



STARS – Strategies Tips and Resources for Schools

Early Play Skills

STARS is a resource created to save you time and includes strategies, tips, methods and practical advice for supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

This resource provides adaptable advice for both Primary and Secondary settings, catering to the needs of your school and students.

Early Play Skills

Why is Play Important?

Play is an important activity in developing attention, focus and speech and language skills. Usually, early play will begin with playing with their favourite toy e.g. teddy or doll. Whilst they're playing with this you can make comments on what they're doing or have your own and model different play skills back.

During play try not to put pressure on the child as this could cause them to become withdrawn or anxious and want to leave the play situation. Accept their play ideas and follow along simply building on their ideas when you can.

Strategies to Use when Playing with you Child

- Get down to their level – It helps if they can see you face and encourages eye contact. So, if they are lying on the floor playing join them so they can see you are there to play with them.
- Join in with your child – If your child has a favourite toy or activity this could be a great place to start as they're motivated by the situation. Comment on what they're doing, build on their play skills, allow them to play and you join in for short periods of time, but go along with their ideas.
- Copy your child – Get down to their level and copy their words and actions, it will help them pay attention to what you are doing as they'll notice you are copying them.
- Get into the space – Your child may find it hard to allow you in at first and may just want to play on their own, however, you can teach them more if you can model and extend their play. So, join in with them and if they don't like it just do for short periods of time. Begin by just sitting and observing and slowly join in, eventually you could take a turn.



Attention and Listening Skills

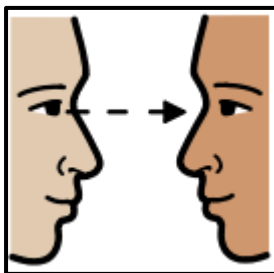
Children begin to develop their listening and attention skills from an early age, and this can be through play. Many young children find waiting, sharing and turn taking difficult. Your child may have developed their

ability to sustain attention on a self-chosen activity but struggle to sustain attention on a less preferred activity. Develop their attention and listening skills through fun games and activities in a calm environment.

To help develop your child's listening and attention skills remember to:

- Have a calm and quiet environment with minimal distractions.
- Switch off any devices e.g., radio, TV, iPad etc.
- Keep activities short to allow them to succeed
- Get down to your child's level when playing and ensure they can see and hear you.
- Praise your child throughout the play session.
- Ensure it is motivating and fun!

Shared Attention



Shared attention can be difficult, we use shared attention to understand what people are talking about or looking at. Developing shared attention will help your child with social interactions and communication skills, having a shared interest with another person. There are two types of shared attention **two-way attention** and **three-way attention**.

Two-Way Attention

Two-way attention is a shared attention between two people, where they share attention with each other. There are fun ways of developing two-way attention including:

- Singing songs and nursery rhymes together (without props)
- Play people games such as tickling, peek-a-book, bouncing, spinning, jumping etc.

When playing and sharing attention with the child use gestures or sign to help them understand your language or to gain their attention.

You know when the child is enjoying two-way attention when they are enjoying the activity showing they're interested by glancing, looking, using positive body language, reading out, vocalising towards you and generally engaged and enjoying the interaction with you.

When your child is enjoying the two-way attention with you, start to build up the time they're engaged for each time.

Make sure your child is confident in this level and has practised it lots before moving on to three-way attention.



Three-Way Attention

Three-way attention is when you can shift your attention between person and object, such as a toy. It works best when two people are sharing one item

To develop your child's ability to share attention between person & object try these activities:

- Hold items near your face so they don't have to shift their attention far from you. You can gradually move it further away as your child builds their focus and is able to shift attention between larger spaces.
- Point to the things you are sharing or talking about, the point prompts the child to look at that particular object.
- Share your child's toy and interest, begin by joining in with their play. Copying their actions, noises, words to help them to shift between the toy they've self-chosen and you and then back again.

Mirroring Play

Some children find playing with or alongside others difficult or prefer to play on their own. Using a mirroring approach, we can begin to teach the child to have fun with an adult without having to share their resources or join the other persons play.

Mirroring play can help the child share attention with another person and help them build up to playing alongside and eventually with someone.

You can mirror your child's play by:

- Watching what your child plays with and how they interact with the object. It may not be the object you'd expect or how you'd expect typically.
- Ensure you get down to their level, it helps them clearly see you and you can see how they are interacting to be able to copy their play.
- If you sit next to your child and they're happy with you there begin to have your own toy and copy their actions, noise, vocalisations or words.
- Continue to mirror the play. Ensure that you have your own version of the toy and join in mirroring what they are doing. Hopefully when you join in, they may look at you to see what you are doing and realise you're doing the same.
- Comment on what they are doing as you play, this models key vocabulary of their interest or toy. E.g. if they're playing with a dolly you could say 'dolly eating', 'yum yum'.



Bubble Play

Bubbles are a simple and great resource for play, building attention and focus, developing their understanding of 'more' 'wait' and 'go'.

Simply start by blowing bubbles, modelling simple language, and popping the bubbles. Once all the bubbles have gone, wait and see if your child requests more using eye contact, vocalising, gestures or using words.



Keep in mind the key language or signs you want them to develop during this time 'bubbles', 'blow', 'pop', 'go', 'more', 'again'.

You can develop and build upon the language they use by using the 'add one more' strategy e.g. if they say 'bubbles' you can repeat back 'blow bubbles' or

'big bubbles'. You can begin to use names e.g. 'Sarah blow bubbles', this helps them to direct their initiation between the child.

Using a fun game of bubbles can help the child develop their joint attention between an adult and object, and allows them to share the resource, taking turns to pop and blow the bubbles in a fun and motivating environment.



Song Box

The use of a song box can help the child build their early play, interaction and attention skills with an adult as well as beginning to make choices when they're ready.

Collect objects which relate to nursery rhymes and keep them in a box for 'song time'. Gain your child's attention and show them an object e.g. a duck and begin to sing 5 little ducks. You could have 5 ducks and a bowl of water to extend their play skills and use the ducks to swim in the 'pond' and then take them away as you sing the song.

If the songs have actions model and encourage your child to join in with the actions. Pause and see if they fill in missing words or be silly and sing the song wrong to see if they notice.

As your child becomes confident in which object is used for each song you could hold two out and offer them a choice of what they want to sing.

Example Objects:

- Five Little Ducks – rubber duck (or 5 and bowl/tray of water)
- Incy Wincy Spider – plastic spider, drain piece, water spray.
- Miss Polly had a Dolly – doll
- Wind the bobbin up – cotton reel
- Wheels on the bus – toy bus
- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – fish / fishing rod
- Row, row, row your boat – plastic boat
- Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star – shiny star

