

## Toys for Children with Special Needs:



## You Can See a Lot by Observing

### In this Issue...

“You can see a lot by observing,” said baseball Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra. He was talking about baseball but he could have been referring to the process of selecting the right toy for the right child for the right reasons, especially if that child has disabilities. This is a process that too often results unintentionally in the purchase of a toy that is right for everyone but the child with disabilities. According to Sue Mistrett, director emeritus of Let’s Play!, a project assessing the role of play in special education that was based at the University of Buffalo’s Center for Assistive Technology from 1995 through 2005, the key to selecting the best toy for a child with disabilities is observation. She tells parents, “Observe, watch, see what is happening between the child and the toy. You think you’ve picked the perfect toy for your child. Now see what she can do with it.” Watching and observing children at play with their toys, she states, “provides clues about the child’s interests and developmental stage and the direction in which the child should be guided.” Observe the child, she advises, “learn what she likes and how she best plays with things – and then buy accordingly.” This issue examines the impact of play on children with disabilities and ways parents and others can select the toy that will achieve the right balance for a child between challenge and pure fun.

### Sue Mistrett Speaks

Her project is no longer funded, but Sue Mistrett is a woman of strong opinions and deep insight when it comes to play, toys and kids with disabilities. “In special education, she says, “we have ignored the power of play.” Too often, she adds, “when we look at children with disabilities, we see the skills they are lacking and go about trying to build them one at a time. However, with

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typically developing kids, we know that play is what they do – it's how they grow and naturally develop those skills. For all children, but particularly those with disabilities, "play builds experience, which helps a child figure out the world – and toys facilitate play."

Sue arrived at Let's Play! in 1995 after spending several years in early childhood development. After earning a undergraduate degree from Daemon College and a Masters from the University of Buffalo in early childhood development and elementary education, she spent the 1980s as a director of a pre-school program in upstate New York where her young charges included both children with and without disabilities and, in the process, began to use assistive technology to help children with disabilities enhance their play experiences.

In 1998, three years after founding Let's Play!, her first grandson was born. He was kept in the hospital for more than a month with severe ongoing seizures. The result, she says, "is a little guy who has significant learning disabilities and ADHD, among other disabilities." Years later, she explains, he is fully included in third grade. "Along the way he has taught many people many things."

When he was younger and little, she says, "the importance of play to him was very obvious to me. I could see his delays. I saw how important it was to encourage him to find ways to help him to keep at it, which he has done and continues to do, with great gusto."

Certainly, he has his struggles, she concedes, "but he has a love of learning and discovery and a need to do for himself. He knows he has to work harder than his peers but he's willing to do that." Her grandson's struggles will continue, she admits. "Play with children other than his brother and sister does not happen easily, nor will it become easier as he gets older. We are very proud of him. He has his good days and bad, but no more bad days than his siblings, just more intense."

With her Let's Play! days over, Sue has moved to the Washington, DC area to be closer to her children and grandchildren but remains busy with education-related activities. "I'm working for a curriculum company that emphasizes the power of observation among pre-school and elementary school teachers in developing a curriculum that benefits all children, including those with disabilities." She's also working with the Maryland Department of Education to expand opportunities for early intervention while continuing to speak at local and national events.

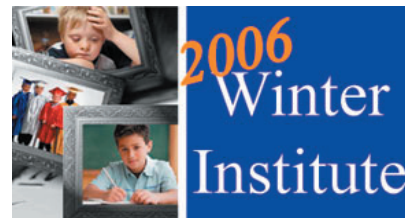
What she continues to love, though, is watching children grow. "I love their excitement when they discover something new, their love of learning, their interests that change daily and the connections they make. I still learn something new every time I go to the playground."

Supporting our interview with Ms. Mistrett are resources to assist parents and others in finding the right toys for their children. We also feature members of our *Knowledge Network*. The members spotlighted this month focus on various aspects of play toy selection by parents and others for children with disabilities. We invite you to contact these members for further information.

Please share this newsletter with other organizations, families and professionals who may benefit from it. We invite you to contact us at <http://www.fctd.info>. We welcome feedback, new members and all who contribute to our growing knowledge base.

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# ■ Toys Are the Tools for Play

**An Interview with Sue Mistrett, Early Childhood Educator, Assistive Technology Expert and Director Emeritus, Let's Play! Projects**

Toys, says the Let's Play! website created by Sue Mistrett, are the tools of play for all children, including those with disabilities. And play is therapeutic, Sue insists, despite the resistance to that concept she continues to encounter within the special education community and among some parents as well.

"What we're missing in special ed -- and what we spent 10 years addressing during the run of the Let's Play! project -- is a lens that helps focus not on what's wrong with a child but what is right." Among special educators, she claims, there are those who ignored the power of play.



**Sue Mistrett**

"When we look at typically developing kids, we view play as just something that they do. It's how these kids find out about the world, how they interact with it. We watch them, and they may be playing, hitting a rattle against something time and time again. Suddenly, we see the child move the rattle from one hand to another, put in his mouth and start hitting it on different surfaces, getting different information from it."

Play, she explains, builds on experience, which helps a child figure out the world. "We in special ed don't typically provide those experiences for kids," she remarks.

## **It's All About Self**

Children are very self-initiated in their typical play, Sue observes. "It's all about self. It's all about empowerment, initiation and what kids do to explore, discover and learn." Children with disabilities, she adds, "aren't expected to do a lot of those things. We see their deficits right away. So we work on the deficits versus working on what makes children children."

Therapists, for instance, "are often excellent at matching up the child's interests and ability with the toy they select for the child. They're right on -- except in how those toys are used. Their perspective is adult-focused. They say, 'This is what I need the child to do.'"

According to Sue, many therapists believe their mission "is not to see how the child interacts with the toy and if the child will take it to the next step if given an interesting toy and opportunities and supports." Instead, she says, therapists may say, "I want this child to be able to lie on her tummy for five minutes, so I am going to

put this very interesting toy in front of her child and let's see what she does -- because I bet that I can get her to sit for five minutes." That is not necessarily a bad approach, Sue admits, "but the opportunities for that child to grab the toy and manipulate it and discover things about it because she wants to have not been assigned the value they deserve."

Instead, she asserts, "what the therapist will do is to put the baby on her tummy, put the toy right in front of the baby, who then gets excited. The baby props herself up on her arms and perhaps even shifts weight and grabs the toy. This is exciting and fun. Everyone is smiling. This is a great thing that the child has initiated. The child knows what he wants -- to get to that toy."



What does the therapist do? "The therapist takes the toy away from the baby and places it further away so the child must work a little harder to get at it. The child regards it again, moves her body, does the things that are difficult for her to do, because the baby has the innate desire to get to the toy and play with it, but the therapist again will take that toy away. Why? Because the therapist's goals for that child are different."

The third time the therapist moves the toy, she says, "the child puts his head down and starts crying. The session is over."

Her message to therapist and special educators: observe, watch and see. "You picked a perfect toy. Let's see what the child can do with it. In the long run, isn't it far better for that child to be interacting, with the therapist facilitating the next move in play than just removing the toy to get to a single therapeutic goal, as opposed to play that has multiple goals?"

## **Beyond Two Divergent Approaches**

Why have therapists and special educators not gotten beyond those divergent approaches, Sue was asked? "Good question! Our therapy and special ed focuses on observing children to find out what's wrong -- and then fixing it." Play is critical to development, she again asserted. "All children need to have opportunities to play. When play is child-initiated, children will do something of consequence. They will learn from that consequence. The next day they may take the same toy, begin to play with it the same way but then move on to something much more complex."

Therapists and teachers need to cease interfering with that process, she says. "Know where to guide the child next. Understand the impact of a positive relationship. Know how to guide a child's development. Develop realistic expectations. Give the kids the

support that they need to play in even more complex ways.”

She adds, “We all want to do so much and yet it’s the child’s role in infancy and just beyond to begin to do for themselves. We can facilitate the process of learning but we can’t learn for them, or the kids suffer from lack of self-esteem and become dependent, which ignites a negative cycle.”

“When you watch children play,” Sue says, “you see them become completely involved. They are truly on a train or a plane, or wherever they imagine they are, and they are going someplace. That complete engagement so often is missing from the experiences of young kids with disabilities, when we interrupt them and redirect what they are doing.”



“When we saw that connection – and this is among the connections that drew me to Let’s Play – between an object, a toy for instance, and how the child uses that object during play, that’s the magic we were trying to capture. That’s why we took a look at universal components of toy design, because we could see a child engaging and creating new ways to play with that same toy.”

When Let’s Play! was founded, “we looked for ways to provide successful opportunities to play“. We had a huge library of toys – specialty toys, switch toys and adaptive toys as well as off-the-shelf well-designed commercial toys.” After talking with families about their children’s interests and what the parents’ play-goals were for them, “we’d bring AT supports and several toys to these families in their homes. We had the parent try out several toys with the child and told them, at the end of the session, that they could keep the toys they wanted for one month. Then we’d repeat the cycle and provide them with some strategies on play.”

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### Picking Toys That Accentuate Independence

She found that parents -- even parents of children with significant disabilities – most often picked off-the-shelf commercial toys over toys designed especially for children with disabilities. “Yes, the kids could use the commercial toys to some extent,” she notes, “but to us the toys picked by the parents did not accentuate the independence the child had demonstrated earlier with the specialty

toys”.

“In our wisdom, we’d say, ‘We’ve made parents aware of the toys that are out there, and as soon as parents see that their child isn’t using the off-the-shelf toy too well, then they’ll ask us to bring the switch toys out again.’”

“But we were wrong. More than 70% of the toys selected were off-the-shelf toys.

“We kept saying, ‘We’ll just have to show these parents the way.’ But we knew that we had to ask the question first. So we went back to the parents and asked, ‘Why did you pick the off-the-shelf toy when he seemed more independent when he was using the specialty toy?’”

The parents replied, “He seemed to like the specialty toy for awhile – but it’s too different. It stigmatizes my child. I want him to be able to play with his brother and that toy is really only for a single kid. It looks too weird. He really likes looking at a piano that his brother was using so we picked that one because it had larger keys on it. Now they can both use it.”

“We said, ‘Let’s all take a step back’. We looked at our data again. Parents are the ones who select the toys that children have and they are telling us loud and clear that they don’t want different toys – they want to be able to select toys right off the shelf for their children. Parents are telling us, ‘I want something that other kids are going to want to play with with my child.’”

Her Let’s Play! team examined what the ideal toy features would be. “We worked closely with therapists, including occupational therapists (OTs). Most were able to pick a toy that zeroed in on the child’s interests, abilities and sensory preferences. An OT told us, ‘I recommend a lot of switch toys to my kids. Yet in my waiting room I don’t have even one.’”

### Universal Design and Toys

Sue’s team heard this heard this from several sources, including parents. It appeared to her that the only way to bridge the gap between the two divergent approaches to toy selection for children with disabilities was universal design. “We decided to take a much closer look at the benefits of universal design as applied to toys,” she recalls.



Let’s Play! collaborated with engineers from the Center for Universal Design, a National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR)-funded engineering center based at SUNY Buffalo where the Let’s Play! project was also based.

"We met with the center. We told them that we were investigating universal design features in toys while the center was working on universal design for many products. We asked, 'How can these two approaches work together?'"

Let's Play! collaborated with the center for two years. "We found that many of the principles of universal design certainly applied to toys. We found that universally designed materials were appealing to kids of all abilities and preferences. Those materials had to be multi-sensory, easy to use, flexible, adaptable to a variety of users – i.e. different levels built in, different ways of using materials – and that they should invite shared use for more than one child, while not stigmatizing any user."

She continues, "We started with several focus groups and developed a tool called the Universal Design for Play tool, a checklist aimed at gauging how appealing and useful a toy is to a child. This tool has been well used by families, groups and professional organizations nationwide. The idea is that as toys are selected for home and school to look for those that are more flexible in their design so that they can be used in more ways by more children."

Universal design, Sue emphasizes, does not mean finding the least common denominator. It doesn't necessarily mean that a toy is simple or just easy to use, for good reason: a significant component of play, she stresses, is the challenge of play, but universal design enhances the ability of children to play together on different levels, providing a way for all children to play together.

Let's Play! also collaborated with Fisher-Price, the Buffalo-based toy manufacturer. Company representatives helped Let's Play! run several focus groups. Sue's team worked with freelance toy designers affiliated with Fisher-Price who also designed for other toy manufacturers. The designers, she remembers, were intrigued by the universal design concept.

In fact, after one focus group, she recalls, a designer named Dave said, "Hey, Susie, come see my 'UD' toy. We're already designing a toy that may come as close as possible to the concept of universal design that we are discussing."

The toy looked like a regular clunky toy car. "You'd say 'Vroom! Vroom!' and let it go. There were no electronics involved. Simple. Basic. Nice size for little hands. I said, 'Show me how it works.'"

The designer picked up the car. "But he doesn't put it on the floor. Instead, he starts moving his arm around – in circles, back and forth. Then he puts the car down and lets it go. The car goes. The car was called a 'Shake and Go.'"

This aspect of universal design allows a child to hold the car and move it in any way that works best for child, she notes. "There's

not one specific, prescribed way to move the car and make it go. They also built this feature in: the longer the car was shaken, the further it would go. These are things kids figure out. 'If I do it really, really hard than it will go really, really far.'"

The designer told Sue, "We applied some universal design principles, just changed a few things at the design stage of toy production so that when the design is changed fewer adjustments need to be made later for individual children. This doesn't remove the challenge for kids; it extends the challenge. This is a form of design that truly makes a difference for a child – and the toys that they can play with."

### **Koosh Ball: A Useful Changeling**

That doesn't mean, she says, "that we don't customize or further adapt toys to meet the needs of individual children." Take Koosh Ball, for example. "These balls are multi-sensory. They can be used by children in so many ways, in so many play stages, whether a child is mouthing them, throwing or catching them, kicking, or whether the Koosh Ball becomes a hat. It's a very flexible type of toy."



For a child who is blind, she might present him with a Koosh Ball with a piece of string attached to make the ball easier to retrieve when it is out of reach. "This is an example of how we customize a toy rather than adapting it," she notes. "The toy itself remains the same for everyone. The toy's usefulness to children can change depending upon what they want to do with it."

It excites her to collaborate with a toy industry that views kids with special needs as a lucrative market. "There are families that are willing to spend whatever they need to spend for a better toy design," she remarks.

"We did a couple of workshops at the Toy Fair," she remembers. "We had a packed house." According to the National Lekotek Center's most recent statistics, children with disabilities represent a \$3.5 billion annual market. "This is a market that toy manufacturers are not overlooking."

### **Small Part Ban Boosts Toys' Accessibility**

While specialty toys are effective, Sue admits, and there will always be a market for them, "we have also found that even kids with most significant disabilities can find commercial toys that they love, such as metallic pom-poms, which are low-tech and off-the-shelf."

There are several elements that have made many commercial toys more appealing for kids of all abilities, she says. One major element is the absence since the 1980s of small parts in toys for children under three years old. Once the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission issued its ban, she says, “all of the levers and buttons on toys were larger. Toys became more accessible, easier to see, more colorful, easier to pick up and hold.”

The electronics revolution also had a huge impact, she insists. “You can’t go to a bookstore for children and pick up a book that doesn’t talk to you and make sounds, which are interesting for all kids but for kids with disabilities are especially compelling, engaging and deeply involve a child in a reading act.”

### The Cool Factor

Toy designers, Sue comments, are instinctive tinkerers who enjoy the challenge of designing toys for all children - with and without disabilities.

“The designers know, as we do, that a universal toy is a better toy for everyone. “For example a door handle with a lever is easier for everyone to use, not just individuals with disabilities. A ramp or a curb cut at a crosswalk is easier for everyone – from moms with strollers to persons in wheelchairs. Universal design improves the environment and the product. Yes, it enhances accessibility for individuals with disabilities, but it also makes it easier – and better -- for all.”

Universal design also lessens the likelihood for parents that their child will stand out for all the wrong reasons. “When we looked at AT supports with kids in fourth or fifth grade, we equipped them with all sorts of technologies, and the kids at that age were fine with that. Then they hit middle school, where they announced, ‘I’m not using that equipment anymore. No way.’”

Thank goodness for iPods, Sue says, and for all the electronic technology that helps children produce study notes via text-to-audio for their iPods. “Now they’ve got their notes that are being read to them while they read along with the paper version. And the technology that they use is cool, which is a huge factor for that age group.”

A universally designed toy can grow with the child, change as the child changes and can be accessible even to kids with severe disabilities, she explains. These toys typically incorporate multiple colors, multiple materials and multiple uses and offer multiple ways to play with the same toy.



### Parents Are Enthusiastic

“Parents we’ve worked with are so enthusiastic about universally designed toys,” she declares. The Let’s Play! project was started in order to achieve recognition for the importance of play. Back then, parents as well as special educators often appeared to give play short shrift. “My mother who was Irish Catholic and had seven kids could not have cared less about play. She’d say, ‘I feed you, clothe you and house you – so go outside and play!’ So our concept is not for everybody.”

Early on, Let’s Play! was loaning supports that were funded by the organization’s early intervention systems under the assistive technology banner. “Parents would approach us to say that they were seeking services for children. We’d ask the parents to tell us about their child. The parents would tell us the diagnosis and explain the child’s limitations. We’d listen and then ask the parent, ‘What’s your child’s favorite toy?’ We’d ask the parents, ‘How do they play with it?’”

Her team considered the responses and then provided not only toys, but also additional AT supports. “If the child was blind or had cerebral palsy, for example, we’d also bring out some lower tech supports for seating or tummy play or an overhead gym, depending on what position was most comfortable for the child.” Communication and mobility supports were also provided – whatever it took to provide successful play opportunities.

In one instance, she explains, “we’d concluded after the first six months that the therapist had to learn to help the family to facilitate play for the child. To do this she had to take a “hands off” approach and support the parent to observe and guide the child’s play. The family would select one toy that they thought their child would like. The therapist would provide “play tips” that would encourage parents and child to use the toys in different ways. At the session’s end, we’d ask, ‘Which toys do you want to keep?’”

This approach helped our county to identify which AT supports were most beneficial by encouraging parents to “try before you buy.”

Giving parents the support they needed and then checking back with them to offer ongoing guidance seemed to give them the help they needed, Sue says.

“Our response from families has been tremendous. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been told by a parent, ‘Thank you for giving me permission to play with my child.’ Or, ‘You’ve restored our child’s childhood to us.’ They were so focused on the clinical therapies and the needs of the child that there was enormous stress on the family. Our approach appeared to normalize the situation while giving the child a chance to be a child, which took

a big load off the parents' shoulders. It restored their sense of parenthood and their role of providing for their kids."

### Toys' Age Range: A Change Is Needed

Among Sue's pet peeves is a toy manufacturer-designated appropriate age range. "Often, kids with disabilities are delayed in their development and parents can find themselves looking in the infant toy section for their 3 year old child, which is a real put-down."

She's trying to encourage toy manufacturers to instead refer to play stages as opposed to ages. "Looking at toys that can be used across stages, like a ball, or certain musical instruments, the first stage can be dubbed, 'What is it?' where a child explores with his/her senses, by banging on it, mouthing it, which is indicative of the exploratory efforts put forth by young children in play's first stage. There's no age limit to this."

The second stage, she says, could be entitled, "What does the toy do?" In the second stage, she notes, "a child explores a piano, for example, where pressing on something like a key creates a consequence, a particular sound. "There's a lot of cause and effect in this stage, including early building with Legos and stackers."

The third stage, she explains, is less directed by toys and more by materials and involves a child's imagination and creativity.

"Kids with disabilities tend to get stuck in the first two stages. When thinking about kids and play, what may come to mind is the pretend piece, where a block becomes a bottle, car or truck or an airplane is accompanied by appropriate sound effects. At that point it's not the toy that's important, it's how the toy is being used."

She adds, "We also need to take a look at promoting pretend play. When you promote this you are bringing all of the systems together. Pretend play is tremendous for cognitive development, language development and social development. Putting a peg in a hole is useful at one level, but it does not use the child's whole being."

What she is advocating, she notes, is the use of materials in multiple ways and encouraging children to employ those materials across different situations in various means and matters and allowing the children to be creative in turning those toys into whatever a child wants a toy to be.

This amounts to permission to grow, Sue says. "If people understood the impact of that facilitation and that encouragement and that expectation, things would change."

### Which Toys Provide a Reasonable Challenge?

How does Sue Mistrett determine which toys provide a child with reasonable challenge? "Often it has to do with flexibility and material," she replies. With the use of building blocks, for example, the adult can be the play facilitator, the person who can set up new challenges, new rules for a child. The parent can ask the child, 'Can you build this higher? How much higher can it go before it tumbles?' We certainly want to provide the opportunity for all children to build as high as they can."

The objective, she explains, "is not to keep everything simple – and boring. The idea is to provide an innate challenge to a child to improvise his/her current use of the toy."

She says she has heard therapists and teachers say, "That child just does the same thing over and over. He just perseverates (excessive repetition of an action) on this."

She remarks, "I look closely at which children are very engaged in an activity, which kids are marginally participating and which are not participating at all. What can be done to help those who are not participating sufficiently? Can the environment be changed? Can the materials be changed? Does the child need support because he/she is unable to use hands or remain seated upright?"

Watching and observing, she emphasizes, offers parents, teachers and therapists clues as to a child's interests and developmental level. "Then you know where to guide them next."

She recalls, "I was watching a little guy at the playground the other day. He was about two or two and a half years old. He was on a mission. This kid was going up the stairs and down the slide and then repeating the process exactly, time after time. He did this at least 10 times. Then he looks up – there was a kid in front of him who was impeding his progress – and watches the kid in front of him descend that slide with his arms up, screaming."

From that point on the kid on the mission changes his routine a little. He's moving his hands as he goes down the slide. He's moving his arms. In child development, we call this looping, not perseveration. This child reminded me about the difference between looking at a child from the vantage point of what's right rather than what is wrong.

Therapists and special ed teachers are certainly educated in what constitutes typical development, Sue explains. "But there needs to be more emphasis in schools on looking through a lens and seeing what is right with a child and how to guide rather than direct him to the next step."

“When we look through the lens of what is wrong about a child’s development we are contributing to the creation of a society divided by differences rather than one in which children learn together in school. Teachers need to understand what development is typical and how to help children achieve their potential by enabling those children to experience all the available opportunities.”

That’s one example, she notes, of regarding children realistically instead of making assumptions that may not prove out, such as saying, “That child has cerebral palsy; he’ll never be able to do this or that.”

She offers another illustration. “Here in Washington, DC, at the playgrounds, scoop swings are plentiful. I was standing in line with my granddaughter who wanted to go on a red scoop swing. Behind us was a child with a pretty significant disability whose parent was holding him. I’m trying to talk my granddaughter into using the regular swing instead so that this little guy has a chance at the scoop swing. My granddaughter said no, she was going on that red scoop swing. I apologized to the boy’s mother. She said, ‘Don’t be silly. This is an exciting swing for all the kids and that’s the way it ought to be. We’ll stand in line and wait our turn.’ I thought, ‘Good for you!’”

The point was, Sue says, “all the kids wanted to go on that swing, not just the kids who had disabilities.”

### Helping Parents Avoid Toy Buying Errors

It’s the season when parents buy toys of all kinds for their children. What mistakes are commonly made and what mistakes should parents of children with disabilities try to avoid?

Toys are the tools of play, she declares -- and they qualify as assistive technology when the goal for the child is play. Selecting the most appropriate toy, she reemphasizes, requires that adults employ their powers of observation and that a focus on which toy is the most advertised be put on hold. “As parents, we’ve all made similar mistakes when it comes to selecting toys. We’ve all bought toys that are used once and end up in a pile in the corner. As a parent, the secret to making the right toy purchase is in observing your child. What does your child like to do? What does he get excited about? Music? The sound of cars? Dinosaurs? What intrigues him?”

She continues, “Watch your child and answer these questions: Where is he most successful? Is he successful with softer toys that he can grab onto more easily? Are there objects that he can push back and forth with a tray in between so that the objects don’t fall off? How does he interact with objects? What does he like?”

She recommends using the checklist that is part of the Let’s Play Universal Design for Play Tool. “Is the toy appealing to your child? How? Why? Does it have multiple colors? Is that what your child needs? Color may not matter to some children as much as texture matters. This list might provide some ideas on what to look for.”

Another important factor is a child’s play stage. “What is he able to do with a toy? Is he still mouthing? That’s fine, because the child is getting information that way, but is there another way for him to get more information? If a child needs sensory input, a parent may want to look into some non-toxic clay materials for him to experiment with.”

A child may love to build blocks but the blocks fall over. “What toys won’t fall over? Give the child opportunities to be successful in building, by using magnet blocks, for example, or Velcro blocks – things that are easy to handle and maneuver and are fun for everyone.”

There are adjustable toys available that have different levels. “There are Game Boys that are fairly simple on level one. There are also controller adapters manufactured by various companies, which can help to accommodate physical problems.”

If a child has low vision, she notes, parents should seek out toys that have some texture so that the child can locate the buttons as well as toys that have volume controls. She recommends toys with features that are adjustable and flexible in their use. “Also look for toys that can be combined with other toys, like adding dinosaurs to blocks. Legos, for example, make little creatures that fit in.”

There are a lot of multi-sensory toys that are available. Families, she says, sometimes remove the batteries, which reduces the toys’ multi-sensory features. “That’s OK. It proves that the toys are adaptable and adjustable. If parents can’t stand the noise of the toy, they’re not going to put the toy out there for the child to play with.”

She cautions parents to avoid toys with small components as well as toys with only one way to play. “Toys must be flexible enough to adapt to different play situations,” she says.

### Adapting Toys with Common Household Supplies

Is it safe or advisable to adapt toys with common household supplies or is it preferable to stick with toys that are specially made for kids with disabilities? Sue replies, “I am all for adaptability. Add a string to a Koosh Ball so that a child can retrieve it. I love the wizardry that parents and teachers and therapists bring to their work. To customize a toy so that it best meets a child’s needs is

very exciting.”

On the Let's Play! website there are two printable handouts that suggest various ways to adapt toys. “Does your child need something highlighted? Parents of children with visual impairments may need to feel certain parts of a toy in order to know which should be pushed or pulled. For example, we might place a piece of sticky-backed Velcro on the toy and highlight it.” Highlighting can also be achieved using colors or textures.



“We suggest ways to simplify, to facilitate interaction in order to put the child more in control, thus reducing some of the barriers to play.”

She reveals that she uses household items as frequently as possible. Using them, she says, empowers parents to make a difficult situation easier. “Sometimes a parent may need to build up part of a toy, to make a handle a little longer. Paintbrushes have grabby ends. Kids with motor problems, when they're trying to add a piece on a construction project, find that the piece moves them. “Simply stabilize the base. Make it easier. Velcro or non-slip material can do for you, release you and make the child more independent by just keeping the base of the toy more stable and in place.”

Even some of the switch toys, when a button is pushed, can move out of the child's reach or visual field. “Put that toy inside a hula hoop or a box top so you can contain it visually so the child can enjoy it.”

Many of the adaptations aren't just for commercial toys, Sue points out. “Specialty toys have to be stable. You have to make the same kind of adaptations to them that must be made to commercial toys. Again, I'd refer you to some of the handouts on the Let's Play! website.”

The more universal a toy is to start with, the fewer adaptations are needed, she concludes. In this season of the year, or any other, “there are always ways to tweak toys to customize them for the kids.”

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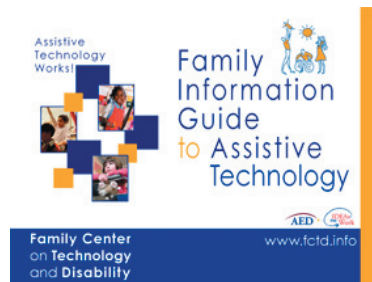


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<http://www.fctd.info/resources/orderCD.php>

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202-884-8068 or [fctd@aed.org](mailto:fctd@aed.org)

# Universal Design for Play Tool

This tool was developed with funding from the US Department of Education,  
Office of Special Education Programs, Grant # H327A030059

## Instructions

Children are unique in their interests and play abilities. Toys that are easy to use for one child may not be easy for another. Universal Design (UD) is an approach to making products usable for people of all abilities. For children, UD means equal opportunities to play.

Toys that are designed with features that are appealing, flexible in how they can be used and adjustable to individual children best reflect the UD philosophy of designing products for inclusive use.

This tool has been designed to help make decisions when selecting toys for children, with and without disabilities, ages birth to three. When using this tool to evaluate a toy, you will agree with some statements more than others. The more statements you agree with the more likely the toy will be enjoyed by all children.

For each of the following statements below circle the number that **best** indicates your level of agreement. Please score each statement.

1	2	3	4	5
definitely no	no	not sure	yes	definitely yes

### 1 The toy is appealing.

• The toy has multiple colors, textures, dimensions, scents and/or sounds.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy's combination of colors, sounds, textures and/or movement is balanced (i.e. not too much, not too little).	1	2	3	4	5

### 2 How to play with the toy is clear.

• The important parts (e.g. knobs, buttons, connectors, areas) are highlighted (i.e. easy to find/ easy to see).	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy does what is expected (e.g. cow moo's, doesn't meow; when toy is shaken bell rings).	1	2	3	4	5

<b>3 The toy is easy to use.</b>					
• The toy is easy to pick up, hold, and use by children with a range of abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
• Toy parts are of adequate size and shape for many children to use.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy requires an adequate amount of effort (e.g. force, number of rotations, etc.) is required for play.	1	2	3	4	5

<b>4 The toy is adjustable.</b>					
• A variety of actions (e.g. holding, kicking, batting) can be used to play with the toy.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy can be positioned in different ways for play.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy allows the child to play with it in a variety of positions (e.g. on tummy/side, sitting, and /or standing).	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy's features (e.g. height, volume, level of difficulty, speed, etc.) are adjustable.	1	2	3	4	5

<b>5 The toy promotes development.</b>					
• The toy encourages imagination.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy encourages social play.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy promotes discovering new ways to play (e.g. cause/effect, building, pretending).	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy stimulates activity (physical or mental).	1	2	3	4	5

<b>6 The toy can be played with in different ways.</b>					
• The toy can be used by children at different ages/levels.	1	2	3	4	5
• The toy's design promotes use in more than one way. (e.g. shape bucket can be a "pool" for dolls, a "purse" or "tool box").	1	2	3	4	5

To find out the toy's UD rating see the **Summary Score Sheet**.

## RESOURCES

### FindTheRightToy.com

This website provides reviews of recreational, educational and therapeutic toys from a therapists perspective. The site is separated by skill areas allowing you to search where you feel your child needs the most help. The mission of Find the Right Toy is to help parents help their children through play using the child's strengths to engage their interest while exercising skills that are weaker. <http://www.findtherighttoy.com/index.htm>

### Dr.Toy

Though not designed specifically for the families of children with disabilities, this website provides a great deal of information about hundreds of toys and other children's products. The holiday gift guide, awards, links and other resources may be valuable to all those seeking toy-buying guidance. Dr. Toy, aka Stevanne Auerbach, PhD, is a national expert on children's play and play materials. <http://www.drtoy.org/>

### Let's Play! Projects

This website features information about assistive technology, adaptive toys, play, and vendors. The site provide ideas and strategies to promote play through better access to play materials, and the use AT. <http://letsplay.buffalo.edu/>

### Exceptional Parent Toy Recommendations

Each year EP highlights fun and educational gift ideas for exceptional children and people of all ages. They have a panel of certified toy testers who offer recommendations for the best toys produced in the past few years.

<http://www.exceptionalparent.com/toys/>

### Center for Creative Play

This site contains a variety of tips for adapting or creating toys for children with disabilities, as well as making the play environment more inclusive. They are committed to the design and development of all inclusive play environments.

<http://www.centerforcreativeplay.org/>

### Oppenheim Toy Portfolio

The yearly toy guide includes thousands of products that are reviewed and rated for quality, developmental appropriateness, and educational and play value.

E-mail: [Stephanie@toyportfolio.com](mailto:Stephanie@toyportfolio.com)

<http://www.toyportfolio.com/PlatinumAwards/Index.asp>

### Let's Play - A Guide to Toys for Children with Special Needs

Toy Industry Foundation in partnership with Alliance for Technology Access (ATA) and American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), has researched and tested hundreds of toys to compile a comprehensive guide of the best toys for children of all ages with all types of special needs.

[http://www.toy-tia.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Press\\_Room/Publications\\_Resources1/Lets\\_Play\\_\(HTML\)/Lets\\_Play\\_2006.htm](http://www.toy-tia.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Press_Room/Publications_Resources1/Lets_Play_(HTML)/Lets_Play_2006.htm)

### We Can Play!

This section of the Alliance for Technology Access website offers a variety of activities and play suggestions for children with special needs. Learn how to adapt a battery operated toy for children who can only press a single button. Learn more about web resources and books about play.

<http://www.ataccess.org/resources/wcp/edefault.html>

### Toys "R" Us Guide for Differently-Abled Kids

P.O. Box 8501

Nevada, Iowa 50201

Endorsed by the National Parent Network on Disabilities and designed to be used in the Toys "R" Us stores in choosing appropriate toys for the child with special needs.

[http://toysrus.richfx.com/catalog\\_toysrus/diffabled\\_06\\_t/diffabled\\_06\\_t.html](http://toysrus.richfx.com/catalog_toysrus/diffabled_06_t/diffabled_06_t.html)

## Toy Vendors and Manufacturers

### Abilitations

The Abilitations website offers products and toys for children with special needs. <http://www.abilitations.com/>

### Abledata

The Abledata website has a section on recreational products for individuals with disabilities The section includes toys, games, music and more. <http://www.abledata.com>

### Achievement Products for Children

Achievement Products offers therapy, exercise and special education products to help children.

<http://www.specialkidszone.com/>

### **Come Play With Me**

The Come Play With Me product line focuses on developmental and educational toys for infants and children.

<http://www.comeplaytoys.com/>

### **Crestwood Company**

Crestwood's product line includes communication aids as well as adapted toys for children with disabilities.

<http://www.communicationaids.com/products.htm>

[http://www.communicationaids.com/adaptive\\_toys.htm](http://www.communicationaids.com/adaptive_toys.htm)

### **Different Roads to Learning**

Books, flashcards, and videos, along with other materials that meet the unique learning style and educational needs of children in the autistic community.

<http://www.difflearn.com/>

### **The Dragonfly Toy Company**

Dragonfly offers an extensive catalog of toys for children with special needs. The PLAY pen section of their website has resources for shoppers including various articles on special needs children with information on recreational and educational play.

<http://www.dragonflytoys.com/>

### **Enabling Devices**

Since 1976 Enabling Devices has been dedicated to providing affordable assistive and learning devices for the physically challenged. They offer a catalog of Toys for Special Children which focuses on the needs of children with disabilities.

<http://enablingdevices.com/home.aspx>

### **Flaghouse Special Populations**

The Flaghouse catalog has a section for Special Populations that offers an extensive selection of adaptive toys and therapy products.

<http://www.flaghouse.com/default.asp?Category=Special%20Populations>

### **Integrations**

Integrations offers a catalog of products for children with learning and sensory differences. The catalog is intended for Teachers, Speech Pathologists, Special Educators, Occupational Therapists, and Parents.

<http://www.integrationscatalog.com/>

### **KIDZPLAY / THERAGIFTS**

The Theragifts division of Kidzplay specializes in selling sensory motor products, toys, and gifts for children that have dysfunction of sensory integration, Autism, Attention Deficit disorders, Developmental Delay or learning disabilities.

<http://www.theragifts.com/>

### **Laureate Learning**

Founded in 1982 by two speech pathologists, Laureate Learning Systems publishes software for both children and adults with learning disabilities.

<http://www.laureatelearning.com/>

### **Mayer Johnson**

Mayer Johnson offers educational and special needs products and augmentative communication products, including Board-maker.

<http://www.mayerjohnson.com/>

### **Pocket full of therapy**

This site was developed by OT's. They offer unique materials and toys that can help provide effective, appropriate, motivating and fun, pediatric therapy and learning. The catalog is arranged into categories pertinent to development.

<http://www.pfot.com/>

### **SensoryEdge**

This site offers an online catalog of educational and sensory-based products. The website, started by parents of a child with special needs, also plans to offer a newsletter with articles and activities from parents, teachers, and therapists.

<http://www.sensoryedge.com/info.html>

### **TFH Special Needs Toys**

TFH offers an online catalog of products and toys for children with special needs.

<http://www.specialneedstoys.com/>



## KNOWLEDGE NETWORK MEMBERS

### National Lekotek Center

The National Lekotek Center constantly works to promote the inclusion of children with special needs into family and community life. Their means of doing this is by creating interactive play experiences.



Lekotek is about kids, particularly kids with special needs. They work to make the world of play accessible to children with all types of disabilities through special play and learning centers where they can have fun with traditional toys, adapted toys, books and computers. While they are playing, Lekotek works to instill new skills upon them, including literacy, mathematical reasoning and computer use skills.

Nationwide, there are thirty-eight Lekotek sites that offer family play sessions, toy lending libraries, Compuplay family computer centers, and other community-specific programming. Children can borrow adapted and traditional toys, books and software from Lekotek toy lending libraries for use at home. Overall, across the whole nation, Lekotek libraries contain over 50,000 toys that professionals at Lekotek have analyzed and catalogued for check out.

One of Lekotek's biggest and newest programs is AblePlay, which is directed towards toys for children with special needs. AblePlay rates toys for these children. These evaluations are useful when parents and guardians are shopping for toys for children with disabilities. AblePlay's ratings and toy reviews help parents and professionals understand each toy's unique features, and how this toy can be used in creative ways for children with special needs.

AblePlay toy evaluators rate each toy in four disability categories: physical, sensory, communicative, and cognitive. Toys are individually assessed during multiple play experiences with five-eight children with varying abilities. After this evaluation, each toy is given a star rating in each disability category and the toy evaluators write a review. The review provides the consumer with a description of the toy and information on ways the toy can be adapted.

For more information on the Lekotek Center, please contact:

3204 W. Armitage Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60647  
Phone: (773) 276-5164  
Toy Resource Helpline: 1-(800) 366-7529  
Fax: (773) 276-8644  
<http://www.lekotek.org>  
Contact: Diana Nielander, Executive Director  
Email: [lekotek@lekotek.org](mailto:lekotek@lekotek.org)

### Enabling Devices-Toys for Special Children

Enabling Devices is a company that is dedicated to providing affordable assistive and learning devices to



help individuals of all ages with disabilities. The company has been creating toys and switches for individuals with physical challenges for more than twenty-five years. They still manufacture and sell those same products, but now the company also carries additional items as well. In addition to toys, they develop, manufacture, and sell hundreds of augmentative communicators, capability switches, environmental controls, sensory devices and media enhancements.

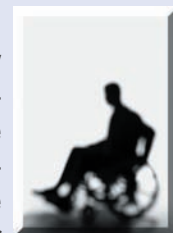
This company designs dozens of new products each year to meet the needs of individuals of all ages. They also have a broad selection of products that could meet many needs. In addition to manufacturing mass-produced products, Enabling Devices offers toy modifications at reasonable fees. They strive to support real needs.

For more information on Enabling Devices, please contact:

385 Warburton Avenue  
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706  
Phone: (914) 478-0960  
Toll-free: (800) 832-8697  
Fax: (914) 479-1369  
<http://www.enablingdevices.com>  
Email: [info@enablingdevices.com](mailto:info@enablingdevices.com)

### Assistive Technology of Ohio

Assistive Technology (AT) Ohio is a federally funded non-profit organization. AT Ohio's mission is to help Ohioans with disabilities acquire assistive technology. They offer several different programs to accomplish that goal. The programs include a loan program, computer distribution, and an adaptive toy library. These programs are designed to increase the availability and use of assistive technology devices and services. AT of Ohio also offers information and referral services to help Ohioans with disabilities locate equipment or information.



AT of Ohio promotes adaptive toys. They have established a program that is intended to help give children access to special toys that are adapted for them or made specifically for them. The program also allows parents the opportunity to "try out" these toys, to find which one best suits their child before purchasing them. AT of Ohio has partnered with the local county libraries so that these toys are available for checkout through the library, just like checking out a book. This allows

parents the opportunity to see the child interact with the toy so they can determine whether or not it will be useful and fun for their child before they purchase it.

The size of the selection and the types of toys available are different at each location. They select their toys from several national companies. These companies include Abilations, Crestwood Communication Aids, Enabling Devices, Technology for Education, and more.

For more information on Assistive Technology of Ohio, please contact:

445 E. Dublin-Granville Road; Building L  
Worthington, OH 43085  
Phone: (614) 293-9134  
Toll-free: (800) 784-3425  
TTYL (614) 293-0767  
Fax: (614) 293-9127  
<http://www.atohio.org/>  
Contact: Dr. William T. Darling, Director  
Email: [darling.12@osu.edu](mailto:darling.12@osu.edu)



### iTECH Center

The iTECH Center is a part of Parents Helping Parents of California. The Center is a preview and demonstration center for assistive technology. Here, parents and professionals are given the opportunity to gain hands-on experience with assistive devices and instructional software before making a decision on which ones best suit their specific needs.

The iTECH Center offers services in seven categories, including Techsploration, Technology for Infants and Preschoolers, trainings, speech-language pathologists, assessments, toy adaptations, and special projects.

Techsploration refers to a guided session where individuals can experience the different types of technology available at the Center. It is a demonstration. Technology for Infants and Preschoolers (T.I.P.) is an early intervention program that introduces young children to technology through play.

iTECH offers various training opportunities that are related to assistive technology and other special education topics. Their speech-language pathologist is available to address communication issues that may arise for various students. Assessments are offered by the iTECH AT certified staff in the school, home, or other settings. Toy adaptation is a program where you can bring your battery operated toy to be adapted

for switch use for only eight dollars per toy. Finally, Special Projects include various events that may occur in the community or on the Internet.

For more information on iTECH, please contact:

3041 Olcott St.  
Santa Clara, CA 95054  
Phone: (408) 727-5775  
<http://www.php.com/include/groups/showInfo.php?ID=32>  
Contact: Janet Nunez, Director  
Email: [itech@php.com](mailto:itech@php.com)

### Special Education Technology Center: Central Washington University

The Special Education Technology Center (SETC) is located at Central Washington University. The Center supports all public school districts in the state of Washington and the personnel who work in these districts. They also support any student, preschool through age 21, who formally received special education services and who may require assistive technology to access their education. Finally, SETC supports families of students with special needs.

They provide collaborative technology planning for specific students whose disabilities require that they use some form of assistive technology in order to fully access their education. The Center features a lending library of toys, switches, augmentative communication devices, alternate keyboards and other computer input devices, environmental control devices and software designed for students with special needs. Finally, they provide staff development on topics including assistive technology overview, augmentative communication, alternate computer input, software solutions and environmental control.

In order to have access to the toys in their lending library, you must be affiliated with a school district in the state of Washington. These items are loaned to the school district for a limited period of time. SETC can connect you with vendors if you are interested in purchasing some of these items that you have borrowed from their lending library.

For more information on the Special Education Technology Center, please contact:

400 East University Way  
Ellensburg, WA 98926  
Phone: (509)963-3350  
Fax: (509)963-3355  
<http://www.cwu.edu/~setc/index2.html>  
Contact: Jerry Connolly, Director  
Email: [connolly@cwu.edu](mailto:connolly@cwu.edu)

## Let's Play! Projects

Let's Play! Projects provide families with children with disabilities ways to play through the use of assistive technology. These projects provide ideas and strategies to promote play through better access to play materials, and use assistive technology to give the children this critical access. These projects believe that by building on what the child can do, and by creating interactive play environments, families can reclaim play as a critical component of childhood.



Let's Play! Projects provide information on selecting toys for play, toys for children with disabilities, adapting toys to make them easier to use, locating specially designed toys as well as other resources to promote play. They also point out that recent commercial toys include features that make them more accessible to use by more children than ever before. They provide guides to help you identify these popular toys.

For more information on Let's Play, please contact:  
University at Buffalo, Center for Assistive Technology  
322 Kimball Tower  
Buffalo, NY 14214  
Phone: (716) 829-3141  
Fax: (716) 829-2420  
<http://letsplay.buffalo.edu>  
Contact: Susan Mistrett, Project Director  
Email: [mistrett@buffalo.edu](mailto:mistrett@buffalo.edu)

## Come Play With Me!

Come Play With Me was organized as a catalog retail sales company. They are committed to providing toys which meet the safety standards of many countries, including the United States, Europe and Asia. The toys that Come Play With Me distributes are mainstream developmental and educational toys, which the president of the company has chosen to promote the development of early skills to enhance a child's ability to learn. These toys are geared towards all children, those with disabilities and those without.



For more information Come Play with Me, please contact:  
Developmental Toys for Infants and Children  
2130 Fillmore Street – PMB 290  
San Francisco, CA 94115  
Phone: (888) 798-2855 Fax: (415) 673-2125  
<http://www.comeplaytoys.com/store/index.cfm>  
Email: [info@comeplaytoys.com](mailto:info@comeplaytoys.com)

## Bright Start Therapeutics Corporation

Bright Start Therapeutics Corporation works to make life easier for parents, more enriching for children, and more enjoyable for the entire family. Their goal is to provide children with special needs and their parents with products that will help them live independently while still having fun.



The Bright Start product line has expanded since their inception. Each year they add many new and improved products. Bright Start is a believer that play is a child's most important work and they want to provide products and therapeutic devices to make sure the play is important in every child's life.

Their products are broken up based on types of play they are geared towards. They have active play toys, adaptive equipment, aquatic therapy, books and resources, child locators, clocks and timers, clothing, communication aids, computer learning, furniture and mats, handwriting, motor skills, movement, puzzles and games, sensorimotor, speech development, strollers, and greeting cards.

In addition to the toys they provide, Bright Start Therapeutics is also dedicated to developing therapeutic solutions for children with special needs who cannot get what they need from mainstream therapeutic devices. They offer an expanded selection of everyday items that parents may need. Their adaptive therapy products mainly focus on movement, positioning, sensorimotor, exercise, aquatics and play.

For more information on Bright-Start, please contact:  
11469 Olive Blvd., #198  
St. Louis, MO 63141-7108  
Phone: 1-(800) 664-4534  
Fax: 1-(800) 664-4534  
<http://www.bright-start.com/>  
Email: [sales@bright-start.com](mailto:sales@bright-start.com)

## Touch Feel Heal Special Needs Toys

Touch Feel Heal Special Needs Toys (TFH) works to provide products that are designed to help individuals with disabilities achieve success in life. Their products cover a wide range of categories.



The categories that the products available from TFH cover include visual, auditory, tactile, vestibular, proprioception, motor, cognition, communication, socialization, independence, and more.

The visual products include items such as a black light or lighting FX. Their auditory products feature noisy toys and CDs. They also have plush and textured toys under their tactile category. Sensory integration and swing frames are examples of vestibular products. For proprioception, they have massage and bath time products. Their motor products are geared towards moving, reaching, standing, manipulation, or throwing. Cognitive products focus on building, gaming, puzzles, rewards, sorting, and other aspects of toys that can stimulate the brain. For communication, they have art products as well as musical products. Socialization products include games and positioning or relaxation devices. Finally, for independence, they offer books, clothes, and mobility products.

For more information on TFH Special Needs Toys, please contact:

4537 Gibsonia Road  
Gibsonia, PA 15044  
Phone: 1-(800) 467-6222  
Fax: (724) 444-6411  
<http://www.tfhusa.com>

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[www.fctd.info](http://www.fctd.info)