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The Special Connection: How to Play With Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

As part of Autism Awareness Month and our continuing coverage during the month of April, Dr. Gerard Costa, Director of Montclair State University's Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health, offers his advice on playing with children with autism.

"Autism Awareness Month provides a great opportunity to address some misconceptions about young children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, or ASD," says Dr. Costa.

While play is important to any child's social and cognitive development, engaging a young child with ASD in constructive play can pose special challenges to parents and caregivers.

"These children often have difficulty with relationships that rely on language and eye contact, yet they can certainly enjoy and benefit from play," notes Costa.

For children aged three and under, he recommends play that follows the child's lead and that uses fewer words and more gestures. Back-and-forth play—whether touching noses, playing peek-a-boo, or simply passing a toy or object back and forth—helps young children develop two-way social communication. Toys and objects are there to encourage social interaction between the child and the adult.

"You should take turns, and make sure you are more interesting than the toys," advises Costa. The "4 Ls"—less language, longer latency—are important to remember when playing with a child with ASD. Following this principle, Costa recommends, "use facial expressions, gestures and initially, fewer words to engage a child in play – and be prepared to wait longer for the child to respond."

According to Costa, like all children, children with ASD are interested in relationships and are attached to their parents, even though their neurobiology can make it more difficult for them to express emotional attachments.

"By encouraging social development and interaction, play helps build relationships and strengthen attachments—anytime and anywhere, with or without toys," says Costa.

Dr. Gerard Costa serves as Director of [Montclair State University's Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health](#), in the College of Education and Human Services, which offers professional development, education, clinical services and research in the areas of autism, infant and early childhood development and mental health. It has received state funding to establish the New Jersey Autism Center of Excellence (ACE) Coordinating Center to provide assistance and support to statewide autism clinical research programs funded by the Governor's Council for Medical Research and Treatment of Autism.

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