

# 8 Toys That Will Help Your Child With Autism Build Skills

By Megan BREault, MS BCBA, LABA

A child's job is to play. The act of playing helps children develop physical coordination, emotional maturity, social skills, and the self-confidence to try new experiences and explore new environments.



**F**or children with autism, it is essential to provide toys and activities that are designed to foster these skills. By learning critical play skills, children with developmental disabilities can increase the complexity of their language, imagination, and creativity. Learning appropriate play skills also provides opportunities for observational learning, increased social interactions, and aid in decreasing self-stimulatory behavior.

“Children and adolescents with developmental or mental health issues often have a variety of com-

plex sensory and motor challenges,” says Tina Champagne, occupational therapist and Chief Executive Officer at The Cutchins Program for Children and Families, a member-school of the Massachusetts Association of 766 Approved Private Schools ([maaps](#)). “These challenges can impact the ability to demonstrate safe behaviors and functionally perform daily activities and routines, such as school participation, in addition to being barriers to social and emotional learning.”

One way to counteract these challenges is by selecting toys and activities that involve similar skills to

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those children are working on at school. If you are looking to have your child work on academic skills, below is a brief list of toys beneficial for children with autism.

### Jumbo Magnetic Letters

Jumbo magnetic letters are one of the simplest toys for teaching letters and simple words. They can familiarize children with the alphabet in an interactive way and demystify potential frustrations that come with learning a language. Learning activities include sorting the letters in alphabetical order, spelling names, identifying and naming each letter, and pronouncing the sounds each letter makes. For less word-centric activities, try sorting by color, counting the letters, or playing a game of “Hide and Seek” with the letters magnetized around the house. The bright colors and shiny or foam texture of the letters make them easy to see, hold, and understand.

### Matching Games

Matching games can be found in many forms, but all function similarly in helping a child with disabilities strengthen fine motor and visual perception skills. Games like “Letter Match,” “Match Me,” or “Letters on the Loose” are all great for classroom or at-home use and can be played individually or with a group. The games require coordination to select different cards, letters, or numbers, which strengthens the dexterity of children who struggle with fine motor skills or

muscle development. In forming a match, children exercise their retention skills for future learning.

### Number Pegboards

Pegboards, or number pegboards, are typically wooden counting games that use small, colored pegs and indentations to help understand number concepts and counting. By placing the proper amount of pegs into the corresponding holes, children grasp the association of numbers to quantities, numerical orders, and simple addition or subtraction. Pegboards are ideal for understanding the concepts of tallying and calculating—all of which are disguised by the joy of play.

### Piggy Bank

A different type of counting is best done through a piggy bank, which teaches a young child the beginnings of financial literacy and money management. Children can learn to identify the different types of coins, how much they are worth, and how to tell them apart. Certain piggy banks provide better features for these lessons, such as providing clear storage or showing the sum of the coins put into it. Other toy piggy banks provide colored or numbered plastic coins for better identification of denominations.

### Jenga

The classic game of Jenga is a hands-on game that requires concentration, body awareness, and fine

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motor skills. The game's structure helps with social learning and turn-taking, and the game's design and conclusion also help with tolerating loud noises and disruption. Alternative versions of the game have questions on each block like "What's your favorite color" or "What's something that smells good?" to prepare children with conversation skills.

### Tooth-Brushing Buddy

There are many tooth-brushing 'buddies' on the market, but all of them serve the same purpose: to promote hygiene in a fun and easy to understand way. Typically, a tooth-brushing buddy is a stuffed animal with a plastic set of teeth that comes with an enlarged toothbrush to help simulate the act of teeth brushing. Tooth-brushing buddies help children follow directions, learn proper brushing techniques, and appreciate oral health and self-care.

### Lacing Kits

Lacing Kits, also known as String Alongs, come in a variety of shapes and configurations, all designed to strengthen self-care skills like shoe lacing, knot tying, and buttoning a shirt. By practicing lacing a string through the holes in a variety of arrangements, a child is developing his/her hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, and pattern recognition skills.

### Sensory Tables

A sensory table is a small table filled or covered with different materials such as water, sand, rice, beans, or other substances. They serve as a contained and clean environment for children to explore different touches, smells, and consistencies, and familiarize themselves with different textures. They make an excellent setting for finger painting or other arts-and-crafts lessons, and learning activities can involve mixing two substances together, separating different materials, or trying to guess the items on the table based on only touch or smell.



*Megan Breault, MS BCBA, LABA, serves as RCS Learning Center's Clinical Director. Megan joined RCS in 2010 as a Behavior Therapist/Floater and was promoted to the role of a Clinician in 2013. Megan became the Clinical Director of the Learning Center in 2015. She received her Bachelor's of Science in Elementary Education and Sociology from Stonehill College and obtained her Master's of Science in Behavior Analysis from Simmons College. Currently, she is pursuing her Doctorate in Behavior Analysis from Simmons University. Megan is also an adjunct faculty member for Simmons University's online program, teaching behavior analysis graduate courses, and has served as a mentor to graduate students from Simmons since 2013. Megan's areas of interest include errorless instruction and staff and parent training.*