



Child-led Play Opens the Door to Connection and Interaction with Young Autistic Children

Fun interactions are a wonderful context for connecting with your child and supporting their social communication skills. One of the best ways to get an interaction going with your child – and to keep it going for longer – is to make sure your play is **child-led**.



What is Child-led Play?

Child-led play is about **Following Your Child's Lead** while having fun together. This means letting your child choose **what** they want to play and **how** they want to play. In child-led play, you see the world through your child's eyes to discover what's most motivating and interesting to them – and then you join in!

Benefits of Following Your Child's Lead

BACK AND FORTH INTERACTION


Following Your Child's Lead not only gets an interaction going, but keeps the interaction going for longer. Children are more likely to interact with us when we join them in the activities that are most interesting to them.

AUTONOMY

Children often spend much of their day following a routine that is set out for them. Many of their daily routines involve following the important adults in their life (e.g. getting dressed, having meals or going to daycare). By following your child's lead, your child gets to feel what it's like to be the leader! This supports their autonomy – they choose what and how you are playing together.

MOTIVATION

When your child takes the lead, they feel more motivated to engage in the activity because it's something they are enjoying in the moment. This gives you the chance to see what motivates them and what they enjoy the most, and you can use that to model the language that is most meaningful to them.



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How to Follow Your Child's Lead in Child-led Play

Step 1: Observe Wait and Listen™ (OWL™)

The first step is to wait and notice what your child is interested in. This is key because it gives your child the lead. Then you observe what they are doing and listen to any sounds or words your child uses. When you Observe, Wait and Listen™, you can see what your child is interested in at that very moment!



Step 2: Get Face to Face

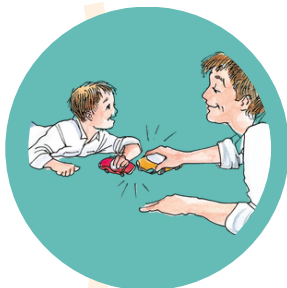
Get down to the child's physical level and position yourself so that you are right across from them. Being face to face brings you physically and emotionally closer to your child. This makes it easier for you to observe what your child is doing and also makes it easier for your child to notice you.

Step 3: Join In and Play Like a Child!

Do the same thing: If they are pushing a train along a track, pick up another train and copy what they are doing.

Make comments: If your child pushes the train on the track, you can say "choo choo goes the train" and then wait to see what your child does next!

Make it into a game: Sometimes following their lead naturally turns into a game, such as playing peek-a-boo or crashing your toy cars into one another. The key is to watch and see what your child enjoys the most.



Step 4: Wait for them to respond

Once you join in by doing the same thing, commenting, or making a game together, you must then WAIT for your child to respond. Are they smiling, laughing or sending you a message? When you play together, what part is the most fun to them?

Step 5: Have fun!

Play like a child and share in the fun together! Remember, this is their turn to be the leader and for you to follow where their curiosity leads them.



Child-led play allows you to see the world of play from your child's eyes. Following their lead and joining in the play is a great way to get the interaction going while having fun together!

The information in this handout is drawn from the Hanen More Than Words® Program and parent guidebook. Visit www.hanen.org/MTWguidebook for more information.