheme sequence.**

In a single-scheme sequence, the child extends one child as-agent play-level action to more than one figure in direct succession. Some examples include extending a piece of toy food to one doll and then to another doll, or brushing one doll's hair and then another's.

Symbolic Play

This level of play involves the representational use of objects, such as pretending one object represents another. For example, a sponge represents a piece of food or a pile of blue blocks represents an ocean. Symbolic play also includes pretending that dolls and animals are alive and pretending that children themselves can take on real-world or fantasy roles. Symbolic play is distinct from presymbolic play in that the play demonstrates true imagination. In presymbolic play, the child performs actions on the doll; in symbolic play, the child pretends that the doll is alive or pretends to be the doll. We often rely on the child's language or the context in which the play act is occurring as a second indicator to determine whether the play act is symbolic.

- **Substitution with object.**

In substitution with object, the child pretends one object is something else, usually indicated by communication (e.g., sound effects or words) on the child's part to suggest that the child is performing a substitution.

- **Substitution without object.**

In substitution without object, the child pretends to represent something without the presence of an object. In other words, the child pretends something is there when it is not. For example, the child pretends to give her play partner "money" while playing restaurant, stirs a bowl while saying, "Soup," as if there is actually liquid in the bowl, or pretends to pour tea out of a pot while making a shhh sound.

- **Doll as agent.**

At the doll as agent play level, the child takes on the role of the figure, pretending that the doll is alive. Some examples include having a doll eat dinner, a dinosaur fly, and a farmer figure drive a tractor. Children will often use language (e.g., "We're running!"), or sound effects (e.g., snoring sounds) to indicate the symbolic nature of play. The child might also help the figure use and

manipulate objects (e.g., holding a tool in the doll's hand to fix the bridge) or speak as the doll (e.g., pretending to be a pirate and saying, "Let's go find the treasure").

- **Multi-scheme sequence.**

A multi-scheme sequence is a sequence of doll-as-agent actions. The sequence appears to mimic a story with one figure. For example, a doll walks to the park, goes down a slide, pushes a friend on the swing, walks home, and then lies in bed and snores. For example, the child takes on the role of the cat, pretending to take a bite of the strawberry, saying, "Chomp, chomp!" and then taking a drink from the cup, saying, "Slurp!"

- **Sociodramatic.**

In sociodramatic play, the child is enacting a familiar role such as a caregiver or teacher. Some examples include the child playing house or playing restaurant. As an example, the child pretends to play the role of a firefighter.

- **Thematic.**

Thematic play is similar to sociodramatic play, but it extends to fantasy characters rather than familiar roles. The actions and roles can be highly creative. Some examples include playing a superhero or a fairy. One example is the child pretends to be a wizard.

On the list below there are more examples of play acts on different levels of play.

Play level-Play act

Simple

- Push truck (discriminate)
- Open and close doors on the barn (discriminate)
- Take blocks out of truck (take-apart)
- Take pieces out of puzzle (take-apart)

Combination

- Put pieces in puzzle (presentation combination)
- Put cookie on Velcro tray (presentation combination)
- Put frosting on cookie base (presentation combination)
- Put shapes in shape sorter (presentation combination)
- Stack furniture (general combination)
- Stack cookies (general combination)
- Stack or build with blocks (general combination)
- Put blocks in truck (general combination)
- Stack puzzle pieces (general combination)

Presymbolic

- Put cup or spoon to mouth (pretend self)
- Put cookie to mouth (pretend self)

- Brush to own hair or assessor's hair (pretend self)
- Build structure out of blocks (physical combination)
- Put figure in bed (child as agent)
- Put figure in barn (child as agent)
- Put figure in chair (child as agent)
- Put cup or spoon to figure (child as agent)
- Put cookie to figure (child as agent)
- Put spoon in cup (conventional combination)
- Put cookies in cup or on plate (conventional combination)
- Place blanket on bed (conventional combination)
- Place pillow on bed (conventional combination)
- Place chair at table (conventional combination)
- Mix with spoon on the plate or in the cup (conventional combination)
- Take one child-as-agent act with two figures (single scheme)

Symbolic

- Pretend the tissue is a blanket (substitution with object)
- Pretend to cook something in the cup or on the plate (substitution without object)
- Pretend to make the truck horn "beep" (substitution without object)
- Pretend the figure sleeps or snores (doll as agent)
- Pretend the figure walks (doll as agent)
- Pretend the figure eats or drinks (doll as agent)
- Perform a sequence of two unique doll-as-agent acts with one figure (multi-scheme)
- Pretend to be a baker (sociodramatic)

Developmental Framework of Play

In typical development, play emerges rapidly and in a predictable sequence of play skills. By 2½–3 years old, most children have developed the social skills and play skills to maintain the highest levels of symbolic play (Lillard, Pinkham, & Smith, 2011). At first, children engage with objects indiscriminately, between 4 and 6 months of age. Around 9–12 months, they begin exploring how these objects work and start to play more intentionally. They might begin with simple actions such as rolling a ball or knocking down a tower. In the second year of life, play becomes more deliberate with children starting to combine objects. Soon after, children's play takes a distinctive turn toward interacting and building with objects in ways that seem more "pretend." For example, they might "pretend" to feed themselves or build with blocks to make a "house." They may put a cup on a saucer and bring a cup to their lips to drink or extend the cup to a doll. Despite appearing more pretend-like, these actions are still considered presymbolic. Between the ages of 18 and 36 months, children begin to play symbolically.

By 48 months, children plan and act out elaborate play stories (e.g., pretending to be pirates going on a treasure hunt), assign roles and actions ("I'll be the pirate and you hide the treasure"), and use objects as substitutes in their environments in creative ways (pretending pebbles are the treasure; Lillard, 2015; Ungerer, Zelazo, Kearsley, & O'Leary, 1981). Play is also social, with

each child contributing to the interaction. Together, children generate ideas and respond to the ideas of the other, they talk about what they are doing with the toys, they use the toys to build something or carry out a developing story, and there is a sense of playful togetherness marked by smiles and laughter. In moments of disagreement, they problem-solve together, check their emotions, and learn from one another. Throughout the play, they are naturally practicing skills such as creativity, troubleshooting, and communication.

Children with ASD often play at less sophisticated levels of play than their typically developing peers (Mundy et al., 1986; Sigman & Ungerer, 1984). For example, a 4-year-old child with ASD may be learning to stack blocks (general combination) while typically developing children of the same age are playing house (sociodramatic).

Additionally, the hurdle between functional play and symbolic play can be particularly difficult, as children with ASD tend to play in a more concrete manner rather than abstract (Jarrold, Boucher, & Smith, 1996; Rutherford, Young, Hepburn, & Rogers, 2007). For example, a child may have an easier time stacking blocks (general combination) compared to building an airplane out of the blocks (physical combination). The child may be very comfortable “giving dolls life” in contexts he may have experienced himself, such as bath time or getting on the bus to go to school; however, the child may be less comfortable with more abstract ideas, such as having the dolls dress up like astronauts and fly to the moon. Play may also include repetitive play acts, rigidity and resistance to change, restricted interests, difficulty developing an interest in toys, and difficulty sharing play with others (Kasari & Chang, 2014).

Possible Goals for Play

• Increased initiations in play.

We want to see the child spontaneously and creatively thinking of and executing new play ideas. After all, the definition of play is that the child engages with objects and toys in spontaneous, creative ways that originate in his own ideas and preferences.

• Increased diversity in play.

Diversity refers to the range of play skills within a single level. For example, if the child plays at a conventional combination level, we would want her to show many different types of conventional combination skills: putting the cups on the saucers, food on the plates, pillows on the bed, chairs next to the table, stop signs next to the road, and so on. The importance of diversity is often overlooked and underestimated. It is not a race to the highest skill. In order to build complexity, we must build diversity as well.

• Increased complexity of play skills.

Complexity refers to increases in the child’s play level (e.g., moving from pretend-self to child as agent play). The goal is not to target the highest play level first but rather to build the child’s skills sequentially, starting at the child’s “mastered” (e.g., fluent) play level and filling in missing skills along the way. Although symbolic play is our ultimate goal given its relations to cognition,

we do not target these skills until the child has developed the skills that precede them (Lillard et al., 2011).