

Toys for Children with Disabilities

Definitions

Play is vital for all children's growth and development. Children discover the world around them through seeing, touching, tasting, hearing, and exploring toys and other objects. Children master language and learn how to communicate with other people through play. Physical play activities help children grow stronger and develop better coordination. When children play with and control toys, they discover how one action effects another. Feeling more self-confident is a natural result.

Think about the child's preferences when choosing the most suitable toys. Traits of toys that can enhance learning and enjoyment include:

Learning

Age-appropriate: Would a peer of the same age enjoy the toy?

Correct ability level: Is the toy closely matched to the child's present abilities?

Growth enhancing: Will the toy promote physical, mental, verbal or social skills?

Child-controlled: Can the child operate the toy without help?

Reinforcing: Does the toy interest, motivate, or excite the child?

Interactive: Does the toy move, make a sound, or otherwise respond?

Durable: Is the toy sturdy? Will it last with repeated use?

Safe: Does the toy have sharp edges, small parts, wires, cords, strings, or elastics that can get tangled around the child? Toys made with toxic or flammable materials should not be purchased. Don't let children play with batteries. Repair or discard toys that are broken. Close supervision is still the best method to protect children from injury.

Disabilities

Visual

Children with visual impairments enjoy toys that make sounds, vibrate, have texture or scent, or are marked tactually (through touch). Toys may be marked tactually with glue, plastic paste, tape (colored tape can provide contrast), Velcro dots, or adhesive Braille labels. Toys that emit light are a good choice. Toys constructed with shiny materials or bright contrasting colors are another option for children with partial vision. Provide children with toys made from a variety of materials such as stuffed animals, wooden blocks, and plastic cars to encourage exploration.

Hearing Loss

For children with hearing loss, toys that have lights, print out messages, or are action packed make good choices. One example for young children is an activity center full of color and motion, such as a bright plate that turns on a light when touched, a bead chain curtain, an unbreakable mirror, a push button that controls a small fan, and a big push button that animates a stuffed animal. Examples of action toys for older children include remote control cars and trucks. Toys with intricate parts and designs are better choices for older children. Toys that foster thinking such as puzzles and shape sorters should also be considered.

Motor Disabilities

Children with motor impairments often have trouble moving their hands, arms, or legs. Toys can be kept within reach by placing them on a tray, cookie sheet, or box lid. Another method is to make a border around toys with pillows. Non-skid materials such as Dycem, Scoot Guard, light weight carpet padding, or rubber pads can be attached to the bottom of the toy or placed underneath the toy. Toys can also be stabilized by adding suction cups, magnets, or velcro strips. Handles can be added or enlarged with foam curlers, rubber, or plastic coating. Light weight toys that do not require much strength may be easier for children to handle.

For children who cannot control arm movements, use unbreakable toys or attach toys to a secure, flat surface with clamps or other means. If the surface slopes, the toy may move out of reach. Position the toy about 12 to 18 inches away to keep it within easy reach. Hanging or suspending toys is another option. A scooter board may supply the mobility needed to play with toys and explore the environment

Cognitive Disabilities

Children with mental impairments often enjoy toys that require only a few steps to work. Toys that may not need to be adapted include magnetized blocks, large crayons, knobbed puzzles with a small number of pieces, and toys that respond to touch or sound. Children can often play with games if the rules are simplified. Paper game pieces can be laminated. It is usually a good idea to select games that children already understand and objects they are familiar with such as cars, kitchen sets, and baby dolls. Children generally like toys that move and make sounds by activating a switch. Switches that require only one movement to turn on are easier to use than those that require repeated motions.

Language Disabilities

Children with language impairments often find it difficult to enjoy toys and games that require talking. Dramatic play, such as playing "dress-up," can offer children a relaxed way of increasing their language and cognitive skills. A toy cooking center where children can pretend to cook may also promote speech. Another

example is a remote control or switch activated jet with sound. These toys may encourage children to freely vocalize or talk.

Multiple Disabilities and Switches

Multiple Disabilities and Switches For children with more than one impairment or for children who are unable to move, adapted or specialized toys may be the best choice. A variety of mail order catalogs sell toys for children with disabilities (see the list at the end of this resource sheet). Toys may also be custom designed or adapted by professionals such as engineers, teachers, and therapists. These toys often use a battery or are plugged into a socket. The toy is usually operated by a remote switch instead of the switch on the toy. The remote switch turns the toy or game on and off, just like the toy switch. A battery operated toy needs an adaptation to the on-off switch so that a remote switch can be used. This adaptation can be permanent or temporary. Both can be made inexpensively at home. Books and booklets with directions for making temporary and permanent toy adaptations are listed at the end of this resource sheet. These toys are generally more expensive. Also, adapted toys tend to break more easily, so look closely at the warranty.

Cognitive Disabilities

CFinding the best switch for a child to use requires a good evaluation. The evaluation focuses on movements the child can make without assistance. The type of switch selected depends on the child's strength and voluntary movements. A switch may also be chosen to promote desired movement. A switch can be positioned almost anywhere. Care must be taken so that abnormal movements are not increased by using a switch. Don't forget to consider the child's desires when choosing a switch or toy.

Switches come in many shapes and sizes with varying sensitivity and durability. These switches can be activated by a variety of movements including blowing into a straw-like device, tilting the head, or by movements of the chin, foot, hand, or finger. Switches can also operate things like mixers, toasters, and other daily living items, resulting in more independence.

Playing with switch activated and other toys can provide the feeling of "I did it" for children with disabilities. This feeling of success is often quite difficult for children with disabilities to achieve. Recognizing and rewarding children's efforts and successes on a frequent basis also helps foster positive feelings. With a little effort and planning, play can become a happy and rewarding experience.

Web Sites

www.familyvillage.wisc.edu
www.disabilityresources.org

www.eskimo.com/~jlubin/disabled.html
<http://codi.buffalo.edu> (Disability Information and Resources)
www.lsi.ukans.edu/beach/beachhp.htm
www.irsc.org
www.familyeducation.com/home
www.ala.org/parents/index.html
www.afb.org
www.toy-tma.org
www.our-kids.org
www.php.com (Parents helping Parents)

Organizations

National Lekotek Center
2100 Ridge Avenue
Evanston, IL 60201
800-366-PLAY 800-573-4446 (TTY)
www.lekotek.org

National Parent to Parent Support System
P.O. Box 907
Blue Ridge, GA 30513
800-651-1151 (V/TTY)
www.nppsis.org
USA Toy Library Association
1213 Wilmette Ave., Suite 201
Wilmette, Illinois 60091
847-920-9030
www.sjdccd.cc.ca.us/toylibrary

National Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY)
P.O. Box 1492
Washington, DC 20013
800-695-0285 (V/TTY)
www.nichcy.org