

Playing people games

Children with autism may process the information they take in from their surroundings a bit differently than other children do. This may be because they are often under- or over-sensitive to certain sensations, such as touch, smell, taste, sound, or movement. For example, when children are under-sensitive to certain sensations, they may seek out more of that sensation. If your child is under-sensitive to movement, we might see repetitive actions like constant running, jumping, or climbing. Or, if he's under-sensitive to sound, he might repeatedly use his noisiest toys.

The sensations your child craves or avoids are called his “sensory preferences”. When you recognize and work with your child’s sensory preferences, you can create situations that make it easier (and more fun!) for him to interact with you. A great way you can do this is with something called “people games”.

What are people games?

People games are simple, repetitive routines that require at least two people, but no toys (think Peekaboo, chase, and tickle games). Your child should naturally enjoy people games as they should grow out of his own unique sensory preferences – whether it’s movement, touch, sound, music, or sight that he craves. But there are other advantages too: people games have their own built-in structure and are usually played the same way each time. The predictable structure in people games means that they’re a great way to help your child to interact, play with you and learn to do new things.

Example: Chase and Tickle

Owen loves to run. His dad, Devin always plays chase with him the same way. He starts the game with his arms up, saying ‘Daddy’s going to get Owen’. The chase begins and then ends with Devin saying, ‘Got you!’ followed by some tickles. This game is very predictable for Owen. He knows what to expect and has even learned to ask Devin for the tickles or to start the game again.



You might already be playing people games with your child without even realizing it!

Some common examples include:

- Hide and Seek
- Peekaboo
- Horsey rides (e.g. riding around on an adult’s back)
- Songs (e.g. “Ring Around the Rosie” or “Zoom Zoom Zoom, We’re Going to the Moon”)
- Finger games (e.g. “Where is Thumbkin?”, “This Little Piggy”, or “Round and Round the Garden”)

These are just a few options. There are many more! And you can even make up your own people games.

Tips for choosing people games to play with your child

The best way to create a people game is to observe your child and then join in on what he's doing, turning it into a game. It's important to notice what he really likes to do. Once you determine the sensations that your child really likes, it's time to think of a people game that might include those sensations.

Here are just a few examples:

For a child that enjoys...

Try...

Running	Chase or tag
Spinning	"Ring Around the Rosie", or spinning in a revolving office chair
Jumping	Jump with him or sing "Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed"
The feel of soft fabrics or textures	Peekaboo using a soft blanket or tickles with a feather
Watching his hands or fingers move	Fingerplay games like "This Little Piggy" or "Where is Thumbkin?"
Deep pressure or strong hugs	Giving a big hug each time you catch him in a chase game
Music or sound	Singing songs, humming or dancing to music with your child

Help your child interact and communicate in your people game

Play your game all the way through many times and use the same main words and actions as you play. Once your child knows the game well, you can begin to pause at key moments in the game and WAIT for a response: when you wait, your child has a chance to join in by looking at you, touching you, smiling, doing an action, or even saying something. For example, let's say you're bouncing your child on your knee. After a few bounces, stop suddenly and wait with an expectant look on your face. This will encourage your child to look at you or make some kind of movement or sound to let you know he wants to be bounced again. Remember to play the game all the way through many times before you start waiting so he has a chance to learn what comes next!



These ideas are from the Hanen More Than Words® guidebook for parents of children with autism or social communication difficulties. For a limited time, **save 20% on this resource with code AAM2019.**

Learn more at www.hanen.org/MTWguidebook

About The Hanen Centre

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit organization committed to promoting the best possible language, literacy and social skills in young children. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically. For more information, visit www.hanen.org.