30 Functional Playful Activities for Occupational Therapy in Autism Spectrum Disorder

A comprehensive guide to therapeutic activities that transform play into effective clinical intervention. Designed for occupational therapists, OT students, and healthcare professionals working with children on the autism spectrum.

Understanding Play-Based Intervention in ASD

The Power of Play

Play is not just recreation—it's the primary vehicle through which children learn, develop, and practice essential life skills. For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, structured playful activities provide a safe, engaging context for building competencies across multiple developmental domains. When carefully designed with therapeutic objectives in mind, play becomes a powerful intervention tool that motivates participation while addressing clinical goals.

Research consistently demonstrates that play-based interventions yield better engagement, longer attention spans, and improved skill generalization compared to traditional drill-based approaches. Children are more likely to participate actively when activities feel enjoyable rather than demanding, creating natural opportunities for repetition and practice without fatigue or resistance.

Clinical Framework

Each activity in this guide has been designed with specific therapeutic objectives aligned with occupational therapy practice frameworks. We address fine motor skills, gross motor coordination, sensory processing, social communication, executive functioning, and activities of daily living—all within contexts that feel natural and motivating to children.

The activities follow a consistent structure: clear clinical objectives, detailed materials lists, step-by-step implementation instructions, and strategies for grading difficulty. This format enables therapists to quickly select appropriate activities, prepare efficiently, and modify interventions to match individual needs and skill levels.

How to Use This Guide

01

Assess the Child's Needs

Begin by identifying the primary therapeutic goals based on comprehensive evaluation. Consider the child's current skill level, sensory preferences, interests, and areas requiring intervention.

02

Select Appropriate Activities

Choose activities that align with therapeutic priorities while matching the child's developmental level and interests. Activities are organized by domain to facilitate quick selection.

03

Prepare Materials and Environment

Gather all required materials before the session. Set up the therapy space to minimize distractions and support successful engagement with the activity.

04

Implement with Flexibility

Follow the step-by-step instructions while remaining responsive to the child's cues. Be prepared to modify difficulty, pace, or format based on real-time observations.

05

Document and Progress

Record observations about engagement, skill demonstration, and areas for modification. Use this data to inform future session planning and track progress toward goals.

Fine Motor Skills & Coordination

Fine motor skills form the foundation for countless daily activities—from self-care tasks like buttoning clothes to academic skills like handwriting. Children with ASD often experience challenges with fine motor coordination, hand strength, bilateral coordination, and in-hand manipulation. The following activities target these essential skills through engaging, playful formats that encourage repetition and practice.

Activity 1: Sensory Dough Construction Site

1

Clinical Objectives

- Strengthen hand and finger muscles through resistive play
- Develop bilateral coordination skills
- Improve tactile tolerance and sensory modulation
- Enhance in-hand manipulation and tool use

2

Materials Needed

- Homemade or commercial therapy dough (various resistances)
- Small construction vehicles and figures
- Tools: rolling pins, cookie cutters, plastic knives
- Small objects to hide: buttons, coins, beads
- Work surface or tray

Step-by-Step Implementation

1. Introduce the dough with a construction theme narrative to build engagement and context
2. Demonstrate basic manipulation techniques: rolling, flattening, pinching, pulling
3. Hide small objects within the dough for the child to excavate using fingers or tools
4. Create "construction projects" requiring specific actions: rolling logs, building walls, making roads
5. Incorporate vehicles to press patterns, create tracks, or transport dough pieces
6. Grade difficulty by adjusting dough resistance and complexity of constructions

Grading Strategies

Easier: Use softer dough, larger objects, simple bilateral tasks like holding bowl while mixing.

Harder: Increase dough resistance, require precise pincer grasp for small objects, add multi-step construction projects requiring planning.

Activity 2: Clothespin Color Match Challenge

Clinical Objectives

- Strengthen thumb opposition and tripod grasp
- Develop visual-motor coordination
- Practice color recognition and matching
- Build sustained attention and task completion

Materials Needed

- Clothespins in various colors (standard or mini size)
- Cardboard circles or paper plates with colored segments
- Optional: numbered sections for counting practice
- Timer for challenge mode

Implementation: Create color wheels by dividing cardboard circles into colored segments matching available clothespin colors. Demonstrate proper clothespin grip using thumb and index/middle fingers. Have the child clip clothespins onto the matching colored sections around the wheel's edge. Start with 4-6 colors and progress to more complex patterns. Add challenge elements like racing against a timer, alternating hands, or clipping in specific sequences.

Therapeutic Tip: This activity is excellent for building the hand strength and precision needed for fasteners on clothing. Monitor for compensatory patterns and provide hand-over-hand guidance to establish proper mechanics.

Activity 3: Threading and Lacing Station

Clinical Focus

Eye-hand coordination, bilateral integration, concentration, and visual tracking—all essential prerequisites for functional tasks like tying shoes and sewing.

Setup Requirements

Lacing cards with various hole sizes, shoelaces or thick yarn with stiff ends, large wooden beads, pipe cleaners, and progressively challenging patterns.

Progression Path

Begin with large beads on pipe cleaners, advance to threading beads on laces, then simple lacing cards, culminating in complex patterns and shoe-tying practice.

Create a "threading challenge" with multiple stations of increasing difficulty. Station 1 uses very large beads and stiff laces. Station 2 introduces medium beads requiring more precision. Station 3 presents lacing cards with clear, widely-spaced holes. Station 4 offers complex patterns or actual shoes for functional practice. Use visual schedules to show progression through stations, building a sense of accomplishment. This activity naturally encourages the crossing of midline as children reach for materials and can be structured to require both hands working in coordinated but different roles—one hand stabilizing while the other threads.

> The beauty of threading activities lies in their inherent feedback—success is immediately visible, providing natural reinforcement for effort and attention.

Activity 4: Tweezers Treasure Hunt

Clinical Objectives

- Refine pincer and tripod grasp patterns
- Develop tool use skills and wrist stability
- Enhance visual scanning and attention to detail
- Practice graded release and placement precision

Materials Needed

- Various tweezers: kitchen tongs, medical tweezers, plastic tweezers, jumbo tweezers
- Small objects: pompoms, beads, small erasers, coins
- Sensory base: rice, dried beans, water beads, kinetic sand
- Sorting containers: ice cube trays, muffin tins, small bowls
- Optional: color or category sorting cards

Implementation Guide

Hide small objects within a sensory bin filled with rice, beans, or other tactile material. Provide age-appropriate tweezers and demonstrate proper grip with thumb on top. Challenge the child to find hidden treasures and transfer them to sorting containers using only the tweezers—no fingers allowed!

Add cognitive elements by requiring sorting by color, size, or category. Create a treasure map showing how many of each item to find. Use a timer to add excitement or have races between therapist and child.

Grading: Start with large pompoms and jumbo tweezers in shallow bins. Progress to smaller objects, precision tweezers, deeper bins, and dual tasks like sorting while counting.

Activity 5: Sticker Mosaic Art

Precision Skills

Peeling stickers requires fingertip control and precise pincer grasp, directly translating to functional tasks like peeling labels or removing bandage backing.

Visual Motor Integration

Placing stickers within designated spaces demands accurate visual-motor coordination and spatial awareness for controlled placement.

Creative Expression

Open-ended art reduces anxiety while maintaining therapeutic benefits, allowing self-expression within a structured motor activity.

Setup: Provide templates with numbered or colored sections for sticker placement, or blank paper for free creation. Offer various sticker sizes from large foam stickers to tiny dot stickers. Create themes based on child interests: vehicles, animals, favorite characters.

Process: Start by demonstrating the peel-and-place motion, emphasizing using just fingertips. Begin with larger stickers that are easier to grasp and manipulate. Progress to smaller stickers requiring more refined control. Encourage placement within specific boundaries or on designated spots. For children who struggle with precision, use templates with larger spaces initially, gradually reducing target size as skill improves.

Gross Motor Skills & Balance

Gross motor development provides the foundation for functional mobility, postural control, and physical participation in daily activities. Many children with ASD demonstrate challenges with motor planning, balance, bilateral coordination, and body awareness. These activities target core strength, coordination, balance, and motor planning through motivating, playful experiences that can be implemented in clinical or school settings.

The following activities are designed to be adaptable to various space constraints and equipment availability. They emphasize functional movement patterns that translate directly to real-world activities like navigating playgrounds, participating in physical education, and managing environmental challenges safely.

Activity 6: Animal Walk Adventure Course

Bear Walk

Hands and feet on floor, bottom up high. Strengthens shoulders, core, and promotes weight-bearing through arms. Excellent for bilateral coordination and motor planning.

Crab Walk

Sitting position, hands behind, lift hips and walk backward. Builds arm and core strength while challenging motor planning and spatial awareness in reverse direction.

Frog Jump

Deep squat with hands between legs, explosive jump forward. Develops lower body strength, power, balance, and bilateral jumping skills essential for playground activities.

Implementation: Create an adventure narrative where the child must move through different "habitats" using specific animal walks. Set up a course with visual markers showing which animal movement to use in each section. Use tape on the floor, cones, or carpet squares to define pathways. Include variations: "The river is wide—use big bear steps!" or "The tunnel is low—crab walk through!" Incorporate animal sounds and characteristics to boost engagement. Add cognitive challenges like collecting picture cards or following a specific sequence.

Therapeutic Benefits: These weight-bearing activities provide proprioceptive input that many children with ASD find organizing and calming. They build the shoulder stability needed for fine motor tasks while addressing core strength, motor planning, and body awareness in a fun, imaginative context.

Activity 7: Balance Beam Challenge Path

Clinical Objectives

- Develop static and dynamic balance skills
- Enhance postural control and core stability
- Improve motor planning and body awareness
- Build confidence with challenging movements

Materials and Setup

- Balance beam (commercial or homemade from 2x4 lumber)
- Foam blocks or pool noodles for varying heights
- Bean bags, small toys, or pictures to carry
- Obstacles to step over or reach around
- Visual markers for foot placement

Safety Note: Always spot the child appropriately and ensure the beam height is appropriate for skill level. Start with floor-level beams before elevating.

Progressive Challenges

1. Walk forward along beam with arms extended
2. Walk while carrying object in both hands
3. Walk backward (more challenging motor planning)
4. Walk sideways, crossing one foot over the other
5. Stop midway and complete a balance challenge
6. Step over obstacles placed on beam
7. Walk while playing catch with therapist

Create themed beam walks: "crossing the bridge over lava," "tightrope at the circus," or "walking the plank on a pirate ship." Use visual supports showing foot placement or direction. Incorporate dual tasks like counting steps, identifying colors on cards, or answering questions while balancing. This cognitive loading makes the activity more functional—real life requires managing multiple demands simultaneously. Document progress by noting how many steps completed independently, types of assists needed, and confidence level.

Activity 8: Target Practice with Bean Bags

Bilateral Coordination

Throwing requires sophisticated coordination between both sides of the body—one side stabilizing while the other generates force and release.

Visual Motor Skills

Aiming and throwing to a target demands precise integration of visual information with motor output for accuracy.

Motor Planning

Calculating distance, force, and trajectory involves complex motor planning and praxis—skills often challenging in ASD.

Setup Options: Use commercial target boards, homemade cardboard targets with point values, hula hoops on the floor, or buckets at varying distances. Create themed targets matching child interests: toss into monster mouths, knock down bowling pins, or land on numbered lily pads.

Implementation: Begin at close range with large targets. Demonstrate proper throwing mechanics: face target, opposite foot forward, arm back, step and throw. Provide immediate feedback on accuracy. Gradually increase distance and decrease target size. Add challenges: throw with non-dominant hand, throw while standing on balance cushion, throw underhand versus overhand. Keep score to work on math skills and maintaining attention across multiple throws. Use visual schedules showing "throw 5 times, then choose reward activity."

Activity 9: Balloon Volleyball

Why Balloons Work

Balloons move slowly through air, providing extended reaction time that reduces anxiety and increases success rates. The lightweight nature allows even children with limited strength to participate fully. The unpredictable floating pattern challenges visual tracking and motor planning in a forgiving format.

Clinical Objectives

- Improve bilateral arm coordination
- Develop visual tracking and timing
- Enhance shoulder stability and strength
- Practice motor planning and anticipation
- Build sustained attention and turn-taking

Setup and Variations

Use regular balloons or specialty balloons with bells inside for auditory feedback. Create a "net" with string or tape. Play individually (keep balloon up), in pairs, or in small groups. Set challenges: use only right hand, use only left hand, use only heads, use only feet, keep two balloons up simultaneously.

Grading Strategies: Easier activities include large beach balls moving slowly, sitting positions reducing balance demands, and therapist doing most positioning. Harder variations use smaller balloons, require standing or kneeling positions, add rules about hitting styles, or include moving to hit from different positions.

Transform balloon play into structured turn-taking practice by establishing clear rules: "I hit, you hit, I hit, you hit." Use visual or verbal countdowns before each hit to build anticipation and attention. Incorporate language by calling out colors or counting hits together. This activity naturally provides organizing proprioceptive input through arm movements while building the sustained attention and motor skills needed for participation in group games and physical education activities.

Activity 10: Musical Movement and Freeze Dance

1 Introduction Phase

Explain the rules using visual supports: when music plays, we move; when music stops, we freeze like statues. Demonstrate and practice several times with very short music intervals initially.

2 Free Movement Phase

Play engaging music and encourage various movement types: jumping, spinning, marching, dancing. Provide movement suggestions for children who need more structure. Keep initial music segments brief to ensure success with stopping.

3 Directed Movement Phase

Add specific movement requirements during music: "move like a robot," "walk backward," "hop on one foot," "dance with arms only." This increases motor planning demands while maintaining engagement through variety.

4 Challenge Phase

Hold specific freeze positions: balance on one foot, freeze in a tall/small shape, freeze while touching floor. Extend freeze duration gradually. Add silly elements like holding funny faces or balancing objects.

Therapeutic Value: This beloved activity targets impulse control, auditory processing, motor planning, and body awareness. The start-stop nature builds self-regulation skills and attention to auditory cues. Select music strategically—use calmer music for organizing effects or energetic music to stimulate movement. Children with ASD often benefit from predictable music patterns and clear auditory cues signaling transitions. Consider creating a visual timer showing how long until the next freeze or using specific sound effects for stopping signals.

Social Skills & Turn-Taking Activities

Social interaction skills represent a core challenge area for many children with ASD. Occupational therapy can address the foundational skills that support social success: joint attention, imitation, turn-taking, sharing space and materials, reading social cues, and regulating emotions during social demands. The following activities embed social learning within engaging, structured contexts that reduce anxiety while providing repeated practice opportunities.

These activities are designed with clear rules, visual supports, and predictable structures that help children with ASD navigate social expectations successfully. Each activity can be adapted for individual sessions (therapist as social partner), small groups, or consultation within classroom settings. The emphasis is on building positive social experiences that can be gradually generalized to less structured social situations.

Activity 11: Cooperative Building Challenges

Clinical Objectives

This activity targets joint attention, collaborative problem-solving, communication of ideas, compromise and flexibility, shared enjoyment, and maintaining engagement with a partner—all essential components of successful peer interaction.

Materials Needed

Building materials such as blocks, magnetic tiles, LEGO bricks, or wooden planks. Include picture cards showing structures to build together, a timer for challenges, and a visual turn-taking schedule. Camera for documenting creations adds motivation.

Implementation Structure

Present a building challenge that requires cooperation: "Build a bridge tall enough for the car to drive under" or "Create a house with a door and two windows." Establish clear roles using visuals: Partner 1 places blocks, Partner 2 hands blocks; then switch. Model collaborative language: "What should we build next?" "I like your idea!"

Grading for Success

Begin with parallel play (building side-by-side with own materials), progress to shared materials with assigned roles, advance to collaborative planning and building, culminate in flexible negotiation of a joint creation without assigned roles.

Therapeutic Strategies: Use a visual turn-taking board showing whose turn it is to add a block. Set a timer for each turn to prevent one child from dominating. Provide verbal scaffolding: "Tell your partner what piece you need." Celebrate joint success enthusiastically to build positive associations with collaboration. If conflict arises, pause and problem-solve using visual supports showing options. Take photos of completed projects to review successes and build narrative skills around shared experiences.

Activity 12: Emotion Charades

Clinical Objectives

- Improve recognition of facial expressions and body language
- Develop emotional vocabulary and labeling
- Practice intentional nonverbal communication
- Build perspective-taking and social cognition
- Enhance imitation and motor planning for social gestures

Materials Needed

- Emotion cards with clear facial expressions
- Mirror for self-observation
- Visual choice board for guessing
- Social stories about different emotions
- Optional: props like hats or simple costumes

Step-by-Step Process

1. Review emotion cards together, discussing what each emotion looks like (eyes, mouth, body posture)
2. Practice making each expression in the mirror
3. Player 1 draws an emotion card without showing partner
4. Player 1 acts out the emotion using face and body
5. Player 2 guesses using visual choice board or verbally
6. Reveal card and discuss: What clues helped you guess?
7. Switch roles and repeat
8. Add complexity: show emotion in context (acting out a scenario)

Adaptation: For beginners, start with just two highly contrasting emotions. Progress to four basic emotions, then add more nuanced feelings like frustrated, proud, or embarrassed.

This activity directly targets social cognition challenges common in ASD. By breaking down the components of emotional expression and providing structured practice in a low-stakes game format, children can build skills that typically develop incidentally through observation. The turn-taking structure ensures equal participation while the guessing game format maintains engagement and motivation.

Activity 13: Conversation Jenga

Setup

Write conversation starters, questions, or social scenarios on Jenga blocks using categories: "Tell about your day," "Ask your partner a question," "Share something you like," "Give a compliment."

Take Turns

Players alternate pulling blocks, following standard Jenga rules. The fine motor challenge of careful block removal adds engaging difficulty while the social component feels secondary, reducing anxiety.

Complete Prompt

After pulling a block, the player reads (or you read) the prompt and responds. Encourage elaboration beyond single words. Partner practices active listening by making eye contact and offering relevant responses.

Build Skills

The game continues until the tower falls, providing natural repetition of conversational skills. The predictable structure reduces uncertainty while the varied prompts build flexibility in social communication.

Clinical Value: This activity brilliantly combines motor challenge with social demands, preventing hyperfocus on either element alone. Children practice initiating conversation, answering questions with adequate detail, asking follow-up questions, and maintaining back-and-forth exchange—all key components of successful conversation. The game structure provides natural turns and endpoints, addressing common challenges with knowing when to stop talking or when it's someone else's turn. Customize prompts to target specific goals: question-asking, sharing interests, perspective-taking, or emotional discussion.

Activity 14: Partner Obstacle Course

Collaboration Through Movement

Create an obstacle course that requires two people to complete successfully. Partners must stay connected (holding hands, holding opposite ends of a rope, or maintaining contact with a beach ball between them) throughout the course.

Course Elements

- Stepping over obstacles while maintaining contact
- Crawling under barriers together
- Walking along a balance beam side-by-side
- Navigating around cones in synchronized movement
- Completing a task station together (both building something)

Clinical Objectives: This physically demanding activity targets cooperation, spatial awareness, communication, motor planning with a partner, and shared problem-solving. Partners must constantly adjust pace, direction, and movement quality to stay synchronized—requiring continuous attention to their partner's actions and needs.

Implementation Tips: Start with very simple courses and highly structured connection methods (holding a short rope). Model how to communicate: "I'm going to step over now—are you ready?" Process after completion: What was hard? How did you work together? What would you do differently next time? Film the attempt and review together, pointing out successful coordination moments. Gradually increase complexity and reduce structure of connection method. This activity builds the foundation for cooperative play and team sports participation.

Activity 15: Board Game Social Skills Practice

Waiting and Turn-Taking

Board games inherently require waiting for turns—a challenging skill for many children with ASD. Use visual turn indicators and practice appropriate waiting behaviors: hands in lap, watching others play, quiet body.

Following Rules

Games provide clear, consistent rules that reduce social ambiguity. Create visual rule cards as references. Practice rule-following in a structured context that can later generalize to less explicit social rules.

Managing Emotions

Winning and losing provide natural opportunities to practice emotional regulation and good sportsmanship. Use social stories beforehand about being a good winner (don't brag) and good loser (congratulate winner).

Social Communication

Games create opportunities for commenting, encouraging others, asking for help, and celebrating together. Coach appropriate game-related language: "Good move!" "Your turn now," "That was close!"

Game Selection Strategy: Choose cooperative games where all players work toward a common goal to reduce competitive stress initially. Examples include Hoot Owl Hoot, Outfoxed, or Forbidden Island. These build collaborative skills without the emotional demands of winning/losing. Progress to simple competitive games with clear winning conditions and short play times like Connect Four or Uno. Avoid games with ambiguous rules or heavy strategic demands initially.

Therapeutic Approach: Videotape game sessions and review, pointing out positive social behaviors. Create a social skills checklist specific to game playing and review before and after. Provide specific positive feedback: "I noticed you waited so patiently during my turn!" If frustration occurs, pause and problem-solve using visual supports. The goal is building positive associations with social play, not perfect performance.

Sensory-Based Creative Activities

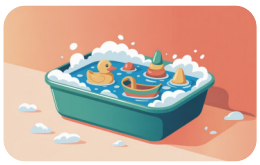
Sensory experiences form the foundation of how we understand and interact with our environment. Many children with ASD have atypical sensory processing patterns—some seeking intense sensory input, others avoiding specific sensations, and many showing a complex mix of both patterns. Sensory-based activities serve multiple therapeutic purposes: they can be organizing and calming, they build tolerance for varied sensory experiences, they enhance body awareness, and they provide natural contexts for exploration and creativity.

The following activities are designed to provide rich, controlled sensory experiences within therapeutic contexts. Each activity can be modified to match individual sensory profiles—reducing intensity for children with sensory sensitivities or enhancing input for children who seek more sensation. The creative element transforms sensory exploration into meaningful activity with a tangible outcome, supporting engagement and sense of accomplishment.

Activity 16: Sensory Bin Exploration Stations

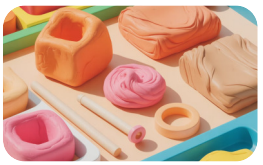
Dry Materials Station

Fill bins with rice, beans, pasta, or kinetic sand. Add scoops, containers, and hidden objects. Provides tactile input and opportunities for pouring, scooping, and sorting. Graded from large materials to progressively finer textures.



Wet Materials Station

Use water with bubbles, foam, or water beads. Include tools like turkey basters, sponges, and containers. Offers resistive squeezing and pouring activities. Temperature can be varied for additional sensory dimension.



Malleable Materials Station

Provide therapy putty, clay, or dough in various resistances. Include tools for manipulation. Delivers deep pressure input to hands and fingers. Can be scented or textured for additional sensory qualities.

Implementation Strategy: Set up 3-4 sensory stations and create a visual schedule showing rotation through each station. Time at each station can start brief (3-5 minutes) and extend as tolerance builds. Provide clear expectations: "Explore the materials, keep materials in bin, clean up when timer rings." Have fidgets or alternate activities available for children who find certain textures aversive. Document sensory preferences and responses to guide future activity selection.

Clinical Objectives: Building tactile tolerance, developing sensory discrimination, enhancing fine motor skills through manipulation, practicing sustained engagement with tasks, following multi-step directions for exploration activities.

Activity 17: Paint Without Paintbrushes

Unconventional Tools

Offer diverse painting methods to explore different sensory experiences and movement patterns:

- Fingers and hands (direct tactile input)
- Sponges (compression and texture)
- Cotton balls (soft, light touch)
- Toy cars (rolling patterns, predictable lines)
- Spray bottles (gross motor, cause-effect)
- Marble rolling (controlled chaos, visual tracking)
- String dipping and dragging (abstract patterns)
- Bubble wrap (texture prints, popping sounds)

Setup and Process

Prepare workspace with large paper, washable paints, and selected tools. Begin with demonstration of one method at a time. Allow free exploration or provide simple directives: "Make the car drive all around the paper" or "Use three different colors."

Emphasize the process over product. There's no wrong way to create. Narrate sensory experiences: "The paint feels cold and slippery" or "The sponge makes soft dots." Take photos of the process and final artwork.

Sensory Modifications: Use thick, smooth paint for more intense tactile input. Add texture (sand, glitter) to paint for varied sensation. Offer smocks or finger cots for children hesitant about mess. Provide immediate cleanup access to reduce anxiety.

Therapeutic Value: This activity systematically desensitizes to messy textures while building creative confidence. The variety of tools accommodates different sensory preferences—children can select methods matching their comfort level and gradually try more challenging options. Process art reduces performance pressure, supporting participation for children with perfectionist tendencies or limited confidence in artistic skills.

Activity 18: DIY Slime and Gak Creation

01

Gather Ingredients

Basic recipe requires white school glue, water, and liquid starch or borax solution. Optional add-ins include food coloring, glitter, foam beads, or essential oils for scent. Prepare measuring tools and mixing containers.

02

Measure and Mix

Follow recipe precisely, practicing measuring skills and following sequential directions. Pour glue, add water, incorporate color. Stir thoroughly—providing resistive work for hand strengthening and bilateral coordination.

03

Add Activator

Slowly add liquid starch while stirring continuously. Watch the remarkable transformation from liquid to solid form. This chemical reaction demonstrates cause-effect and captures attention through dramatic change.

04

Knead and Play

Remove from bowl and knead until desired consistency achieved. Explore properties: stretching, pulling, pushing, rolling. Discover what happens when pulled quickly versus slowly—demonstrating non-Newtonian properties.

05

Extend Learning

Hide small objects in slime to find. Make impressions with stamps or toys. Use cookie cutters for shapes. Experiment with combining different colors. Store in airtight containers for repeated play.

Clinical Benefits: The creation process builds following directions, measuring skills, and chemical science understanding. The unique sensory properties of slime—stretchy, moldable, slightly sticky—provide intense tactile and proprioceptive input that many children find regulating. The resistive pulling strengthens hands while the oozing, flowing properties offer fascinating sensory exploration. This is an excellent activity for building tolerance to unusual textures in a highly motivating context.

Activity 19: Nature Collage Creation

Collection Adventure

Begin with a nature walk to gather materials: leaves, flowers, small stones, twigs, seed pods, feathers, or bark. The outdoor component provides vestibular input, gross motor activity, and natural sensory experiences. Use a collection bag or basket. Encourage observation and selection of interesting items.

Clinical Objectives

- Expose to varied natural textures and materials
- Develop visual-spatial planning for composition
- Practice fine motor skills: gluing, arranging, pressing
- Build categorization and sorting skills
- Enhance attention to detail and observation
- Create meaningful connection with natural environment

Creation Process

Provide cardboard or heavy paper as base. Offer glue in various forms: liquid glue, glue sticks, or glue dots, allowing children to select based on sensory preference. Arrange materials before gluing to plan composition. Discuss patterns, colors, and design choices. Some children benefit from templates or outlines; others thrive with complete creative freedom.

Sensory Considerations: Natural materials offer incredible textural variety: smooth stones, rough bark, soft petals, prickly seed pods. This diversity supports sensory exploration while remaining "natural" and often less threatening than manufactured textures. For children with tactile sensitivities, use tweezers or tongs to handle materials initially. The organic, irregular nature of materials reduces perfectionistic concerns—there's no "wrong" way to arrange natural objects.

Extension Ideas: Create seasonal collages tracking changes in nature. Make mandalas from natural materials (arranged but not glued). Create nature "people" or animals from found objects. Press flowers between wax paper for sun catchers. Use collected items for printing patterns in paint or clay.

Activity 20: Shaving Cream Sensory Play

Pure Exploration

Spray shaving cream directly on table or tray. Encourage free play: spreading, drawing, making prints, mixing in colors. The cloud-like texture and fresh scent provide unique sensory input. Easy cleanup with damp cloth.

Learning Integration

Practice writing letters or numbers in shaving cream. Draw shapes or pictures. Hide small objects to find by touch. Play tic-tac-toe or simple games. The ephemeral nature removes performance pressure—mistakes disappear with a swipe.

Art Creation

Mix food coloring into shaving cream on paper. Spread into designs. Press second sheet on top and peel apart for mirror image marbled paper. Or scrape designs with tools for interesting patterns and textures.

Therapeutic Applications: Shaving cream offers intense tactile input in a "messy" medium that's actually quite easy to manage—it doesn't stain and cleans up readily. The fluffy, light texture appeals to many children who dislike heavier, stickier substances. Writing in shaving cream provides immediate tactile feedback that enhances letter formation learning. The deep pressure of spreading and pressing into cream delivers organizing proprioceptive input.

Safety and Preparation: Use unscented varieties for children sensitive to smell. Test on small skin area first to check for sensitivities. Supervise closely to prevent ingestion. Cover nearby surfaces. Have cleanup supplies immediately accessible. For children hesitant about direct contact, provide tools like spatulas, spoons, or squeegees to manipulate cream initially. Document tolerance and enjoyment to track sensory processing changes over time.

Additional Functional Activities

Beyond the domain-specific activities already presented, the following exercises address functional skills that integrate multiple developmental areas. These activities target real-world competencies—self-care skills, executive functioning, sequencing, and independence in daily tasks. Each activity maintains the playful, engaging approach while building capabilities that directly impact a child's ability to manage everyday demands at home and school.

Activity 21: Dress-Up Race with Adaptive Equipment

Clinical Focus

Dressing skills represent critical self-care competencies that directly impact independence and self-esteem. Many children with ASD struggle with the motor planning, bilateral coordination, and sequencing demands of dressing tasks.

Setup

Create two piles of clothing items with various fasteners: buttons, zippers, snaps, Velcro, laces. Include shirts, pants, socks, shoes, jackets, and hats. Use adaptive equipment like button hooks, zipper pulls with rings, or elastic shoelaces as appropriate.

Activity Structure

1. Start with child in basic clothing
2. Set timer or play music
3. Child puts on items from pile—over existing clothes is fine
4. Practice fastening each item completely
5. Can race against timer, against therapist, or for personal best
6. Celebrate completion and review challenging fasteners

Grading: Begin with easy items (pull-on pants, slip-on shoes). Progress to simple fasteners (large buttons, zippers). Advance to complex fasteners (small buttons, ties, laces). Reduce visual cues and physical assistance systematically.

Teaching Strategies: Break down each fastening skill into component steps with visual supports. Use backward chaining—you complete most steps, child does final step, gradually moving backward through the sequence. Provide hand-over-hand guidance initially, fade to verbal cues, then independent completion. Practice specific skills in isolation (buttoning board, zipper board) before integrating into full dressing. Make it silly and fun—putting clothes on backward, creating wild costume combinations—to reduce pressure and increase engagement.

Activity 22: Cooking Projects for Following Directions

Recipe Selection

Choose simple, no-cook recipes with 4-6 clear steps: trail mix, fruit kabobs, sandwiches, or yogurt parfaits. Create visual recipe cards with photos showing each step and ingredients needed.

Sequential Assembly

Follow recipe steps in order using visual supports. Practice "first, then" sequencing. Check off each completed step on visual checklist to build awareness of process progression.

1

2

3

4

Ingredient Preparation

Practice measuring, pouring, and combining ingredients. Use adaptive tools like easy-grip measuring cups or containers with pour spouts. Build math skills through measuring and counting.

Completion and Enjoyment

Finish preparation, clean up workspace, and enjoy the created food. This natural reinforcement powerfully motivates engagement with the activity and builds positive associations with following multi-step directions.

Clinical Benefits: Cooking addresses executive functioning (planning, sequencing, organization), fine motor skills (pouring, spreading, cutting with safe tools), sensory exploration of food textures, following multi-step directions, safety awareness, and independence in life skills. The concrete, meaningful outcome provides powerful motivation—children can see, touch, and taste the result of their efforts.

Sensory Considerations: Cooking offers natural sensory exposure to varied food textures, smells, and tastes in a non-demanding context. Children can explore foods without pressure to eat them. Start with preferred foods and familiar flavors, gradually introducing new sensory experiences. Some children benefit from wearing aprons or gloves initially. Others enjoy the messy, hands-on nature of food preparation. Document sensory responses to track tolerance development over time.

Activity 23: Toy Wash Station

Setup Water Station

Fill two tubs: one with soapy water, one with clean rinse water. Gather dirty toys (plastic figures, toy vehicles, blocks), scrub brushes, sponges, and towels for drying.

Washing Process

Child scrubs toys in soapy water, providing resistive work and proprioceptive input. Practice using tools appropriately. Work on concepts of clean versus dirty.

Rinsing and Drying

Transfer toys to rinse water—practicing crossing midline. Dry thoroughly with towels—building hand strength through squeezing and wiping motions.

Sorting and Storage

Sort clean toys by category, size, or color. Return to proper storage locations. Practice organizational skills and category understanding.

Why This Works: Toy washing transforms a chore into play. The water play element is inherently motivating for most children. This activity builds self-care skills (washing), organization, sequencing, sustained attention, and responsibility while providing rich sensory input through water temperature, soap texture, and resistive scrubbing motions.

Variations: Wash baby dolls and practice body part identification. Wash dishes or play food for dramatic play skills. Create "car wash" for vehicles with assembly line stations. Add bubbles for extra sensory fun. Use various temperatures to explore thermal properties.

Activity 24: Treasure Hunt with Visual Maps

Map Creation

Draw simple map of therapy space or home showing landmarks. Mark treasure location with X. For beginners, use photos of locations. For advanced, use abstract map symbols requiring interpretation.

Clue Following

Provide sequential clues leading to treasure. Clues can be written, pictorial, or verbal. Each clue leads to next location. Builds sequential thinking and working memory as child tracks progress.

Treasure Discovery

Final location contains "treasure"—small toy, stickers, or preferred activity choice. Success builds confidence, spatial skills, and problem-solving abilities. Can incorporate motor challenges at each clue location.

Clinical Applications: Treasure hunts target spatial awareness, visual perception, sequencing, working memory, motor planning (navigating to locations), following directions, problem-solving, and sustained attention to task completion. The inherently motivating quest format maintains engagement through multiple steps.

Implementation Variations: Indoor hunts for small spaces or outdoor hunts for gross motor input. Individual hunts or partner hunts requiring collaboration. Simple 3-step hunts or complex 10-step adventures. Include physical challenges at each location: jump five times, do three animal walks, balance for 10 seconds. Create themed hunts: pirate treasure, dinosaur eggs, superhero missions. Document success and gradually increase complexity of maps and clues.

Activity 25: Puzzle Assembly Races

Types and Progression

Puzzles range from simple inset puzzles with 4-6 pieces to complex 100+ piece jigsaws. Select based on current visual-perceptual and fine motor skills. Progress from:

- Simple shape sorters and inset puzzles
- Chunky puzzles with handles (6-12 pieces)
- Floor puzzles with large pieces (24-48 pieces)
- Traditional jigsaws with small pieces (50-100+ pieces)

Within each type, difficulty varies by image complexity, piece shape similarity, and visual contrast.

Race Formats

- **Against Timer:** Complete puzzle before timer ends—measuring and celebrating improved speed over sessions
- **Against Self:** Beat personal best time, fostering growth mindset and tracking progress
- **Against Partner:** Each person has identical puzzle, race to completion (ensure fair matching of difficulty)
- **Team Assembly:** Work together to complete one large puzzle cooperatively

Strategy Teaching: Explicitly teach puzzle strategies rather than assuming skills. Sort edge pieces first. Group pieces by color. Look at reference picture. Try systematic scanning. Rotate pieces to test fit.

Clinical Value: Puzzles develop visual-perceptual skills, spatial reasoning, problem-solving, frustration tolerance, persistence, fine motor manipulation, and visual-motor integration. The defined goal and clear completion point support task engagement. The cognitive demands build executive functioning—planning, organization, and flexible thinking when pieces don't fit as expected. Success with puzzles builds confidence in problem-solving abilities that generalizes to other challenging tasks.

Activity 26-30: Quick-Reference Additional Activities

26. Flashlight Tag

Dim room, use flashlight to "tag" objects matching verbal cues. Builds visual tracking, listening skills, and quick motor responses. Add gross motor by having child run to tag each item physically.

27. Instrument Echo Game

Therapist plays simple rhythm on percussion instrument, child echoes back. Develops auditory processing, motor planning, working memory. Progress from 2-beat patterns to complex multi-step sequences.

28. Story Stones Acting

Create stones with pictures. Child draws stone and acts out that element while building a story. Targets imagination, motor planning, sequencing, and narrative skills in playful format.

29. Cutting Skills Obstacle Course

Create progressively challenging cutting tasks: straight lines, gentle curves, angles, complex shapes. Each cut piece becomes ticket to next gross motor obstacle. Integrates fine and gross motor work.

30. Feelings Sorting Activity

Provide scenarios on cards. Child sorts into emotion categories and discusses how they might feel in each situation. Builds emotional literacy, perspective-taking, and self-awareness through concrete sorting task.

Each of these activities can be expanded with detailed implementation plans, but this quick reference provides immediate ideas for incorporating additional variety into therapy sessions. Mix and match activities based on current therapeutic priorities, child interests, and available resources. Remember that the best activity is one that engages the child while targeting meaningful clinical objectives.

Conclusion: From Play to Progress

The Art and Science of Playful Intervention

The thirty activities presented in this guide represent more than just games or time-fillers. Each has been carefully designed to embed therapeutic objectives within engaging, motivating contexts that respect the unique learning profiles of children with autism spectrum disorder. When we transform clinical goals into play, we harness children's natural drive to explore, create, and master new skills.

The most effective occupational therapy doesn't feel like therapy to the child—it feels like fun. Yet behind that fun lies sophisticated clinical reasoning: selecting activities that target specific skill deficits, grading challenges appropriately, providing just-right support, and systematically building toward functional independence. This is the art of pediatric occupational therapy.

Implementation Principles to Remember

- Follow the child's lead and interests while maintaining therapeutic intent
- Grade activities dynamically based on real-time performance
- Celebrate effort and progress, not just perfect performance
- Use visual supports generously to reduce anxiety and support success
- Build in choice whenever possible to increase motivation and autonomy
- Document what works to inform future session planning
- Collaborate with families to extend learning beyond therapy sessions

30

Evidence-Based Activities

Each grounded in occupational therapy principles and research on effective intervention for children with ASD

4

Developmental Domains

Comprehensive coverage of fine motor, gross motor, social, and sensory processing skills

100%

Adaptable Framework

Every activity includes grading strategies for individualizing to each child's unique needs and abilities

As you implement these activities, remember that you are not simply filling therapy time—you are building foundations for lifelong skills, confidence, and independence. Every successful interaction, every mastered challenge, and every moment of joyful engagement contributes to that child's developmental trajectory. The play-based activities in this guide are your tools; your clinical expertise, creativity, and genuine care for each child's wellbeing are what transform these tools into meaningful intervention.

> Play is the work of childhood. In occupational therapy for children with autism, we have the privilege of making that work therapeutic, meaningful, and joyful.