

# The Building Blocks Early Play Program Manual



# Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Suitability</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A note on toys and activities</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Programs of support at Aspect</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Understanding a child's interests</b>	<b>9</b>
Focus Area 1	9
Activity Sheet 1	11
<b>Encouraging reciprocal play</b>	<b>12</b>
Focus Area 2	12
Activity Sheet 2	14
<b>Encouraging shared attention</b>	<b>15</b>
Focus Area 3	15
Activity Sheet 3	17
<b>Encouraging communication through games</b>	<b>18</b>
Focus Area 4	18
Activity Sheet 4	20
<b>Encouraging communication through visual supports</b>	<b>21</b>
Focus Area 5	21
Activity Sheet 5	24
<b>Encouraging structured play</b>	<b>25</b>
Focus Area 6	25
Activity Sheet 6	28
<b>Teaching turn-taking</b>	<b>29</b>
Focus Area 7	29
Activity Sheet 7	31
<b>Encouraging Early Pretend Play</b>	<b>32</b>
Focus Area 8	32
Activity Sheet 8	34
<b>Summary</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Parent satisfaction questionnaire</b>	<b>36</b>

# Introduction

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The Aspect Early Play Program consists of eight Focus Areas around developing early social communication skills and building social connectedness in play. Social connectedness is the feeling of being connected to others and/or the sense of belonging to a group. For children and individuals on the autism spectrum, this can come in many forms and present very differently based on their individual preferences. This connectedness can start with familiar adults in the child's life during early childhood, such as their parents and extended family, siblings, educators, and therapists.

The program underwent a pilot study in 2014. Following the program, parents reported an increase in their child's joint attention, requesting and imitation skills, as well as high levels of satisfaction with their gains in knowledge and with the program overall.

The Early Play Program will benefit parents and educators living/working with a young child diagnosed on the autism spectrum whose play skills are more often solitary and who may not be currently engaging in social interaction with others.

The program supports families and professionals by equipping them with the skills to begin building social connectedness and positive relationships with the child and maximising the child's outcomes.

Each Focus Area includes a session plan with discussion points, teaching strategies, activity sheets, video exercises and recommended homework. The program is designed to be shared with the child's early childhood educators and others in their support team to focus on a collaborative approach to early childhood supports.

The program can be carried out in the child's natural setting at home, with or without a therapist, with the child's learnt skills being transferred and generalised to other settings such as daycares and preschool. It can also be of benefit within an early childhood education setting where educators have children on the autism spectrum under their care.

The program works hand-in-hand with Aspect's A Guide for Developing Play Skills, which is available from [www.autismspectrum.org.au](http://www.autismspectrum.org.au). This publication provides both carers and professionals with background reading about autism, play development in children on the autism spectrum and current best practice in play-based intervention.



# Suitability

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All children on the autism spectrum are different and have a diverse range of play skills and preferences. Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition which is characterised by differences in social communication and patterns of behaviour.

Social communication is more than just words and talking. Social communication is the way we use body gestures, actions and sounds to tell others around us what we want, how we are feeling, and to be able to share interests and experiences. For children on the autism spectrum, this may mean they need help to develop their verbal and non-verbal communication through back-and-forth interactions with others.

Patterns of behaviour may include a preference for routines and predictability, and differences in the way a child processes and responds to the sensory environment. This means they may prefer to play with toys the same way and be resistant to changes in play. They may also find some experiences overwhelming, such as loud sounds or certain textures, or they may seek out specific sensory experiences such as climbing up high or engaging in messy play.

As a result, the play of children on the autism spectrum may look a little different. They may need a little more help to show and share experiences with others and copy other people's play actions. They may also need help with responding to changes in play, learning the rules of social play, and playing cooperatively with their same-age peers.

The Early Play Program is most suitable for children who may prefer to play on their own and may become upset or move away when others try to play with them.

They may not yet be bringing toys to show others for shared enjoyment, or pointing out things to others of interest, e.g. plane in the sky. The child may also have difficulty initiating shared attention and may still be learning to copy another person's actions.

For children presenting with severe behaviours of concern or whose parents would like to target other skills such as toilet training or sleep issues, these families may benefit from seeing external therapists either before or at the same time as the Early Play Program. This will help to maintain the focus of the Early Play sessions on the child's development of early social communication skills.

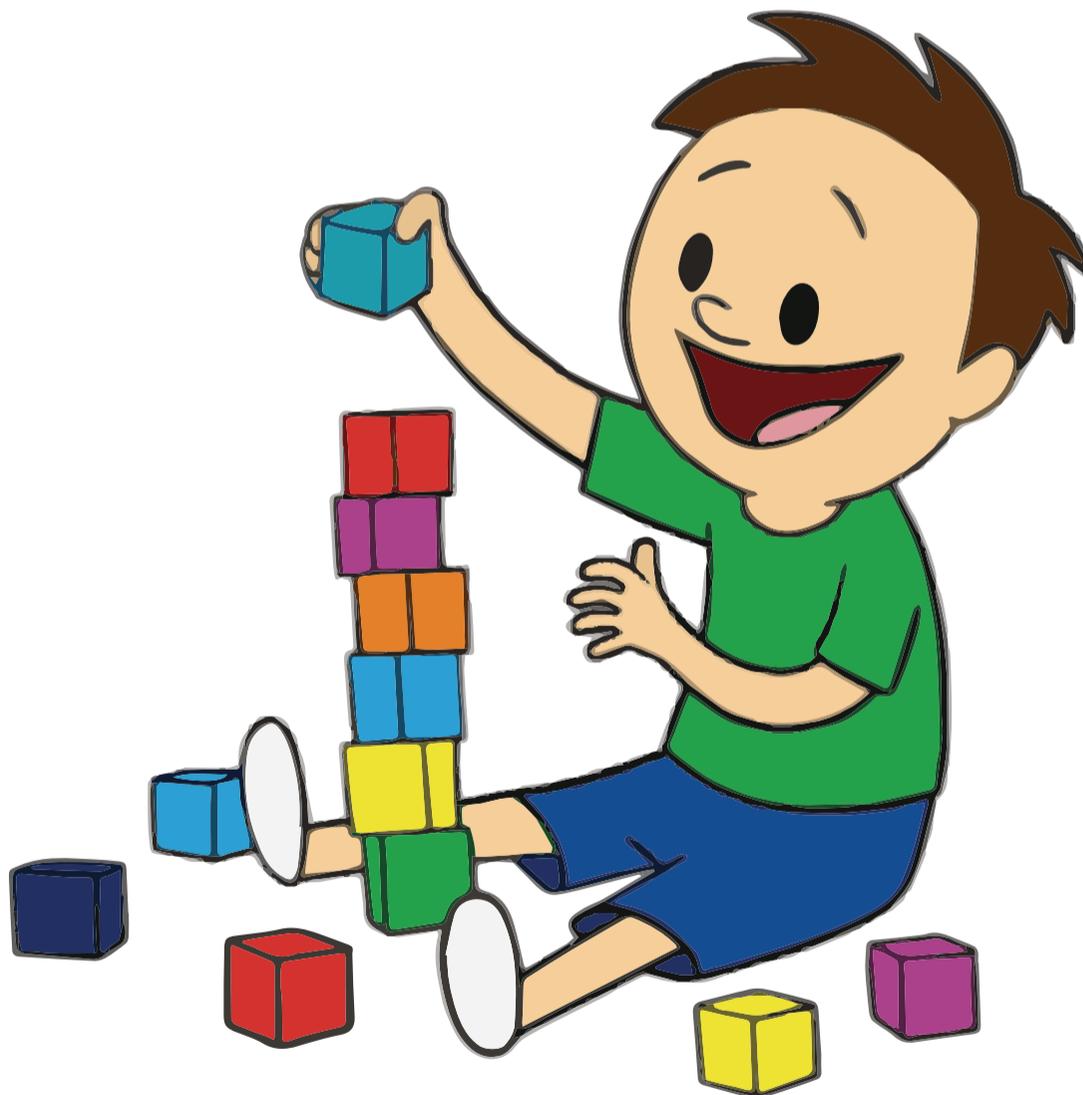
## A note on toys and activities

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All children differ in the way they play, and there is no right way to play with toys and engage in activities. The child should be free to explore and pursue their own play interest, rather than it being determined by others around them.

Throughout the Early Play Program, we will make toy and activity suggestions for the various strategies; however, it is important to remember that toy selection should depend on a child's individual preferences and the availability of toys for the family. You do not need to buy any specific toys for this program, and you will be able to use the toys you have in the home.

Also, keep in mind that some toys may frighten or cause distress for some children due to their sensory characteristics or their unpredictable nature. One example may be cause and effect toys such as a Jack in the Box. Always work within a child's comfort level.



# Programs of support at Aspect

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Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) has a framework to tell us how best to work with people on the autism spectrum. It is called the Aspect Comprehensive Approach (ACA). It is an approach that puts the people we support at the centre of everything we do.

The ACA is based on these rules:

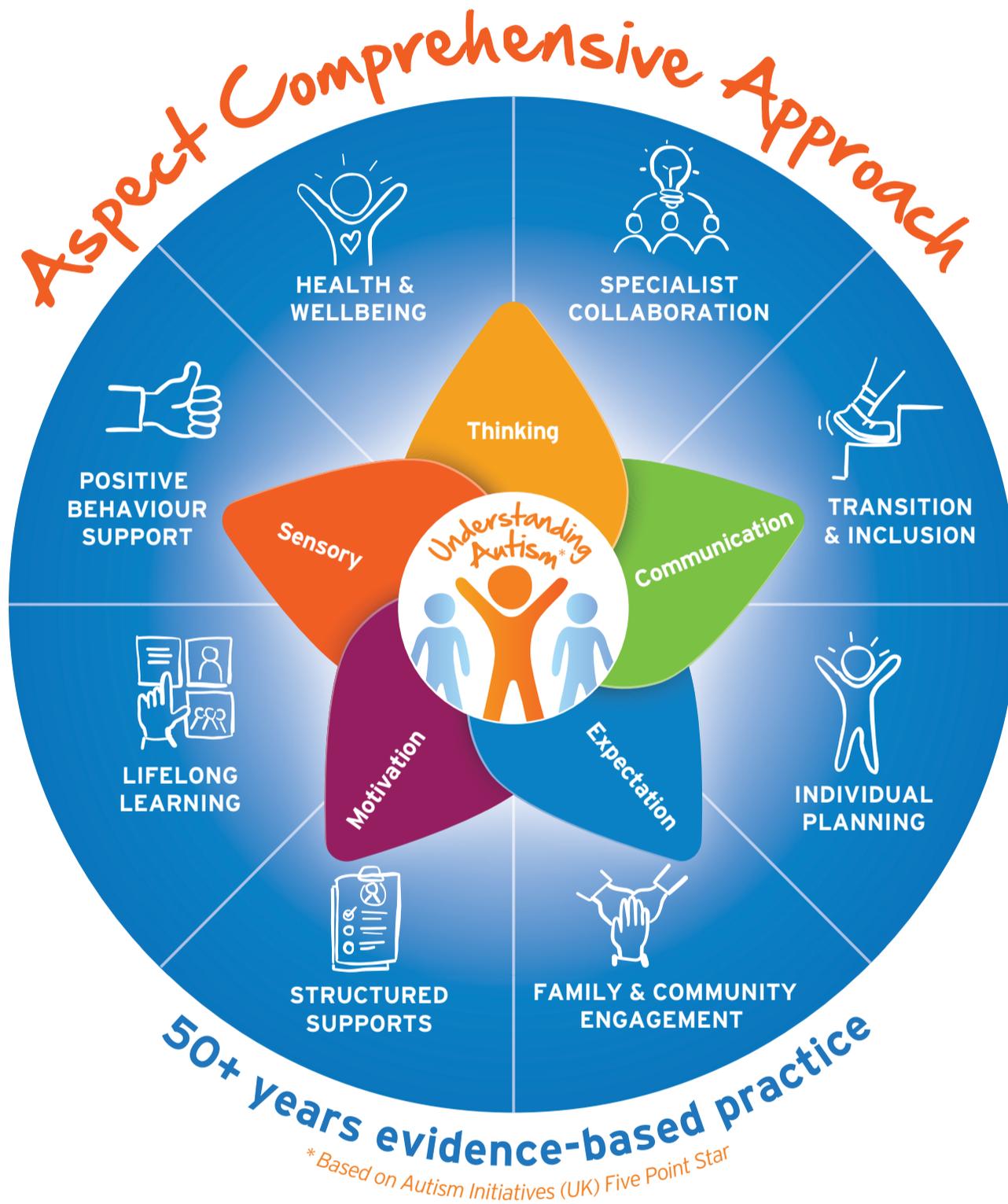
1. It is for all participant's on the autism spectrum.
2. We give support to all areas of the participant's lives based on their needs.
3. Our approach is positive and builds on what the participant is good at and likes to do.
4. We work together with parents/carers and professionals.
5. The approach is based on good practices and research.

Aspect defines 'Evidence-Based Practice' as strategies that:

- have the highest quality available research showing positive impacts for Autistic people and their families in real-world settings
- meet the aspirations, preferences and values of people on the autism spectrum
- fit with Aspect's 50 years of expertise in autism practice and assists the work of our educators, therapists and support staff
- are positive and not painful or distressing, respect the full diversity of Autistic people and can contribute towards an Autistic person's satisfaction with their quality of life and their inclusion in society

Our early childhood publication series are in line with Aspect's Comprehensive Approach and definition of evidence-based strategies.

For more information on the ACA, please visit our website: [autismspectrum.org.au](http://autismspectrum.org.au).





## *a different brilliant*

understanding, engaging & celebrating the strengths, interests & aspirations of people on the autism spectrum

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) is Australia's largest autism-specific service provider, with one of the biggest evidence informed autism-specific schools programs in the world. A not-for-profit organisation, we work in partnership with people of all ages on the autism spectrum and their families to deliver positive, practical supports, services, practices and research that recognise *a different brilliant*<sup>®</sup> - *understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths and interests of people on the autism spectrum.*

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