

Everyday Activities of Toddlers and Their Families Making Every Moment Count



Toddlers learn by doing. They learn about their world and how to interact with others by exploring and participating in activities around them. For children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this is very important. Learning in everyday activities where they use what they learn makes the skills immediately useful and functional and more likely to generalize. Everyday activities and routines at home provide an incredibly rich source of learning opportunities for toddlers.

Everyday activities can vary widely across families and cultures, but there are many common activities that families share. Despite differences, most families spend time eating, caring for each other, doing family chores, playing, and learning together. By taking advantage of the activities that you are already spending time doing, you can provide the intensity needed to support your child's learning.

All families of toddlers spend some time in everyday activities in the following 8 activity categories:



Play with People includes social games such as peek-a-boo, “I’m gonna get you” and hide & seek. It also includes songs and rhymes like “Ring-around-the-Rosy” and “Itsy-bitsy Spider.” Because children with ASD can become overly focused on objects, keeping objects out of the activity removes the competition for their attention. It is a good category to get started with because you can quickly learn to provide supports for many components of active engagement and be successful getting your child to look at them, laugh, and share enjoyment.

Play with Props is a good next step before activities with small toys and objects. Props include play equipment such as a slide, rocking horse, or swing, and moveable objects, such as a large ball, wagon, blanket, or sofa cushions. Having large props is a way to introduce objects in play without too much competition for attention. By adding motivating actions and movements, you can help to create enjoyment with the object and interaction.



Meals and Snacks provide a great context for sharing enjoyment and interests as well as natural everyday practice of requests and protests. By having your child participate in preparing the food, cooking, setting the table, and cleaning up, you can create more opportunities for practice and learning.

Caregiving Activities such as washing hands, dressing, changing diapers, bathing, and brushing teeth happen many times a day and can be structured to offer many opportunities for productive roles, social interaction, and communication.





Play with Toys includes constructive play with solid objects like blocks and puzzles; or fluid materials like play dough, sand, or finger paint, and pretend play with vehicles, animals, or dolls. Children with ASD may have limited skills in pretend play or restricted interests to particular toys. They may have relative strengths with constructive play, and therefore, that may be easier to get started to promote social interaction when playing with toys.

Family Chores like picking up toys, putting clothes in the laundry, feeding a pet, getting the mail, or taking out the trash or recycling are opportunities to engage your child. Taking advantage of the time that you already spend doing family chores can create learning opportunities during these necessary tasks.



Books, Letters, and Numbers can help promote language and literacy. Children with ASD are often interested in shapes, colors, letters, and numbers. These activities can be set up to promote interaction and sharing interests with books, magazines, photo albums, iPad apps, or computer games.

Transitions are the moments that occur between activities and are critical to adding predictability to what is coming next as well as expanding opportunities for learning throughout the day. Teaching your child how to “make a plan” as one activity ends can help provide a smooth transition and promote active engagement from one activity to the next.



Practice makes perfect! Learning to embed intervention supports and strategies in a variety of everyday activities across these 8 categories will promote learning and generalization for both you and your child. However, moving from simply having opportunities to promoting active engagement for a toddler with ASD can be challenging. It may require careful planning and support by you and your early intervention provider. Families may need help to expand meaningful activities with new ideas or to add new types of routines and activities that will build your child’s inventory of experiences.

Variety is the spice of life! As you gain confidence and your child makes gains, you are encouraged to create “hybrid” categories by mixing elements, such as playing with toys in the bathtub, looking at a photo album during snack, or playing a social game during diaper changing.

All the world’s a stage! The home provides a safe context for you to become comfortable and confident using intervention supports and strategies that you are learning. But don’t forget that learning opportunities extend beyond the walls of home.

These 8 activity categories can be extended to places in the community. Families go to the grocery store, the post office, the doctor, and run all sorts of other errands. Toddlers and their families also spend time at the neighborhood playground, library, church, or temple. Families visit other family members and friends, attend school activities for siblings, or go out to dinner. These natural environments in the community also provide rich and varied opportunities where learning can occur.

Parents are often surprised to find that some of the most fruitful opportunities for a child to learn occur in the context of the activities you are already doing each day. When you take a close look at how your family spends time, you will find moments for learning where you least expect it. Most importantly, by taking advantage of the ordinary events of everyday life, you really do make every moment count for your child’s learning. Moments add up to minutes and hours that are critical to achieve the intensity needed to impact learning and development for a child with ASD.