SELECTING TOYS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Play is what children do; it is how they grow and learn. The importance of play in a young child’s life cannot be over-stated; it is their primary occupation, impacting all areas of development. All children regardless of ability need a variety of opportunities to playfully interact. Since toys are the child’s tools for play, finding toys with features that make them usable by all/most children is a critical part of this effort. Toys with these features are defined as “universally designed”.

Families and service providers should look for toys that include features that make them universally appealing, usable and fun, that are challenging, yet appropriate for the child’s abilities. Any toy should be safe and durable. Consider these features as you select toys for a child:

- **Is the toy appealing?** Does the toy have bright colors or texture? Does it respond with lights, sound, movement or vibration? Color, sound, texture, lights and vibration add to the multisensory appeal of the toy. *What kind of response appeals most to the child?*
- **How does the toy work?** A simple, intuitive design is best. Controls should be obvious and accessible. *Will the child understand how to use it?*
- **Is the toy easy to use?** How much force is required to interact with the toy? It should be easy to use and require little strength. Are multiple movements required? *Will the child be able to interact with it?*
- **Is the toy adjustable?** Can the volume level, height, speed, or level of difficulty be changed? Toys with adjustable features may appeal to a child longer. *Can it adjust to the child’s interests and abilities?*
- **Can the toy be played with in different ways?** Does the toy appeal to children at various developmental levels? Toys should encourage use in more than one way. *Can it be used in different ways across play stages?*
Emerging Play Stages

As a child grows, play emerges in different interactions and forms. The following section describes " Emerging Play" stages as an organizational background that is based on the work of J. Piaget (1962) and S. Smilansky (1968). This is not meant to indicate that children move sequentially through the stages, but rather to provide a framework to help families understand how their child plays. In each stage, play progresses from undifferentiated exploration to more specific manipulations where a child’s interactions gradually develop from simple to complex. Children grow at their own rate and often incorporate elements of many types of play in what they do. Knowing the "next step" helps adults to select and present toys in different ways to support the developing young player. This section includes examples of well-designed toys that support specific play stage outcomes. Open-ended toys that promote discovery offer a wider variety of learning opportunities for all children than do toys with a single purpose. However, single purpose toys can guide simple interactions until mastery is achieved.

Play and Children with Disabilities

Play of children with disabilities typically follows the same play stage sequence, but the developmental pace is often delayed and the movement from simple to complex play may be reduced due to sensory, cognitive and physical limitations. Children with disabilities engage in more manipulative, functional play and pretend play may be significantly delayed. This may be due to pretend play opportunities not being offered nor seen as important. When practitioners help families understand play and its impact on development, families focus on what their child can do and what interests her at a given stage. When they understand “what comes next” they can apply new strategies and take note of ongoing changes in their child’s play behaviors.

Sensory Exploratory Play: What’s this?

In the sensory play stage, a child uses all of his/her senses and simple manipulation to explore objects. S/he gazes, listens to, smells, touches, bats, grabs, pulls at toys and begins to move towards them. In this stage play is characterized by practice and repetition; young children explore all objects in the same ways with repetitive movements. Observe to find out a child’s interests and preferences. Toys with a specific sensory characteristic (color, sound, scent, vibration, weight, or texture) can be very
motivating. Some children may "shut down" when presented with too much sensory stimulation, while others prefer toys with multiple characteristics. Look for toys that are easy for the child to use -- to grab, hold, hang onto and move. Look for toys a child can play with while in several different positions and that promote new discoveries.

**Sensory Play toy examples:**

**Swirl**— *(Manhattan Baby)*
Colors, textures and the shape of this toy make it universally appealing. This toy can be picked-up and held in a variety of ways from many positions. As this toy is lightweight, that has brightly colored loops and wooden discs that spin up and down. It can be explored as a rattle with one or two hands or used to roll across the floor.

**Wiggly Giggly Shaker** *(Hands on Toys)*
This shaker rattle is durable and responds with interesting “giggle” sounds when shaken. The sounds change when shaken again, rolled or thrown. Easy to hold, it fits well in little hands when the child is ready to reach out and take hold of things.

**Crib + floor mirror** *(Sassy)*
Mirrors are visually motivating for many children. With Velcro tabs, this large mirror can be hung from the crib or attached to a bouncy seat or placed on the floor in different positions for play on tummy or while sitting.

**Jumpy Crab**
This soft plush toy responds to any touch or sound by vibrating and moving slowly around a table surface.
Sassy Gym Play Mat – (Sassy)

This multi purpose play mat includes detachable hanging toys, multi sensory textures, and a separate mirror. Its upper rim can be used to support an infant’s head and shoulder to reach out or as a tummy time bolster. Materials, colors and sounds provide an adaptable play environment.

Functional Play: What does it do?

In the functional play stage, a child progresses to understanding how a toy is used. Functional play begins with banging toys against each other or a surface to make a noise, knocking blocks down, pressing buttons on a phone or swiping a finger across a screen to make something happen. A child begins to understand cause and effect in that specific actions result in similar responses. Those with difficulty manipulating toys may enjoy highly reactive ones. Some electronic toys that require minimal touch or voice to "turn on" and have multiple responses (lights, vibration, sound, etc.) are useful.

Children slowly begin to use toys as they are designed to be used; to discover what they must do to make a toy work. A child manipulates objects in a functional manner (e.g., pressing keys on a keyboard, uses different movements with a busy box), and then uses tools (e.g., hammer on pegs, rake in sand, wand for bubbles, tunnels). Self directed imitation also begins to emerge (e.g., holds cup to her mouth, kitchen play) during the functional play stage.

Functional Play toy examples:

Developlay Activity Center – (Tiny Love)

Hang this toy on a crib or put in the removable feet and use it on the floor. This toy features two sides requiring different movements to promote discovery learning as your child's interests change. It combines color, texture, and sounds within a variety of reactive areas. Children are encouraged to pull, spin, push, grasp, look and listen.
**Rollipop Starter Set** – *(Edushape)*

This toy comes with brightly colored balls with faces that can be dropped into the tower. The weighted balls disappear inside columns then slowly roll down and around to the bottom only to be dropped again. Connect the colorful plastic ramps together to make the tower as high or low as you want.

**Boppin’ Activity Bugs** *(Fisher Price)*

This pop-up toy has 4 colored bugs. When pressed down, the bugs lock in place. Child uses one of four developmental actions: slide, pull, toggle or turn to make them pop up again.

**Crawl Tunnel** *(Melissa and Dave)*

The Crawl Tunnel promotes crawling and hide and seek play while a child moves through it to the other end or views the world from inside. The collapsible tunnel is five feet long, and is water repellent for indoor and outdoor play.

**Constructive/Creative Play: What Can I Make?**

During constructive/creative play, children begin to use materials and incorporate planning, coordination, problem solving and creativity. A child begins to sort and build with various objects. Materials are used in simple and then more complex ways. Actions such as matching and contrasting shapes and sizes, characterize these toys. Young children begin demonstrating constructive play by placing items on top of or next to each other.

Children combine manipulation, creativity and planning in similar ways when interacting with a variety of expressive materials. Children benefit from a range of materials such as play dough, paint brushes, markers, and finger paints to use on a variety of surfaces: papers, cardboards, bathtubs, sand boxes, trays, etc.
Organize, Sort & Build
Child begins to use materials and incorporate planning, coordination, problem solving and creativity. Materials are used in simple and then more complex ways. Children manipulate objects in a variety of ways:

**Shapes & Sorters:** Matching and contrasting shapes and sizes characterize these toys. A wide range of items is found, from same size single shapes to varied shape sorters.

**Construction**
Young children begin constructing by placing items on top of or next to each other. Stringing pieces with cording or tubing is a type of construction.

**Constructive/Creative Play toy examples:**

**Incrediblock (Fisher Price)**
This toy offers a variety of activities with music, motion, lights, and five sides of busy play. Children can sort, watch blocks tumble, lights spin and stack the blocks.

**Mix and Match Activity Blocks (Lamaze)**
With multiple textures, crinkle sounds, and a discovery mirror, the blocks encourage sensory exploration and constructive/creative play. A child can configure them in multiple ways.

**Lego Soft Blocks (Lego)**
Building is easy with these over-size blocks, six times the size of ordinary LEGO blocks. Large but light, soft and quiet, the blocks encourage more than one child to play. Easy to stack and knock down. Features that extend their use include blocks that are decorated with eyes and mouth, roof tile bricks, and lots of basic bricks in four colors.
Jumbo Magnet Builders (Constructive Playthings)

These large rods and balls stick together magnetically with safe, permanently embedded magnets. Helps to make building successful for more children.

Pets Sound Puzzle (Melissa and Doug)

Children are rewarded with matching familiar pet sounds as they put each of the 8 puzzle pieces in place. Find the matching picture on the puzzle board and hear the animal meow, woof or tweet.

Magnetic Tabletop Easel (ALEX)

This flexible art center can be used in several play spaces- on the floor, table or tray. It has a double-sided surface with a green chalkboard on one side and a magnetic dry erase board on the other. Trays on both sides offer a place for chalk and 4 non-spill paint cups fit in the built-in openings. Use with the ALEX paintbrushes designed for users with different hand grasps.

Spin Art Center (Lakeshore)

Simply turn on the electronic spinner, squirt the paint and glitter onto the card to create an original design. Children can make a new picture every time. Because it is battery-operated, it can be adapted for switch use.
Pretend/Dramatic Play

Children imitate actions seen or heard about and to build on these experiences to create new ones. Using theme environments (farms, airports, kitchens) helps the child to re-create experiences and routines. Realistic items and props (carts, food and kitchen items, water play, cars/vehicles, brooms and tools) that relate to the theme can be used throughout the play experiences of a child to enhance imagination. Pretend play helps a child to make sense of life experiences, express her individuality and gain a sense of control.

As children develop, the representational objects get increasingly abstract - i.e., a peg becomes a bottle or a large box is a car. The child begins to create imaginary situations (drive a car to a gas station, give “medicine” to a “sick” friend, bring books to the library). Language is expanded through these experiences.

Pretend/Dramatic Play toy examples:

Shopping Cart (Step2)
This low and wide cart shape is easy to handle, with durable, large wheels that roll smoothly. Its open basket space provides trouble-free access to items inside.

Because this creative toy uses batteries, a battery adapter and switch can provide a way for any child to press a button to get the spinner spinning.

Battery device adapter - Ablenet
Jellybean Switch - Ablenet
**Pizza Party** (Melissa & Doug)
This realistic wooden pizza lets everyone make their own slice just the way they like. Easy to use from a variety of positions, Velcro makes it simple to change the slice from pepperoni to pepper or mushrooms. Six thick slices are served on a brightly colored tray; comes with cutter, spatula, and over 50 toppings. This toy encourages both constructive and pretend play.

**Handiworker Workhorse** (Little Tykes)
The workbench & realistic tools are colorful and easy to use with large handles. Workbench features include a pounding bench for nails and screws, storage on top and both sides, plus a carrying handle. Includes nails, screws, screwdriver, wrench and hammer.

**Thomas Wooden Railway** (Fisher Price)
This battery operated train works with any Thomas and friends railway set. It connects to other cars with magnet connectors. The toy can be adapted for switch use so that a child can make it start and stop with any single switch. Because the toy moves, a wireless switch would be best.

**Puppettos Theatre Stage** (Manhattan Toy)
Children can use this portable stage in any position: on the floor or on any tray or table. Finger or hand puppets can be used to create and re-tell stories within the brightly colored stage. The curtains open and close and puppets can be kept in two attached pockets.
Animal Sounds Farm (Fisher Price)

Barnyard sounds bring this classic toy to life as it introduces the farm, props and farm animals. Imitating animal sounds and moving the pieces around the barnyard engages children of all abilities. The easy-to-handle shapes and open barn design make moving the figures in and out easy. Props include a farmer and his animals—there's even food and water for the animals. The familiar farm theme and animals with expressive faces promote pretend-play experiences.