

I'm not a robot



Classroom activities for nonverbal autistic child

Finding activities for a nonverbal autistic child can be tricky. This collection of autism activities will help you build communication skills, fine motor skills, sensory play skills and more. Make sure you check out my Autism Workbooks as well if you are looking for printable autism activities. When we refer to a child as “nonverbal” it means that he or she is not using verbal language to communicate. It is really important to remember that this doesn’t mean that the child is not communicating. A lot of our communication is nonverbal. My collection of Autism Workbooks contain over 50 autism activities that I personally designed based on my 20+ years of experience working with children on the autism spectrum as a therapist and autism center owner. The activities in the Autism Workbooks are perfect for building communication, fine motor, sensory play and life skills – all while decreasing difficult behaviors that are getting in the way of learning. (The workbook bundle includes some fabulous social story bonuses as well!) Adapted sign language can be an amazing tool for teaching a nonverbal autistic child to communicate. Looking for more autism activities for non verbal learners? Get your copy of the Autism Activities Workbook Bundle here and never run out of activity ideas! I love using Montessori Learning Trays to teach new skills. They are a fun and engaging way to build new skills. Experience are a great tool for processing different types of activity. Use them to build expressive and receptive language skills. Related: How to Teach an Autistic Child to Speak I love sensory boxes and so do my little learners! May yours do too? Some of my favorites? If you don’t have a sensory table yet, I highly suggest you get one (or make your own). You can use a sensory table to work on teaching new vocabulary words, building receptive language skills, taking turns and more. They are so much fun! Incorporating sensory breaks into the day with a nonverbal child, can be essential. Keep frustration at bay while also increasing movement, with fun sensory breaks throughout the day. Quiet Books are a fabulous tool for learning new skills and incorporating simple and calm play activities into your child to students’ day. Use the zoo play dough mats to work on the names of the animals, process sensory experiences (by manipulating play dough) and more. This collection of worksheets will help you teach numbers, writing and more. This simple activity calls for a simple pail and clothespins to build fine motor skills in a simple way. Folding origami can be a great way to build your little learner’s fine motor strength and precision. Use a DIY pointing book to teach your child or students to point, while also building fine motor skills simultaneously. Looking for more autism activities for non verbal learners? Get your copy of the Autism Activities Workbook Bundle here and never run out of activity ideas! Use this simple cotton balls and clothespins activity to build your child or students’ fine motor skills. Use this list of 62 social skills to teach to build your little one’s social skills, step by step. This is one of the most popular printable activities on this blog! Teach your child to make a fish out of play dough and say “fish”, “fish bowl” and “play dough”. This collection of free printable Winter play dough mats is perfect for an autistic learner who is nonverbal. Dinosaur play dough mats are a fun and easy way to build new skills as well. Create an entire dinosaur unit or add these free printables to your existing activity plan. Matching skills are an important prerequisite to learning verbal communication. Add some simple matching activities into your home, classroom or therapy programs with my fish matching games. For more printable autism activities, check out my Autism Activities Workbook Bundle! My favorite indoor autism activities to get you through a long Winter! Similarly, these are my favorite outdoor autism activities! Books About Colors Best Board Books Autism Books Easy kids yoga is a great activity for incorporating movement activities into your every day schedule with an autism child. Choose one or two of the autism activities for nonverbal learners to try or use them all! First published January 12th, 2021. Last updated March 3rd, 2025 with more information, additional tips, and better readability. Using games with a nonverbal autistic child is a great way to support them to thrive. Pairing fun and interest with learning is an effective teaching strategy. Additionally, non-speaking children benefit when parents and support people encourage connection and emotional safety over compliance. One way to do this is through games and other fun activities. So, today, let’s dive into different activities and games for the nonverbal autistic child in your life. While many people say “nonverbal children” when referring to kids who don’t speak, this is not accurate. The term nonverbal indicates a child is without language. However, most young children who don’t speak do understand and can use language. (This is why we must give them the tools to do so such as AAC Alternative and Augmentative Communication.) By understanding that communication skills are multi-faceted, we can better support and connect with young children who don’t speak, have communication disorders, or live with selective mutism. Let’s presume competence. The following list contains 20 fun activities and games for nonverbal children. A game of Spot It is easy to play with a child who doesn’t speak aloud. Simply take turns pointing to the matching picture on the Spot It cards. Encourage receptive language by repeating a carrier phrase for each play of the cards. For example, pointing to a red bird on a Spot-It card. There is a red bird. Expand language while creating connection and safety in your relationship. Creating these emotionally calm moments with your autistic child helps you both develop stronger pathways of regulation between the two of you. Your autistic child must feel safe with you if they’re ever going to be able to take direction from you. Using card games, especially those designed as matching games are a fun way to increase any number of different skills. For example, you can work on Math Skills (Using Shapes as an Example). Use flashcards of a number of different shapes. Lay them face down on the table. Take turns turning over a card and finding its matching shape. Again, use a carrier phrase to reinforce receptive language skills. “I turned over a . . . Now I turn over a . . . I got a match! / didn’t get a match.” Use any area of your child’s interest to encourage learning in any area. For example, if your student likes Peppa Pig, use a Peppa Pig memory game. Autistic and other neurodivergent children live in a world designed in opposition to who they are. This means that they’re constantly set up for failure which can make “losing” even harder for them. Provide them with an internal narrative that tells them that losing is okay and to be expected. Do this by modeling an emotionally affirming internal dialogue. For example, if you don’t turn over a matching pair, say something like, “Oh well. I didn’t get a match this time. I’ll try again next time.” And then repeat, repeat, repeat. Autistic kids, like neurotypical children, often love putting together puzzles. In fact, in our homeschool, we use puzzles for just about all of my son’s special interests. Using puzzles is a great way to reinforce any areas of learning while working on visual-spatial skills, problem-solving skills, team-building, and turn-taking. (Hint. . . do the puzzle with your child if they’d like your company.) Building with blocks is a great way to increase hand-eye coordination in kids who struggle with coordination. Use blocks to model verbal language specific to: prepositions (in, on, above, below, etc.) numbers, colors, and more. For example, “I put a block on top of the tower.” These solar-system-themed blocks are stunning and great for visual learners. Related: 30+ Best Gifts for Kids Who Love Space & Astronomy Any activity that involves building and creating is a winner for so many reasons. Legos are a perfect side-by-side activity for non-speaking and neurotypical children. Build up fine motor and problem-solving skills, visual-spatial awareness, and more. Hide and seek is such a fun way to have fun without the need to speak using oral language. From the first time we play peek-a-boo with a child, we engage in this silly game of hide and seek. One of the best things about the hide-and-seek game is the laughter and relationship building through connection. There’s nothing more important than to be sought after and found. Just like neurotypical children, nonspeaking children enjoy the social interaction of hide-and-seek. Physical play is essential to any child’s development. From infancy, movement matters. Tummy time alone supports core and neck strength that are foundational to all later motor skill development. Surprisingly, tummy time doesn’t just set the stage for sitting, crawling, and walking. It is critical to later develop fine motor skills such as speaking and handwriting. Additionally, it’s well-known that to get an autism diagnosis, a child will struggle with some areas of difficulty with motor skill development. Some autistic kids may appear clumsy, have a heavy gait, or have challenges throwing a ball, for example. Fortunately, a private occupational therapist can support your non-speaking autistic child in all things motor skills. However, you don’t have to rely on one hour a week of occupational therapy. There are so many fun activities that can help autistic kids develop their motor skills through play. Related: Motor Skills in Autism: Why Your Child’s Cerebellum Matters Set up an obstacle course in your living room. Here are some ideas for an obstacle course. Cushions to jump over, Chairs to climb over, Aline of painter’s tape to balance across as a “tight rope”, Lay a hula hoop on the ground and have your child jump inside 10 times Have them return by crawling under the kitchen table Slide across the room using a tummy scooter Spin around in one direction five times Then spin them in the opposite direction 5 times (Vestibular Input) Jump into a crash pad at the end Whether your child or student has higher support needs or not, this type of activity is so much fun. As always, be sure to modify it to meet your child’s needs. Model using the obstacle course, offer visual cues with large hand gestures, and narrate what you’re doing. Remember, nonverbal autistic people very often understand (receptive language) well. Give your child every opportunity to hear spoken language while they’re happily engaged. When you use language in a playful and fun activity, kids are better able to make sense of new concepts and directions. Be sure to engage your child in the process and participate with them. Make it fun and low-pressure. Read your child’s nonverbal cues and follow their lead. Most young kids (and many adults) love to make Play-Doh creations. Play-Doh, clay, and kinetic sand are excellent sensory tools to support your child’s fine motor skills. At the same time, it provides needed sensory information to the brain. Specifically, sensory activities like these provide proprioceptive input to the small joints and muscles of the fingers, wrists, and arms. Further, nonverbal kids (nonspeaking) can use play-doh to learn: Letters, Numbers, Colors, Counting, Science. (For example, check out this ocean playdough) A wonderful benefit of sensory experiences such as this is that most children enjoy sensory play. That means sensory play is a great way to teach non-autistic children to learn Autistic social skills and how to be inclusive in social situations. Try the best no-cook playdough recipe you can make with (or without!) a stand mixer! Trampolines are versatile tools to provide autistic children of all ages with physical exercise opportunities that support sensory integration. Jumping on a trampoline provides both proprioceptive and vestibular sensory input to help calm the brain and body while at the same time increasing attention span. The more autistic children jump, the more they develop greater spatial awareness of where their body is in space. Further, the benefits of jumping on a trampoline are numerous. cardiovascular health, increased overall muscle tone, core strength elevated mood, increased attention span If you’re homeschooling your non-verbal autistic child, try this: Nonverbal autism does not mean nonliterate. As long as teachers and parents allow kids to learn based on who they are, autistic kids can thrive as readers. Related: Autism Trampoline Therapy: Is It a Real Thing? Painting is a great way to allow any child to express themselves without the spoken word. Non-verbal children, like many minority groups of people, have a unique perspective to share with the world. Spread the buffet of different types of creativity tools for your child and them an opportunity to express themselves through art, paints, brushes, sponges, and paper When working with nonverbal individuals who are older, consider more sophisticated tools such as acrylic paints. For younger children, be sure to choose some form of washable paint. Kick up the sensory profile of the art by allowing your sensory-seeking student to dip their hands in finger paint and use those handprints to create how they see fit. Be sure to have smocks, baby wipes, and a large trashcan nearby for easy clean-up. Autistic children, like non-autistic children, all have different sensory needs. Again, living in a world designed in opposition to how you’ve been designed is incredibly stressful for autistic and other neurodivergent children. They’re often pressured to act like non-autistic people when they are wired to think and process the world differently. As such, autistic children, teens, and adults often suffer from severe mental health distress. One of the greatest gifts we can give our non-speaking autistic children is as many emotional regulation tools as possible from as young an age as possible. If your autistic child enjoys calming visual input, try creating a sensory jar or bottle with them. Here’s a simple sensory bottle to get you and your nonverbal autistic student started. Materials: Clear empty plastic water bottle Water Vegetable oil Food Coloring Additional add-ons: Glitter Confetti Sensory beads Instructions: Pour water into the bottle to the halfway point Then fill the rest of the bottle with vegetable oil Add a few drops of your child’s favorite color Have them put the top on and flip it over Add more colors to their preference Shake and watch it settle For more emotional regulation activities for kids, check out 47 ideas here. Use pretend for everything, but especially for language development. Despite rumors to the contrary, autistic kids, whether non-speaking or not, are just as capable of pretend play as neurotypical kids. In fact, some of the most imaginative people out there are autistic (think Hollywood, the theater, writers, etc). Participate in activities led by your nonverbal students. Don’t try to control everything. Instead, let your kids take the lead and allow them to tell you who they are. Parents, speech therapists, and teachers (even those with special education degrees) often make learning hard on students when we try to control everything. Discovery-based play is powerful. Use small toys and dolls (that your student chooses) in imaginative play. Use a kind and gentle voice modeling compassion and acceptance among the dolls. Because people without autism struggle to understand autistic social rules, as a parent or educator it’s important to learn autistic social skills. For example, autistic social skills do not rely on eye contact. Follow the child’s cues and do not try to control the situation. You’ll learn much about your nonspeaking autistic student when you slow down and “listen” to their forms of communication. Sorting games are a great way to support nonverbal autistic children in developing organizational skills. When I say organization skills, I’m not referring to organizing Marie Kondo style. Specifically, sorting and organizing toys by shapes, colors, and functions supports growing executive function skills. Additionally, it lays the foundation for later problem-solving skills that will be necessary for life. As an added bonus, positional play is related to visual-spatial development. Further, autistic kids, are often subjected to stressful situations creating lots of anxiety. Sorting games can be a calming and regulating activity for many neurodivergent children (and adults). Every speech therapist knows the value of incorporating board games into their speech therapy time. Using a child’s favorite board game is a great option to support fun, play, relationship, language, and cognitive skills. Of course, every child will have their own needs, but here are a few board game ideas. Sneaky Snacky Squirrel Game fine motor skills color identification turn-taking model language skills using repetitive “carrier” sentences. “I picked up the blue acorn.” “You chose the green acorn.” Animal Action Cards Gross motor skill development Following directions Auditory processing Adding animal noises in a fun way can lead to vocalization (if they so choose) Qbitz Problem-solving Strategy Overall brain-building skills Depending on your child’s age and ability, you can choose challenges based on difficulty level. Check out this list of 59 Best Educational Board Games for Kids. (I discovered many of these through Speech Therapist friends and colleagues.) American Sign Language is a wonderful language for anyone, but especially non-speaking autistic students. In fact, where many parents and educators mistakenly believe teaching a child sign language will slow their language development, the opposite is true. Learn some basic signs with your child and if they enjoy it, make learning sign language a fun game. Additionally, tools that use signs and picture cards can further support the acquisition of language. As always, follow your student’s lead and make signing fun and engaging. Alternative ways to teach this amazing communication skill are by using music and movement to reinforce learning. Try an American Sign Language video to support multisensory learning. Jack Hartmann’s learning videos are engaging and use movement, music, and fun for all kids. His sign language video is one example of an ASL video you can use with your nonverbal autistic child. Fortunately, there are many interactive educational apps available for kids of all different needs. Some of the best apps for my 9-year-old son have been those recommended by his past speech-language pathologist. Some recommended apps include: CodeSpark Academy Kids FlipAClip for animation PBS Kids Another recommended AAC app for those with unique communication styles including selective mutism is Type. (I can see this being an excellent tool to support teaching reading.) Minecraft is a great video game to support your child’s problem-solving, visual-spatial awareness, as well as language, and reading skills. Drawing is an excellent activity for autistic children for so many reasons. The benefits include: If your child needs extra drawing ideas, check out these guided winter drawing prompts. While many people say “nonverbal children” when referring to kids who don’t speak, this is not accurate. The term nonverbal indicates a child is without language. However, most young children who don’t speak do understand and can use language. (This is why we must give them the tools to do so such as AAC (Alternative and Augmentative Communication.) By understanding that communication skills are multi-faceted, we can better support and connect with young children who don’t speak, have communication disorders, or live with selective mutism. Fortunately, there are many different ways to communicate. body language pointing facial expressions hand gestures typing writing reading noises Nonverbal communication is a valid form of communication. As such, it’s important to encourage nonspeaking young children to grow their communication skills in a safe, encouraging environment. When you support a child’s ability to communicate, you provide them with one of the most empowering life skills. In the end, autistic children, whether speaking or nonspeaking, enjoy many of the same games and activities as non-autistic kids. I hope this list of games for a nonverbal autistic child has inspired you to follow your child’s lead and have fun together. So, Friend. Am I missing any of your autistic child’s favorite games and activities? I’m always looking for recommendations to share with other neurodivergent families.