



autism
NOVA SCOTIA

Exploring **P L A Y** Together

Play Box and Guide



Our Vision

A world where autism is understood, accepted, and everyone is living their lives fully.

Our Mandate

We are a community-based organization that builds understanding, acceptance, and inclusion for Autistics/individuals on the autism spectrum and their families through leadership, advocacy, education, training, and programming across the lifespan.

Inclusion ✨ Respect ✨ Collaboration ✨ Courage ✨ Acceptance

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Gratitude

This play guide was developed in collaboration with students and the QuickStart Nova Scotia team. We would like to thank the students that were involved in this project as part of their practicum hours. We are grateful for their time and dedication. We are also thankful to the QuickStart Nova Scotia team members for sharing their experience and continuing to build collaborations between community partners.

We begin by acknowledging that Autism Nova Scotia's **Exploring Play Together: Play Box and Guide** was created here in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq Nation. This territory is covered by the Treaties of Peace and Friendship, which the Mi'kmaq and Wəlastəkwewiyik (Maliseet) communities first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The Treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources, but established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.





Activities, ideas, and information in this play box and guide are beginning steps, and are not meant to be a one size fits all approach. Please use this play guide as you see fitting with your family routines, community, child, and cultural needs and wants.

Within this guide, child with autism, autism, Autistic and Autistic child will be used interchangeably. The use of this language is intentional, as there is ongoing conversation within the autism community around preferences for identity-first vs person-first language use. By interchanging these terms throughout the document, it is our intent to respect everyone's perspective.

About this Guide



The **Exploring Play Together: Play Box and Guide** are an initiative of the QuickStart Nova Scotia program through Autism Nova Scotia. They were made possible with support by the Government of Nova Scotia.

The idea for a play box and guide came from the identified need for play resources and family activities due to Covid-19 restrictions and circumstances. This play box and guide aims to provide useful ideas, information, and next steps in play.

This play guide was created for caregivers to learn about play and autism, and have easy

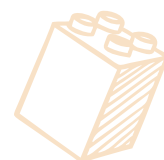
access to play ideas and supports in play for their individual child.

This is a guide, and is not an exhaustive resource of supports and play ideas. A child's individual likes and dislikes are always important to consider in supporting their development.

The intended age for this play guide is 12 months to 6 years old, and although many of this information can be used with any child, it was developed for caregivers who have a child with a confirmed, provisional or suspected autism diagnosis.



QuickStart Nova Scotia is an interdisciplinary team. This play guide has elements incorporated from contributions of a Speech Language Pathologist, a Behaviour Analyst, and an Occupational Therapist. It is deeply rooted in play based routines, child and family directed practices, and building skills in a child's everyday environment.



We all play differently.
Differences explored and
shared, embraces new
learning for all.



Autism is the brain processing environmental information in another way. It is neurodiversity; the person’s brain has physically developed differently from a neurotypical brain.

Each person who is Autistic is an individual and the characteristics that are associated with autism are unique to them and creates their own different experiences.



Recent prevalence of autism from Nova Scotia Health is 1 in 34.
(<6 years old in preschoolers in Nova Scotia)



Did You Know?



Children who are exposed to more outdoor experiences are less likely to injure themselves when playing outside.

Autism & Play

Everybody plays. What we learn from play, we learn for life. Play is how children spend their day. A past time.



Play influences how a child learns and responds to their surroundings. It supports the development of language, social-emotional engagement, problem-solving, fine and gross motor abilities, and daily skills.

Children with autism may have play that is **explorative**. They may stick to **one action** on a toy, **watch others** in play or play with the toy in **other ways** than it is designed to be played with.

This **explorative type of play** can be tricky for caregivers to become involved in, because it might look like their child is **not playing as expected** or their child **prefers to play alone**.

Autism & PLAY

What it may look like ...

Don't know how to play

Want to be alone

Playing differently – non-play behaviours

Repetitive play

Sticking to the same toy, play theme, or pattern of play

Staring off

Preoccupied with an object or type of play

What may be happening ...

Has not been taught how to play with the toy

Play or toys given are “above” or “below” the child’s level of play

Partner is being more of a director within the play

Adult is not aware of what is catching the child’s attention

Child may be warming up slowly to the toy or play

Children with autism may initiate play with subtle cues

May need additional supports to maintain play

May need support in knowing how to shift attention

There may be variety of elements that is making play harder

Initiating play by picking a toy or joining in may be too tricky at first

Child may prefer at that moment to play ‘their way’ – everyone has a preferred way to play, and ‘their way’ is familiar, predictable and enjoyable

Frustration may be happening for either the caregiver or child



Did You Know?

Play can be helpful to your child's ability to solve problems, practice social skills and experiment in a fun, safe and familiar environment.

Joint attention skills are an area that is commonly talked about within autism early intervention.

Shared information, emotion or meaning about an object or event between two people is the result of joint attention.

Joint attention helps a child learn from the common signals in their everyday. It is foundational for language and social development.

Shared toy play can support in learning joint attention, by attending to both the play partner and the toy.





“

Joint activity is an activity in which two partners are engaged with each other in the same cooperative activity, attending to the same objects, or playing or working together on a common activity.

– Sally J. Rogers



Within play and everyday routines, teaching and learning is occurring for a child.

Joint activities support the back and forth of learning and teaching, as well as fostering the development of those joint attention skills.



A child learns that their actions and communication is impactful if people respond to any forms of attempts.

Communication attempts could be **subtle body movements** to continue a chase game or to ask to spin, could be **word attempts** to ask for a toy or using **gestures**, like **pointing** or **waving hands**, to ask for things or protest.





Did You Know?

Children learn and develop communication, social skills, and fine and gross motor abilities through play.

Supporting Play

You can help your Autistic child learn how to play and develop their skills just by playing together. Playing with your child is also a great way to tune in to your child and build your relationship.

Play is a builder of confidence and self-esteem

By helping your child's play develop, you also help your child learn how to:

- Explore their environment
- Learn from others
- Share things
- Take turns
- Imagine what other people are thinking and feeling
- Communicate
- And more!



Did You Know?



Play supports physical development – climbing on sturdy furniture and boxes and rolling on yoga balls may help balance and movement.



Autistic children have strengths tied to how they think and learn. Using these strengths and their interests will maximize a child's learning.



Child's Interests and Motivators

Follow the child's lead

Play **alongside** them

Imitate their play, their sounds, **enjoy** their play

Introduce a new type of play that adds to their enjoyment

Narrate – put words to what they may want to say

Share – take turns being the **leader** and the **follower** in play

Use their likes to add something new to play

Find the child's **social comfort zone**

Do not try to **change** the child's likes, **build on them**



Supporting Play

Try This ...

Too many choices in play can be overwhelming, so keep it simple.

Starting Play

- Show what to do with the toy.
- Join your child at their level – sit in the sandbox, go down the slide, and build the blocks.
- Have Fun! Limit directions and questions, and just play!
- Watch what they like and how they want to play. Now you try their play!

Back & Forth Play

- Be sensitive and responsive. How may they tell you that they like or dislike something? Share words with them in those moments. If they want a ball, say *'ball'* while giving them the ball. If they do not want the ball, say *'no'* or *'bye'* – to model to the child the words they can use.

- Create reasons for communication – preferred toys on a shelf or in clear baskets provide communication opportunities.
- Try rolling a ball to each other, make silly sounds or sing a song together, copy their sounds or actions.
- Name the objects and actions your child is doing – *'blue car', 'drive'*.
- Limit questions, and narrate with simple words – *"roll roll roll"*.
- Encourage your child to let you know what they would like to play with either by pointing, looking at, or naming the toy.

Ending Play

- Present a new toy, game or activity when you see signs that your child is losing interest.
- Clean up together or put away the previous activity – to clearly show which activity you are playing now.
- Change up the pace and energy level of the next activity.





Did You Know ?

People games like singing, gentle tickles, clapping, and peek-a-boo support social-emotional communication.

These social activities start the process of the back-and-forth manner of communication, turn taking, and exploring together.

They motivate children to communicate that they want to continue the activity and help to regulate emotions, energy, and arousal levels so that the child can be as alert and attentive as possible in order to learn.



PLAY is a Skill to be Learned

What to do if your child has a hard time starting or joining play?

You can support their learning by:

- Taking their hand and gently guiding them through the actions
- Give a leading touch to help them to start the action
- Demonstrate the action while they observe and encourage them to copy you
- Point to a part of the toy that may interest them or an action that they could do in play
- Explain the action through words, while you demonstrate and while they copy
- Express lots of excitement when they do engage!

Did You Know ?

Playing and exploring a variety of objects and textures like water, sand, mud, snow, and feathers supports a child's sense of touch.



Leveling Up

Once your child is comfortable with certain toys, games, or types of play, it's time to ***level up!***

Try varying the activity by adding a new action, changing where you play or have new people join.

For example:

If your child has mastered stacking blocks on the floor, try getting them to stand at a low table, add in additional objects, stack blocks outside, or play with a new partner.



Did You Know?



Imitating your child's actions, following their lead instead of teaching, and being less directive leads to longer interactions with them.



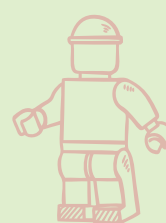
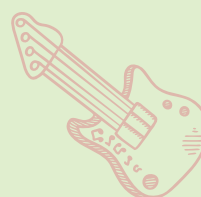
Be Mindful

What is the purpose of the toy for the child?
Do you want them to play with you or play independently?

Electronic toys and toys that your child really likes are sometimes best for independent play time.

Why? Because children tend to want to produce the same action again and again, and these toys can be difficult for the child to disengage their attention from and re-engage with something or someone new.

So, not the best for shared play but great for independent play!



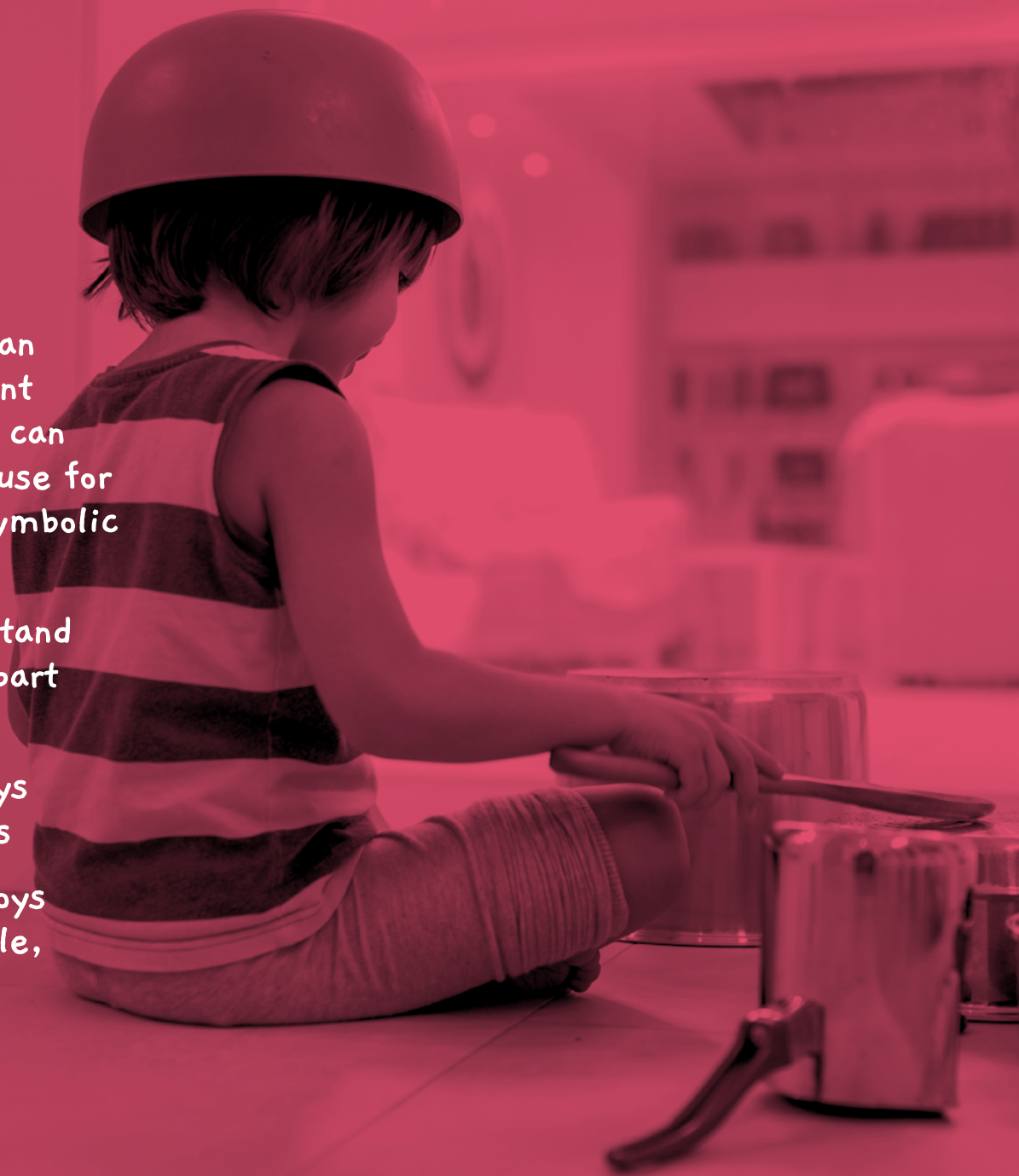
Check out **Autism NS** on **YouTube** for toy and play suggestions!

Did You Know?



In play, one object can symbolize or represent many others (a bowl can be a dish, hat, or house for animals). Through symbolic play, children:

- Explore and understand that objects are a part of play
- Understand that toys can perform actions
- Comprehend that toys can represent people, places, and things



What if your child loves the toy?

Join in rather than introducing a new one.

Ending toys:

- Try to end each activity by saying “*all done?*” or “*finished*” and encourage cleaning up together. This will teach your child there is a start, middle and end to activities and interactions.
- If there is resistance to end an activity, offer two new toys or games to choose from.

Transitioning from one activity to the next is hard!

Try this:

- Make the current activity less exciting
- Stop playing
- Start putting away a few pieces
- Give them a concrete limit; for example, “*two more turns*” or “*one more slide*” at the playground



P L A Y is a Skill that Encourages



Communication

*Understanding & Using Languages
to Express Themselves*



Social Skills

Interacting with Others



Joint Attention

Sharing Interests with Others



Imitation

Learning from Others



Fine Motor

Small Finger & Hand Movements



Gross Motor

Big Body Movements



Cognition

Thinking & Reasoning



Personal Independence


Daily Living Skills

A child is shown from the chest down, wearing a dark t-shirt, sitting and playing a wooden tambourine. The tambourine has a light-colored wooden head with two mallets resting on it. The body of the tambourine is decorated with a geometric pattern of triangles. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with some toys scattered on the ground.

Did You Know?

Simple musical instruments like a tambourine, drum, triangle or shakers allow children to explore sound, rhythm and patterns.

Songs like 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' and 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' are great choices to develop rhyming and rhythm abilities.

A photograph of two young children outdoors. A child in a pink shirt is reaching up towards a blue balloon held by another child. The child holding the balloon is smiling and looking down at it. A yellow balloon is also visible in the foreground. The background shows a body of water and a clear sky.

“What we learn from play, we learn for life.”



Inclusion ✧ Respect ✧ Collaboration ✧ Courage ✧ Acceptance

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



QuickStart Nova Scotia is made possible with support by the Government of Nova Scotia