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Child and Family Tip Sheet: Building Skills Through Toys

University of Montana Rural Institute

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Building Skills Through Toys



Children learn important skills from interacting with peers and play materials. Here are some things to think about when evaluating toys for a group-play setting.

Toys should be:

- Durable
- Visually inviting
- Easy to clean and sanitize
- The right size for the space or room arrangement
- Versatile, with more than one use
- Safe for the age and stage of every child



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Toys should also be:

Accessible

The equipment or toy should allow each child to use the toy without help. For example, a teeter-totter with handlebars and a back rest can be used by children of varying abilities.

Adaptable

It is more important that each child can play with a toy in some way than it is for children to play with a toy in the same way. A water table, for example, offers a sensory play experience for kids with a variety of skill levels.

Cooperative

Some materials inspire collaborative play, such as a parachute or wagon. Children may express their wishes, use turn-taking skills, or discuss rules for play when playing with cooperative toys.

Designed for Two

Materials designed for two allow children to play together. The toy may have two seats (a two-seated tricycle) or a handle and a place to ride (a wagon) or two entrances (a tunnel or barrel).

Interactive

Toys should encourage children to interact. Children communicate with each other verbally and nonverbally (smiles, frowns, hand signals) when they play face-to-face. Adding a dishpan of sand or water may increase opportunities for children to watch each other's play and communicate. Easels placed side-by-side maximize children's interaction better than ones that are back-to-back.

Adapting Toys

Here are some ideas on how toys can be adapted so kids with a variety of abilities can play together.

Make Toys Easier to Grasp

You can make toys easier to grasp by:

- **Adding a knob.** Glue a ball, a large bead, or a small peg to a puzzle or wind-up toy. If a puzzle piece has no handle, attach a spool, bead, or drawer pull.
- **Attaching a ring.** If a stuffed animal is large and does not have arms or legs that are easy to grasp, attach a bracelet or metal ring securely to the animal.

(Make sure the improvised piece is firmly attached to avoid a potential choking hazard.)

Make the Toys More Intriguing

Children may not know how to play with a toy, or a toy may have lost its appeal. Consider:

- **Group toys to suggest a play theme.** Surround a stuffed animal with feeding equipment or arrange an airplane puzzle next to toy airplanes. Grouping helps children make play connections and sparks imagination.
- **Add a surprise element.** Adding a sensory experience or using the toy in an unpredictable way can make familiar toys interesting again. Freezing pretend food before putting it in the play kitchen or putting clothes on a stuffed animal add a surprise to ordinary play.

Increase the Interaction Value

Adaptations can create new opportunities for children to interact.

- **Provide duplicates of the same toy.** Have enough blocks, paints, crayons, scoops, etc., for small groups of children to use at the same time. Children are more likely to interact and share if there are enough toys for all.
- **Add props.** When it is impossible to provide duplicate toys, arrange toys with props. Grouping a ball with large plastic hoops and construction cones increases the chances that children play together.

Add Extra Sensory Input

Children may not be able to process information with one or more of their senses; adaptations add extra sensory input.

- **Add food extracts.** Adding smells may prompt children to use toys differently. For example, adding vanilla extract to playdough may encourage a child to pretend to bake. If you have children in your care who exhibit Pica (compulsive eating of nonfood items), make sure any items you're scenting are not toxic if ingested.
- **Add new texture.** Attach Velcro dots to blocks, include sponges with water play, or add sand to finger paint. Be aware that some children may have adverse reactions to certain textures.
- **Vary temperature.** A warm stuffed animal may encourage more cuddling. Changing the temperature of the water from one day to the next can add a fun surprise to water play.
- **Increase visual contrast.** If a child has difficulty seeing where a puzzle piece fits, use paint or markers to darken the space where puzzle pieces go. If a child cannot distinguish between two parts of a snap, paint one part of the snap a different color. When coloring or painting, it is helpful if the color of paper is different from the color of the table.

The Child Care Plus Center was based at the Rural Institute from 1987 to 2012. The nationally-focused Center supported and promoted inclusive early childhood environments.

Child Care Plus is no longer an active project. However, the materials are still relevant. To address the needs of a broad audience, Rural Institute staff updated several Child Care Plus resources in 2021.

The updated views expressed in this document may not reflect the original Child Care Plus purpose, or the official position of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities or University of Montana.

MonTECH

IMPROVING LIVES WITH TECHNOLOGY

If you know a child who is unable to play with toys in a typically hands-on way, MonTECH can help. MonTECH is a free service that loans tools and devices to support independence.

A child who cannot play with a toy with their hands may be able to play with a toy by pressing a button. MonTECH carries specially adapted toys and a wide range of buttons (called 'switches') that can activate the toy with one light touch of a finger, foot, knee, head, or any body part that can move.



Toys and switches can be checked out and borrowed like a library book. Request them through our website or by email or phone, and we'll ship to you for free. At the end of 30 days, mail the items back to us (utilizing our free return shipping) and request something else to try with your little ones!

Use MonTECH to provide a range of toy options for your kiddos with diagnoses, or to try a product before you decide whether to buy a similar one for your center. MonTECH also loans communication, mobility, feeding, and positioning equipment; our team is accustomed to working with educators, families, and therapists to ensure the right loan item for the children in your care (although you're most welcome to explore options on your own!).

Please call or write with any questions about how MonTECH can support you in your work:

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