NAIT Playboxes Implementation Guide

Playboxes

national autism implementation team

NAIT Playboxes Implementation Guide

This resource has been developed by NAIT in partnership with the Edinburgh Playboxes Team.

Content

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Overview

Introduction to Playboxes

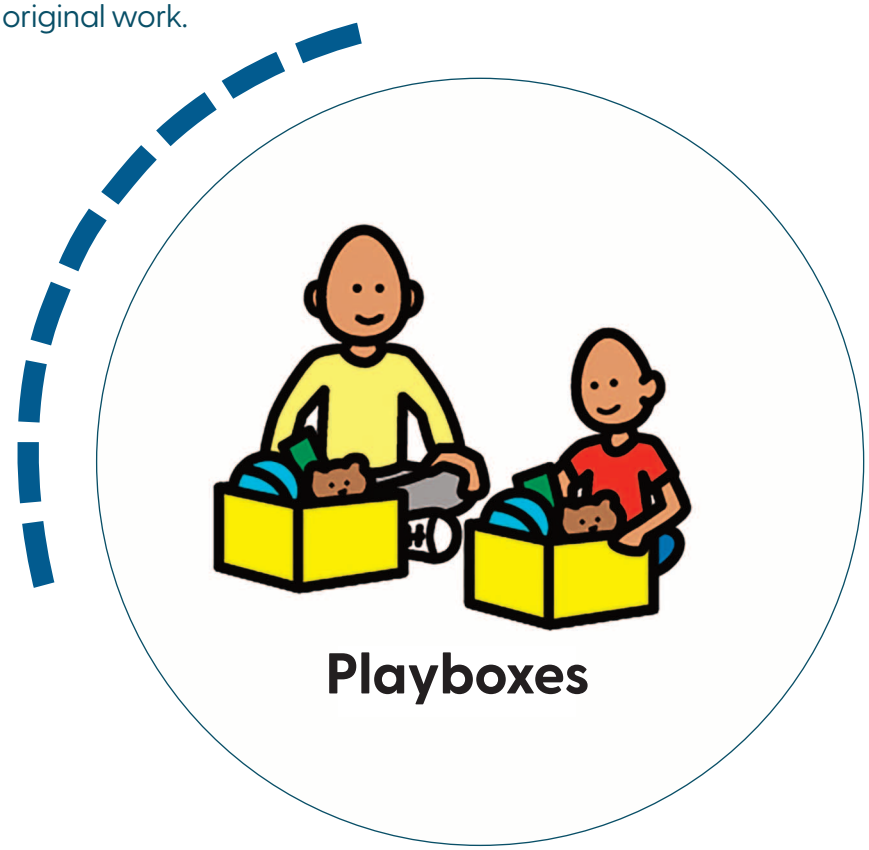
Playboxes is an approach developed by a multi-disciplinary team under the leadership of Dr Helen Marwick from the University of Strathclyde.

The approach is based on the Joint-Play Intersubjectivity Assessment Method (JPIAM), which promotes and assesses active interpersonal engagement and communication in pre-school autistic children.

Playboxes offers opportunities for early play experiences by providing an enthusiastic play partner, a dedicated place and time and engaging resources designed to interest the child. It is motivating and it is fun.

The late Dr Marwick gave permission to Playboxes Team members to deliver Playboxes Training.

The Marwick family has given permission (2024) to the Edinburgh Playboxes Team, to continue to disseminate the outcomes from this work, including the delivery of Playboxes Professional Learning and undertaking research using this approach, which uses and builds on Dr Marwick's original work.



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Overview

A Neuro-affirming Lens on Playboxes

In a neurodiverse world play can take many forms. Play can be whatever is meaningful and pleasurable to a child or young person.

Play can be with other people, alongside other people or on your own. All are important. Lots of valuable play and exploration can happen without other people.

The children and young people we work with will have a range of preferences for what they wish to play with, including conventional toys and other objects, and how they like to use these. Within safe parameters, Playboxes provides a predictable and supported space for children to explore their preferences and to discover what is enjoyable to them.

When we refer to 'toys', this term includes safe objects that a child finds interesting and motivating within the play context.

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Overview

How does Playboxes fit with CIRCLE and SCERTS?

Strengths and rights based

All children have the right to play (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Play provides a context where we can connect with others, experience joy and learn new things.

Environment first

CIRCLE and SCERTS are both frameworks designed to help practitioners to meet need through support within naturally occurring environments such as early learning and childcare settings, school, home and in the community. The adults make changes to the environment and to their own communication, actions and responses rather than expecting the child to change.

Playboxes provides a safe context for a child to explore and discover their own play preferences.

Predictable and desirable

A SCERTS lens highlights that learners participate best when communication, expectations and resources are predictable and desirable.

Each child's Playboxes experience is unique as the boxes, toys and communication are tailored to the individual's interests and preferences. Predictability is key to the method.

We will always be doing the right thing if we are aware of each child's development and are providing interactions and opportunities that match the needs of the child.

Realising the Ambition: Being Me (2020)

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Resources

Key Messages for SCERTS Implementation

Introduction

The following Key Messages are designed to guide practitioners implementing Playboxes in early learning and childcare and school settings.

1. **There is no right way to play**
2. **Provide predictability**
3. **A time for trust**
4. **Play without goals**
5. **Play is fun!**

1. There is no right way to play

Play offers an opportunity for children to learn about the world around them. It provides a safe environment to explore and investigate.

In a neurodiverse world play can take many forms. Play can be whatever is meaningful and pleasurable to a child.

Play can be with other people, alongside other people or on your own. All are important. Lots of valuable play and exploration can happen without other people and/ or without toys.

Children will have a range of preferences for what they wish to play with, including conventional toys and other objects, and how they like to use these. Within safe parameters, Playboxes provides a predictable and supportive space for children to explore their preferences and to discover what is enjoyable to them.

The list of items we commonly consider 'toys' could be extended to include safe objects that a child finds interesting and motivating within a play context.

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Key Messages

2. Provide predictability

Predictability helps to reduce anxiety. Disrupted expectations increase anxiety. Practitioners can seek to reduce anxiety and support participation by providing physical and social environments that are predictable to children.

The Playboxes method has a clear and predictable structure that can provide a safe context for fun and learning.

It is important to make the start and finish of Playboxes sessions a familiar routine for the child. Using the Playboxes Boardmaker© symbol on a child's visual timetable, where developmentally relevant, can help them to predict when the session is going to happen. A timer, signing or verbal cue can be used to indicate that the session is coming to an end. For many children, knowing what is happening next will be helpful.

Weekly sessions frame Playboxes as a 'special time' and allow a child to experience anticipation. Wherever possible, sessions should happen in the same space, on the same day and at the same time. Sessions can last from 10 minutes to 45 minutes, depending on the energy, engagement and needs of the individual.

The adult play partner needs to be consistent and, rather than substitute for an unavailable adult, it is better that the session does not take place.

3. A time for trust

Building trust and a positive relationship takes time and together the adult and child build shared memories of the play that they bring to future sessions.

Successful Playboxes sessions can be both a safe place to experience new things and to experience disappointment.

It is not uncommon for practitioners to note that there is little engagement or joint play for the first three or four weeks. As trust and shared memories build, and the adult provides motivating experiences, engagement in joint play tends to develop beyond this point.

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Key Messages

4. Play without goals

Playboxes is an opportunity to have fun and to see where the fun leads. The adult partner comes to the play without agenda, targets or goals, allowing the play and communication to develop in whichever way works for the child.

Playboxes offers an opportunity to look closely at how a child chooses to play and what is attractive and appealing to them. It allows a safe context to explore play without distraction or interruption.

"Facilitating development and authentic play should not be confused when writing goals. We can have goals around development, but the only true 'play goal' we can have for another person is really a goal for us, as their partners, to ensure the person's access to opportunities and resources to engage in whatever activities they consider play!" (Laurent, A. and Fede, J. Autism Level Up!)

5. Play is fun!

Many practitioners report that children are excited to see the Playboxes symbol on their visual timetable and some have told them that it is their favourite thing about nursery or school.

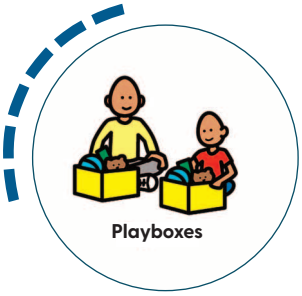
Throughout the play the adult is 'tuning in' to the child and, where possible, picking up on their ideas and feelings and responding to them.

Importantly, the adult must leave their everyday role at the door. They should not try to insert broader learning goals into the session, for example, 'floating and sinking' or focus on a particular phonic sound or number, and everyday class management tools should not be evident in the session. Any unexpected responses should be managed through the play, for example, "That made teddy feel sad. How can we make him feel happy?"

The adult play partner should aim to make the sessions as desirable as possible. If a Playboxes session is no longer fun for the child, it is time to, carefully and sensitively, bring the session to an end.

Resources

How to do Playboxes



Who?

- Autistic children and other neurodivergent children
- From 2 years upwards
- One consistent adult, experienced in working with neurodivergent children

Where?

- In a consistent space
- In a separate room within school/ nursery/ home/ clinic
- Ideally not too big a space
- As few distractions as possible
- Play on the floor where accessibility considerations allow

When?

- Ideally weekly sessions
- Ideally the same time each week
- At least 10 weekly sessions
- Approximately 10 - 45 minutes per session
- It may help to prepare child by using a 'Playboxes' symbol on their visual timetable

What?

- Two matching boxes with lids
- Each box decorated appropriately for particular child and adult
- Photograph/ picture of the child on one box and of the adult play partner on the other
- Every box should contain a cloth. Cloths can be big or small.
- Every box should contain a 'representational other' (teddy/ dolly/ puppet) who can join the play, take turns in a game or express preferences and ideas throughout the play
- Select and include two sets of toys – some matching, some complementary
- Toys chosen to suit particular child's interests and developmental stage

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How to do Playboxes

Expressive- attentive play

e.g., party blowers, bubbles, spinners

Goal directed play

e.g., skittles, fishing game, pull back cars

Imaginative play

e.g., puppets, tea set, farm family and animals

- Initially select around three toys from each category – all three categories should be represented
- Thereafter remove toys that have been 'unsuccessful' for more than one week
- Retain some 'successful' toys from week to week
- Based on child's interest, add new toys to build on existing play
- Introduce some new toys to extend play opportunities

Getting Started

- Decorate the two boxes with pictures and sensory objects likely to engage the child
- Select matching or complementary toys and put them in the boxes
- Note the chosen toys on your Playboxes Record Sheet
- Check with the team around the child to find out how their week/ day has been going and whether there is anything that might be affecting the child's regulation
- Prepare the child for the session as developmentally appropriate, as you usually would for an upcoming activity, e.g., put the 'Playboxes' symbol on to the child's visual timetable

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How to do Playboxes

How?

- Place the two boxes on the floor in your chosen room
- Bring the child into the room
- You might draw the child's attention to the decoration on the boxes
- Allow the child time to explore the box
- You may wish to open the adult box
- You might encourage the child to open their box

Within the three types of play the adult will be trying to...

- Observe and listen to the child
- Join the child in play by bringing their matched or complementary toy into interaction
- Imitate
- Model
- Invite and offer comparisons
- Provoke searches for identical or complementary pieces
- Negotiate transfers
- Enable shared focus
- Instigate turn-taking
- Share pretend play
- Model interactions between representational toys
- Offer imaginative scenarios/ narratives
- Involve representational toys in interactions (attributing feelings and purposes to toys in relation to child and adult)
- Demonstrate awareness of another's perspective in supported joint imaginary play

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How to do Playboxes

The playful setting also enables the adult to achieve these aims by:

- Surprising the child, in ways that might be desirable to them
- Amusing the child
- Intriguing the child
- Imitating the child
- Suggesting activity/ offering ideas for interaction
- Informing the child
- Referring to previous shared experiences with the child (recalling shared memories)
- Demonstrating awareness of the child's perspective
- Enabling the child to be effective upon the adult, e.g., the child amuses the adult
- Responding to all expressiveness of the child (vocal, verbal, motor, gestural)
- Being aware of the child's ideas and feelings and responding appropriately

Ending the Play Session

- You might use a silent timer, visual support or verbal warning to indicate that the session is coming to an end
- For some children knowing what is next may be helpful
- At the end of the session encourage the child to help to pack the boxes up
- Tell the child that you will return to play again next week
- For some children it might help to prepare the child that some toys will be the same and some will be different
- Fill in your Record Sheet as soon as possible after your session
- Select your toys for the next session

Resources

Playboxes Practitioner Checklist

This tool may help you to reflect on your play sessions to date and to plan for future sessions.

Before the session

Have you:

- Found out what the child likes?
- Decorated the two boxes with things that might interest the child?
- Put a photograph of you on the lid of one box and a photograph of the child on the lid of the other?
- Found a quiet, uncluttered space in which to play?
- Put a representational other (teddy, soft toy, puppet or doll) in each box?
- Put a cloth in each box?
- Put some matching toys in the boxes (e.g., bubbles)?
- Put some complementary toys in the boxes (e.g., skittles and ball, train and track)?
- Put some 'expressive attentive' toys in the boxes (see toy list)?
- Put some 'goal directed' toys in the boxes (see toy list)?
- Put some 'imaginative' toys in the boxes (see toy list)?
- Used the Playboxes symbol on the child's visual timetable, where appropriate?

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Playboxes Practitioner Checklist

During the session

Have you:

- Waited to see if the child will open the box?
- Prompted the child to open the box?
- Modeled opening the box?
- Tried to interest the child in the toys?
- Copied what the child is doing within the play?
- Tried to amuse the child?
- Tried to surprise the child, in ways that might be desirable to them?
- Modeled some play for the child?
- Made suggestions within the play?
- Encouraged the child to make suggestions?
- Accepted the child's suggestions?
- Developed the child's ideas?
- Suggested searching in the box for something?
- Reminded the child of things that happened in previous play sessions?

At the end of the session

Have you:

- Given a verbal warning or used a visual support or silent timer to indicate the end of the session?
- Encouraged the child to be involved in packing away the toys and putting the lids back on the boxes? (This is optional and should not be insisted upon.)

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Playboxes Practitioner Checklist

Between sessions

Have you:

- Completed a Playboxes Record Sheet for the session?
- Kept some successful toys in the boxes?
- Removed some unsuccessful toys (e.g., toys the child showed no interest in or discarded)?
- Taken out toys that were problematic (e.g., could be used in unsafe ways or distressed the child)?
- Considered what toys to add in to extend the existing play?
- Checked that you still have some toys from each of the three categories?
- Discussed the session and shared your observations with parents/carers and the team around the child?

Resources

Suggested Toys by Play Stage

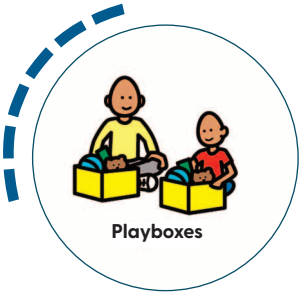
Every box should contain:

- a 'representational other' (e.g., puppet, teddy, doll or toy animal)
- a cloth
- approximately three items from each category

Expressive Attentive	Goal Directed	Imaginative		
Bubbles	Fishing game	Playdoh	Play cash register	Play school
Party blowers	Hook a duck	Building blocks	Shopping basket	Doll's house
Spinning tops	Skittles Springy	Bricks	Purses	Fire engine/ station
Shakers	Spider	Little people/ figures	Play money	Play hospital
Wind-up toys	Marble run		Play groceries	Police station
Squeezy toys	Duplo			Playpark
Light up toys	Lego			
Noise making toys	Lotto	Farm	Baby	Play food
Textured toys	Connect 4	Farm animals	Clothes	Plates, cups, cutlery
Click Clack	Buckaroo	Zoo	Bath	Pots and pans
Track Rainsticks	Hungry Hippos	Zoo animals	Bottle	Kitchen toys (e.g., toaster, kettle)
Percussion instruments	Shape sorter	Dinosaurs	Nappy	Picnic/ party food
Jack in the box	Velcro dart board	Pets		
Pop up toys	Dominoes	Dressing up clothes	Cars and garage	Items related to current interests (e.g., spring, minibeasts)
Tumbling toys	Stacking toys	Hats	Bus	
'Cause and effect' toys	Jigsaws	Glasses	Trains	
	Board games	Telephones Tool kit	Pirate ship	
	Jenga	Doctor's kit	Spaceship	
	Cars		Airplane	
	Train set		Helicopter	

Resources

Playboxes Record Sheet



Date .....

Length of session ..... **Session number** .....

Child's name .....

Adult's name .....

Toys in box		
1	4	7
2	5	8
3	6	9

Types of joint play engaged in	Example of play
Expressive attentive	
Goal directed	
Imaginative	
Imaginative with representational other	

Comments
Key observations (e.g., engagement, enjoyment, communication, attention, concentration, imitation)
Considerations for next session

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Resources

Reflective Questions for Implementation

The following questions are designed to support staff working in and with schools to provide neuro-affirming play opportunities for children and young people.

- Do I know the developmental and communication levels of the child and what I might need to do to find out?
- Am I tailoring my selection of Playboxes toys to match with these?
- Do I know about key things in their life at home or school that might affect their regulation when they are playing?
- With regard to neurodivergent children and young people, am I thinking about differences rather than having a deficit focused outlook?
- Am I helping the child to be their authentic self?
- How can we use what we learn from Playboxes in other parts of the child's week at home or school?
- Do I know how and where to seek further advice and support to guide my Playboxes practice?
- What reading/ other professional learning can I do to further inform me about the needs of autistic learners?

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Resources

Frequently Asked Questions

When delivering the Playboxes method, it is anticipated that practitioners will think of questions not answered within the Professional Learning. The following 'frequently asked' questions and answers are included to address many of these. Any outstanding questions can be sent to autisminfo@ea.edin.sch.uk

What kind of boxes should I use?

Boxes should be equal in size and large enough to hold a range of up to ten toys. Screws, fixings or loose parts should be avoided. Each box should have a lid which lifts completely off.

Do you decorate the box with the child?

No, part of the excitement is the reveal of the interesting boxes which will hopefully encourage the child to want to look inside.

How should the adult box be decorated?

The adult box can be decorated with the adult's interests, e.g. cakes, beaches, bicycles, or in a neutral way, e.g., colours, numbers, children's characters. Both can work well if you plan to use the box in play with more than one partner. Alternatively, it can reflect the child's interests in a similar way to their own box.

Do you put some of the child's favourite toys in e.g., a favourite toy bus?

Ideally the toys in the boxes should be 'novel' and not available in the general play area while the sessions are in progress. It is likely that children have established ways of playing with familiar toys. Unfamiliar toys provide greater opportunity for exploration, new play experiences and, perhaps, potential for joint play.

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Frequently Asked Questions

Should the adult lead the play or should the child?

Playboxes enables both the child and the adult to take the lead in starting or suggesting activities, with each following the other.

Within the three types of play, and using the matched resources, the adult can: join the child in play, imitate, model, invite and offer comparisons, instigate turn-taking, refer back to shared experiences, offer imaginative scenarios, and give interpersonal effectiveness to the communicative moves and activities of the child, as well as amusing, surprising and intriguing the child. Adults are encouraged to involve the 'representational other' toys as an additional participant in the play activities.

Is it okay for the child to take toys out of the adult's box?

The child can take toys from either box. The adult should not however, take anything from the child's box without the child suggesting or consenting to this. Instead, the adult should try to provoke the child to search in their box, for example by saying, "I've got bubbles. Have you got bubbles too?" or "What can you see in your box?"

When do you change the toys and how do you decide what to put in?

It is important to keep some the same and to leave toys in for a couple of weeks to allow time for the children to get used to them. The changing of toys is helpful to develop play and this will come from the child's interests e.g. if they are enjoying food play you can add 'cooking' toys, if they are enjoying games e.g., skittles you could introduce other games eg 'hook a duck'.

What should I do if the child takes the toys into a corner and turns their back on me?

Again, this is okay. The child can choose to play on their own or with the adult partner. The adult might want to copy what the child is doing and to 'tune in' to their enjoyment. Showing the child that you value their way of playing is key to building trust.

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Frequently Asked Questions

What should you do if the child takes both parts of a complementary play toy, e.g., ball and skittles?

Some children will feel more comfortable playing alongside the adult or on their own. Both are okay. There is no wrong way to play.

The adult might want to use their own matching toy to copy what the child is doing or to engage in parallel play that might, in time, be interesting or amusing to the child.

How the toys are distributed can affect how they are played with, for example, placing all of the skittles in one box and the balls in the other is more likely to lead to joint goal directed play than placing a half of the skittles and a ball in each box.

If a child is really enjoying Playboxes, should you do it more than once a week?

A key element of the Playboxes approach is that the time spent playing feels 'special' as it only happens once a week. This allows the child to experience anticipation and it allows the adult to be really playful in a way that might be more difficult if it was happening more frequently.

The time in between sessions allows the adult to reflect on what has been enjoyable for the child and what less so, and to plan any changes to the box contents to support future play exploration.

How long should you keep trying if the child is not showing interest?

Playboxes sessions can be short or long; there is no set time frame. Some children may take a few weeks to manage the transition to a new place, person and activity and it is important to go at a pace that is right for the individual. There are many examples of play which really 'took off' after about four weeks so don't give up too quickly!

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Frequently Asked Questions

If a child has engaged in Playboxes already, is it okay to do it again?

Some children and their adult play partner continue play sessions well beyond the suggested ten weeks. This is okay.

Before beginning a new set of Playboxes sessions, with a different trained adult play partner, it is important to change the boxes and toys. The child is likely to have particular memories and expectations associated with the previous sessions and it would not be possible for a new adult to meet these in a predictable way.

If a child is already involved in imaginative play, should you still put toys in that are expressive-attentive and goal-directed?

The boxes should always contain some toys from each of the three play stages, with the balance changing as the play moves across the stages, e.g., more expressive attentive toys and fewer imaginative when the child's play is at an earlier stage. Expressive attentive play, such as party blowers and bubbles, can be fun at any age or stage!

How often should you change the toys in the boxes?

There is no fixed rule as to how many toys should change and when. The adult might wish to add in a toy to offer an extension to a particular play routine or to remove something that the child did not like or which has not been played with for two or more weeks. Sometimes it will be appropriate to swap a few toys at once, e.g., to move on from food play and introduce farm animals or a small world play park.

To support predictability, it can be helpful to let the child know that you will play again next week; some toys will be the same and some will be different. The 'representational other' is likely to be developing a role within the play and is often consistent across all sessions.

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Frequently Asked Questions

Should the Playboxes person be someone who works with the child every day?

Any member of the team around the child can be a Playboxes play partner, providing they remember to leave their role at the door!

Is it okay for someone else to join the Playboxes session?

Playboxes provides an opportunity for uninterrupted joint attention between the adult and child. Others being in the room or joining the play makes this less likely to happen.

What should I do if the child seems dysregulated or distressed during the session?

Play should be joyful and Playboxes sessions fun. If the child is not having fun, the session should be brought to an end in a sensitive manner.

Resources

Additional Reading and Resource List

Publications:

- Prizant, B. M., & Fields-Meyer, T. (2022). Uniquely human: Updated and expanded: A different way of seeing autism. Simon and Schuster.
- Wood, R. (2019). Inclusive education for autistic children: Helping children and young people to learn and flourish in the classroom. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Websites:

- Autism Toolbox: www.autismtoolbox.org
- National Autism Implementation Team: www.thirdspace.scot/NAIT
- Autism Level Up! www.autismlevelup.com
- Education Scotland Online Modules. Inclusion in Practice: The CIRCLE Framework https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/inclusion-in-practice
- CIRCLE: www.thirdspace.scot/CIRCLE
- SCERTS: www.scerts.com

Film clips:

- National Autistic Society 'Too Much Information' clips: https://youtu.be/WIxXbONMqNc https://youtu.be/aPknwW8mPAM
- TED Talk Amy Laurent 'Compliance is not the goal: Letting go of control and rethinking support for autistic individuals' : https://youtu.be/fx3cfzlCG_Q

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Resources

Legislative and Policy Context

Scottish Legislation:

- Equality Act 2010:
  https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance
- The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 :
  https://education.gov.scot/resources/education-additional-support-for-learning-scotland-act-2004

Scottish Policy:

- Curriculum for Excellence (2007):
  https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/
- Getting it Right for Every Child:
  https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec
- Early Years Framework (2008):
  :zhttps://www.gov.scot/publications/early-years-framework/
- Play Strategy for Scotland (2013):
  https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2013/10/play-strategy-scotland-action-plan/documents/00437132-pdf/00437132-pdf/govscot%3Adocument
- Realising the Ambition: Being Me (2020):
  https://education.gov.scot/media/3bjpr3wa/realisingtheambition.pdf
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):
  https://www.cypcs.org.uk/rights/uncrc/full-uncrc/

Supported by:

- How Good is Our School 4:
  https://education.gov.scot/media/2swjmnbs/frwk2_hgios4.pdf
- How good is our early learning and childcare (2016):
  https://education.gov.scot/media/qryie4yx/hgioelc020316revised.pdf
- General Teaching Council for Scotland, Professional Standards 2021:
  https://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/professional-standards.aspx

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Resources

References

- Marwick, H., Jarvie, K., Cowie, H., Johnston, L., Hammond-Evans, N., & Cockayne, R. (2022). Developing Pretend Play in Autistic Children Using the Playboxes Joint Play Approach as Part of Ongoing Practice. Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 52(7), 3050–3060. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05156-9
- Realising the Ambition: Being Me https://education.gov.scot/media/3bjpr3wa/realisingtheambition.pdf
- Review of Additional Support for Learning Implementation, Crown Copyright, 2020 https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation//
- Equality Act, 2010 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance

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Precious, unforgettable, humbling memories of going to collect children for Playboxes sessions; whatever the setting, be it community health centre, nursery, Child and Family Centre, mainstream school or special school, as soon as the child saw me, they would stand up and rush to meet me at the door: this was the Power of Playboxes!

Hilary Cowie, Speech and Language Therapist

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