

Activities For Children With ASD

What do you do with children with ASD when they are not in school, therapies, or other classes? This is the challenging question many parents have, but it's a difficult one to answer for several reasons:

- a. Children with ASD have a very limited interest and do not want to try new things.
- b. Some activities require a certain level of cognitive ability that many children with ASD do not possess, thus this limits the variety of activities they can choose.
- c. For reasons stated above, children with ASD often will require supervision.

Despite these challenges, it's extremely important to find them activities during what people may call "down time;" otherwise, children with ASD will often either do something not appropriate or perform their stims. Stims are like habits in that the more somebody does them, the harder they are to decrease. Stims can also intensify if they are allowed to be performed; for example, if rocking the body is the stim, the rocking may become more intense.

One important note regarding the down time for children with ASD, some may think they should be given the down time. As someone who has worked this population of children for over 16 years, I would say notice what they are doing during their down time. If it is appropriate like playing games or watching videos (not constantly watching the same videos or the same scenes repeatedly, which is stimming behavior) then that is something that should be allowed. If however, you let them go without giving them any directions and they immediately go and do their stims (i.e. rock their body, talk to themselves, line up their toys, watch the same videos over and over, etc.), then you should not give them down time but instead have them do something appropriate. Below are some activities they can do.

Activities

I. Games

Games have certain characteristics that about them that match children with ASD:

a. There are set rules. Rules can be simplified to make them easier for the children to learn. Children with ASD are often used to being told to follow rules. This experience will help them during games.

b. Games are usually played in a structured format. Everybody takes a turn. Start the game at a certain location. If you select a certain card or roll a certain number on a dice, then do another action. Generally, everybody will do the same action, so this format makes it easier for children with ASD to follow.

c. There is usually a goal to the game. In sports, try to get the most points. In a board game, try to finish first. In a video game, complete the mission. Have a certain concrete goal lets the children know what they have to do to win.

d. There is a natural reinforcer built into most games: winning! Even if children with ASD do not understand winning, when they do win, people around them (teachers, friends, family) praise them and are happy for them. This in turn makes the children happy.

e. Games are social. Children with ASD often have difficulty socializing with other people. During games though, there are the built in structure and rules, which allow them to fit in. After playing the game for a while, they know what to expect and how to respond. For example, during cards games, they know what to ask people (e.g. "Do you have the number 8). They know when it's their turn, and when they have to wait. They know how to start the game (ask people, "Do you want to play"), and they know how the game ends (when someone wins).

Types of games:

1. Card games.

Playing cards are inexpensive and portable so you can play in various places. The rules often require matching numbers and colors as well as putting the numbers in order. These are skills children with ASD can learn.

Some card games that require at least two people to play include:

Crazy 8 – This game requires the child to match the card in the pile by either color or suit (i.e. diamond, hearts, etc.). The number 8 card is wild meaning the player that has it can change it to any suit they like. The person who puts down all their cards first win.

The links under each game will bring you to a short video that will teach you how to play the game. You can watch it with the child, but don't rely on the video to teach your child how to play the game. Look down at the end of this section to get some suggestions about how to teach your child to play card games.

Crazy 8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDQjn3k76Mw&list=PL19Vvg5Z2Z7spunUDZyGMZ1CMK5mUNOKV>

Uno

Similar to Crazy 8, but there are extra cards like skip a turn, draw four extra cards, reverse the order, and more. Learning the Crazy 8 game first will be easier for the child. Once it's time to learn Uno, he will already be familiar with the rules.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxKtz0s_IBc&t=2s

Go Fish

This game requires the players to find all four suits of a certain number. Players do this by asking other players, for example, "Do you have number 7?" If the player has 7's, he must give all the 7's to the other player. The player that has the most cards at the end of the game wins. This game is great because it requires the children to directly ask other people questions.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2z9xZYWqmo>

Below are card games that can be played with only one person:

Memory (aka Concentration)

This is the classic game in which you put all the cards face down on the table and then you have to find two cards that match such 5 and 5. If they match, you can take the cards. The object is to keep finding the cards that match until all the cards are removed.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=492bM_dhdR4

Classic Solitaire

Playing this game requires putting numbers in order and matching certain colors and symbols. These are skills children with ASD can learn and from my experience, they tend to like matching colors and symbols.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTG6EgEv1Ag&list=PL19Vvg5Z2Z7u6ohXRAZulUtUCFTw4DyJz>

Other popular one player card games are variations of the solitaire game. Below are some of the more popular ones:

Wish Solitaire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk5YokL8yaA>

Streets and Alleys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzSWIKbfBSY>

FreeCell Solitaire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZWvvggL7IuU>

Spider Solitaire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAusmINetIs>

Pyramid Solitaire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnRIETGqHec>

2. Board games

Candy Land

This is one of the first games children can play. They don't need to know how to count in order to move the pieces. It's great for practicing the names of colors.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y1ih1iu-Jg>

Chutes and Ladders

This classic game is simple to play. It can be very challenging though since at some point it seems like you are first and will win the game, but then if you land on the slide space, you can slide back down and be the last person. This game can be a good way to help the child practice dealing with adversity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cB6JikQ0gU>

Mouse Trap

This game has been around since 1963. Children like building the trap and seeing it in action. Playing this game can take over 30 minutes. Children will have a good opportunity to practice their patience during this game.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Njnm_WAIU-M

Snug as a Bug in a Rug

This is a game that will give the child some practice in discriminating objects in various categories such as shape, number, and size.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GVonUdljbs>

For children who can do some simple math, the following games will not only be fun but help them practice their math:

Sum Swamp

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2XNMFQK4XU&t=134s>

The games below are not board games but my students thought they were fun and they are educational as well.

Shut the box game

The child can actually play this game by herself or with three other people. When they first start playing, you can write her a cheat sheet with

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSsjeIROo5k>

Guess Who

Another game that can help the child be more aware of people's faces is the game Guess Who. In this two player game, each player has to guess the name of the other player's person out of the 28 people on each player's board. This is done by asking the other player questions such as, "Is your person wearing a hat," or "Does your person have white hair?" By asking these questions, people on the board are eliminated to help the player guess the name of the other player's person. This game is for children with a higher cognitive ability. Each turn requires the player to ask a question thus providing a lot of social interaction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkRdgE3g-CE>

Memory Game (with various pictures)

This game was mentioned already in the cards game section above, but it can be played with pictures as well instead of playing cards. Using pictures of vocabulary words the child has just learned would make this game not only fun but educational as well. In the video provided below, drawings of fruits were used. You can also use pictures of animals, letters, action words, vehicles, etc. Children with ASD often need improvement in their ability to remember things (i.e. short term and working memory). These kinds of memory games can play a significant factor in their improvement.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x6AGMnePQE>

II. Video Games

Some people may think too much video games or too much "screen time" is not good for a child. For typical children, this is true. For children with ASD though, it can be very difficult

to find activities for them to do. They prefer to stim or do inappropriate behaviors. Therefore, if the child likes video games, they are a much better option than stimming or inappropriate behaviors.

Parents do need to consider what kind of games their children play though. Certain games are violent or graphic and not appropriate for certain ages. Check the games recommended age before playing.

There is a vast variety of games now that can be played on many different kinds of devices.

For the computer, games can be installed on the computer, or they can be played online. Below are a few websites that offer free games. Some sites will show ads since the games are free. Children learn quickly how to close the ads. When introducing these websites to your child, monitor them to make sure they are playing appropriate games. The websites do not categorize the games nicely so a young children's game can be put next to an adult violent gun shooting game. There are sites like the first two (PBS and cartoon network) that you can trust will have all their contents appropriate for children.

<https://pbskids.org/>

<https://www.cartoonnetworkasia.com/>

<https://poki.com/>

<https://www.ufreegames.com/>

<https://www.enjoy4fun.com/>

<https://www.a10.com/>

There are also consoles like PlayStation, X-box, Wii, Game Boy, Nintendo DE, and Nintendo Switch just to name the popular ones. If you can rent games where you live, try renting first to see if your child likes the game before purchasing it.

Ipad or Android app games provide children with another option. There are a lot of free android games but they sometimes require you to watch ads, which can make for an unpleasant experience. As stated earlier, monitor your child to make sure they are:

- a. Playing appropriate games
- b. Know how to get rid of the ads
- c. Not clicking ads which can lead them to other websites

III. Education websites

There are many kinds of education websites. The one for children with ASD are called personalized learning oriented educational websites. Most require a monthly fee. If you pay yearly, they will give you a discount. Most will give you a trial period to let you test it to determine if it is right for your child. Some of the popular ones include:

<https://www.education.com/>

<https://www.ixl.com>

<https://www.mathplayground.com/>

<https://www.khanacademy.org>

www.starfall.com

Reading websites:

There are also websites that focus on reading. Some will allow children to read many kinds of books. Some have videos of people reading the books out loud while also showing pages from the book. There are free websites while others require a fee.

<https://storylineonline.net/>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TheScholasticChannel/search>

<https://www.indypl.org/blog/for-parents/free-video-read-alouds>

<https://www.readingiq.com/>

www.getepic.com

IV. Sports /Exercise

Doing something physical is a great break from therapy which requires the child to sit in a chair. Going outside to do some exercise could wake up a child and give them more energy. Some popular outdoor activities to try include:

Jogging, riding the bike, swimming, as well as sports like basketball, baseball (playing catch or hitting the ball), and soccer. Playgrounds also offer slides, swings, and various climbing structures. Even a walk in the park or to the supermarket would be a nice change of pace than sitting inside.

For indoor activities when the weather is not good, try the activities below:

Running on the treadmill, ping pong, badminton, playing catch with a soft ball, dart board that uses soft darts or Velcro balls. There are also many exercise videos online that are catered towards children (some will dress up as Spiderman or Mario while they are teaching). The videos are about 10 minutes long. They encourage the children to follow what they are doing in the video. It's like having an exercise teacher in your house. Look at some examples below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3LPrhI0v-w>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X1p0Yd6WAo&t=370s>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_R1dhwY9RE&t=246s

Gyms for children where various classes are offered and led by trained professionals can also be a great option. They often have equipment that you cannot find in the typical playground. The children's gym may be a better option for younger children who tend to fall more since there are usually soft mats everywhere.

Warning regarding sports and exercise:

When doing exercises, sports, or outdoor activities, be sure to not allow the child to do stims like rocking her body or flapping her hands or gazing at objects (looking at things in an awkward manner). Sometimes it can be very challenging to stop the child from doing these stims because they might be moving frequently such as preventing a child from rocking her body when she is jogging. It's been mentioned on this website how important it is to stop the stims if you want significant progress. If the activity becomes an opportunity for the child to just keep stimming, then consider choosing another activity.