

Toys for Children with Special Needs

The Holidays are coming up and many families are asking for gift ideas for children with special needs. Here are a few ideas:

Commercially Available Toys

In the past, See 'n Says were operated by pulling a long string. This required quite a bit of force and a long arm. Today's See 'n Says have an easy to pull lever or a large push button in the middle. Many toys are fairly easy to play with, right out of the box, you may just have to hunt around and think out of the box.

Here are some great resources:

- **Toys R Us**

Toys "R" Us has a Toy Guide for Differently-Abled Kids that comes out every Fall and is available in stores and online now at www.Toysrus.com/DifferentlyAbled. This year's guide includes the Top Ten Tips for Buying Toys and Safe Play Tips for Children with Special Needs. Toy options are sorted by categories including visual, thinking, tactile, social skills, gross motor, language, self-esteem, fine motor, creativity and auditory. Toys "R" Us will ship a number of catalogs to your facility, so you can pass them out to families and explore options together.

- **National Lekotek Center**

Lekotek has facilities throughout the country with toy lending libraries to help families with special needs children to find toys they can play with. Their website also includes useful information at www.Lekotek.org.

- **Ableplay**

One Lekotek website feature is Ableplay (www.ableplay.org) which allows you to search for toys by categories and see each toy's rating in the areas of physical, sensory, communicative and cognitive. The site also includes the top ten newest products.

Sometimes a toy just needs a little help. Buttons on a toy may be too small for a child with fine motor limitations. You may be able to attach something larger to the button to increase surface area. A child with visual impairments may have difficulty finding a button on a toy. Try attaching items such as Velcro to the button to increase tactile feedback.

Don't forget, kids like and need to play together. Make sure siblings and friends can still use the adapted toy and strategize ways the child can participate in age appropriate play.

Switch Adapted Toys

Loads of toys run on batteries. Some of these battery operated toys can be adapted so that a child can activate the toy with a switch. How do you know if a toy can be adapted? Well, in general, if a toy turns on and runs when the power switch is placed at "on", the toy can be adapted. If the toys does not run until the power is turned on *and* a button is pressed on the toy (such as squeezing Elmo's hand), it generally cannot be adapted. Some of these latter toys may be available from specialty catalogs and are adapted for you.

If a toy can be adapted, you will need a **battery device adaptor** to place between the battery and the terminal. A switch plugs into the battery device adaptor. When the switch is held down, the circuit is completed and the toy will run. Sustained activation is required.

Some children have difficulty holding a switch down to activate the toy. A great solution is the **Switch Latch and Timer**. This little box plugs in between the toy and the switch and modifies how the switch controls the toy. In Latch mode, pressing the switch once turns the toy on and pressing the switch again turns the toy off. No sustained activation is required. In timed mode, a single switch activation turns the toy on for a preprogrammed amount of time (1 – 60 seconds).

Here are some great resources:

- **Ablenet**

Ablenet offers battery device adaptor and Switch Latch and Timers, along with other cool products. Check them out at www.ablenetinc.com.

- **Enabling Devices**

This company offers a large variety of specially adapted toys, including many that are difficult to adapt on your own. Many of these toys are also designed for children with sensory limitations. Look up “Check-up Time Elmo”, it is great! See the whole selection at www.enablingdevices.com.

Switch toys are fun, for a little while. Making the same toy turn on and off can get boring, fast! Add some new switch toys to the mix or check out some other options below.

Beyond toys

Kids play with other items besides toys. Many a toddler has been found playing in the kitchen with pots and pans! Older children like to help make cookies. Music is a favorite of most children.

- **Simple electrical devices:** Ablenet also manufactures the **PowerLink** which acts just like a switch latch and timer for electrical devices. It works the same as plugging a device in and out of an outlet. For this reason, this technology will not work with devices that require power before buttons will respond, such as a CD player with electronic buttons. A radio will work and so will an older style tape player with mechanical buttons for Play, etc. The PowerLink works well for all sorts of simple electronic devices, including Christmas tree lights, train sets, radios, blenders, portable foot baths, lamps, fans, lighted mirrors and vibrating mats.
- **CD Players:** Enabling Devices makes a switch adapted CD player and iPod.
- **MP3 players:** Enabling Devices makes a switch adaptation for the iPod, as does RJ Cooper (www.rjcooper.com).
- **Cameras:** Enabling Devices offers a switch adapted camera that can take digital pictures and short movie clips. This comes with a powered base to allow the user to move the camera to “frame” the picture.
- **Computer:** Look for early childhood software that is engaging, addresses numerous conceptual areas and progresses as the child advances. Some of these programs learn from your child and systematically move from exploration to mastery of concepts. If a child is unable to use the standard keyboard and mouse, alternative computer access methods can be explored. Lekotek has a great program called Compuplay that can be of help. Look for games that allow the child to play with others and that are engaging enough that siblings and friends will beg to play, too!

Play is FUN and so much more. Play is critical to the development of fine motor skills, visual spatial concepts and cognitive concepts. Play with other children develops communication and social skills. Children have typically had many years of play under their belts before entering the school arena – vital preparation.

Reference:

Lange, M. (Nov 2007) Play Time! Adapting Toys and other fun things for play. In Advance for Occupational Therapy Practitioners. (pp. 22-23, 38).