

Playful Pathways to School Readiness



AutismONTARIO

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Introduction

Getting ready for school or working on school-readiness skills can feel overwhelming and stressful. There are different areas of development and skills that increase your child's likelihood of success at school. This workbook outlines play-based activities to support these skills at home.

As you consider the activities in each section, think about whether this skill area is:

- Important to your family right now.
- An area where your child is currently successful, and you want to build on this progress.
- Something that might be fun to work on together.



Before You Get Started

- Within each chapter, there are options to support your child with what they can do right now. You can use the information to decide at which **stage** and **step** you want to start with.
- It is important to remember that each child is different, with different support needs and different strategies needed to learn a new skill.
- The activities will often ask you to choose a book or toy your child likes. You know your child best so choose something that is easily accessible in your home that you think will most suit your child's interests.
- Throughout this workbook, you may notice terms that are unfamiliar to you. We have included a glossary at the back if there is something you don't understand and to help you find more information if needed.

Chapter Information

As you work through the activities, you will notice consistent titles and sections used:

- Why are we suggesting this activity?
- What will you need?
- Other helpful resources
- Activity breakdown
 - Each activity has a '**Steps for Everybody**' section where you will start.
 - Then the '**Steps by Stage**' asks: where are your child's current skills for this area? This section includes a chart to help you figure out what your child can do in the skill area. You will use the chart to find out what **stage** your child is at and that will guide you to what activity **steps** you should take.

★ **Stage 1 - Beginning Skills:** Use the steps in this stage if your child is just starting out and this is a brand new skill area.

♥ **Stage 2 - Emerging Skills:** This stage is for children who have worked on this skill before, and their skills are starting to grow.

◆ **Stage 3 - Established Skills:** Children in this stage have already learned this skill and just need some more practice. Stage 3 can also be used if you're looking for ways to expand on this skill with your child.

Recording Progress and Celebrating Success

Recording progress is an important part of skill development and so each activity has a section where you can keep track of what is or is not working.



[You can record information on how the activity is going using this Data Collection Form](#) 





Tip: It is important to celebrate successes no matter how small! These activities may be brand new for your child so you can celebrate them engaging, participating, or even just becoming aware of the activity.

Tips for Reinforcing Your Child's Learning

You may consider using an item or praise (i.e., reinforcement) to motivate your child to work on their skills. When using reinforcement, you want to give the reinforcer right after your child tries something new so that they can make the connection between what they did and getting something they wanted. Reinforcers can be many different types depending on what works best for your child:⁴



Tangible rewards (items): Favourite items or foods, or physical engagement such as tickles, hugs, or high-fives.



Praise: Verbal phrases such as “great playing”, “you’re a superstar”, or more specific to the task, “I like how you brushed your doll’s hair” or “I like how you’re parking your cars”.



Preferred activity: If your child prefers to do something different with their toys, you can have them spend time after working on the skill doing what they enjoy. For example, they might want to line their toys up, or spin them, or spend time stimming.



Fun with Language and Listening

Activity: Storytime

Why are we suggesting this activity?

Autistic children may have difficulties paying attention to their parents and a story, while they are reading a book together.¹ As a parent, you can have an impact on your child's engagement with stories just by being aware of **how** you read the story.²

When parents read with their child, they are providing an opportunity to help their child develop their language skills. Children are exposed to vocabulary and grammar, develop their listening skills, and are given opportunities to practice using their expressive language skills. Children also benefit from a meaningful connection with their caregivers while sharing books.

What will you need?

- Children's picture books that match your child's interests



Tip: There are places within your community that you can access free children's books, including your local library, EarlyON centre, or your child's school library.



Activity Breakdown

Steps for Everybody

1. **Choose a book that your child will like.** If your child has a special interest, such as dinosaurs, cars and trucks or animals, that may be a good place to start. Other options include books that are visually stimulating or interactive books such as tactile books, lift-the-flaps books, or books with songs.
2. **Establish a reading routine** by choosing a time each day that you will read the book with your child. This daily reading routine will help your child know what to expect.
3. **Provide an instruction** that lets your child know what's happening. Examples include, "time for books", "let's read", or "story time".
4. **Encourage your child to join** you by sitting down in a comfortable place with the book.

What can your child do right now?



**Your child does not
like to read books.**



STAGE 1



**Your child can sit for a
few minutes and look
at a book.**



STAGE 2



**Your child can sit and
listen when you read
them a book.**



STAGE 3



Stage 1: Your child does not like to read books.

5. While your child is looking at you, you can try the following strategies:

- **Let your child lead** by having them hold the book and/or allow them to explore the book in their own way.

- **Use simple words** instead of reading the words on the pages. You can also try using silly words, songs, or sounds to get your child's attention!

For example, for some children, it might be helpful to pick a book that is also a song, such as "Wheels on the Bus". Then, you can sing the words as you turn the pages.

- **Point to and label the pictures.** You can use the pictures in the book to mimic the actions. For example, if there is a picture of a child going down a slide you can trace your finger down the slide as you say, "Weeeee".

- **Model the actions of the characters.**

For example, if a character is eating, you can pretend to eat with a pretend spoon and make slurping sounds.

- **Wait for your child's reaction.** This could be a look, a smile, a sound, or a word depending on their communication skills.



6. Be consistent with how long you expect your child to pay attention to the book. It might be only a few seconds to start, and that's ok! Starting with a short amount of time helps your child learn the routine and expectations. Try to slowly increase the time they engage and aim to have their attention for at least a couple of minutes before moving on to the next stage.



Stage 2: Your child can sit for a few minutes and look at a book.

5. While your child is engaging with you, you can try the following strategies:

- **Read the text** on the pages in the book. Simplify or shorten sentences if that helps with your child's attention.
- **Follow your child's lead.** Don't worry if they want to skip pages or focus on certain pages for a longer amount of time.
- **Practice taking turns** by each turning a page or lifting the flap (if you're using that type of book).
- **Be animated** and use varied tones, voices, or sounds.
- **Label and repeat words**, especially those that your child is interested in.

For example, if your child points to the truck, you could say, "That's a red truck" — or, if your child's communication skills are expanding, you can be specific with, "That's a fire engine."

- **Ask questions** about the pictures.

For example, if there is a picture of a boy holding a ball, you could ask, "What is the boy holding?" Wait for a response — and if your child does not respond, you can repeat the question and provide the answer, "What is the boy holding? He's holding a ball."

6. Start to introduce new books into your routine.





Stage 3: Your child can sit and listen when you read them a book.

5. While your child is engaging with you, you can try the following strategies:

- **Talk about the title of the book** and ask your child what they think the story may be about.
- **Read the text** on the pages in the book.
- **Allow your child to look at the pictures.** Give them time to look at the pictures and wait until they speak.
- **Show interest in what they are looking at.** Talk about the pictures and describe the characters using describing and action words.

For example, “I see that the girl in a blue t-shirt is riding her bike.”

- **Ask questions about the pictures and the text.**

For example, “What do you see on this page?” or, “Do you think the girl riding the bike is going slow or fast?”

- **Talk about the words** that were used to build their vocabulary. If it is a word they may not know, explain the word by giving a similar word they may know.

For example, “The word humungous means really big.”

6. Read different books that are a combination of books that your child already enjoys, new ones that they don’t know about yet, and some that may be less interesting to them.



[You can record information on how the activity is going using this Data Collection Form](#) 

Other Helpful Resources

For book ideas, you can access the Autism Ontario [Children’s Book Gift Guide](#)

Playing Together

Activity: Promoting Play Routines

Why are we suggesting this activity?

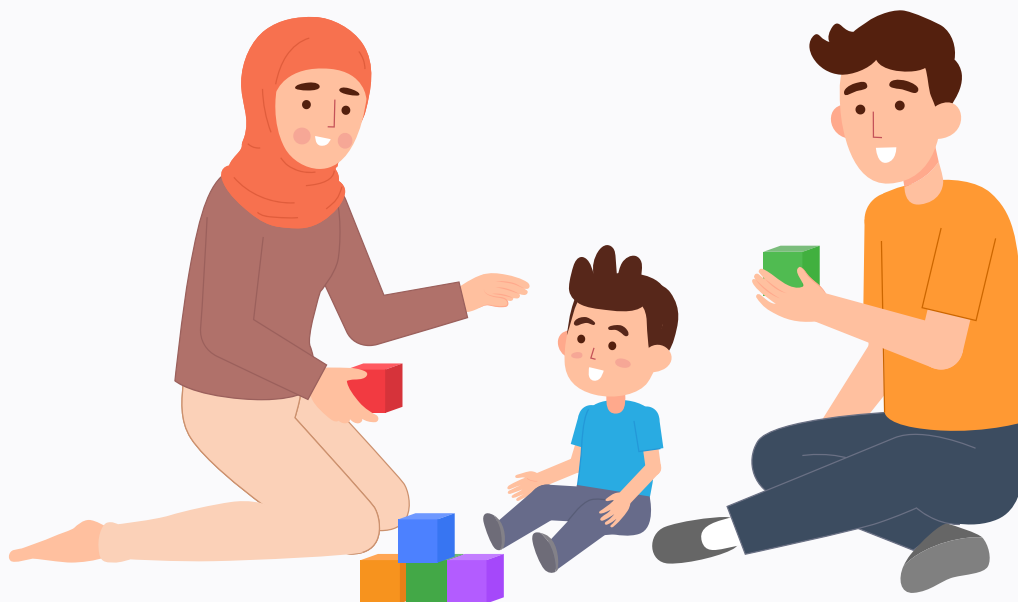
Autistic children often struggle with functional and pretend play. Functional play is play using toys and/or objects in the way they were intended to be played with.³ For example, your child may love to line up cars; however, functional play would mean they are driving the cars, parking the cars, or making 'vroom' sounds as they push them around. Playing with cars is one type of play routine, but there are many more. Your child may be more interested in kitchen play, playing with dolls, or a farm. Play is a skill that will help with making friends and learning social-communication skills.⁴

What will you need?

- Toys or items you think your child **might** be interested in playing with. These can be toys or household items they have shown an interest in or ones you can easily access in your home.



Tip: There may be places within your community where you can access toys that may interest your child. You can visit your local EarlyON centre or library, or ask at your child's school.



Activity Breakdown

Steps for Everybody

1. Choose 1-2 toys or items in your home that you think your child might be interested in playing with.

What can your child do right now?

Your child does not use toys in a functional way.

For example, they will only hold a hairbrush to feel the bristles.

★ **STAGE 1**

Your child understands one action with one toy.

For example, they understand to take a hairbrush and brush a doll's hair.

♥ **STAGE 2**

Your child can play with 1-2 toys in the same play routine, using the toys in different ways.

For example, when a doll, cat, and a brush are given, your child knows to brush the doll's hair, then brushes the cat's fur.

◆ **STAGE 3**



Stage 1: Your child does not use toys in a functional way.

2. Introduce a toy and model one action with it. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Model, or show, an action** that you would do with the toy.

For example, if you picked a doll and a brush, you could show your child how you brush the doll's hair.

- **Use gentle physical help to guide their hands** through the action. Some children respond well to physical help while others don't. You know your child best!

For example, you may put your hand over theirs and help them brush the doll's hair.

- **Provide verbal prompts/instructions to your child** to encourage them to do the action.

For example, you could hand them the items (doll and hairbrush) and say, "Brush the doll's hair."

- **Talk to your child** and describe what you're doing.

For example, "This dolly has knots in her hair. I am going to brush it! Brush, brush, brush. Wow dolly, you look so pretty."

3. Repeat this play routine everyday with your child, giving them time to try an action before you jump in, until you start to notice a change in how they play with the toy.





Stage 2: Your child understands one action with one toy.

2. Add to the play routine that your child is already familiar with. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Bring in a second toy** that fits the play routine they are already familiar with.

For example, if your child is already familiar with one car and can do one action with it (e.g., push it around making a sound), add a second car and wait to see what your child does with the second toy.

- **Model a different action** with the second toy in a play routine.

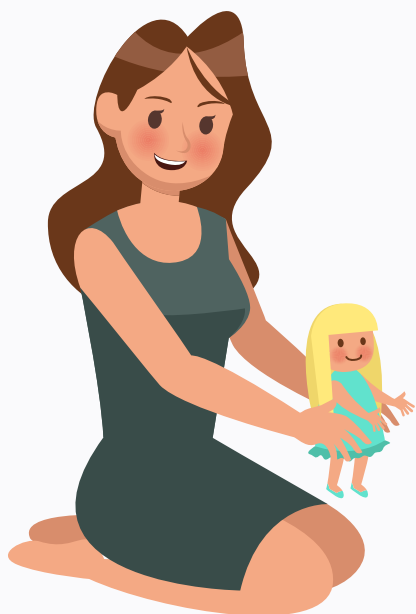
For example, you might race the two cars around.

- **Provide verbal prompts and gestures to your child** encouraging them to imitate or show the actions.

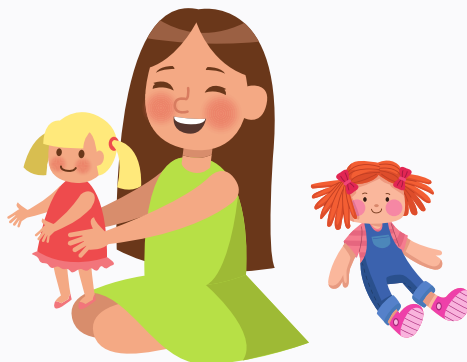
For example, you could hand them the two cars and say, “Race”.

- **Talk to your child** and describe what you’re doing.

For example, “These cars are going to race. Here we go. The blue car is winning. Oh, no! Now the red car is pulling in front,” as you push the two cars around on the floor.



3. Repeat this play routine everyday with your child, giving them time to try an action before you jump in, until you start to notice a change in how they play with the toy.





Stage 3: Your child can play with 1-2 toys in the same play routine, using the toys in different ways.

2. Continue to build on the actions and toys in your chosen play routine. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Add in other characters/toys** that fit the theme.

For example, add in other farm animals if you had chosen a cow and a barn.

- **Add in other actions** that the toys might do.

For example, have the farm animals get into a truck or have them eat hay.

- **Provide verbal prompts and gestures to your child**, encouraging them to imitate or show the actions.

For example, you could hand them the animals and say, “Load them in the truck.”

- **Talk to your child** and describe what you’re doing.

For example, “These animals are hungry. I am going to load them into the truck and take them to find some hay.”

3. Continue to use the steps in Stage 3 to add new actions and objects to the play routine.



[You can record information on how the activity is going using this Data Collection Form](#) 

Other Helpful Resources

Here are some toys that might work well for this activity:

- Dinosaurs or animal figurines
- Dolls (optional accessories such as brushes, stroller, bottle)
- Doctor or veterinarian kits
- Cars (optional garage)
- Blocks
- Trains



Motor Skill Builders

Activity: Stick It

Why are we suggesting this activity?

Fine motor skills are required for many different types of activities and skills, such as picking up, holding, and grasping items, activities of daily living (dressing, eating, etc.), printing, and colouring. To do all of these things, children need to be able to move and manipulate their fingers.⁵ It is important that autistic children participate in activities that build their fine motor skills because the research shows they may be delayed in developing these skills.⁶ This fun activity uses stickers to work on these skills, and together, you can create something beautiful.

What will you need?

- Stickers that match your child's interests
- Paper
- Glue stick (optional)



Tip: If you don't have stickers at home, you can make your own using a glue stick and small pictures, cut-outs from magazines, leaves from outside, or paper scraps.



Activity Breakdown

Steps for Everybody

1. **Set up a workspace** (table, floor area, desk) with stickers and paper for your child to choose from.
2. **Have your child choose their paper and stickers:**
 - Let them choose verbally, by pointing, or visually (staring or looking more intently at one option).
 - If it is difficult to get their attention, you can hold up two choices and say, "Pick one".
3. **Provide an instruction** that lets your child know what's happening.
For example, you can say, "It's sticker time," or, "Let's look at all these stickers."

What can your child do right now?



Your child has never used stickers before.

★ **STAGE 1**



Your child needs help to peel stickers off but they can stick them onto paper independently.

♥ **STAGE 2**



Your child can peel and stick stickers onto paper independently.

♦ **STAGE 3**



Stage 1: Your child has never used stickers before.

4. Introduce stickers to your child. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Model or show them what to do.** Peel the stickers off and stick them to the paper.
- **Talk about the steps** as you do them.

For example, as you are peeling the stickers off, say, “First we peel the stickers off” and then, as you are sticking them to the paper, say, “Then, we stick them on!”

- **Provide short instructions** to guide them through the steps.
- **Use gentle physical help to guide your child’s hand** or take the sticker off the sheet for them and hand it to them to stick. You know your child best — and what they need to be successful!

5. Continue until your child is no longer interested in the activity. It’s OK if this is only one sticker to start with! This is all new, and it will take time for your child to become comfortable with this activity.



Stage 2: Your child needs help to peel off the stickers but they can stick them onto paper independently.

4. Encourage your child's independence with stickers. Here are some ideas to try:

- Give verbal prompts to your child.

For example, "Peel off the sticker" or, "Stick it to the paper."



Tip: Always wait after you give a prompt to see what your child understands and can do.

- Offer physical help if needed. You can start peeling the edges of the stickers for them or peel off the whole sticker and give it to them.
- Offer another sticker once they have put the sticker onto the paper.

For example, "Do you want another one?" Watch for them to respond either verbally or through their behaviour/gestures and then ask, "Which one do you want?"

5. Continue until your child is no longer interested in the activity. The idea is to increase the amount of time your child spends playing with stickers and completing the task. This is a skill which may take a while to develop, so celebrate success in any form!



Stage 3: Your child can peel and stick stickers onto paper independently.

4. Encourage your child's creativity with stickers. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Participate in the activity** with your child and make it fun.
- **Ask questions** about the stickers.

For example, "Why did you pick this one?", "Can we put these two stickers side-by-side?", and, "My favourite is this sticker. Which is your favourite?"

- **Tell a story** with your stickers.
- **Invite siblings, friends, or peers to join** in creating a picture together.

5. Continue until your child is no longer interested in the activity. The idea is to continue to build on the complexity of the activity and the amount of time they spend on it.



[You can record information on how the activity is going using this Data Collection Form](#) 

Other Helpful Resources

For other fine motor activities you can do at home, you can access the Autism Ontario [Activity Book series](#).

Motor Skill Builders

Activity: Toy Toss

Why are we suggesting this activity?

Toy toss is a fun, social, and active activity that your whole family can participate in to improve gross motor skills. Autistic children and youth often struggle with coordinating their bodies into movements such as running, jumping, or throwing.⁵

What will you need?

- Any small items that you feel comfortable with your child throwing. Examples include bean bags, soft toys, balls, pinecones, or scrunched-up pieces of paper
- A bin, basket, or box to throw things into



Tip: It's OK if you don't have specific toys for this activity. Be creative and use what you have around your home.



Activity Breakdown

Steps for Everybody

1. **Set up a space** with the items you are ready for your child to throw (e.g., toys, balls, pinecones) and the basket or bin you are going to use.
2. **Let your child choose the item that they want to throw:**
 - Let them choose verbally, by pointing, or visually (staring or looking more intently at one option).
 - If it is difficult to get their attention, you can hold up two choices and say, “Pick one”.
3. **Provide an instruction** that lets your child know what’s happening.
For example, you can say, “It’s time to play toy toss” or, “Let’s throw together!”

What can your child do right now?

Throwing into a basket is a brand-new game for your child.

★ **STAGE 1**

Your child can throw an item into a basket; however, they are not interested in it as a game.

♥ **STAGE 2**

Your child understands that toy toss is a game and will play it with you. They may still require some help though.

♦ **STAGE 3**



Stage 1: Throwing into a basket is a brand-new game for your child.

4. Introduce toy toss to your child. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Model the activity.**

For example, you can hold the toy and say, “It’s time to throw it in the basket,” and then throw it. If you get it in the basket, you can say, “Yay, I got it in!” — and if you didn’t get it in, you can say, “Oh, no! I need to try again.”

- **Offer help.** This could be using your hands to guide your child’s hands through the activity.



Tip: All children are different. You can try different methods to assist them and see what works best for your child.

- **Let them try.**

For example, you can let them attempt to toss the item into the container and respond to let them know how they are doing by saying, “Yay! Nice try” or, “Let’s try again.”

5. Continue until your child is no longer interested in the activity.

Don’t worry if they don’t want to participate on your first attempt. This is meant to be a fun activity — and you can try again on a different day!





Stage 2: Your child can throw an item into a basket; however, they are not interested in it as a game.

4. Encourage your child's participation in toy toss. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Wait for your child** to throw the item into the basket. If your child throws the item right away, you can respond by saying, “Yay! Nice try” or, “Next time.”
- **Use verbal prompts and gestures** to encourage your child to toss the item.
For example, you can tell your child to pick up the item while pointing to it. When they pick it up, you can then say, “Throw it into the basket” while pointing to where it should land.
- **Take turns.** You can say, “It’s my turn” and pick up an item and throw it towards the basket.

5. Continue until your child is no longer interested in the activity.

Option: You can set a timer for 1-2 minutes and play toy toss. As your child becomes more interested in this activity, you can extend the time. Some children benefit from a timer that outlines how long they need to participate in an activity.





Stage 3: Your child understands that toy toss is a game and will play it with you. They may still require some help, though.

4. Encourage your child's independence in playing toy toss. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Slowly reduce the number of verbal prompts and gestures** you need to use to keep your child interested in the game.
- **Add onto the game** and increase complexity by:
 - Making it a race; the winner is whoever gets all their items into the basket first.
 - Including siblings, cousins, or friends and continue with turn taking.
 - Add a point system and work on tolerating losing and congratulating the winner(s).

Remember this will be a cooperative game where everyone will take turns. Go slow, and make the game fun!



[You can record information on how the activity is going using this Data Collection Form](#) 

Other Helpful Resources

For other gross motor activities you can do at home, you can access the Autism Ontario [Activity Book series](#).



Data Collection Form

Instructions:

1. Write the skill area and activity you are working on.
2. Each day:
 - Write the date, stage, and step that you are working on.
 - After the activity, circle the number from the scale that matches how well the activity went.

Beginning	Emerging	Established
1	2	3
4	5	

Likert scales use numbers to show how your child is doing:

- A score of 1 means your child is just starting and the activity is new to them.
- A score of 3 means your child is getting better at the activity and you can see they are improving.
- A score of 5 means your child has learned the skill and is doing well.

Skill Area					
Activity					
Date	Stage	Step	How did it go?		
			Beginning	Emerging	Established
			1	2	3
			4	5	
			1	2	3
			4	5	
			1	2	3
			4	5	
			1	2	3
			4	5	
Comments					

Glossary

As you work through the activities in this workbook, you will notice some common terms used. These strategies are evidence-based, which means the research tells us they are helpful and effective for teaching autistic children and youth new skills if used correctly.

Prompts: Help that a parent or caregiver can give to their child to support them with the skill they are learning. The prompt chosen should be accepted by the child and allow them to demonstrate the skill/step/action correctly. If the child was unsuccessful in showing the skill even with the prompt provided, you should try a different prompt the next time.

Some types of prompts include:

- Physical prompt: physical guidance, including full hand-over-hand assistance
- Gestural prompt: pointing or indicating
- Model prompt: demonstration of the expected skill, either by the parent or caregiver, or by using a video
- Visual prompt: objects, pictures, or written materials (e.g., visual picture schedule)
- Verbal prompt: short, spoken instruction

Prompts are “help” or “assistance” to make the individual successful. Once your child can demonstrate most of the task or skill, it is important to use fewer prompts to help them build independence.^{7,8}

Since the goal is independence, it is recommended to use prompts which may be easier to fade such as physical guidance or gestures such as pointing. Verbal instructions are often more difficult to eliminate.



Task analysis: Some of the activities in this workbook can include several steps. Sometimes the activity or goal can feel overwhelming to teach all at once, so we have broken them down into smaller, more manageable steps that can be taught individually. This is called a ‘task analysis’ and it can be found under the title ‘Activity Breakdown’. [7.8](#)

Chaining: After your child learns one step of an activity, they can start to “chain” by learning the next step. This way they can do both steps 1 and 2 successfully. Once they have learned all the steps, they can “chain” all the steps together and do the whole activity from beginning to end. [9](#)

Reinforcer: A reinforcer is something that will increase the behaviour or skill that you are teaching; it rewards the new behaviour or skill. Some children do well when they are given something after a step or task is completed. These can be favourite toys, stickers, or verbal phrases (e.g., good job!). [10](#)

It is important to remember that, over time, we want to fade out the use of additional reinforcers. For example, if you are giving a sticker every time your child sits on your lap when it's story time, you want to gradually increase the expectation so that eventually they sit and listen to an entire story to get a sticker, and that ultimately no sticker is needed as the activity itself becomes enjoyable and rewarding.

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