

TOYS

*Universal Tools for Learning,
Communication and Inclusion for
Children with Disabilities*

Simon Technology Center
PACER.org/stc





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PLEASE NOTE: These are general recommendations. If your child is having difficulty with any of these toy suggestions, please contact PACER Center.

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Introduction

The toys children use during play are extremely important in their development. Anthropologists have found evidence of toys dating back as far as the first record of human life and among all cultures. Toys can be an entertaining and educational way for children to learn and respond to social situations, and they give children the opportunity to interact with other children.

For children with disabilities, toys are not only a wonderful educational tool, but they can provide a unique opportunity for communication, self expression, and, especially, inclusion.

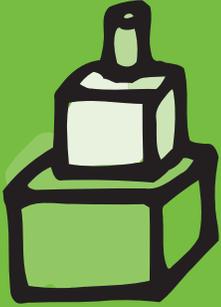
On the surface, children playing with a toy seems simple, but in fact, they are learning a skill each time they play. Playing with toys can set the foundation for reading, writing, mathematical reasoning, social interaction, and creativity. Even though a child with a disability may have some limitations, he or she can still develop skills to use throughout life, including:

- **Physical (gross-motor) skills** such as reaching, crawling, walking, running, climbing, jumping, throwing, catching, and learning balance.
- **Fine-motor skills** such as learning to handle toys with hands and fingers.
- **Mental skills** such as problem solving and learning cause and effect.
- **Language skills** such as interacting with others and using words for favorite playthings and activities.
- **Social skills** such as learning to follow directions, cooperating with others, taking turns, following the rules, and sharing.
- **Self-esteem** such as achieving goals through play. Self-esteem is crucial to an individual's happiness and success.
- **Emotional skills** such as experiencing pleasure, bonding with others, and working through feelings during role play.
- **Creativity and imagination** such as pretending to be a doctor, a teacher a parent, or a fire fighter; learning that life is full of possibilities and opportunities.

Playtime also gives children, especially those with disabilities, the opportunity for success. Children who experience success during playtime want to repeat the experience, and they also want to take on a new or more difficult challenge during their next opportunity to play.



Top Ten Tips On Buying Toys



Professionals at the National Lekotek Center, a national organization that advocates using toys, play and family interaction to teach youngsters with disabilities, recommends the following be considered when selecting toys for children with special needs:

1. **Multi-sensory appeal** – Does the toy respond with lights, sounds or other movement? Does it have bright colors, a scent, or texture?
2. **Method of activation** – Will the toy provide challenge, without excessive frustration, for the child? Will it be fun to use? What force is required to activate the toy?
3. **Places the toy will be used** – Can the child use the toy from a variety of positions, for example, while lying on one's side or on a wheelchair tray?
4. **Opportunities for success** – Can play be flexible and open-ended, with no definite right or wrong way? Is it adapted to the child's individual style, ability or pace?
5. **Current popularity** – Is it a toy most children know and want? Does it tie in with other popular themes from television, movies, or books?
6. **Self-expression** – Does the toy allow for creativity, uniqueness, and decision-making? Will it give the child experience with a variety of different media?
7. **Adjustability** – Does it have adjustable height, sound volume, speed, and level of difficulty?
8. **Child's individual abilities** – Does the toy provide activities that reflect the child's development and chronological age? Does it reflect the child's interest?
9. **Safety and durability** – Is the toy sized appropriately? Can it be washed and cleaned?
10. **Potential for interaction** – Will the child be an active participant during use? Will the toy encourage socialization with others?

For additional information on purchasing toys for children with disabilities, contact the National Lekotek Center at 800-366-PLAY or visit www.lekotek.org.

(Source: www.amazon.com)

Learning New Skills Through Play

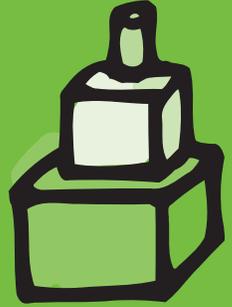
Erin, a 3-year-old girl with Down syndrome, enjoys brushing the hair of a My Little Pony®. Erin's personal care attendant (PCA), Shannon, is pleased to see Erin brushing the pony's hair. "There are such a variety of toys that help stimulate different skills. She has a hard time with this activity, so it was nice to let her brush the pony's hair."

Children with disabilities learn skills throughout the day through ordinary activities, such as:

- Dramatic play
- Using blocks
- Studying science
- Learning math
- Playing games
- Putting together puzzles
- Reading books
- Creating art
- Making or listening to music

Children have many opportunities to be creative—by listening to and reading stories, engaging in dramatic play, and experimenting with writing, drawing, copying, inventing, and learning words. Items children use during these activities include:

- Pegboards
- Puzzles
- Legos®
- Markers
- Scissors
- Easel or finger painting
- Clay modeling
- Any other materials of their choosing (Wolery, R.A. & Odom, S.L. 2000)



Categories of Toys

To children with special needs, playing with toys becomes even more important. Adults may be hesitant to purchase toys for children with special needs. They may be concerned that children with disabilities will be unable to enjoy them. However, there are thousands of easy-to-purchase toys that children with disabilities can enjoy, and these toys can also be modified for children with a variety of special needs.

Toys for Physical or Muscle Development

- Magnetic blocks
- Writing tools and scissors
- Puzzles
- Balls
- Playground equipment
- Small flashlight

Toys for Intellectual Development

- Board games
- Card games
- Sorting games
- Listening games
- Books

Toys for Make-Believe or Dramatic Play

- Dress-up clothes
- Play dishes
- Dolls
- Puppets
- Cars and trucks

Toys for Creative Development

- Clay
- Crayons
- Paints
- Paper

Toys for Sensory Play

- Watertable
- Sand and water toys
- Music
- Musical instruments
- Play-Doh®
- Bubbles

"I liked the markers and poster paints because they are big and easy for little hands to grasp. He liked them a lot too!"

-Parent of a boy with limited vision.

Selecting the “Right” Toy

Nick, a 5-year-old boy with multiple disabilities, enjoys riding in a brand new “Radio Flyer®” wagon. It has built-in seating and seat belts. Dawn, Nick’s mom, is thrilled, “I just love this new wagon,” she said. “It doesn’t even need to be adapted. It doesn’t have sharp metal parts which could accidentally hurt him.”

The right and appropriate toys are those that challenge the child’s interest and are closely linked to their skill level and ability. It sounds simple, but selecting the “right” toy is anything but child’s play. (Boehm, H., 2003)

Before making a purchase, consider that children of all ages need a well-balanced assortment of toys to contribute to their development and pleasure. Parents should study and observe their child, know their interests and abilities, and read labels to help make the right decisions.

Child development experts recommend the following:

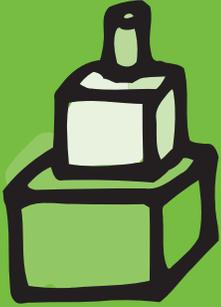
Birth to six months:

- Crib gyms
- Floor gyms
- Activity quilts
- Mobiles
- Safety mirrors
- Teething toys
- Large interlocking rings or keys
- Cloth toys
- Soft dolls
- Stuffed animals (short-pile fabric)
- Musical and chime toys
- Rattles

Some Simple Adaptations:

- Hang one toy, versus three or more, from the toy bar.
- Roll up a bath towel to place under your baby to prop him or her up.





Six months to one year:

- Balls (1^{3/4} inches or larger),
- Push-pull toys
- Activity boxes
- Nesting cups/stacking toys
- Simple shape sorter
- Pop-up toys
- Soft blocks
- Stuffed animals (short-pile fabric)
- Bath toys
- Squeeze/squeak toys
- Cloth or cardboard picture books

Some Simple Adaptations:

- Put some toys on a small rug or carpet to keep the boundary area smaller.
 - Add a connecting link to toys that will keep them attached to a highchair or stroller.
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One to two years:

- Balls (small or large)
- Push-pull toys
- Ride-on toys
- Wagons
- Backyard gym equipment
- Simple shape sorters
- Puzzles with knobs (whole object pieces)
- Blocks
- Sandbox toys
- Water toys
- Bath toys
- Dolls
- Play vehicles

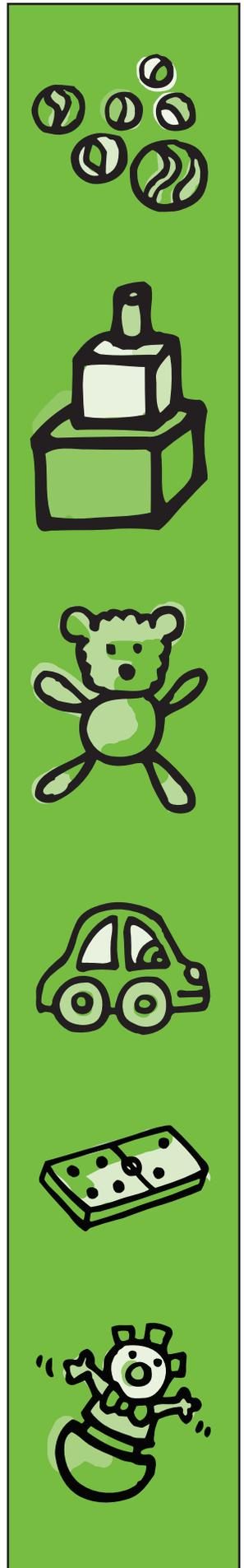
- Kitchen equipment
- Play household items (telephone, shopping cart)
- Playhouse
- Child-sized table and chairs
- Non-toxic art supplies (large crayons, coloring books)
- Musical instruments
- Cardboard books
- Pop-up books

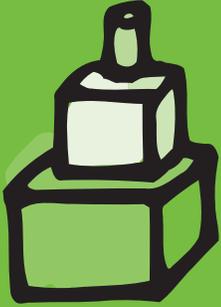
A Simple Adaptation:

- Add a phonebook or cans of food to your child's push or riding toy to weight it down so it doesn't tip over.
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Two to three years:

- Balls
- Backyard gym equipment
- Building blocks and building systems
- Blocks with numbers and letters
- Wading pool/water toys
- Sand toys
- Puzzles with knobs
- Doll that can be bathed, fed and diapered
- Dress-up clothes and accessories
- Hand/finger puppets
- Play household items
- Non-toxic art materials
- Play scenes (farm/airport) with figures and accessories
- Tricycle with helmet
- Play vehicles
- Shape sorters
- Wagon





- Playhouse
- Storybooks
- Stuffed animals

A Simple Adaptation:

- Add foam grips to the handles of toys or crayons for a better grip.
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Three to six years:

- Tricycle with helmet
- Bicycle with helmet
- Construction toys
- Lacing and threading sets
- Puzzles (10 to 20 pieces)
- Doll clothes
- Dress-up clothes and accessories
- Props for make-believe
- Cassette/CD player
- Simple board games
- Word and matching games
- Storybooks

A Simple Adaptation:

- Add page turners to books to make the pages easier to turn.
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Six to nine years:

- Complex gym equipment
- Bicycle and helmets
- Sporting equipment
- Simple swimming equipment
- Stilts

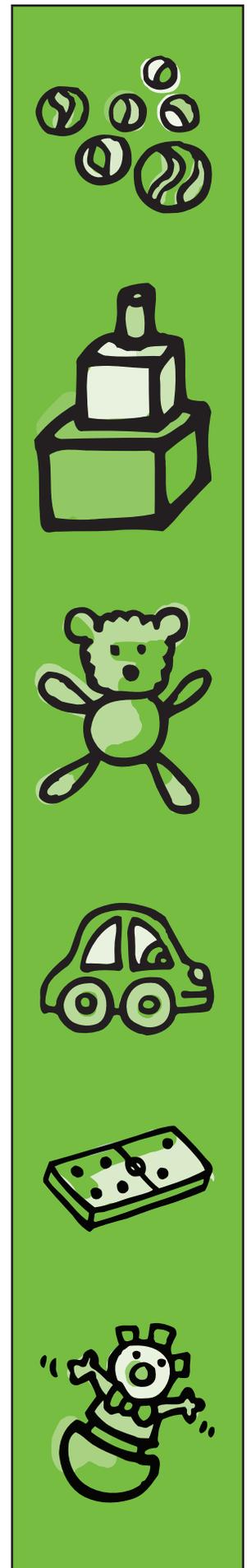
- Rollerskates or Rollerblades® with helmet
- Construction toys
- Pogo stick
- Jump rope
- Action figures
- Paper dolls
- Model kits
- Craft kits
- Science kits
- Art supplies
- Table-top sports
- Electronic games
- Jigsaw puzzles
- Fashion career dolls
- Video games
- Board games
- Cassette/CD player
- Books (children's classics, fairy tales)

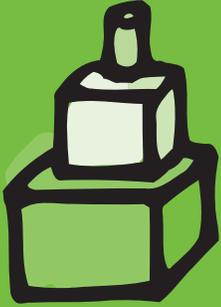
A Simple Adaptation:

- Add a simple switch to the CD player to allow your child to select their musical choice.
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Toys present an educational and entertaining way for children to learn the essential skills needed throughout life. Social interaction, self expression, reasoning, and communication are just a few skills that are learned through play.

For children with disabilities, playing with toys is a very positive way for them to learn some of these necessary skills. It also presents the opportunity for success. If children have success during playtime, they will most often want to repeat the experience, thus taking on new challenges. Therefore, it is important for parents to choose the right toy for their child. The toy should be both age appropriate, adaptable to the child's disability, and fun. If the child enjoys using the toy, he or she will continue using it, thus increasing his or her skill level.





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