12

Let's Pretend!

Chapter goal: To give you strategies for helping your child develop pretend play that is spontaneous, creative, and flexible.

Why Pretend Play Is So Important

Pretend play (or ***symbolic play***, as many people refer to it) helps expand children's thinking abilities, because it involves play ideas that come from a child's imagination rather than from the physical environment. When a child picks up a toy animal and makes it walk, growl, or eat, those ideas are coming from the child's mind, in contrast to picking up a puzzle piece and putting it in the puzzle—actions for which the goals are built into the physical materials. The mental aspect of pretend play is deeply connected to language and other kinds of thought, and it is thus a very important part of young children's mental or cognitive development.

What's Happening in Autism?

Young children with autism have difficulty learning and using pretend play. Although they typically have many object interests, the world of pretending does not seem to come naturally to them. Young children with ASD may be very adept at playing with puzzles, blocks, shape sorters, and even letters and numbers, and yet when faced with a doll, a toy bottle, a spoon, and a plate, they may seem to have no idea what to do with the objects. Pretend play goes beyond using an object as it was intended (such as picking up a fork and putting it in your mouth), though that is an important beginning point; it involves using ideas that come from the imagination, rather than from the objects themselves (such as pretending there

is ice cream in a bowl and scooping up the ice cream, eating it, and then getting another "scoop of ice cream" and saying, "Want some ice cream?").

By about 2 years of age, children typically start to use pretend play. You will see them treating a block as if it were a piece of cake, "combing" a doll's hair by using a rectangular block, and so on. However, this development of pretend play doesn't emerge naturally in most young children with autism; it needs to be taught. One theory regarding why it does not develop naturally is that parts of the brain that are important for abstract thinking, such as the frontal lobe, develop more slowly and aren't as well connected to other parts of the brain in autism. The parts of the brain that are responsible for perceiving and remembering the concrete world and for understanding concrete information and facts appear to be functioning well—in fact, more strongly than in other children in some cases. This helps us understand why many people with autism have excellent memories for concrete details but some difficulty with pretend play and, later, abstract thought.

Imaginary play skills are closely linked to language skills. In fact, studies have shown that when a child with autism develops pretend play, his language abilities also increase, even if therapy has focused only on improving pretend play skills and not on language directly.[1] Why? Pretend play activities teach a child skills that allow him to develop a "shared experience" with another person, a joint focus of attention. This provides a context for developing, using, and practicing language.

Why Is It a Problem?

As just explained, the close relationships among symbolic play, language development, and abstract thought highlight an important area of relative weakness in autism. The themes of pretend play are about people and their lives; developing pretend play skills helps young children with autism expand their knowledge about the social world. Pretend play abilities also help young children with ASD join in such play with their typically developing peers and expand the learning opportunities available through such interactions. It allows them to learn what others are thinking and feeling by pretending to experience what others are experiencing. And finally, in pretend play, the world of ideas overpowers the physical world. This capacity for thought to overrule the physical world is quite important for children with ASD, for whom the physical world seems to speak very strongly. When a block becomes a key for a car engine, a bar of soap for a baby's bath, or a handful of food for a toy horse, the child's ideas are molding and shaping the physical world into the child's mental world.

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[1]Kasari, C., et al. Language outcome in autism: Randomized comparison of joint attention and play interventions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *76*(1), 125–137, 2008.

What You Can Do to Increase Your Child's Symbolic Play Skills

Young children with autism can learn to produce and enjoy symbolic play, just as they can learn to use and become proficient with language. They need exposure, practice, and guidance to develop these skills, but parent–child daily toy play is a powerful tool for developing pretend play. You can teach symbolic play in just the same way that you have taught the other play skills in Chapter 11—through joint activity routines. The time to start introducing symbolic play is after your child is playing with many different toys, combining objects in play, and combining several different actions in his play with individual toys. Your child needs to know how to imitate, how to engage in joint attention, and how to use many objects in functional play spontaneously and reciprocally before it is time to move forward and build more imaginative, make-believe play.

Symbolic play involves three types of play skills:

1. The first is called ***animate play*** and involves using dolls and animals as if they were alive and could act on objects themselves, such as having a doll pick up a cup and drink from it, or having an animal brush its own hair or fur with a comb.
2. The second is called ***symbolic substitution*** and involves using objects as if they were something else, as when a child uses a Popsicle stick to stir in a cup as if it were a spoon, or flies a block in the air as if it were a helicopter.
3. The third type involves ***symbolic combinations***—putting together several different pretend play acts to create a more complicated scene. An example would be stirring pretend water in a teapot, putting the lid on, pouring the water into cups, and then taking a drink, making sipping noises, and maybe using a spoon to stir the cup. This sequence involves six different symbolic actions that together make a logical flow, the way the scene really happens—a symbolic combination.

There are five specific steps you can carry out to facilitate these three different types of pretend play skills:

Step 1. Teach conventional, or functional, play skills.

Step 2. Animate dolls and animals.

Step 3. Move from imitation to spontaneous symbolic play.

Step 4. Teach symbolic substitutions.

Step 5. Develop symbolic combinations.

In the following pages, we describe how to carry out each of these steps, give you some ideas for activities to try, and suggest what you can do to solve problems that may come up. Be aware that this sequence takes a long time for young children to develop. Toddlers typically develop these skills beginning at age 12 months and continuing to 36 months and beyond. Think of this as a long-term activity that may take a year or two to complete, but one that you can start immediately.

Step 1. Teach Conventional, or Functional, Play Skills

Rationale. ***Conventional (functional) play*** involves playing with objects whose meanings are defined socially—that is, by how people use them. Conventional play teaches children the social meaning of people's actions: Objects carry significance beyond their physical attributes or cause-and-effect relation. In other words, an object has a meaning defined by society rather than by its sensory characteristics. Let's use a comb as an example. A comb's meaning, or identity, is defined by how people use it—in contrast to, say, a jack-in-the-box, whose meaning is defined by its physical causality (the relationship between turning the lever and the clown popping out of the box). The cause-and-effect relationship defines the jack-in-the-box, but the meaning of a comb, a toothbrush, a tissue, or a spoon is defined by how people functionally use each object. Conventional or functional play is being used when a child picks up a play tea set and stirs a spoon in the empty cup or pretends to drink by putting cup to mouth, or picks up a hairbrush and briefly touches it to his hair, or puts a hat on Dad's head, or tries to put on Mommy's sunglasses. It is as if the child is saying, "I know what people do with this; it's for your nose," or "This is for drinking." The child is "naming" and giving a social meaning to the toy with his gestures in his play.

Activity: *Teach Your Child to Use Realistic Objects during Conventional Play*

Conventional play is an important step in play development, because it means that the child has learned certain actions from watching other people. This demonstrates social learning—attending to what other people are doing and imitating what they do. You can help your child develop conventional play skills through adapting the steps of your regular joint activity framework, as follows:

1. Introduce the object(s) during setup (e.g., a toy phone).
2. Model and prompt the main theme (e.g., putting the phone to your ear and saying, "Hello?").
3. Use imitation to help your child coordinate actions on her body and on yours (e.g., give the phone to your child and encourage her to answer it and put the phone to her ear).

4. Vary and expand the play to include other "characters" (e.g., putting the phone up to a doll's or another family member's ear).
5. Expand the play into other activities, especially self-care and household tasks (e.g., have Dad call on the real phone and let your child answer it).

Here are ideas for adapting the steps:

- **Setup:** Offer functional play objects like toy animals, comb, brush, cup, fork, tissue, hat, beads, mirror, toy food, dolls, tea sets, doctor kits, sunglasses, phones, and toothbrushes in a box to your child. If she shows some interest, let your child choose an object and explore it, just as in any other object play routine.

- **Theme:** For your turn, model the "conventional" (social) action with the object, using relevant action words ("Brush hair" while briefly brushing your hair or your child's; "Zoom, zoom" while rolling a car fast; making drinking noises with a cup and saying, "Yum, good juice"; etc.). After your demonstration, hand the object back to your child and encourage him to imitate, prompting, shaping, and fading your prompts just as you have done in teaching any other kind of object imitation.

- **Role reversal:** As you model conventional play acts, model them on both yourself and your child. As your child takes the object, prompt her to act on you with the object, as well as on herself. When you do this, the two of you are reversing roles! Encourage role reversal games (e.g., you put a hat on the child and the child puts the hat on you). Hats, beads, brush, cup, sunglasses, spoon, and many other toys/objects work very well for role reversal. Experimenting with double toy sets (two of each object) can turn into lovely, imitative, role reversal games. As you practice the role reversal in these games, use your name and your child's name to mark turns ("Mama's hair, Jerrod's hair," "Emily's turn, my turn").

- **Variation: Using dolls, toy animals, hand puppets, and other people.** After your child is both imitating and spontaneously producing conventional actions on you and on himself, it's time to bring other "characters" into the play. Large dolls with clearly defined facial features; stuffed animals; hand puppets like Elmo or Cookie Monster; other family members—including these characters in your role reversal games will expand your child's play and move your child closer and closer to symbolic play. To introduce these new characters, first model a conventional play act on yourself while labeling it (and making sound effects). Then do the same action on the doll or animal, using the same simple descriptive language, and follow that by encouraging and prompting your child to "feed Pooh," "brush Teddy," "hat for baby."

- **Expansion:** Finally, you can expand the number of conventional objects and actions that you model and the situations in which you use them. You can model conventional actions on objects during bath time, by modeling rubbing your face or arm with a washcloth and then handing it to your child. When it's time to brush teeth, first model toothbrushing with your own toothbrush on your own teeth. During mealtimes, model eating a bite of fruit with a fork, and encourage your child to do the same. When your child needs a messy face wiped, first model it by wiping your own mouth with a napkin, and then encourage your child to do so. If something spills, model wiping up the spill with a paper towel, and then encourage and prompt your child to imitate you. If you are mixing pancake batter or eggs and milk for scrambled eggs, model stirring for your child, and encourage her to take a turn. Help your child learn the social meanings of the many conventional objects that you handle in your child's presence during the day. Including your child in these kinds of activities for a few minutes gives your child many more opportunities to learn from you about what people do and the words that go with objects and actions in life's daily routines. Conventional play is the stepping stone to symbolic play.

Here are some more activity ideas:

- Use themes your child knows: bathing, eating, dressing, going to bed, familiar songs and finger plays, playing on swings and slides. Use a washcloth to pretend that you're washing a bear's hands, face, and tummy. Add the "soap" to make sure the bear gets really clean. Or dress your child and his favorite stuffed animal together, taking turns to put a shirt, shorts, and socks on each one. Maybe your routine for putting your child to bed is to get a drink of milk or water, sing a song, and then kiss her goodnight. Help your child carry out these actions with her doll. Carry them out on the doll yourself as you put your child to bed, and encourage your child to do likewise.
- A community outing—especially a new experience, like going to the zoo or going to the doctor's office—opens up a new set of experiences to act out in pretend play. During play, act out the steps involved in the recent experience: buying an admission ticket to the zoo, walking around the house to look at the different animals, and pretending to feed the nice ones; or using a doctor's play kit to take an animal's temperature/blood pressure, give it a shot, put on a bandage, and give the animal a lollipop.
- Sensory social routines can be acted out with animals and dolls too. If your child has a favorite song sequence, like "Ring-around-the-Rosy," you can incorporate a doll into the routine as if it were another person. You can also hold two small action figures as if they are holding hands and

have the dolls act out "Ring-around-the-Rosy." Or if you and your child are each holding the doll or animal's hand, you can swing it back and forth to the tune of "London Bridge."

- Self-care activities are great ways to incorporate this theme. When bathing your child, putting her to bed, having dinner, or brushing teeth, incorporate the same actions on yourself or on a large doll or favorite animal. Encourage your child to act on you or on the doll, just as you are acting on your child.
- During book routines, have the doll or animal sit beside your child. Show pictures and label them for your child, then for the animal.
- Household chores can also be used as character play opportunities. Your child's dolls, animals, or characters can help water the garden, feed the dog, and participate in other activities, just as you have your child join in.

What if my child is not interested in conventional play? Initially your play might need to focus more on the objects involved in conventional play than on the social meaning. For example, mealtime is associated with plates, bowls, and feeding utensils. Encourage your child to feed you a bite off her spoon or to share her sippy cup. Show her with your fork how to feed a doll or stuffed animal seated on the table. Add fun effects, sounds, and lots of enthusiasm and praise to each attempt your child makes to participate (even watching what you're doing counts), to increase the social appeal of the play activity. Try extending the number of play actions or length of time your child can continue before transitioning to the next activity. This idea can also work during other daily routines, like dressing or bathing. You could take turns dressing the doll, animal, or each other, or using a washcloth to give mini-baths to each other and play objects. The goal is to keep it creative, so your child will become more interested in what you're showing her with the materials.

Summary of Step 1

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you now have ideas for using real objects to teach this first step of symbolic play—functional play—during daily joint activities with your child. You have also introduced a doll or other figures into functional play. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for expanding your child's play—knowledge you will use in **Step 2**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

Note: This is a good time to move on to the next chapter. Continue to read this chapter and to focus on building pretend play skills with your child, but start

Chapter 13 as well. Chapter 13 focuses on developing speech, and the kinds of play you are doing here will help your child make progress in speech as well.

Activity Checklist: Am I Using Realistic Objects during Symbolic Play Activities?

____ I have ideas for what kinds of real-world activities to use when playing with my child.
____ I have ideas for what dolls/animals and materials can be included in these activities.
____ I have prepared a box of conventional play objects that can be used on myself, my child, and a doll/animal/figure.
____ I am adapting the joint activity framework (setup, theme, variation, closing/transition) as suggested above to teach different symbolic play acts to my child.
____ I am keeping the joint activity short, interesting, and fun.
____ I know how to pause and wait for my child to carry out his or her own functional play acts with the objects.
____ I know how to model different functional play acts with the objects for my child to imitate on me and the doll/animal/figure.
____ My child and I are practicing several different functional play routines in joint activities (meals, bath, dressing, changing, outdoor play, errands).

Gracie is 28 months old and has recently started using single words to communicate greetings, protests, and some needs and wants. Gracie's mother wants to expand her functional play skills to help usher in pretend play. Gracie loves her Yo Gabba Gabba! *dolls, and she often carries one or two in her arms when walking around the house. When it's time for a snack, Gracie's mom starts to include the dolls in the routine. Gracie seats herself in her chair; Mom sits kitty-corner from Gracie; and two of the dolls are seated on the table between Mom and Gracie. Gracie selects juice from her mother's choice of crackers or a drink, and Mom responds by pouring juice into the cup, followed by pretending to pour some into the dolls' cups (she adds a "sssh" sound for effect). Gracie watches her mom intently as she gives the doll a drink from the cup. Mom makes slurping sounds as the doll drinks, which Gracie finds funny. Gracie takes a drink from her cup, which Mom has the doll imitate. When Gracie finishes, Mom encourages her to give a sip to the doll, modeling with her own cup. Gracie watches and then imitates her mother's action, extending the cup to the doll. Her mother makes the slurping sound, and Gracie laughs. Gracie holds out her cup again and looks right at her mother, as if signaling her mother to make the slurping sound. Her mother responds immediately with the sound again, letting Gracie know*

that she has understood her gesture. Next, Gracie's mom shows Gracie how to feed a cracker to the doll, and she adds chewing sounds while the doll eats the cracker. Her mom holds up the juice container or bowl of crackers for Gracie to choose what to give the doll. Gracie says "ca" for cracker, and Mom gives her two pieces—one for Gracie to eat herself, which she does immediately, and the second to feed to the doll with Mom's help. Mom accompanies the doll's bite with chewing sounds ("yum yum yum"), which makes Gracie smile. Mom gives the doll a drink and intentionally spills a little juice on its face. She points out to Gracie that the doll's face is dirty, and hands Gracie a napkin to wipe its face. Gracie wipes her own face first, but after Mom points to the doll and explains again, Gracie helps to wipe the doll's face. Mom and Gracie continue with these three actions—drink, eat, and wipe—for a few more minutes, until Gracie indicates that she is finished and snack time is all done.

Ben's mother often finds that it's difficult to keep Ben, her 4-year-old, occupied when she is grocery shopping. He often whines and wants to get out of the grocery cart seat. She decides to use pretend play to teach him some appropriate actions. At home, she writes out a list with some food items, and then she places the items (bananas, carrots, toy pizza, ketchup bottle, and a box of animal crackers) in various locations throughout their family room. After she gets Ben's little sister's grocery cart, she tells Ben that they're going to the grocery store at home! She reads the list and says they need to find bananas somewhere in the family room. They stomp around the room looking until Ben vocalizes and points to the bananas on top of the couch. Ben and his mother run over to the bananas and put them in the cart. Next, his mother asks whether they should look for the bottle of ketchup or the pizza. Ben chooses the pizza, and the search is under way. Ben finds the pizza next to the television. Mom chooses the next item from the list to look for and gives Ben a clue to its location. The game continues until all five items from the grocery list have been found. The last item is a box of animal crackers—a favorite of Ben's. They roll the cart into the kitchen, and Mom puts the items away and has Ben put the animal crackers on the table. They then sit down at the table together with the animal crackers and a drink, ready to celebrate their shopping trip.

Step 2. Animate Dolls and Animals

Rationale. Step 2 helps your child understand that dolls can represent people and their actions. Agents of action—people and animals—act spontaneously on the world. They cause actions to happen; this is what defines them as agents, or animate beings. Toys and other inanimate objects cannot act spontaneously, but living things—people and animals—can. Very early on, children understand the difference between animate and inanimate objects. They act it out when they manipulate dolls and animals so that the figures are acting on things—walking, growling, waving, eating, drinking, dancing, and so on. The strategies described

above have taught your child how to easily incorporate dolls and animals into lots of pretend play actions. The next step is to help your child learn about how figures can also "act" as independent agents.

You will continue to use joint activity routines, offering objects and following your child's interest, taking turns, both participating, both adding ideas, and following your child's cues about when it is time to be finished.

Activity: *Have Dolls Take on Human Actions*

Here are ideas for adapting the joint activity routine to your child to use dolls or stuffed animals as if they were "alive" and able to act on their own:

- **Setup:** Begin by bringing out a box of conventional toys or objects that people use on their bodies (brush, comb, sunglasses, hat, necklaces, bracelets, cup, feeding utensils, plate, plastic food, washcloth, soap, telephone, napkin, tissue, and so on). Have your child choose one of the toys, and either show your child an action that she already knows, or let your child show you a functional action with that object. The action will be directed to either your child's body or yours.
- **Theme:** As the two of you act this out, name both the action and the person ("Feed Mommy," "Joshua drink," "Comb hair").
- **Variation:** As you have done before, bring out a doll or an animal, demonstrate doing the action to the animal or doll while naming the action and animal/doll ("Feed Oscar," "Brush kitty"); then hand the object to your child, and encourage your child to carry out the same action on the figure ("Joshua, feed kitty," "Joshua, give baby a drink"). Provide physical prompts if your child needs them to succeed. Then take a turn yourself and perform the action on the toy. Go back and forth a few times, you and your child acting on the toy, the child, yourself, while labeling the action and the recipient each time (e.g., "Feed Mama," "Feed baby," "Feed Joshua").
- **Variation:** Now have the doll do the action on itself. Hold the object in the doll's hand, and move the doll's arm through the action. Narrate for your child ("See, Elmo is eating," "Baby brushes hair"). Have the doll carry out the act on your child's body ("Elmo brushes Caitlin's hair"). In this step, the doll is acting as if it were alive, or animate; it is an independent agent of action.
- **Closing/transition:** As you run out of ideas, or as your child's interest starts to wane, offer the box and ask, "All done?" while putting your object into the box. If your child also puts his objects in the box, you can say, "All

done with Oscar" (or "kitty," etc.), and have your child help you put the box away and make a different choice.

You have just shown your child how the doll can carry out an independent action. Now, as you play out the themes that you have developed in Step 1 with functional play, add this step to each of your routines: Have the doll or character use the objects on itself, on you, and on your child. As this becomes familiar to your child, give your child a turn and help your child "animate" the figure by making it act. In addition to having the figure use the objects, the figure can also jump, run, and go to sleep. Toy animals can "drink" out of water bowls, "eat" their food in their food dishes, and walk on all fours. They can lie down on their sides and go to sleep. Help your child learn to imitate these kinds of actions, in which the characters themselves are doing the actions that are part of the scenes from life you have been playing out with your child. Once your child easily produces acts in which he directs actions to other people and dolls and animals in play (feeds them, gives them drinks, etc.), you will begin to model how the doll or animal can also direct actions inside the play scene.

Now, in your daily pretend play activities with your child, have the animals or dolls routinely participate in the actions as actors once the theme gets going, and help your child carry out these actions. After you have had your child imitate this successfully many times, wait to see if your child will make a figure act independently, either spontaneously or after your suggestion. If your child helps the character produce an action without a physical prompt, imitate the action on your own body right away, and respond with enthusiasm! If not, keep trying. As your child builds up more ideas, more skill, and more enjoyment from pretend play, he will begin to have characters create actions.

Here are more ideas for animate play:

- You can incorporate animate play actions into all kinds of daily routines. Having a big doll in the bathtub allows you and your child to wash the baby's belly, hair, face, and feet, just as you wash your child's belly, hair, face, and feet. Baby or Elmo can be at the table during a meal, sitting beside your child, getting a bib, getting some "bites" and "drinks," and having his face wiped with the napkin. Lion can sit on the potty after your child sits on the potty. The baby doll can have a diaper changed after you change Madison's diaper. Your child can take Curious George on a walk in the stroller after you come back from a walk with your child in a stroller. Thomas the Tank Engine can take turns in the swing with your child, can be on the swing next to your child, or can take turns on the slide. Cookie Monster can go to the doctor's with your child and have his ears checked, his height measured, his chest listened to. He can go get his hair cut right along with your child. Dora the Explorer can draw her own picture with

crayons. Incorporating figures into your child's daily routines emphasizes the "human" qualities of animate toys and helps your child develop the ideas behind pretend play.

- Physical actions can also be used to illustrate animate characteristics. Have the characters kick balls to your child, jump on the trampoline with your child or off the bottom step, bounce on the bed, and act out song routines that your child knows and loves. Characters can splash water, blow bubbles, drive cars and trucks, and be part of "Ring-around-the-Rosy." Encourage your child to include the characters and act out these actions, prompting if you need to and then continuing the action with your child so there is a fun reason to continue.

Summary of Step 2

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you will have found object routines that you can make dolls and other figures act out on themselves, on you, and on your child during your joint activity routines. You have also shown your child how to do this, and your child is imitating you in "animating" the figures. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for facilitating spontaneous symbolic play—knowledge you will use in **Step 3**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

Activity Checklist: Am I Using Dolls/Animals as "Action Agents"?

____ My child likes the dolls, animals, or figures being used in play.
____ I know how to offer choices among objects to keep my child motivated to continue a joint activity.
____ My child and I are able to carry out conventional play acts with objects on each other and the doll/animal/figure.
____ My child can imitate my actions with the figures in several different scenes, including making the figure act independently.
____ My child and I clean up the objects together and choose the next joint activity to do.

What about Gracie? *Gracie and her mother have been following the joint activity script to take turns giving crackers and juice to Gracie's dolls. After reading the suggestions in this part of the chapter, Gracie's mother sets up snack time a little differently just by adding a variation to the usual routine. She takes Gracie to her room to have a pretend snack, and together they set out the cups, saucers, spoons, plates, and*

napkins and take a seat along with Gracie's doll on the floor. Gracie's mom takes out a bib and asks Gracie to help her put it on the doll (just to vary the play); this is followed by pouring "juice" into each of their cups, including the doll's. Gracie's mom now models having one or the other of the dolls carry out one of the different play actions that she has planned with the objects, by manipulating the doll's hands with an object so that it feeds itself from the plate. (Other actions could be pouring drinks, stirring with the spoon in a cup, placing items on its plate, wiping its mouth.) After she models, it's Gracie's turn, and Gracie carries out the action on herself. She is imitating the doll! In Mom's next turn, she has the doll give Gracie a bite of real cookie. Gracie eats it and then offers a piece to the doll. The doll then gives it to Mom. They continue to carry out actions from snack time with each other, so that there's a round robin of turn taking among the three play partners—Mom, Gracie, and the doll. When Gracie's interest in the activity fades, Mom has her help place the materials and dolls in a container, and they move on to the next play activity. In this routine, the doll has acted as an independent agent, and Gracie has treated it as such.

What about Ben? *Ben likes his toy cars more than any doll or stuffed animal, so his mother decides to use these in the play. She tells Ben that his cars need a bath, and they go to the bathroom sink and get a washcloth, soap, lotion, and a towel (all the items she would use for giving Ben a bath). She also includes an Ernie doll as a character. Since this is a new routine for Ben, she models each step with the first car (pouring water into the sink, putting soap on the washcloth, rubbing the car with the washcloth, rinsing the soap off, drying the car off with the towel, and putting lotion on the car), helping Ben participate with each action. With the next couple of cars, Ben is able to do more of the routine, with her prompts. Mom now has Ernie join in the car washing, and Ernie gives props to Ben and also helps with the steps. Mom now uses Ernie instead of herself as the participating partner. Ben likes this new activity and starts to imitate Ernie; he also gives Ernie a car and a towel when Mom suggests it. When all the cars have had their bath, Ben and Ernie empty the water, put away the props, and take the clean cars back to their garage. Mom is pleased that she has figured out a routine that 4-year-old boys might do together. It is the first time Ben has related to a doll as if it were a person.*

Step 3. Move from Imitation to Spontaneous Symbolic Play

Rationale. As you and your child play out more and more actions with various props and various action figures (dolls, animals, etc.), your child is building up more and more ideas about pretend actions. The more ideas your child has, the better prepared she will be for suggesting some of these ideas to you. As you play out more themes, you will use more props, and the boxes of objects and action figures will probably be getting fuller and fuller. As your child picks out some toys, add enough so that there are several different actions that you and she could do in these "scenes."

Activity: *Follow Your Child's Lead in Spontaneous Play Actions*

Set up the materials in some kind of orderly way (e.g., cups on saucers, eating utensils laid out by the plate; cup and napkin; pitcher or bowl of pretend food; two different action figures available). Then, instead of modeling an action, just wait, looking expectantly at your child, to see what she will do first. When your child produces a spontaneous play action, first comment on it ("Kitty is eating") and then join in the play by imitating your child and using a related action, following your child's lead (make another animal eat the food with the kitty). If your child waits for you to start, offer a choice of two objects, and see if your child then begins an action rather than doing the action yourself. Give as little help as is needed to help your child produce the first action directed either to the figure, you, or herself. (This is called a ***least-to-most prompting hierarchy***. You are giving as little help as your child needs to be successful.) Following your child's lead by imitating her actions with enthusiasm and fun provides your child with reinforcement for her spontaneous play. This is the key to increasing your child's spontaneous play: Provide familiar and interesting materials, wait, and then follow your child into the play, adding fun and interest to your child's themes. When you are focusing on spontaneity, you want to follow your child's lead and be less active than you have been in starting all these routines. It's fine to add new ideas here and there to keep the play lively and interesting, but you want your additions to be responses to your child's ideas, rather than leading and directing, so your child's initiations are being strongly supported.

Summary of Step 3

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, your child will be initiating pretend play routines and may also initiate using figures (dolls, animals, figurines) as animate beings. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for teaching other kinds of symbolic play—knowledge you will use in **Step 4**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

Activity Checklist: Can My Child Carry Out Spontaneous Play Actions with Props and Action Figures?

____ My child is able to choose different objects and props from the box for character play.
____ I know how to set out the materials in an orderly way to help my child start to play.
____ I know how to wait and follow the least-to-most prompting hier-

archy to encourage my child's spontaneous play actions with the character.

____ I know how to follow my child's lead when he or she chooses a play action to do on the doll/animal/figure.

____ My child is able to use different objects or props and initiate different play actions among the doll/animal/figure, my child, and me.

____ I know how to model and help my child use the doll/animal/figure to act out different play actions.

____ My child, the doll/animal/figure, and I can act out different play scenarios during daily routines.

What about Ben? *As you have read earlier, Ben doesn't care much for dolls or animals. Mom has introduced the idea of animate toys by teaching Ben how to carry out different play actions with objects and props on his cars and having a character help him. However, he engages the characters only for car play. Mom tries to come up with other ideas for character play. She thinks about how much Ben loves his Lightning McQueen pillowcase, which shows a race car from the Disney movie* Cars. *She wonders whether the pillow might work as a "doll" to bring to life. Since Ben can easily feed his toy cars, she decides to seat the pillow in a chair next to Ben during lunch and tells him it's hungry. When Ben doesn't respond, she asks him whether McQueen would want a bite of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich or his apple. She's glad that she has offered Ben a choice rather than taking the first turn to feed something to the pillow, because Ben picks up an apple slice and touches the pillow. Mom does her best imitation of McQueen's voice and thanks Ben for sharing. Next McQueen asks for a bite of Ben's sandwich, and Ben obliges. Then McQueen says he's thirsty and asks if Ben could get him a cup. Mom gets up to retrieve an empty cup and hands it to Ben. When he doesn't place the cup in front of the pillow, McQueen says, "Hey, buddy, don't forget that I'm thirsty. Give me a drink, please." Ben smiles as he raises the cup to the pillow. McQueen and Ben continue their lunch together and make sure that Mom doesn't feel left out.*

Step 4. Teach Symbolic Substitutions

Rationale. The next type of pretend play that your child will develop is the ability to treat objects as if they were something else. You have probably seen a child invent objects "out of thin air," such as handing you a pretend cookie to eat, putting a cereal bowl on her head as if it were a hat, or sitting in a cardboard box as if it were a car. Just like play with action figures, this is an important step in children's pretend play and thinking skills. It shows that thoughts and ideas can guide their actions—that they are no longer bound to the world of objects.

Instead, their mental world is becoming stronger and more abstract, and they can impose their ideas on the world of objects. This is a huge step for little children with autism, and a very important one to develop for thinking skills, for language skills, and for social development. It will help them understand the play of their age-mates and participate with other children as competent play partners.

Activity: *Help Your Child Learn to Create Pretend Objects in Play*

You will use the same joint activity format that you have used to teach all the other play skills. In this type of play, you will model using ***ambiguous*** materials—materials that do not have a clear function in and of themselves—as if they were the familiar props your child is using in your pretend play routines.

Here are ideas for adapting the joint activity routine for this purpose:

- **Setup:** Using the set of props you have been using for pretend play, include some ambiguous objects that can easily represent objects your child likes to use. These are objects that do not have a strong identity of their own. For example, instead of using a play cookie, use a round piece of cardboard: It is shaped like a cookie, but doesn't have a strong identity as anything on its own. The ambiguous object should resemble the realistic object that it will be a substitute for in some key physical features. For example, a Popsicle stick is a good ambiguous object to represent a spoon, fork, or knife. It is not a good substitute for a towel, however. A small piece of cloth is a good substitute object for a towel, or a hat, or a diaper, but it is not a good substitute for a spoon. However, they are both ambiguous; neither has a strong identity of its own. Blocks are particularly good ambiguous items. A cylinder-shaped block is a good substitute for a baby bottle or drinking glass. A square block is a good substitute for a cookie or a bar of soap. Small pieces of cloth, Popsicle sticks, small pieces of paper, baby blankets, shoeboxes, and other random household materials work well as ambiguous objects. Try to find two ambiguous objects to substitute for two key objects in each of your play scenes with your child. Add them to your box of objects for pretend play.

  Now that you have these props in your box, let your child pick out some familiar objects and choose the theme, or suggest it yourself and follow your child's lead into the pretend scene. Action figures will be present, of course, and multiple props related to theme, all realistic except for the one or two ambiguous objects that you have chosen for this scene. They will be substitutes for the realistic objects in the play.

- **Theme:** Use the realistic (not ambiguous) objects to start off the pretend play scene with your child, as you two typically do, doing the actions on

each other and on the doll, animal, or other figure. Have an ambiguous object that will be used next to represent the realistic object nearby.

- **Variation:** After you have played out a theme involving the realistic object for which you have a substitute available, immediately repeat the action using the ambiguous object, while narrating and modeling the action as you typically do. Label the ambiguous object with the name of the real object it is representing: "Look, here's my [comb, shoe, cookie, etc.]!" For example, if the goal is for the child to pretend that a triangular block is a baby bottle, then have the block, bottle, and baby present. First set up, model, and have your child imitate feeding the baby with the bottle, with you and your child each taking a turn. Then immediately model feeding the baby with the block, calling it a bottle, and encourage your child to imitate this. Play this back and forth a few times, and also include the other realistic props in your typical actions involving feeding. This might be a good time to have two figures available, so when your child feeds one figure with the bottle, you can feed the other figure with the block, and vice versa. Imitating your child while using the equivalent object will make the idea of the substitute stronger.
- **Closing/transition:** As usual, begin an organized closing and transition to a new activity as interest or ideas wane.
- If this is not becoming clear to your child, back up and go back to pretend play themes with dolls or other figures and realistic, miniature props for a while. Continue to expand the number of themes your child can play out with realistic props. As we have said earlier, children generally prefer

Helpful Tip

Other ambiguous objects include the following:

- *Popsicles stick, Lincoln Logs, Tinkertoys.* These can be good substitutes for feeding utensils, ice cream cones, rocket ships, pencils/pens, thermometers, brushes/combs, keys.
- *Blocks and shoeboxes.* These can be substitutes for cars, trucks, planes, food, pillows, beds, roads, houses, garages.
- *Yogurt and cottage cheese containers, orange juice boxes cut in half vertically.* These can be substitutes for drinking glasses, bowls, plates, bathtubs, pools, hats, spaceships.
- *Necklaces, artificial leis, and beads.* These can be substitutes for snakes, crowns, belts.
- *Pieces of cloth.* These can be substitutes for towels, washcloths, scarves, diapers, bibs, tissue.

to use realistic props rather than ambiguous ones, and building up pretend play themes with realistic props is setting the stage for your child to learn to use an ambiguous prop as a substitute. After you have a very well-established theme that your child enjoys and can play out with all the objects without your prompts, try the substitute object again. Remove the key realistic item from a favorite theme, and have only an ambiguous substitute object available for that key part. As you play along, request the needed object. Feign ignorance and ask for it, such as "I need a spoon" when there are only tongue depressors there, along with a real bowl and cup. Point to a tongue depressor, say, "Here is a spoon," help your child give you the tongue depressor, label it as a spoon, and immediately use it to eat "cereal" from the bowl. Ham it up with sound effects ("Yum, yum, delicious!"), and then offer a bite of cereal to your child with the spoon. Encourage the pretending, and then give your child a tongue depressor to use as a spoon. Help him if needed. Then produce a real spoon and imitate your child eating the cereal. These are the steps for teaching symbolic substitutes.

- Build up your child's knowledge of many ambiguous objects representing many different props. In each of your play theme boxes, have multiple ambiguous objects available that can be substituted for the object necessary for that theme; be sure your child has learned to use the ambiguous objects and can use them in more than one way. For example, a Popsicle stick can be used several ways: as a spoon for feeding, a crayon for writing, and a thermometer for doctor scenes. As the play evolves, your child may well begin to use the ambiguous objects spontaneously. If so, label the object with its pretend identity with enthusiasm! If your child does not do this spontaneously, continue to hand the ambiguous object to the child, label it with its pretend identity, and ask the child to use it (e.g., to feed the baby, comb the baby's hair, etc.).

Activity: *Help Your Child Learn about Invisible "Objects"*

The next activity in this sequence is the use of invisible "objects," represented by gestures and pantomime. Don't start this activity until well after your child spontaneously uses a number of ambiguous objects to represent realistic objects during play. Be sure your child really understands the use of substitute objects before you move to this skill. You will help your child develop an understanding of invisible "objects" exactly as you have helped her develop the use of substitute objects. However, now you will completely leave out a key prop in a set of pretend play objects. For example, you might leave the bottle out of the prop set for feeding the baby. In this case, you will play out the familiar and well-loved baby-feeding scene—but when it is time for the bottle, and you and your child see

no bottle, you will pretend by holding the invisible "bottle" in your hand, saying, "Here is a pretend bottle." Take your turn to feed the baby, using the same language you always use. Then pass the turn to your child, saying "Here's the bottle. You feed the baby," while you hand the invisible "bottle" to your child. Help your child do the same thing, pretending that her hand is holding a bottle. You will go back and forth a couple of times this way—asking her to give you the "bottle," pantomiming the routine again, taking turns back and forth. At the end, produce the real bottle and let your child use it on one figure while you demonstrate the pantomime gesture once again on another.

After your child can act out a key prop using an invisible "object" by gesturing to represent it, do the same thing in another prop set. Leave out the main object—the cookie, the cup, the comb, the steering wheel—in a favorite play scene and represent the invisible "object" with your own pantomimed gesture, playing out the routine just as you usually do. Be sure to use the same language and actions you typically use, so your child will really understand what you are doing. Then help your child imitate the invisible "object" as you do. As your child catches on to a new one, slowly add invisible "objects" through pantomimed gestures to your other pretend play themes with your child, and help your child understand them. Go slowly from one routine to the next, and use the real objects intermixed with the invisible "objects" if your child seems confused. If this seems very difficult for your child, go back and spend some more time using substitute objects and then try this again. There's no hurry; this is an advanced level of pretend play for young children.

Helpful Tip

In each theme or scene you are playing out, don't use more than one invisible "object" as a substitute for a key object. Children much prefer realistic objects, or ambiguous objects, over invisible "objects." However, it is quite important that your child learn about invisible or pantomimed "objects," for two reasons: because it allows play to become more creative and less limited by props; and because other children will do this at times, and your child needs to understand it to play along. Many children will think this is funny and will enjoy pretending to feed you or to drink from "nothing." Persist gently, and your child will come to understand this.

Summary of Step 4

Congratulations! You have now taken your child through this whole sequence of learning about symbolic substitutes. This process of learning about pretend play and substitutions takes a long time for all young children. It is a gradual process of learning about more and more scenes from life, more and more ways of playing them out, and more and more props and language. Your child can learn this

too! And it opens up your child's ability to understand pretend play, to participate with peers and siblings, and to use pretend play to learn about the social world. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for teaching the final type of symbolic play—knowledge you will use in **Step 5**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

Activity Checklist: Can My Child Substitute Objects during Play Activities?

____ I have ideas of what kinds of ambiguous objects or invisible "objects" can be used in play with my child.
____ I know how to set up and use real objects and dolls/animals/figures to develop the first play theme with my child.
____ I know how to model the action with ambiguous objects for my child to imitate.
____ My child is able to play with ambiguous objects to represent realistic objects in different ways.
____ I know how to model actions using invisible "props" for my child to imitate.
____ My child can carry out play actions with several invisible "objects" when I set them up.

What about Ben? *Ben and his mother pretend that Ben's cars need to be fixed by the mechanic. They drive the cars to the "garage," using pillows to build the structure and a stuffed bear to act as the mechanic. Ben and his mom hand the bear straws, plastic forks and spoons, and pieces of tape to use as the tools to repair the cars. They take turns helping the bear talk about what he's doing to fix each car. Since Ben is very knowledgeable about cars and their parts, he is able to provide a lot of the dialogue. Mom then takes over the role of mechanic and models actions using pantomimed "tools" with her hands as Ben explains procedures for fixing specific car parts. She then reverses roles and has Ben become the mechanic, suggesting that he fix something. Ben likes this idea and pantomimes filling up the "tank" and pumping up the "tire" while Mom makes suggestions, just as he did earlier. Mom makes sure he narrates what he is doing.*

Step 5. Develop Symbolic Combinations

Rationale. The last category of pretend play to help your child develop involves combining various pretend play actions so that your child is able to play out a whole scene from life, rather than just one or two related actions. Think about

a scene from your child's life, like bedtime, and how many different actions are involved. For some children, bedtime begins with taking a bath, changing into pajamas, and brushing teeth. Then parent and child may head to the bedroom and sit in the bed together to read a book. Then the parent tucks the child in, covers her up and gives her a kiss, sings a song, provides a favorite toy or blanket, turns out the light, and closes the door. Each of these activities involves a number of actions in and of themselves, and when you consider all of them together, there could be as many as 50 separate actions involved in this whole string of events. Right now your child may play out a going-to-bed sequence that involves putting a doll onto a toy bed and covering it up, which involves two actions. Even adding the book, the story, the kiss, and the lights out makes this a much more elaborate scene, with many actions combined. Once your child can combine one or two actions into a pretend play scene easily, you can help your child expand the number of actions involved, so the play becomes richer and more elaborate.

Activity: *Combine Symbolic Play Actions into "Scenes from Life"*

The time to start focusing on combining actions is the point at which your child can easily play out several different themes with you (eating, bath, and bedtime are each a theme), and can imitate *and* spontaneously produce several different pretend actions on objects in each theme.

Here are ideas for adapting the joint activity routine for this purpose:

- **Setup:** Have your child choose a theme for pretend play from some choices of objects. Have your child choose a figure or two to add as characters in the play, sit down with you, and label and organize the props. You will want at least four or five props.
- **Theme:** Wait for your child to begin a pretend act; if he doesn't begin, then encourage and help him begin. There is the theme. Imitate it in parallel play so that you have joined in the theme.
- **Variation:** In your next turn, play out and narrate the theme action, and then follow it with an additional action that in real life follows those your child has already produced, narrating as you go. By doing this, you are demonstrating a sequence of actions that occur together in the scene from life that you are acting out (e.g., pour from pitcher to cup, stir the drink, and drink from the cup; then put down the cup on the saucer and wipe your mouth with the napkin), while narrating your actions ("Pour the juice. Stir it up. Drink my juice. Um, good juice. Uh-oh, I dripped some juice"). Then share the props with your child and encourage your child to "have some juice too," using whatever prompts you need to have your child combine multiple actions as well. Having a double set of toys may

help, so that you can model multiple acts and prompt your child through imitation. Your goal is to build a sequence that is one or two steps more than your child is already doing easily.

- **Closing/transition:** As your child's interest begins to wane, or the play is feeling too repetitive, suggest that it is time to finish and offer the cleanup box. If your child does not want to clean up, offer another choice of theme in the box, and see if your child will make another choice. If so, then put the new materials down and encourage your child to help clean up the pretend play set so she can move to something else.

Here is a list of pretend themes and related actions, in case you need some ideas:

- **Having characters go to bed:** Take off clothes, put clothes in hamper, put on PJs, brush teeth, pick out book, sing lullaby, kiss/hug good night, turn off the light.
- **Having characters wake up:** Get dressed (take off PJs, put PJs in hamper, put on clean clothes), wash face, brush teeth, comb hair.
- **Mealtime:** Set table, pour juice, put food into plate/bowl, eat, drink, wipe face, clean up.
- **Running errands:** Pretend to get in the car and go to a post office, grocery store, toy store, or restaurant. Go through some steps, then go home (cardboard boxes make good "cars").
- **Going on an outing:** Go to preschool, church, doctor/dentist appointment, play date, birthday party, Grandma's house, zoo.
- **Playing at park:** Go on swings or slide, climb up–down, build sand castle.
- **Giving/taking a bath:** Fill up tub, pour bubbles, wash body parts, rinse off soap, dry body parts.
- **Playing out stories**: Act out the themes from your child's favorite books, movies, and classic fairy tales after your child knows the stories well.
- **Going to the doctor's office:** Go in the door, sign in, get weighed and measured, go into the exam room, sit on the table, have the doctor listen to heart and chest, look in ears and mouth, check reflexes in feet.
- **Going to the dentist:** Go in and sign in, go to the exam room, sit in the chair, put on the bib, tip back a little, open mouth, look in with a mirror, tap some teeth, rub the gums, squirt water in, sit back up, take bib off, get new toothbrush.

Note: Not only can you and your child play out these themes yourself with props from home, but as your child becomes a more advanced player, you can play these themes out with small doll figures, houses, cars, and props. Now the little figures can go to the zoo, the doctor, camping, to the park, to the farm, and so on, using commercial toy sets for props. You and your child can act out themes from favorite books or movies this way. Helping your child learn to create these stories with doll figures is great preparation for thematic play with other children.

Activity: *Use Pretend Play to Help Your Child in Real-Life Experiences*

Amazingly, this process of playing out scenes from life will also help your child understand more aspects of real-life experiences. As you play these out, you may find that daily routines that are difficult for your child (toothbrushing, bedtime, haircuts, etc.) become easier as your child learns and practices the steps and narration in play. Pretend play offers a way to prepare your child for a new experience that has the potential for being difficult or scary! Creating a "script" for what your child can expect in a new experience is called ***priming*** and is a research-based strategy for familiarizing a child with the skills and behaviors to use inside a sequence of events.

Here are suggestions for priming your child for a first trip to the dentist, using pretend play:

- Two weeks before a dentist visit, start to play out a dentist visit with Winnie-the-Pooh, Mickey Mouse, or another favorite figure of your child's—preferably one that has teeth or at least a mouth that opens. Play out with your child on the character the main simple steps—the chair, the bib, opening the mouth, the dentist looking at teeth with a mirror and touching them with a stick, and getting down. Start very simply, with the chair, the light, a bib, and a tongue depressor. Call it "playing dentist." Play it out several days in a row with the figure, having your child take a turn acting as the dentist with the doll or animal, and also with you.
- As this play theme becomes familiar, add a couple more steps, and also play it out with another person if possible. If Mom has been playing this out, Mom can recruit Dad or Grandma to be the patient. Be sure to cheer for the "patient" when the "exam" is finished. As the theme gets to be familiar, use turn taking to have your child be the "patient" sometimes—to sit, put his head back, put on the cloth, open his mouth, and let you touch a couple of teeth with the tongue depressor. Then take off the bib and cheer. Your child now has a "script" for the dentist's office and is prepared for what will happen.

- A few days before your scheduled visit, ask the office if you can come in for a "preview visit," with an assistant playing out the steps you have practiced on you and then on your child, so your child sees the familiar script in the new place and knows what to expect. Take your camera and your child's favorite doll or other figure with you! When you go there, have the receptionist greet your child and your child's toy, and take a picture of the receptionist. Then walk into a dental suite, look at the chair, and perhaps put the toy figure in the chair. Take a picture of the chair. Have the assistant show your child how the chair goes up and down with the figure in the chair; then take a ride on the chair yourself, holding your child and the toy if she is relaxed about it, or just with the toy if your child seems anxious. Then sit in the chair holding your child and the toy, lean back, and have the assistant look in the mouth of the figure with an instrument and then in your mouth. Get a picture of the assistant looking into the mouth of the toy. If your child is relaxed, you can encourage your child to let the assistant look in her mouth. Try to get a picture of this. Then be finished and cheer the child and the toy. Get a picture! If it is possible, get a picture of the dentist who will see your child. Then have the celebration that you have practiced in play. Take a picture!
- Print out the pictures that you have taken, and make a little book with the pictures in order. Read it with your child to your child daily before the real visit. Be sure to end the book with the celebration picture and story.
- After the event is over, continue to play it out in pretend play, that day and here and there in the days after that. You can add more and more props (mask, cup, light, etc.), and it can be a theme for your child to choose from for pretend playtime.

As your child has new life experiences, they all become possible themes for pretend play, both for preparation and for review play afterward. Critical social events are important themes for pretend play: birthday parties; doctor and dentist visits; getting "owies" and having them washed and bandaged; playing circle games with others; sitting in restaurants; going to the library for story hour; family and holiday routines; going to religious services—whatever repeated events you do with your child or events that cause your child anxiety. As you expand the number of props, figures, and actions, you will also naturally expand your language, and your child will be learning both the actions to anticipate and the language that goes with each event.

Summary of Step 5

This step has focused on helping your child learn to create scenes from life by combining pretend play actions into logical sequences. You have been building

up the number of combined acts in your child's pretend play themes. At some point your child will know the whole "script" for each of these themes, from beginning to end, and will be able to participate in playing them out with you, with brothers and sisters, and with other children at preschool and at home. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with all of the necessary skills for teaching different kinds of symbolic play to your child. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

Activity Checklist: Can My Child Combine Symbolic Play Actions?

____ I have ideas for what real-life events and familiar stories my child and I can act out during play.
____ I have the necessary props, dolls/animals/figures, and other objects for my child and me to re-create the real-life event.
____ I know how to adapt the joint activity routine to help my child combine several pretend play actions in a sequence.
____ I know how to use other strategies (make a preparatory visit, create a storybook to build the script, act out the events with characters or ourselves) to help my child understand and carry out play actions inside real-life events.
____ My child can easily combine different play actions in my home and in at least two other community settings.

What about Gracie? *Gracie's mom likes the idea of including dolls and animals inside other daily routines. Right now Mom is working on potty training with Gracie and thinks that having her* Yo Gabba Gabba! *dolls also use the potty might motivate her daughter to do the same. Since Gracie can already carry out the actions with the objects on her mother, herself, and her dolls, Mom moves straight to having a doll act as its own agent. She speaks for the doll as it walks into the bathroom ("I have to go potty") and completes each step that's part of the potty-training routine ("Pants off," "Underwear down," "Help me sit on potty, please," "Go pee-pee," "Wipe-wipe," "Panties up," "Flush toilet," "Wash hands"). Mom congratulates and praises the doll for doing each step while Gracie watches. Mom even hands a little reward to the doll for cooperating—a ribbon to put in its hair (Gracie loves ribbons and barrettes in her hair). Next Mom has the doll say to Gracie, "Your turn," and through Mom the doll helps Gracie move through the potty-training steps. The doll then offers Gracie a choice of which ribbon to put in her hair. Gracie is very excited to have a pretty new ribbon to wear, and happily gathers up her dolls at the end of the routine.*

"Learning good pretend play skills has been extremely valuable for my son. Because he was very interested in playing with cars, we helped him develop complex adventures for his cars (taking turns with his sister to fill cars with gas in a toy garage, racing down the ramps, becoming stuck on a ramp). He can now develop complex stories by himself and can spend long periods of time playing independently or with his sister. I think this has also been extremely helpful in teaching him empathy and understanding of other people, because we can talk about why a car might be happy or sad, or why his sister might be happy or sad with a particular development. Coincidentally or not, he has simultaneously developed a much better ability to look at a picture and describe how a person is feeling (e.g., 'She is sad because she fell off her bicycle')."

Chapter Summary

Pretend play is a crucial developmental skill for all young children. It fosters thinking skills, language skills, and social skills. In particular, pretend play helps all children understand social expectations and social roles; it helps them learn the "rules" that underlie social events. Pretend play can also be used to prepare children for real-life events. Once your child understands pretend play, has some language, and can spontaneously come up with pretend play actions, you can help your child use pretend play to practice upcoming events. Pretend play routines, including storyboards and storybooks, can be used to practice novel situations—a first airplane ride, a trip to the hospital, the first day of a new group program, a birthday party, going to church, a new baby in the family, adjusting to a new pet. They can help your child become less afraid of certain triggers: the wind, hair washing or haircuts, the vacuum cleaner, the lawn mower, the shower. Symbolic play can also be used to help your child practice the rules for group games and activities. Learning the rules for "Duck, Duck, Goose," circle time at preschool, "Musical Chairs," "Stop and Go," and so on can be fun and extremely helpful for your child when you play these out with your child and also play them out with dolls. Practice birthday parties, dentist visits, greetings, and other routines between dolls, so your child can learn the social scripts that go with these routines. Practice what a child should do when a friend gets hurt while playing: what to say, what to do. This is how your child will learn how to respond appropriately to others. Your child will learn these from your using the imitation and language skills you are teaching (which is how all children—and adults!—learn social scripts). Thus pretend play is as useful for young children with autism as it is for children without autism: It helps them make sense of real life and play with other children.

Refrigerator List

Goal: To help your child develop pretend play that is spontaneous, creative, and flexible.

Steps:

- ✓ **Use everyday objects during play.**
- ✓ **Bring dolls/animals/figures to life.**
- ✓ **Substitute objects for other things.**
- ✓ **Combine multiple actions to make scenes from life.**
- ✓ **Everyday life events are the right themes for play.**
- ✓ **Playing out social interactions and other new experiences helps your child understand them.**
- ✓ **Playing out scenes from favorite movies and books is great for advanced pretend play.**

13

Moving into Speech

Chapter goal: To help you support your child to use and understand speech through active social interaction with people, their facial expressions, and their gestures.

Why Speech Development Is So Important

Speech is our main mode of self-expression and of social interaction. It is the skill that parents of young children with ASD are typically most worried about. You may very well have turned to this chapter before reading the rest of the book. Or you may wonder why we've waited so long to discuss this critical topic. It's because everything else we have discussed so far is part of the foundation for speech development in young children. Just as children have to sit up and stand before they can walk, they have to be able to attend to parents, imitate their sounds, communicate with gestures, and shift their attention from objects to people and back again before they can learn the meaning and use of speech. So if you have not yet read Chapters 4–12, please do so before trying to apply the strategies in this chapter.

Learning to talk involves two skills: using words to convey desires, experiences, feelings, and thoughts to other people, which is called ***expressive language***; and understanding what others are saying, which is called ***receptive language***. Young children with ASD often have much difficulty learning to understand and use speech, but most are quite capable of learning to communicate with words, with the help of their parents and professionals.[1]

[1]A small minority of children with autism do not learn to use spoken language. These children, however, can learn to communicate by using pictures and other visual devices. All children need to learn to communicate by using either speech or other communication methods.

What's Happening in Autism?

Although not all children with ASD are delayed in developing language, most are. Many children struggle with learning to use speech, but all are helped by the strategies we discuss in this chapter. Many children with autism have overall slower rates of development in all areas (cognitive, social, communication), and this means that they will also learn language at a slower rate. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 4, autism is associated with a very specific difficulty in paying attention to other people. Finally, some children with autism have a specific difficulty with speech above and beyond their other problems. However, most children with autism can learn to use speech, provided they have enough support and the right kind of support.

Why Is It a Problem?

Autism's effect on children's social attention to others—their decreased social initiative, social responsiveness, and social engagement—results in fewer opportunities for these children to listen, learn, and respond to language. Therefore, we need to increase their opportunities for social interaction, as this will help promote language development. We have spent most of this book discussing ways to decrease the amount of time your child spends playing alone, wandering about the house, watching movies, and spending time relatively unengaged with others. You have already put many changes in place to help your child learn to talk by increasing the amount of time the child participates in meaningful social activities with others throughout the day.

You already know that helping your child learn language means helping your child interact face to face with you and others in the family whenever possible. Watching movies or playing with electronic "educational" toys or computer games may be entertaining, but children learn to communicate by interacting with other people. Words they may pick up by imitating a movie script or an electronic program are often not used to communicate with others. Children learn *communicative* language from their *interactions* with other *people.*

Given the demands of running a household, working outside the home in some instances, and caring for other family members, it simply isn't possible to spend most of your day on the floor playing with your child. However, during the moments you are naturally with your child—such as during meals, bath time, or at the playground—you can drastically increase the number of language-learning opportunities you provide for your child by using the strategies discussed in this chapter. By including your child with autism in more household activities, and by making the care and play routines you already have with your child more interactive and language-focused, you can help your child's language abilities grow. So let's discuss the specific strategies for promoting speech and

language development. We discuss expressive language first, followed by receptive language.

What You Can Do to Build Your Child's Expressive Speech and Language

Does your child make many sounds? Does your child use his voice as a way of communicating, even though he has not yet learned to talk? Can your child imitate any simple sounds you make, like animal sounds, or car sounds during car play? Can you and your child make noises back and forth to each other? Developing these skills paves the road to speech. Here are the steps to building expressive speech and language:

Step 1. Build up your child's vocabulary of sounds.
Step 2. Develop vocal games with your child's sounds.
Step 3. Increase opportunities for listening and responding to sounds made by others.
Step 4. Talk to your child in a way that promotes language development.
Step 5. Add sounds to gestures.

In the following pages, we describe how to carry out each of these steps, give you some ideas for activities to try, and suggest what you can do to solve problems that may come up. *We have had an extremely high rate of success in teaching young children with autism to speak by using these techniques. Most develop first words within a year.*

Step 1. Build Up Your Child's Vocabulary of Sounds

To develop speech, your child needs to be able to make a lot of sounds, and to make them frequently and in response to you.

Rationale. Often very young children with autism produce very few sounds, especially consonants. Vowel sounds, like "ah," "ee," and "oh," are easier for children than consonant–vowel combinations, like "ba," "da," and "ta." The first step is for your child to make a lot of simple vowel sounds and to make them frequently, in response to your making similar or other sounds. If your child does not yet do this, this is where you will start to focus—on increasing the frequency with which your child makes sounds, and also the number of different sounds your child can make.

Activity: *Treat Sounds Like Words and Repeat Your Child's Sounds*

One of the most effective strategies you can use is to respond to your child's sounds *as if* they were words: by answering your child, by imitating your child's sounds, or by saying something that sounds like what your child said. If your child is vocalizing to himself, go up to him and imitate the sounds. Get in a good position for attention (see Chapter 4), repeat the sounds your child is making, and then pause. Your child may vocalize again. If so, respond again. Then, see how many times you and your child can go back and forth. This is a little conversation, and it shows that your child can control his voice, can choose to turn it on and off, and is aware of taking turns with voice. If your child stops vocalizing, that's okay! It doesn't mean that you've done anything wrong or that your child doesn't like it. Maybe it's really hard for your child to choose to turn on his voice right now. Maybe it is a new experience and your child has to think about it a little. Maybe he is surprised! You've done the right thing; keep doing it. With enough experience, your child will probably start to vocalize back when you repeat his sounds. Persistence will pay off.

Step 2. Develop Vocal Games with Your Child's Sounds

Once you and your child can vocalize back and forth easily when your child starts to vocalize, try starting the vocal game yourself, before your child makes a sound.

Activity: *Use an Everyday Activity as an Opportunity to Make One of the Sounds Your Child Typically Makes*

Try this activity while you are face to face and you have good attention—in the high chair, at the changing table, on your lap, on the bed. Look at your child, make a sound you know your child can repeat back and forth, and wait expectantly for your child to "answer" you. If she does, answer back and carry out your mini-conversation. Practice starting these with the various sounds you and your child use to play turn-taking sound games. When your child can sustain the back-and-forth interaction with you when *she* starts it, and when she can "answer" you with the various sounds she has when *you* start the "conversation," you and your child have taken a giant step toward speech.

Helpful Tip

Some families like to keep a list of sounds their child makes on the refrigerator or a kitchen cabinet. Watching the list grow over time lets you know that your work is paying off.

Helpful Tip

Toy microphones that echo or carry sounds may encourage "quiet" talkers to experiment with their voices. Try voicing (or singing) an extended vowel sound into the mike while your child watches—something like "oh-oo-oh-oo-oh" or "la-la-la-la-la." When you are finished, hand the mike to your child. He may look at it, mouth it, hold it to the mouth, or put it to your mouth for more. Take it back after a short time, vocalize again, and hand it over again. You can also pat your child's mouth with your fingers to encourage mouth movement and emerging sounds. Try it on yourself while chanting and then again with your child. Do this several times in a row, and play either or both games daily. In a few days, you may see your child begin to vocalize into the mike or pat your mouth to start a vocal game as well.

If your child does not answer you when you start the vocal play, don't worry. At some point, she probably will. Continue to imitate your child and build these little back-and-forth exchanges from your child's vocalizations, and continue to try to start them several times a day. Your child will very likely follow your lead in the near future.

Twenty-month-old Sabrina was a quiet little girl who rarely sat still and had little interest in objects. Her vocalizations were infrequent and occurred when she was moving around the room. Her mother, Christie, consistently imitated her, but Sabrina was not yet responding. Christie also sang to Sabrina many times a day, with animated face, voice, and gestures, and she found that Sabrina particularly liked "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." When Christie started to sing it, Sabrina would stop, turn, and come close to her to watch and listen.

A few weeks after Christie started to use the techniques in this book, she heard Sabrina making song-like vocalizations. These sounded a bit like "Twinkle," so Christie sang back what she had heard. Sabrina turned and approached her mother. Then Christie stopped the song, and Sabrina started to "sing" again. They went back and forth several times in a row.

Christie took this as a cue to augment the song repertoire and started to sing during many of her dressing and changing routines—just little made-up songs as she went along. Within a week or two she started to hear "words" inside Sabrina's songs; her daughter was learning speech sounds inside the music. When Sabrina started a song, Christie continued it. She found that if she started a favorite song and then stopped at the end of the line without finishing it, Sabrina would fill in the missing word. Sabrina's consonants and vowels, and her word-like utterances, were increasing steadily inside the song bits, and Christie started to hear these new sounds when Sabrina was vocalizing to herself as well.

They had had so much practice going back and forth in songs that Sabrina now began to respond when Christie imitated her vocalizations. She repeated them, and the two could go back and forth with sounds as well as songs. Sabrina now had enough sounds that Christie could begin to embed them into their play routines. Sabrina loved feeding one of her baby dolls and watching bubbles. Christie could use Sabrina's "ba-ba" sound inside both of these routines, for bottles and for bubbles. And when she got one of these routines going, Sabrina did imitate the "ba-ba" sound, several times a day. In a few weeks, Sabrina had moved from no consonants or imitation to many episodes every day of back-and-forth vocalizing and singing, and Sabrina was now ready and able to start to imitate some word approximations inside the routines that Christie chose, using the sounds Sabrina had already mastered.

Step 3. Increase Opportunities for Listening and Responding to Sounds Made by Others

Another technique to use with a child who is just beginning to develop control over her sounds is to increase the range of sounds you provide by using nonspeech sounds, songs, and chants.

Rationale. Animal noises, car noises, and other types of sound effects made during play routines are important steps toward speech, even though they are not speech sounds. Activities involving songs and sensory social routines generally involve words used in ritualized, playful ways that will engage your child.

Activity: *Increase the Number of Times Your Child Hears Nonspeech Sounds*

When you are playing with toys with your child, weave sound effects into your social exchanges with the toys.

Here are some activity ideas:

- Say "Ringggg" dramatically when you put the phone up to your ear.
- Make engine noises ("vroom-vroom") when you play with trains, cars, and planes, and also when you do books or puzzles about vehicles.
- Make animal noises for toy animals and pictures of animals in books and puzzles.
- Make silly noises like tongue clicks, raspberries, lip pops, and other crazy fun sounds you can think of during diaper changes, mealtimes, toy play, and sensory social routines.

Watch your child's reactions, and repeat those effects that catch your child's interest and attention. Make each sound and patiently wait for your child's turn to imitate or make a sound back. Whether or not your child responds, take another turn. The predictability of your sounds will help your child learn to make them.

Activity: *Increase the Number of Times Your Child Hears Words*

These kinds of activities generally involve words or sounds used in playful ways that are built into chants, play routines, or songs. Here you can use all those "baby games" that combine words and gestures, like peekaboo, chase/"I'm gonna get you," bumblebee, "Round and Round the Garden," and "This Little Piggy." We also include songs with action, like nursery rhymes—"This Is the Way the Ladies Ride," "The Noble Duke of York/Grand Old Duke of York," "London Bridge," and "Ring-around-the-Rosy." Bubble routines that involve "pop and poke," as well as routines with balls, jumping, swings, and slides that involve "Ready, set, go!" and "One, two, three!", provide opportunities for words to enter your child's ears in rhythmic and predictable ways. When your child is involved in any rhythmic activity like jumping, swinging, or banging, add the words "jump, jump, jump" (or "up and back" for swinging, or "whee" when the swing comes toward you) in rhythm with your child's activity.

Children seem particularly attracted to these kinds of rhythmic social sound and action routines, and these are often the first words they say. Try to build up lots of fun sensory social routines every day with these kinds of sounds, words, and songs. Hearing all these sounds will help your child build up more and more sounds and learn much more about the social aspects of sounds and the meanings of some words.

Summary of Steps 1–3

Thus far in this chapter we have been talking about helping your child develop the sounds that she will need for speech production, and helping your child use those sounds in back-and-forth imitation games. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for helping your child learn to speak and use language. These are skills you will use throughout your child's first language-learning stage—building on the sounds your child can already produce, offering new sounds and words in interesting contexts, and helping your child expand sounds in meaningful activities. If you don't feel secure in these skills, turn back to the start of the chapter and ask your child's speech–language therapist to observe your interactions and give you some feedback or coaching with these techniques. Eventually this style of talking with your child will become so natural that you will not even think about it. Maybe it already is!

Activity Checklist: Am I Helping My Child Develop New Sounds?

____ I know the sounds my child makes regularly, both vowels and consonants.
____ I typically imitate my child when he or she is vocalizing, and I try to be positioned for eye contact.
____ I know how to pause and wait for my child to take a turn after I make a sound.
____ I know how to develop some back-and-forth sound games with my child.
____ I use lots of sound effects, single words, song routines, and "baby games" that combine action and simple words or sounds with my child.
____ I routinely pause when I am playing games with sounds or words, and wait for my child to look, gesture, or vocalize (take a turn) before I continue.

Step 4. Talk to Your Child in a Way That Promotes Language Development

Rationale. How parents talk to their children has a big influence on their children's language development, and this is also true for children with autism. Parents who talk frequently to their children (face to face, using simple language) about what the children are doing, seeing, and experiencing; who label their children's actions and objects; and who narrate activities as they are carried out help their children talk more and develop larger vocabularies. Parents who use speech mostly to give their children instructions or corrections limit their children's opportunities for language learning. You want to be sure you are talking to your child throughout the day during both play and nonplay activities, and that whenever possible, you have your child's attention when you are talking.

> *"So important to talk to your child! So many parents talk about the child, around the child, but since the child is not verbally communicating back, they slow down or stop communicating to the child."*

Talk about what? The easiest thing to do is simply to talk about what your child is doing. "You want the ball?" "Here's the ball." "That's right—roll on the ball!" Follow your child's focus of attention. You know that what your child is attending to is what your child is thinking about. Put words to it: "There's the bed." "You want on the bed?" "Up on the bed!" "Time to sleep." *Put the words in your child's ear that*

you want to come out of your child's mouth. Name the object your child is looking at. Name the action your child is using with the object. If your child is looking at what you are doing, describe it. If your child is looking at you, say something. Act as your child's narrator or translator; name what your child is looking at, playing with, touching, or using.

Helpful Tip

If you have any doubts about how many words to use, think of yourself as your child's translator, and stick to what is most important to conveying the meaning of the action: Name what your child is looking at, playing with, touching, or using. Limit your language to simple words and short phrases to capture the key nouns and actions of your child's movements.

How complex should your language be? For children who are not talking yet, you want to keep your sentences really short and to the point. Limit your language to simple words and short phrases to capture the key nouns and actions of your child's movements.

Activity: *Make Your Language Just a Little More Complex Than Your Child's*

In general, you want your language to be just a little more complex than your child's. If your child doesn't talk yet, or if your child is just beginning to use words, then these one- to three-word phrases are just about right.

Here are some ideas:

- Name people:
  - "There's Mama!"
  - "Hi, Daddy!"
  - "Grandma's here. Hi, Grandma!"
- Label objects:
  - "It's a ball. See the ball."
  - "That's a doggie."
  - "That's the light."
- Label actions:
  - "Bang, bang, bang the drum."
  - "Jump, jump, jump" (on the bed).

Helpful Tip

You want your language to be just a little more complex than your child's. This is what we call the ***one-up rule***: make your sentence one word longer than your child's. If your child doesn't talk yet, or if your child is just beginning to use words, then these one- to three-word phrases are just about right. If your child is combining a couple of words (e.g., if your child says, "Bang drum," or "Big car"), then use slightly longer phrases ("Yes, bang the drum fast," or "It's a big red truck").

- "Splash, splash" (water in the bathtub).
- "Pour the water" (from cup to cup in the kitchen sink).
- "Water on" (as your child turns the faucet on). "Water off" (as she turns it off).

"Just labeling the environment for the child is huge, even if your child can't engage in a reciprocal conversation with you."

You can think of a simple vocabulary of the words you want your child to learn, and then use those words frequently (many times a day) until your child learns them. Provide words for the objects and actions your child encounters in daily life. Everything needs a name—sensory social routines, foods, toys, people, and pets—and actions are important to highlight as well as names of things. There is no need to focus on colors, counting, or letters for children who are just beginning to talk. Those will come later. In the beginning, focus on names, labels for objects, and actions of the objects and activities that engage your child.

"I think parents gets so worried about the developmental level of typical peers that they feel their children need to know things like colors, letters, and numbers, but do not realize they do not have the foundation for it yet."

Sixteen-month-old Manuel's parents do an excellent job of narrating his activities. They use a mixture of Spanish and English, just as they speak with others in their family. It is quite important to their family to raise bilingual children, since the grandparents speak only Spanish. Manuel's brother also has autism and speaks both languages well, so the parents are confident that Manuel will also learn both. Here is what Manuel's father says as Manuel is playing with a ball maze on the coffee table.

Manuel goes to the coffee table and begins to put a ball in one of the holes that is part of the toy on the table. His father, Ramon, goes over to the coffee table and

sits on the floor across from Manuel (he is now at eye level and close). Ramon places a ball—"Pelota aqui [Ball here]"—as he points. Manuel hammers the ball; Ramon accompanies with him "Boom, boom, boom." Then he asks for the ball—"Dammi a Papa? Pelota? Gracias [Give to Papa? Ball? Thank you]"—as he reaches out his hand and Manuel gives it. Manuel pushes several balls into their holes. "Push, push," says Ramon.

Then Ramon picks up the hammer and a ball. He offers both to Manuel, while saying, "Te quieres, Manuel? Quieres pello or pelota?" Manuel reaches for the ball. "Pelota? Si? [Ball? Yes?]" As Manuel takes it, Ramon says, "Si, la pelota. [Yes, the ball.]" Manuel reaches for the hammer, and Ramon says, "Quieres pello. Aqui e pello." Then, as Manuel hammers the ball, "Bang, bang la pelota." Then he asks for it: "Dammi a Papa" [Give to Papa], aqui [here]," as he points to his hand. He says, "Thank you," as Manuel gives it to him. "Papa's turn," Ramon says as he hammers: "One, two, three!" Then he says, "Manuel's turn," as he hands it over to Manuel. Manuel bangs the hammer: "Bang, bang, bang." Ramon offers a ball—"Manuel, pelota?" He gives Manuel all three balls, and as Manuel puts them in the holes he counts: "Uno, dos, tres; tres pelotas [three balls]."

In this narration, we see all the features we have discussed. Ramon, the father, uses simple words and phrases to describe all of Manuel's actions and the objects that he is looking at. He takes turns with his son and uses simple language to accompany his own actions. His language is repetitive, and his sentences are generally one or two words long, just right for a child who is not yet speaking. He uses sound effects (such as "Bang, bang"), ritualized phrases ("One, two, three"), and simple gestures (such as extending his hand) when he makes a request of his son. He helps Manuel follows his simple verbal instructions, and he uses a happy, positive voice throughout.

Ramon also joins Manuel in an activity that Manuel has chosen, and he positions himself so that he can easily follow Manuel's actions and gaze so he can label just what Manuel is focused on at that moment. This is what we mean by "narrating your child's activity" at just the right level for this child. In this episode Manuel vocalizes only three times (we have not described these here). However, within 1 month, Manuel is imitating many of these words and is initiating some of them as well: "One, two, three," "thank you," "ball," "please," "*mas* [more]," "*agua* [water]," and several other words in both languages. At 18 months he is well on his way to becoming a verbal child, and at 22 months he speaks in short Spanish and English phrases, has well over 50 words, and understands his parents' simple speech in both languages.

Step 5. Add Sounds to Gestures

Rationale. We have been talking about how to help your child do three things: (1) develop more sounds and words; (2) develop the ability to "turn on" his voice;

and (3) make words or sounds back and forth with you and others in vocal play—"mini-conversations." For children who can do these three things, the next step is adding gestures to their sounds, to increase their nonverbal communications. We talked about how to build up your child's gestures and body language in Chapter 7. Now it's time to put sounds to those gestures.

To help your child learn to put word approximations or sounds to gestures, you will need to model the skill very consistently. The procedure should follow these steps:

1. Choose a gesture and a word or word-like sound that your child uses frequently, and model them together.
2. Add sounds or simple words to accompany all your child's gestures.
3. If your child is making sounds but not words with her gestures, add word approximations—nouns or verbs—to the simple sounds.

Here are some ideas for carrying out this sequence:

- **Choose a gesture and word or word-like sound to target.** Pick a sound your child can already produce. Now choose a gesture your child already uses frequently that the sound could easily be paired with. Let's say, for example, that your child has learned to consistently reach or point to an object to request it, and that your child makes many requests by pointing every day (because you are offering many choices every day—good for you!). Now think about what sound or word your child uses that could be paired with a point. Does your child say "da"? Is "da" something your child can repeat after you? If so, it's a great choice for pairing with a point—it's close to the word "that." What about "ah"? Can your child repeat "ah"? It also sounds a little like "that."

  After deciding on the gesture and word you plan to use, ask your child to hand you things during a game by pointing and saying, "that, give me that." You have just modeled what you want your child to learn. And when your child points to or reaches for something, before you give it, imitate your child by pointing to the object and say, "That? You want that?" Wait and see if your child will try to imitate the word "that" by saying "ah" or "da" before you give it. If she says anything at all, give the object. If she looks at the object but doesn't say anything, give the object. Model this when your child makes requests every day. Pretty soon your child will probably begin to add a sound to the requesting gesture.

- **Add sounds or simple words to all your child's gestures in the same way.** In the gesture games you play, try to add a sound consistently—"boo" when your child uncovers his face during peekaboo, "bye" when your child waves bye-bye, "no no" when your child protests and pushes away an unwanted

food or object. Follow the suggestions we have just laid out above to find a simple "word"—a sound to pair with your child's gesture. Start modeling it and trying to get your child to imitate it. Your animal sound games and books, and your sound effects in your toy play routines, are other places to encourage your child to imitate your sounds with gestures.

Remember! The first time your child imitates your word and gesture, imitate your child's word and gesture right back, give the toy to your child as quickly as possible, and keep the game going. Don't ask your child to imitate you again right away. It's really tempting, but it's a brand-new skill, and it may be really hard for your child to do it twice in a row. Instead, go ahead and take your turn, and just model it again a couple of times. Then give your child another turn. She may model the sound as well as the gesture; she may not. But try it again the next day or the next time you do the routine. As it becomes easier for your child, you will expect more of these, and you can expect more imitations in a row. But baby steps are the way you will get there.

- **Add nouns or verbs to the simple sounds.** Now, at this point, your child is vocalizing with his gestures and in your baby games and sound games, but he may be saying only an "ah" or a "da." You are still playing your vocal games, right? So your child is likely increasing the number of sounds he is making, and can now imitate back and forth with you. So now, after your child gestures and vocalizes with his "ah" or "da" or other sound, imitate back and then model the correct word. For instance, if your child points to a cereal box and says "da," you say, "That? Cereal! [emphasizing the "s"]. Cereal!" And hand it over. Add a real word to all your child's gesture-plus-sound routines—ideally, a word that contains some sounds your child can already make and imitate in games with you. After you have done this for a few days, if your child is not starting to imitate the new word, get closer, look at him, say "Cereal? Cereal? Sss-cereal?", and look expectantly, waiting for your child to imitate. Give the cereal regardless of what your child says or doesn't say.

Helpful Tip

As you begin to use the correct words for your child's sounds, try not to use the word "more" or "please" as a general term for requesting, and instead use the object or action name as the target. This will expand your child's vocabulary and prevent overuse of "more." This way your child can understand and start to use the names of objects and actions to communicate.

If you and your child have a number of vocal imitation games going, and if you have a number of sounds in them that your child can imitate, her ability to

start imitating and adding sounds should come along. Accept any sound match your child makes. It's a long way from "Sss" to "cereal," but this is the way that all little children learn to speak. They say what they can, and over time—as their speech muscles and skills develop through practice, and as they learn to hear the sound differences more precisely—they come closer to saying the real word.

Summary of Steps 4–5

If you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist, you are now armed with important skills for helping your child build an initial vocabulary. These are skills you will use throughout your child's language learning—building on what your child can already produce, offering new words in interesting contexts, and helping your child expand her utterances in meaningful activities. If you don't feel secure in these skills, turn back to the start of this section and review. Consider asking your child's speech–language therapist to observe your interactions and give you some feedback or coaching with these techniques.

Activity Checklist: Am I Building My Child's Vocabulary?

____ I talk to my child throughout our activities together—both play and caregiving activities.
____ I speak in simple language to my child, using phrases that are just a word or two longer than my child produces on his or her own.
____ I routinely narrate my child's activities as he or she does them, and I position myself for easy eye contact while doing so.
____ I frequently take turns with my child and label my actions as well as my child's.
____ I add simple sounds to my child's gestures (sounds I know my child can imitate), modeling them for my child and waiting expectantly for him or her to imitate me.
____ If my child easily imitates a simple sound with a gesture, I also model a single appropriate word and wait for my child to imitate it.

Caution! Does your child imitate, or echo, easily? If so, you may find it very tempting to provide the child with phrases and encourage him to echo every word, hoping that he will learn multiword speech more quickly. *Don't do this!* It doesn't help; we think it actually fosters more echoing. Instead, base your own word length on the length of your child's spontaneous, meaningful, nonechoed utterances. Your child may be able to echo a whole sentence, but may produce only single words spontaneously. If this is the case, then base your sentence length on

Summary: Building Expressive Speech and Language

Steps	Activities	Techniques
Step 1. Build up your child's vocabulary of sounds.	**Activity:** Respond as if your child's sounds are words: Repeat them, answer them, or say a word that is similar to the sound and that makes sense in context.	**Techniques:** Position yourself face to face. Repeat or otherwise respond to your child's sounds, and then pause, waiting for your child to make another sound. When your child makes another sound, respond again in a similar manner.
Step 2. Develop vocal games with your child's sounds.	**Activity:** Carry on a "mini-conversation" by making one of the sounds your child makes, waiting for your child to respond, and answer back with the same or different sound.	**Techniques:** Gain the child's attention first by initiating the game while you are face to face. Look at your child, make the sound, and wait expectantly. Sustain the back-and-forth interchange as long as your child is interested.
Step 3. Increase opportunities for listening and responding to sounds made by others.	**Activities with nonspeech sounds:** Make noises such as animal sounds, car noises, phone rings, and so on while playing with your child. Make noises such as tongue clicks, raspberries, and lip pops while interacting with your child. If your child shows an interest, repeat and pause, waiting for your child to imitate.	**Techniques:** Watch for your child's reaction to the sounds. Repeat the sounds to increase your child's interest and attention. Wait for your child to respond. Have fun!
	Activities involving words and sounds in songs and sensory social routines: Make sounds and use words while playing familiar games involving songs or other routines (e.g., peekaboo, chase/"I'm gonna get you," bumblebee, "This Little Piggy").	**Techniques:** Use songs or routines that involve anticipation and a sound, such as "Ready, set, go!" Songs or routines that have a predictable rhythm are especially effective.

(cont.)

Summary *(cont.)*

Steps	Activities	Techniques
Step 4. Talk to your child in a way that promotes language development.	**Activities:** Talk to your child throughout your shared activities: while you are playing, riding in the car, making dinner, and so on. Label objects and actions, describe in simple words what your child is seeing and doing. Narrate your own activities, and narrate your child's activities.	**Techniques:** Follow the focus of your child's attention and actions by describing what your child is seeing and doing. Narrate whatever your child is doing with simple language. Use short and simple phrases or single words. In general, your language should be just a little more complex than your child's language. (If your child uses only sounds, use single words that expand on those sounds; if your child uses single words, use simple phrases using those words.) Decide on the words you want your child to learn, and use those words frequently in different situations.
Step 5. Add sounds to gestures.	1. Choose a gesture and word or word-like sound, and model them together. 2. Add sounds or simple words to your child's gestures. 3. Add word approximations to your child's gestures. **Note:** Skip #2 if your child is already using words.	**Techniques:** During a game or other interaction, model the gesture and word you wish your child to learn. When your child uses a gesture such as reaching or pointing, use a sound or word to indicate what your child wants before giving it to your child. When making sounds or using words with your child during play or other types of interaction, add a gesture to that sound.

your child's one-word *spontaneous* utterances. Hold your sentence length to two or three words (the one-up rule), and follow all our guidance above. For example, if your child spontaneously says "milk" to request it, don't tell your child, "Say, 'I want milk.'" Instead, just say something like "Here's your milk," or "Want more milk?" or "Yummy milk" as you hand over the milk. Focus on slowly building up your child's spontaneous speech, and all should progress well.

What You Can Do to Help Your Child Understand Speech

At the time they are diagnosed with autism, young children typically understand very few words that the people around them use. Some children might seem to understand more than they actually do, because they may learn to "read" the whole situation and make good guesses about what will happen next, based on their past experiences. For instance, you may say, "It's time to go to preschool. Let's get in the car," and your child may head to the door. It looks as if your child has understood your words. But you have also picked up your keys and your jacket, as well as your child's backpack and jacket, and these may be the nonverbal cues your child is using to interpret what is going on.

Sometimes young children with autism seem to ignore the speech that is being directed at them. You may be doing a terrific job of narrating play, using simple language, and providing language models, but the words may not "penetrate" your child's attention. Your child may not have learned the importance of listening, or the need to follow through by responding to your words. But you can teach your child to listen and respond to words. It will come.

Helpful Tip

To know whether your child really understands the meaning of a word or phrase, speak it without any gestures and see what happens. If your child follows the meaning—reaches for the object, follows the instruction, carries out the action—then it is clear that she understands your words. If not, then your child may understand the situation well, but not the words alone yet.

"One thing I found helpful was to realize when my son was following other cues rather than words, so that I could fade out the other cues gradually. My son loves to go on walks outside, so one of the earliest commands he would follow was 'Let's go outside.' By initially giving lots of cues (pointing toward the door, etc.) and then reducing them, I was able to encourage him to rely on the words more, and then could see when he was responding to the words alone. One of our biggest breakthroughs occurred when I asked him to get his shoes and take them to the door, and he actually did! At the time, he rarely responded to verbal commands. However, the fact that he'd picked up on the nonverbal cues showed us that this was a highly motivating phrase to learn."

The best news about receptive language learning is that when you follow the guidelines we have given you for expressive language development, receptive language understanding will develop right alongside it. The techniques actually develop both sets of skills. Over time, as you follow the techniques we have already covered, your child will learn that speech is important, that she needs to listen and attend to what is being said, and that she is expected to respond when spoken to. If you've been helping your child make sounds with her gestures, you've already been expecting your child to listen to the word or sound you've modeled and imitate it back. You've waited to give your child the cereal until she responds with a sound. In this situation, you expect your child to listen to you and to respond. You make it clear that a response is required, and your child has learned this. This is how your child will learn to respond to other spoken requests you make or spoken instructions you give to your child.

In the previous chapters, you added labels to objects and actions throughout the day during your child's activities. These techniques are powerful for building receptive language. Now we will address a different topic: understanding other's instructions.

Continue using the previous steps and add these other steps, which focus precisely on understanding and responding to others' speech:

Step 1. Expect a response, then get it.

Step 2. Be clear about the natural reinforcers of your child's speech, and be sure to use them for responding to speech.

Step 3. Instruct less and follow through more.

Step 4. Teach your child to understand brand-new words and instructions.

Step 1. Expect a Response, Then Get It

Part of teaching your child to understand is raising your expectations for your child's response.

Rationale. When a young child with autism does not speak or understand speech, over time you may stop expecting the child to respond. But a child who isn't expected to respond won't learn the importance of speech. So it's critical to start requiring a response.

 Activity: *Follow Through on What You Say to Ensure a Response*

When you are focused on teaching your child to understand speech, your expectations and follow-through are crucial. For this step, you need to get your child's attention, give your child a simple instruction, and wait briefly for the child's response. If there is none, quickly physically cue or prompt your child to follow

through, and then follow with the reinforcer, whatever it may be. The turn-taking routines discussed in Chapter 6 are great examples. When it's your turn, you can extend your hand, say, "Give me," wait briefly for the child to give, and prompt your child to place the object in your hand if the child needs help completing this step. Then you take a very fast turn and give the object right back, so that the child ends up with the object he wanted in the first place. Making gentle and easy but frequent requests or instructions and requiring follow-through is a crucial teaching technique for developing children's understanding of words and their attention and responsiveness to adult speech.

Step 2. Remember the Natural Reinforcers of Your Child's Speech, and Be Sure to Use Them for Responding to Speech

Step 2 may sound simple enough, but it's important to choose the right reinforcers—the rewards for cooperating. You need to work with your child's own goals and motivations. So the time to teach your child the instruction "Sit down" is when your child wants something that you have. Have your child sit down on a small chair or the floor before you hand over the glass of juice she is requesting, or "Come here" to go outside to play, or "Stand up" to transition from a sitting activity to a fun physical game. In all these examples, the instructions are followed by a powerful reinforcer. They are also physical skills your child already has—sitting, standing, walking to you. If you provide an instruction right before doing something that your child wants, your child will get used to hearing your instruction and the rewarding activity and words that follow. Inserting simple demands before delivering what your child wants is a very powerful part of teaching the child to follow simple instructions.

Two-year-old Alex plays happily alone, and he pretty much ignores his parents' efforts to engage him. As he puts pegs into a little car, his mom says, "Put it here," and points to a hole. He ignores her and puts it elsewhere. He reaches for a pompom, and Dad sees his goal, picks it up, and offers it to him. "Want the pompom?" says Dad, but Alex turns away from Dad and picks up the other pompom lying within reach. Dad hands him the other pompom, and he drops it on the floor. He turns back to the car, and Mom models driving it while making "vroom-vroom" noises. He blocks her and starts to put pegs in again.

Alex's lack of response discourages his parents, and they don't know how to motivate him to engage with them. They decide to use identical cars in play activity and to imitate his actions with one of the cars with an identical one they are holding. As they begin to imitate his actions and narrate, he begins to look at what they are doing. After about 10 minutes, his father holds back for a minute, and Alex looks at him and makes a little emphatic noise, as if to say, "Come on, Dad, do it!" Dad does, and Alex smiles and looks up at Dad briefly. As they continue to imitate him, they now begin to add a piece to his car. He does not reject this, but rather looks up

at Mom and then continues. After a couple more minutes, Mom hands him a peg and he puts it in his car. Then, as he reaches for the pompom, Dad hands it to him, saying "Here, Alex, pompom," and he takes it. Dad picks up the other pompom, says "Alex, pompom," and hands it to him. Alex takes it. He turns back to the car and puts another peg in, which Mom imitates. She then drives her car, making a "vroom-vroom" sound, but he places another peg. She picks up a peg and offers it: "Alex, peg." He says "peg" and puts it in.

Mom and Dad have developed a very effective strategy in this play. They imitate him, narrating and helping him for several turns, and then they place an instruction (e.g., "Alex, peg") inside the flow of activities. They make sure to follow through (either by handing it over or by placing the piece), but their play interactions with him are so rewarding that he follows through with the instructions, and this keeps the game going. After another few minutes, his father offers a choice: "Alex, peg or pompom?" as he holds both out. Alex says "peg" and selects the peg, which Dad then labels ("You chose peg"). Lo and behold, he is communicating, with gestures, gaze, and even a word imitation!

Alex is harder to engage than some young children with ASD, but his parents are persistent. They do not give up, and they find a way to join him in play. Like most children, he enjoys being imitated, quickly experiences the contingency, and comes to expect it—and that becomes the reward for this shared activity. His parents choose their words and actions carefully, fitting them into his preferred activity and being careful to space their instructions out so they follow several minutes of Alex-led activity. Their persistence, their ability to establish a powerfully reinforcing joint activity, and their wisdom at putting simple instructions into the play, directing him to do things he already wants to do—these techniques allow them to begin to work on receptive language, the names of the objects. Within 12 weeks, Alex is playing cooperatively in toddler-type toy activities with both parents, imitates single words easily, and uses about 25 words spontaneously.

But what if there is no built-in reinforcer in the play activity? In the example above, Alex's parents find a reinforcer inside the activity—pegs and pompoms—and focus their language and expectations for Alex's responses on these items. However, if there is no intrinsic reinforcer (a reward that relates to the child's behavior) in a routine, you can create one. As you know from Chapter 9, learning happens only when behaviors are followed by reinforcers. How can you create reinforcers where there don't seem to be any?

Sometimes you can use activities your child really likes and rearrange the order of household routines to capitalize on the reward power of the favorite activity. For instance, it is a struggle for many parents to motivate their children to get dressed for school in the morning, even when the children are perfectly capable of self-dressing. Think about the reward structure for getting dressed. Is there any? For children who are hungry in the morning and are motivated to eat breakfast, parents can establish a new rule—that the children have to be dressed

Helpful Tip

Follow ***Grandma's rule***, or ***Premack's principle***. Grandma's rule is "First work, then play." Premack's principle (coined by David Premack, a professor of psychology) is that when a more preferred activity follows a less preferred activity, the more preferred activity can act as a reinforcer for the less preferred activity.

before breakfast. Now breakfast, which would have happened anyway, gets repositioned to follow self-dressing and can reinforce the activity.

There has to be some reward for a child for following an instruction. This doesn't mean you are spoiling or bribing your child, regardless of what others say. This is how children learn. You wouldn't go to work if you were not receiving a paycheck, would you? It's the same for your child. You need to find something your child is motivated to have: a favorite activity, an object that your child really loves to handle, an electronic toy, or even a little piece of a favorite cereal or a sip of juice. Some desired event must follow your child's cooperation with the instruction, no matter how much you had to help, for your child to learn. If your child has a runny nose and you provide a tissue and help him wipe it, the natural thing to do then is "throw it away." Say it and help your child do it. Once it is thrown way, clap and cheer for your child, pick him up and play a favorite game in the air, or go back to the very fun activity that was interrupted by the runny nose. All of these will provide rewards for throwing the tissue away.

Helpful Tip

Think about what rewarding event can follow your child's response. Sometimes the reward might be more logical than naturally related to your child's behavior. Here are some examples:

- First dress, then eat breakfast.
- First wash hands, then have a snack.
- First go potty, then play outside.
- First put jacket on, then go for a ride.
- At bedtime, first brush teeth, then read a book.

Step 3. Instruct Less and Follow Through More

To teach your child that your words have meaning, you must follow through—happily, playfully, but consistently. So be careful what you say! Be ready to act. Giving instructions without following through actually teaches children to ignore their parents' instructions. If you are not in a position to assure that your child follows through on an instruction by helping your child through it, don't give the instruction in the first place. Fewer instructions, with more follow-through, often aids children's learning of others' speech.

Step 4. Teach Your Child to Understand Brand-New Words and Instructions

So far, we've been talking about giving children instructions involving things they can actually do. They are capable of sitting, standing, giving, approaching you, and throwing things in a trash container. You give them the instruction and walk them through it, fading your supports as quickly as possible. Through this process, they learn what the instruction means. However, most of the instructions you will give your child a little later on will involve skills your child does not yet have. Now you will be teaching the skill and the language for it, all together. Putting on a coat, taking off shoes, bringing you her pajamas, sharing his toy with his brother—these all involve new skills your child will need to learn from you.

The process will be the same: (1) You will figure out the reward—fun bath time follows undressing; taking off a coat or jacket and hanging it up on the hook is necessary before entering the preschool room; bringing you the pajamas is followed by a favorite storybook; sharing a toy involves getting it back very quickly and getting another one to play with. (2) Then you will give your child the instruction and help her follow it. (3) Finally, you will reward her for following the instruction.

Over repeated practice opportunities (daily or several times a day), you will slowly decrease the amount of help you give (fade your prompts) to ensure that your child follows through. That is, you will be giving less and less help once you give the instruction, until you are just gesturing that your child should follow through. Then you will fade your gestures, and your child will follow your verbal instruction and use the skill independently.

What about skills that have lots of steps? For multistep tasks like bathing, your child may need quite a while to learn them all. In this situation, it is often useful to begin to work toward independence by having your child learn the very last step independently, then the last two, then the last three. This is called ***backward chaining***. For instance, you would help your child take off his clothes up until the very last step (shirt off head), which your child would do alone. Once that is mastered, you would focus on the next-to-last step as well (shirt off neck and head). This is the process we have discussed in Chapter 7, in which you are breaking down the skill into its various steps and teaching each step as its own skill—even while you have your child participate in all the steps, so he learns the chain.

Caution! We recommend that you *not* use verbal instructions in the various steps of a chain. The instruction to "Wash hands" needs to mean all the steps of washing hands. Teach your child the intermediate steps through physical prompts and gestural prompts, but don't use verbal instructions to prompt your child to do the individual steps; otherwise, you are in danger of having a child who waits

to be told each step. You want each *action* to become the antecedent for the next action. So use physical prompts or gestures to keep the chain of steps going, and physical arrangement of materials if you need to, to help your child through a complex set of actions involving objects (e.g., laying out the clothes to be put on in order on the bed, or putting all the pieces for table setting on the table).

Summary of Steps 1–4

Your child's intervention team will be able to help you figure out how to help your child learn all kinds of instructions. We are really just trying to give you a beginning point here (a place to start after diagnosis while you are waiting for your child's services to get organized and get going) and a follow-through point (a way to work with your child at home and in daily life that augments other interventions your child will receive). To monitor your own learning, see if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for helping your child build her understanding of speech. These are skills you will use throughout your child's language learning—building on what your child can already do, offering new vocabulary words in their appropriate contexts, and helping your child follow through with instructions in meaningful, enjoyable activities. If you don't feel secure in these skills, turn back to the start of this section and review. Consider asking your child's speech–language therapist to observe your interactions and give you some feedback or coaching with these techniques.

Activity Checklist: Am I Building Up My Child's Understanding of Speech?

____ I routinely put simple words and instructions into our play and caregiving routines.

____ I monitor myself and consistently help my child follow through with instructions.

____ I make sure there are rewarding consequences that follow my child's successful cooperation with instructions.

____ I foster my child's independence at following instructions by fading my help rapidly.

____ When teaching my child a new skill, I use simple, direct language to introduce the activity.

____ When working with my child, my instructions or directions are balanced by the many opportunities my child has to make choices and have fun with me; we are partners in the process.

Summary: Building Receptive Language

Steps	Activities	Techniques
Step 1. Expect a response, then get it.	**Activities:** During turn-taking routines, use gestures and words and expect a response in return. Make gentle requests or commands and require a response from your child. Reinforce every response.	**Techniques:** Get your child's attention, give your child a simple instruction, and wait briefly for a child response. If there is none, quickly physically cue or prompt your child to follow through, and then follow with the reinforcer.
Step 2. Be clear about the natural reinforcers of your child's speech, and be sure to use them for responding to speech.	**Activities:** Notice your child's goals and motivations, and use these as reinforcers for following instructions, requests, or commands. During everyday activities, insert simple demands before delivering what your child wants.	**Techniques:** When your child wants an object, ask your child to follow a command, such as "Sit down" or "Come here," before giving your child the desired object. Provide an instruction right before doing something your child wants and that you would have given anyway; your child will get used to hearing your instruction and the praise or other reward that follows.
Step 3. Instruct less and follow through more.	**Activities:** During your typical daily routines or during playtimes, teach your child that your words have meaning by consistently following through with whatever you request and comment on.	**Techniques:** Use fewer instructions throughout the day, but always follow through by expecting your child to respond to your instructions, even if this requires that you walk your child through the response, fading your gestures, prompts, and supports over time.

Summary *(cont.)*

Steps	Activities	Techniques
Step 4. Teach your child to understand brand-new words and instructions.	**Activities for teaching simple one- or two-step skills:** During everyday activities, when you wish to teach a new skill, figure out the reward (fun bath time follows undressing; taking off a coat or jacket and hanging it up on the hook is necessary before entering the preschool room; bringing you the pajamas is followed by a favorite storybook; sharing a toy involves getting it back very quickly and getting another one to play with). Then you will give your child the instruction, help your child do it, and then give the reward.	**Techniques:** Over repeated practice opportunities (daily, or several times a day), you will slowly decrease the amount of help you give, to ensure that your child follows through (fade your prompts). That is, you will be giving less and less help once you give the instruction, until you are just gesturing that your child should follow through. Then you will fade your gestures, and your child will follow your instruction and do the skill independently.
	Activities for teaching multistep skills: During activities (such as getting dressed) that require multiple steps, use the same teaching methods as for single-step skills, but start by teaching the last step, then add the next-to-last step, and so on.	**Techniques:** Break down a complex skill into a series of single steps. Teach each step as its own skill, starting with the last step. Chain all of these steps together to teach the complex skill. Avoid using a different verbal instruction for each step. Instead, use one verbal instruction for the entire sequence of steps that make up the complex skill. Use physical prompts and cues (e.g., laying out materials needed in a sequence) to help your child chain the different steps together.

Chapter Summary

Young children with autism often have significant difficulties using and understanding speech. However, they are capable of making enormous gains in these areas. We believe, and have demonstrated in our studies and clinical work, that the majority of young children with autism can learn functional, spontaneous, phrase speech. To promote their language development, children need to receive high-quality language experiences and intervention throughout the preschool years. Parents are in the best position by far to provide the greatest number of language-learning opportunities, regardless of the intensity of "outside" therapies.

Speech builds on gestures, imitation, shared attention, and vocal and object play. Functional communicative speech begins with these skills. The fundamental techniques that you as a parent can use involve simplifying your language; creating many, many opportunities for the child to engage with you and communicate throughout the day; using gestures, words, and sound effects in all your activities with your child; building up your child's repertoire of speech sounds through vocal games involving imitation, sound effects, animal sounds, and song patterns in play; increasing your expectations for your child to vocalize along with his gestures; and increasing your expectations and follow-through to show your child how to listen and respond to your simple instructions. Let communication routines become part of all your caregiving routines and play routines with your child. Include your child in as many of your household activities as possible. Interacting with others who are speaking to them and doing shared activities is how children learn functional language skills. This is how every child learns to use and understand spoken language.

Refrigerator List

Goal: To help your child use language and understand speech.

Steps:

- ✓ **Raise your expectations!**
- ✓ **Continue imitating your child's sounds to develop vocal games.**
- ✓ **Everything, and every action, and quality, needs a name.**
- ✓ **Use simple language; follow the one-up rule.**
- ✓ **Put in your child's ear the words you want to come from your child's mouth.**
- ✓ **Instruct less; follow through more.**

14

Putting It All Together

We are coming to the end of a long time spent together. You've accumulated a lot of strategies for directly addressing the learning challenges of early autism. All of these are based on the success we've had with the Early Start Denver Model, which helps young children learn naturally by building learning into everyday routines, and particularly by incorporating it into play. Children with autism need to discover the rewards of social interaction, because being engaged in activities with others and communicating with them are the routes to all learning, including learning to speak.

We hope that by now, with practice, use of the strategies we've described comes naturally to you too. And we hope, as a result, that you've seen your child turn a corner toward becoming engaged, communicating, and learning, which will lead to success in the years to come.

In this final chapter we'll review the building blocks you've accumulated, to give you a picture of how they all fit together in your daily interactions with your child and propel your child along a typical developmental path at this crucial early stage of life. We'll also show you how these parent-delivered strategies can intersect with the early intervention efforts of the professionals who are assisting you and your child. Finally, we'll help you keep the most important principles in mind as you continue to teach your child in the months and years ahead, and we'll steer you to the appropriate chapters to review if you run into any problems with using the strategies you've learned in this book.

But first, here are two important bits of advice if you've just gotten started and are worried that weaving these strategies into your already busy life will be too difficult:

- **Carve out moments to interact and play with your child.** It's a challenge to use teaching strategies, set up play activities, and arrange everyday activities so they can provide teaching moments. Things go slower; less gets done. It takes young children with autism time to learn new routines. Working them into these new routines takes time, and your child may protest changes in his or

her routines. However, this will become more and more automatic, both for you and for your child. As you practice these routines, they will become like second nature to you. You will no longer have to think or plan or monitor yourself—it will be natural. The same will be true for your child. Young children are flexible and can learn new routines, and they enjoy interacting with parents (and the younger they are, the more flexible they are!). Whether it is dressing, mealtime, playtime on the floor, or reading books at bedtime, the important thing is to find interactive time throughout the day to engage your child face to face with you as you narrate your shared activities and elicit your child's participation. That is how your child will learn.

- **Take baby steps.** Go one little step at a time, making sure there are fun activities, things your child enjoys—rewards for participation—built into each activity. You will be rewarded by seeing your child become much more of a participant in family life, learning much more about language and about how the world of your family works. Remember, "slow and steady wins the race." Take your time to adopt new routines. The routines are always going to be there. The strategies described in this book should offer pleasurable parenting experiences for you, as well as your child.

Please share these techniques with your child's circle of concerned others: your partner or spouse, grandparents, siblings, babysitters, preschool teacher, and other caregivers. That way, your child's learning opportunities will increase; others will have more satisfying experiences with him or her; and you can share the responsibility for helping your child learn among the many people who care about your child. You will be able to talk to others about what is working well and what is not. Your child will learn how to use his or her new skills with many different people, not just one. And each person will bring to the learning situation his or her own style and ideas, which will enrich the learning experience.

Your Foundation for Giving Your Child an Early Start

At this point you are undoubtedly very aware of how many learning opportunities you can create for your little one in every one of your play and care routines. If you've started incorporating our suggestions into your day, you're applying many critical principles for teaching a child with ASD.

You are likely quite skilled now at gaining and holding your child's attention. You know that learning cannot occur without attention, and if you have followed the guidelines for positioning yourself with your child, for rewarding attention, and for making sure you have your child's attention before trying to teach anything new or reinforce anything already taught, your child probably pays much more attention to you now than when you started with this book. **If you take**

away only one thing away from this book, take away this principle: the importance of gaining and holding your child's attention for learning from you.

You understand the structure of a joint activity and its importance as the framework for teaching and engaging your child. In joint activities partners share control of the activity, at times leading and at other times following each other. They play together, building on each other's actions by imitating, elaborating, or taking turns. It is through joint activities that young children learn in natural settings—at home and out, with you and the rest of your family—and ultimately with their friends and classmates too. Joint activities begin with your child's attention, motivation, and interest in an activity. In a joint activity you and your child are face to face, so that both of you are attentive and involved with the materials and with each other. Together you develop a theme, and then variations to expand the theme. Finally, the two of you close it down and transition smoothly to another activity; you sustain your child's attention through the transition and into the next activity, so there is no break in attention and learning.

You have probably experimented a lot with the joint activity structure, using it at meals and in care interactions like bathing, dressing, changing, and bedtime, as well as in play routines. You and your child probably have a wide range of joint activity routines at this point. Some of your routines use toys and other objects. These object-oriented routines highlight cognitive, play, motor, and language growth. Other play routines occur without toys. These sensory social routines create emotional exchanges and shared attention, and especially foster language, imitation, and social learning. You are probably seeing some very big differences now in your child's willingness to engage in joint activities with you and others—better attention, more motivation to engage, many more skills, more mature and sustained play with toys, much more communication. Take a deep breath, to remember and appreciate what you and your child have accomplished.

You have learned a lot about how children learn. Now you understand that you've been applying the ABC's of learning in all your routines with your child. The terms ***antecedent***, ***behavior***, ***consequence***, and ***reinforcement*** have come alive for you. You know that your child's behaviors occur in response to some stimulus or another (the antecedent), and that the teaching–learning process ties antecedent and behavior together by following them with a desirable consequence for your child—one that occurs right after the child uses the skill you are trying to develop. Understanding this ABC relationship will allow you not only to teach your child new skills, but also to replace unwanted behaviors that may crop up with more acceptable and more communicative ways for your child to achieve his or her goals. It will also help you develop plans to teach your child new skills and behaviors, by thinking through the ABC's for yourself.

If you have completed this book, you now know a great deal about the development of communication skills. The developmental skills young children use to learn from others—imitation, joint attention, gestural and verbal communication, speech, practice in play, and practice during daily activities—are part of your moment-to-moment awareness. You have learned how to embed imitation into all kinds of joint activities. Imitating actions on objects is particularly easy to target in open-ended joint activities with objects. Gestural imitation is particularly salient in sensory social routines, especially songs and finger plays. And verbal imitation to learn new language structures occurs during language-learning activities in all kinds of joint activities.

You now know much more about how language develops—from meaningful gestures, from your child's use of his or her voice, and from the ongoing process of learning how speech and gesture influence others. You know the importance of functional communication: helping your child develop the gestures and words needed to indicate what is already in your child's mind. You are giving your child the gestures and words that label his or her desires, actions, interests, and feelings. You are putting the words in your child's ears that you want to come out of the child's mouth.

The purpose of language is to coordinate and share information and experiences with other people. Language is primarily a social behavior. You are emphasizing the functional and social aspects of communication when you respond to your child's gestures and speech by following through on their meaning—that is, by saying back what your child has said with the body or with speech (with a little elaboration), to let the child know that you have heard and understood it, and to provide a model for a slightly more mature way to say it. This is the one-up rule. You are responding to communication with meaningful communication rather than praise. And you know how to embed all this into playful routines, both during play and during caregiving. You are an expert in play! You are likely to be a very fun play partner and to have all kinds of play routines involving toys, social games, pretend, physical games, and outdoor activities in your repertoire.

Finally, you have learned how to make the most of the learning opportunities afforded by your everyday activities and routines with your child. Remember the big six types of activities introduced in Chapter 4: toy or other object play, social play, book activities, meals, caregiving (bathing/dressing/changing/bedtime), and household chores. Here is a review of the basic guidelines for making the most of these opportunities.

Meals

Does your child eat at the table, in either a booster seat or a high chair? If not, work to make that change and then sit down and eat with your child. Incorporate

your child into family meals. Try to structure three meals and three snacks a day, all at the table and all involving others, while you decrease (or eliminate) eating on the run. Having a child sit down to eat or drink (even to sit down on the floor to drink from a cup) gives you the chance to work on many requesting skills, imitating skills, and communication skills centering around food and drink, which are usually very motivating for children.

As you read this, you may realize that you had once successfully established organized mealtimes and snack times, but that now your child has gone back to eating and drinking whenever and wherever he or she wants. These patterns have probably evolved slowly over time, and you can slowly undo them, step by step:

1. Begin by having your child sit down to eat. At the table is the best place, but if that is too far a stretch, begin by requiring the child to sit down wherever he or she is. Once seated, you can hand your child food or drink. If your child starts to get up while holding the food, consider taking the food away and encouraging your child to sit down again. Your child may well refuse to sit any longer after a few bites, at which time you will remove the food. However, if your child isn't yet full, he or she will be hungry or thirsty again soon, and you can practice again. If you are warmly and gently persistent, you will likely teach this skill quickly.

2. Once your child sits, switch to having the child sit in the kitchen, near the high chair. Try to give your child as much as he or she can eat and drink at one time, and then put off the next snack or meal for an hour or two.

3. Once your child is sitting in the kitchen for all food and drink, move the eating place to the high chair or booster seat, where you can sit right across from your child at a corner and provide the food there.

4. Be sure to eat or drink a little something yourself—a cup of coffee, piece of fruit, something to make it a social time. If you typically have a TV or video running during meals, turn it off, either quickly (if your child tolerates it) or slowly if needed, by first muting the sound for a few meals, then dimming the picture for a few meals, then keeping it off. Instead, sit with your child; have your child's food on the table (ideally, with you and the other family members); offer your child food and name the food; and wait for eyes, voice, or gesture to request. Don't give very much in a portion, so that your child needs to request many times to end up full. Shifting your child to eating three meals and three snacks a day at the table will result in better nutrition, better eating habits, and much more communication. If you can't do this for three meals, do it for one or two.

Caregiving Routines

Build social play routines into changing, bathing, dressing, washing hands, brushing teeth, and getting ready for bed. Add songs, social games, and object

play routines to all your caregiving routines. Help your child do many of the steps of each routine him- or herself, instead of being passive (or resistant!) while you do it all. When you help your child participate in washing and drying, brushing teeth, washing hands, handing you a diaper, or giving you a sock or shoe, you will also be adding language and increasing communication during these activities—the building blocks of speech and language. You already spend time doing these things, and adding communication games and child expectations to those routines makes them richer learning experiences for your child. For example, if your child is watching a video while being dressed, little learning about dressing can take place. If the TV is off, you and your child are face to face, and you are helping your child complete each step of the routine (pull on each piece of clothing; hand you shoes, socks, or diaper; help pull zippers or button buttons), as you talk to your child in simple language about each step, narrating the activity, your child is learning language, self-care, social, and motor skills.

Bedtime is an especially important time for language learning. Does your child have a set bedtime routine? If not, can you begin one? Bathing your child and playing with bath toys nightly provide a very rich setting for language learning and social exchange. Following the bathing and drying routine with lotion and pajama-dressing routines that are language-rich and full of social exchanges provides two more learning-rich activities. Brushing teeth can be another language- and learning-rich activity. So, finally, are putting your child into bed and reading a book together (which for young children means naming and talking about the pictures and creating sound effects, not reading the script).

We have just walked you through close to an hour of a bedtime routine. It takes time, and parents with multiple small children and other demands will have many limitations on their time. However, this is a whole hour filled with language and social learning activities, and it is a routine that will also build better sleep habits. Even picking out one or two of these routines nightly will be very helpful for your child. Their consistency and repetition are what make these routines such powerful learning experiences.

Toy and Social Play

You have probably already increased your toy play routines and sensory social routines with your child, since we have been focusing on these so strongly throughout the book. Finding 15–30 minutes two or three times a day (morning, afternoon, and evening?), indoors and out, will help you continue to build the communication and learning value of these routines. The critical factor in play is the joint activity routine structure, with partners face to face, actively engaged with each other and the toys or social games, and communicating back and forth throughout. Try to help others who play with your child—parents, older siblings, grandparents, babysitters, and others—use these techniques as well.

Household Chores

Don't forget about household chores! There are many ways young children can participate with you in chores. They can help you feed the dog, water the plants, pull the clothes out of the dryer, wash the tires on the car. They can play in the kitchen sink with water, scrubbers, and vegetables while you prepare a salad. They can play beside you in bubbles while you wash dishes. They can participate in making cookies or putting cut-up vegetables in a cooking pot or salad. They can help unload the dishwasher and put the silverware into the correct slots in the silverware drawer. In the grocery store, they can put objects into the cart. When you include your child in your everyday routines, you are automatically talking to your child about the task and helping your child do it. Your child is having new experiences, learning new skills, learning how the world works, learning new words, learning from you! Just participating with you in your chores increases your child's learning opportunities enormously during daily life.

Partnering with Your Professional Team

By this point you have likely enrolled your child in early intervention services (or are trying very hard to do so) and are working with professionals to continue to help your child progress. Your child's therapists and educators have likely identified a number of developmental gains that your child is ready to make, written as a set of learning objectives. Everything we have covered so far will help you teach these skills to your child through your ongoing play, caregiving, and daily routines, at home and out and about. You will be working very closely with the professionals on your team, and you should never hesitate to ask for information, clarification, or advice when in doubt about anything involved with your child's treatment.

- If you need your therapists to break down the learning goals they have developed into smaller steps so you can work them into your routines more easily, ask them to do it for you, so you can figure out where to start on each skill.
- If you do not have a copy of each professional's treatment goals, ask each of your child's team members for them.
- If you need help in figuring out how to work on those goals at home in your natural routines, ask your professional team members to show you and to write out a home program for you.

Watch how the different professionals work with your child. Identify what works and what doesn't. Join in your child's treatment sessions, so you can learn from the therapists and carry out their goals at home. This is how your child will

benefit from their knowledge. Help your team members identify what is helpful and what is not for your child. They are the experts in their disciplines, but you are the expert in your child. You know what your child likes and does not like, how he or she learns best, what your child can and cannot do yet at home, what is working and what is not. Help your team understand all this about your child. If you see your child not progressing in his or her treatment with others, speak up! Lack of progress signals a problem in the teaching plan, not a limit in your child's ability to learn. If your child is not progressing in one area, ask your team to come up with a different approach. You know your child can learn: Look at all the things you have taught your child over the past weeks as you have worked your way through this book.

Above All Else

- **Every interaction you have with your child is an opportunity for your child to learn and for you to teach.** Your child learns something in every one of these interactions, so ask yourself whether what is happening is what you want your child to learn. Maximize your child's learning by using the incidental (already existing) experiences you have with your child—family routines, outings, chores, caregiving, time in the car. When you use these times to engage your child in the activity, rather than moving your child through routines without engaging him or her in the step-by-step process, your child can be receiving hundreds of learning opportunities every day.

- **Try to teach your child the skill he or she needs in the setting in which your child will use it.** Practice eating communication skills at the table where your family eats. Practice taking off a coat and putting it on a hook when your child comes in from outside, both at home and at preschool. Teach your child to dress and undress when and where it's appropriate, and to name the objects used in each setting or activity in which the child encounters them in daily life. Children learn real-life skills more quickly and more deeply in real-life settings and situations, rather than through flash cards and computer games. Learning "sticks" when it occurs in daily life.

- **Work toward age-appropriate initiative and spontaneity.** Spontaneity and initiative indicate independence. You are not teaching your child simply to follow directions for everything your child needs to accomplish throughout the day. That's the reason behind strategies that involve following your child's attention, reading his or her cues to direct you to rewarding activities and materials that motivate your child to engage and participate. We've encouraged you to be alert for spontaneous performing of skills that you're trying to instill. When your son makes a sound on his own (not just one elicited by you during a game), or your daughter takes the initiative to lead you to the refrigerator when she's

hungry instead of screaming, your quick response with a reward or reinforcer at the ready will solidify this skill. But be sure that demonstrations of independence are age-appropriate and are not substitutes for communication. Most 2-year-olds, for example, do not have unlimited access to the refrigerator, because it's not age-appropriate behavior. So if your 2-year-old with ASD opens the fridge to get a drink, it may very well be because he or she does not have a way to request it from others or is not motivated to use the communication skill of requesting it from others. You have likely taught your child ways to participate in many, many new activities, both regular household routines and play routines. All of these together foster your child's ability to initiate an activity and spontaneously begin communication, play, and social exchanges. Try to support your child's initiation of age-appropriate play skills, personal skills, and language.

- **Help your child regulate his or her arousal and activity levels to optimize availability for learning.** We have discussed this idea in terms of the choice of joint activities. There is a rhythm to interactive play that you have likely already discovered. You probably now know how to optimize your child's attention and energy for learning by alternating between quieter activities and livelier ones. As we've said before, it also helps to alternate between object-oriented joint activity routines and sensory social routines. Move from place to place as you create different joint activity routines. Children's body movements and positions can tell you something about what they need. Quieter, more passive children may need to be energized for learning through lively, physical, sensory social routines that involve fast, quick movements. An active, busy child who has trouble attending for more than a few seconds needs periods of lively, physical, social play (think playing chase, running outside, climbing stairs or slide ladders, or other types of backyard play) to alternate with quieter, slower, rhythmic, sensory social activities that focus attention for learning (such as being rocked on a ball, chair, or lap as you sing a song together; walking and moving to rhythmic music; or being rocked in a rocking chair while you go through an interactive book). Organize the physical space for a busy child by putting away things that are out, by limiting the number of materials available at any one time, by using boxes and containers and shelves or closets for toys, and by being ready to transition smoothly from one activity to another to extend and maintain your child's attention. Remember to use the structure of joint activity routines in the lively activities as well as the quiet ones, to take advantage of the learning opportunities that are already there. Helping your child stay in a well-regulated state for learning also helps markedly with behavior. It's a "two-for-one" deal!

- **Don't forget to take care of yourself emotionally.** When you feel emotionally spent or discouraged, don't forget to rely on your social support network, as we have talked about earlier in the book (see especially Chapter 2). Call a friend, touch base with other parents by email or on Facebook, or talk to your partner or other family member. Talk to your physician if you feel down or blue most days.

Get the help and support you need, so you can enjoy life and continue to help your child succeed and grow.

Reviewing When You Hit a Snag

Here are some questions to consider if you run into difficulties along the way. If you answer no to one or more of the questions, think about the strategies you are using by revisiting relevant chapters:

- ✓ Am I using simple words and phrases (the one-up rule) to communicate with my child? (If you might not be, review Chapter 13.)
- ✓ Am I waiting first to see if my child can do a new skill without my help? (If you're not sure you've been doing this, see Chapter 12.)
- ✓ If my child needs help, am I giving as little help as needed for my child to demonstrate the new behavior or skill? (If you think you might have gone astray here, review Chapter 12.)
- ✓ Do I have my child's attention before communicating with him or her? (If not, review Chapter 4.)
- ✓ Is the activity fun for my child? (If the child doesn't show signs of enjoying the activity, go back to Chapter 5.)
- ✓ Is the activity fun for me? (No? See Chapter 5.)
- ✓ Does my child experience the "reward" of the routine as soon as he or she tries to use the target skills I am trying to teach? (Not sure? Review Chapter 9.)
- ✓ Do I see and respond to my child's efforts to interact and communicate with me (even if they're not perfect)? (To be sure, see Chapter 7.)
- ✓ Is my child getting enough practice to master the new behavior or skill? (See whatever chapters address the skills you're working on. They all discuss practicing to cement the skills.)

In closing, we have written this book for you parents, your child's first and most important teachers. Parents are the most influential teachers children will ever have. We hope the tools we have passed on to you will help you and your child continue to learn from and teach each other for many years to come. We hope we have helped you experience the pleasure of watching your child master new skills, step by step. Know that all of those little steps are adding up to big gains as your child engages, communicates, and learns from others. As you watch your child develop and engage with others, we hope that your confidence in your child's future—in his or her ability to have a fulfilling, meaningful, joyful, and productive life—will also grow.