

Summer activities for children with autism



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The long school summer holidays can be wonderful, but are also sometimes a challenge for parents! How do you keep your children busy and happy for all those weeks? For parents of autistic children, including non-verbal children, keeping them occupied may be even more of a challenge. Autistic children may have particularly sensory needs to be accommodated and use of an autism app or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) needs to be considered where appropriate.

So what can you do to cater for the needs of autistic and non-verbal children without spending a fortune and maybe even including a bit of learning as well? Here are a few ideas.

Walks and exploring

Getting out of the house is almost always a good idea. Wherever you live and whatever the weather there is sure to be some exploring to be done!

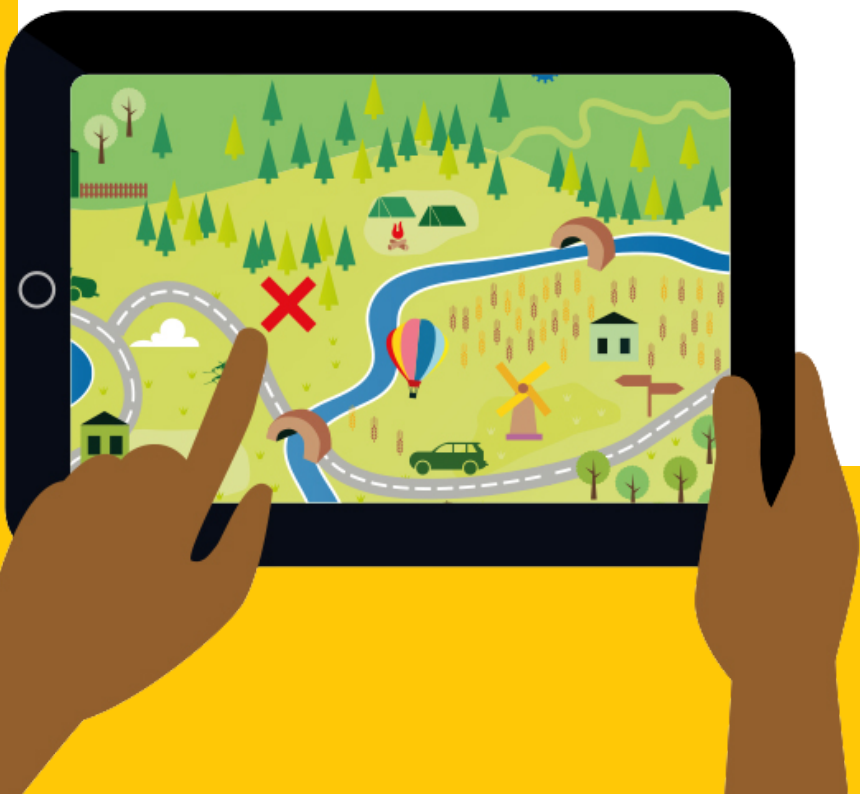
To start with, how many of us have properly explored even the places very close to where we live? Is there a path you have seen and wondered where it led, or a part of your area you have always meant to have a proper look at?

Now is the time, ensuring that it is safe to do so of course.

Tell your children that you are going exploring to a place that not even you have been to before to see what you find, while reassuring them that there is nothing to worry about if you need to!

You could show them that the phone or tablet you are using for AAC or a non-verbal app also has a map on it!

There is so much you can do to keep your children engaged and interested while you are out, and this can be tailored to the needs of autistic children as required. For example, you could count or record different sounds, smells or textures you find. You could collect sticks, leaves, feathers or pebbles (maybe even for using in art later!) If you live in a busy area, let each child pick a colour and see how many cars of that colour they can spot while you are out, or practice reading the signs on shops and road names.



If an autistic child has a special interest, see if you can build this into your walk. For example, can you take a child who loves trains to a bridge or somewhere else where you watch and listen to some go past? These types of experiences can be particularly valuable for autistic and non-verbal children.

Whatever you do, keep it exciting and interesting for your children. Point out things to see, hear, smell and touch. Make sure that a non-verbal child can fully participate using AAC. Keep up the story that you are explorers. Finally, the promise of a treat like an ice cream at the end of your great expedition always works well!



Gardening

Closer to home, or maybe even in it, how about some gardening? Even a tiny balcony or window ledge is enough space to grow something, and there is so much for children to gain and learn from this as well as having lots of fun.

Depending on your situation, try to pick things that will grow reasonably fast and perhaps get them started towards the beginning of summer so that your children can see them grow. Cater to the sensory needs of autistic children by encouraging them to touch the soil and seeds, and then the plant itself as it grows, to see the different colours or perhaps to hear the leaves of a larger plant rustling in the wind.

A non-verbal child will be able to appreciate this just as much as any other child and can use their autism or AAC app to share how it makes them feel.

Autistic children often love routines, so you could make watering a part of their routine – seeing their plants grow as a result can be hugely rewarding, particularly if it ends with beautiful flowers or something that they can enjoy eating!

Wildlife and pets

Even if you do not have a pet, there is wildlife all around us even in the heart of the city – just pick up a stone or abandoned brick on the ground. You may not like finding a spider in your bath, but even this can be an activity to spark your children's' imagination and interest! Let them help you catch it in a glass, have a good look at it (if they want to!) and then help you release it outside. This could then lead to stories, pictures or model making.

If you have a chance to spend more time with animals, either a pet or visiting a farm or zoo, autistic children may find plenty to indulge their sensory needs. Encourage them to take in all the sights, sounds, textures and smells (even the less pleasant ones!). Make sure that non-verbal children are not left out and encourage them to use their AAC and autism apps to join in and share their thoughts and questions.

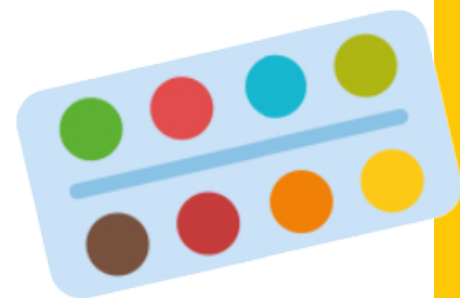


A pet offers further scope as your children can watch it grow and learn (just like them) and help in its care such as feeding and grooming. Again, there are opportunities to make this a fun part of an autistic child's routine. It has been shown that contact with animals is known to reduce stress and anxiety, common issues with autistic and non-verbal children.

Art

Now you have all that wonderful inspiration and perhaps a few things and photos you brought home from your trips out, how about some art? Let your imagination (and that of your children) run wild – there is much more to art than drawing and colouring!

Can you use any of the things you collected to make a collage or perhaps your own model of the beach or the woods in a small box? If an autistic child is fascinated by textures, can they make rubbings of things and use these in pictures, or see if they can make similar textures using art materials?



Pebbles from the beach can be decorated with pens or paints, and models of your town made from empty boxes or building blocks.

Music is art too, so can you and your children find ways to copy the sounds you heard while you were out, whether birdsong, waves or traffic sounds! This may be particularly valuable for a non-verbal autistic child who can then use other sounds to express themselves.

Water

Is there anything better than some water play outside on a hot and sunny day? A washing up bowl on a balcony can be just as much fun as a paddling pool in a garden – the key is to get your children using all their senses and having fun. They will really enjoy it if you get just as involved as them and end up getting just as wet too!



Use whatever you have to hand - you do not need to spend money on special water toys. A few plastic cups, an empty squeeze bottle and a few things to float like corks can provide lots of fun and food for imaginations. Perhaps you could make paper boats and see which one's float and even which can carry the most cargo before they sink or have races by blowing them across the water.

Water play is another great activity for non-verbal autistic children - no language is needed to enjoy splashing around and laughing as you all get wet together! Just make sure that the tablet or phone you use for their AAC and autism apps is in a safe dry place.

Picnic

Finally, you can combine just about the other activities here in a picnic! You can make the food together, explore on the journey to your site and see what you find when you get there, collect things to take home for art and experiments, and use all of your senses all the time of course!



Even if it rains all day, have a picnic at home - you could even make a camp inside using sheets draped over furniture! An autistic child with sensory issues may particularly enjoy creating a safe, cosy space like this.

There is no need to see the summer as a challenge to keep your autistic children's senses occupied. With a bit of thought, planning and considering what will work best for your children, you will soon be wondering how you are going to fit it all in!

