

Adapting Toys and Play Materials



Although adaptation is most commonly associated with children with disabilities, toys can and should be adapted whenever any child—or group of children—needs extra assistance. The following ideas illustrate ways that early childhood toys and play materials can be adapted.

Make toys easier to grasp. You can make toys easier to grasp either by altering the toy or by substituting a different shaped toy that serves the same purpose.

- ✗ Add a knob. A round ball or large bead can be glued over the small peg handle on a puzzle or wind up toy. If a puzzle piece has no handle, a spool, bead, or drawer pull works.

- ✗ Attach a ring. If a stuffed animal is large and does not have arms or legs that make it easy to grasp, you can attach a bangle bracelet or metal ring securely to the animal.

Make the toy more intriguing. Children may not know how to play with a toy or the toy may have, over time, lost its appeal. Minor adaptations can make toys more intriguing and encourage children to explore them more fully.

- ✗ Group toys together. Combining toys can suggest a play theme. Surrounding a stuffed animal with feeding equipment or arranging a puzzle about airplanes next to toy airplanes help children make play connections and increase the chances that one of the toys will spark a child's imagination.

- ✗ Add a surprise element. Many familiar toys can be rejuvenated by adding a sensory experience or using the toy in an unpredictable way. Freezing pretend food before putting it in the housekeeping area, arranging puzzle pieces in a play scheme, and putting scent on a stuffed animal or baby lotion on a doll add a surprise element to ordinary play.

Increase the interaction value. Adaptations can create new opportunities for children to interact.

- ✗ Provide duplicates of the same toy. It is even preferable to have more than one for each child. Picture 3 or 4 children in a sand box with six shovels, six buckets, and six sand sieves. Children are happy to offer each other a bucket or give up a shovel because there is always another one to play with.

- ✗ Add props. When it is impossible to provide duplicate toys, arrange toys with props. Having more than one 48" ball may not be practical, but arranging the ball with large plastic hoops, construction cones, and perhaps a smaller ball or two, increases the chances that a group of children could happily play a game together.

Add extra sensory input. Some children have disabilities that limit their ability to process information with one or more of their senses. Adaptations that add extra sensory input take advantage of all possible learning channels.

- ✗ Add food extracts. Adding familiar smells may encourage children to use toys differently or explore them more fully. Vanilla extract, when added to a rattle, may encourage a child to grasp the toy and bring it to her mouth.

- ✗ Add new texture. Attach Velcro dots to blocks or a material with an unusual texture to a play activity, such as sponges to water play or sand to finger paint. Be aware that some children may have adverse reactions to certain textures.

- ✗ Vary temperature. A stuffed animal that is warm may encourage more cuddling. Water play is always a surprise when the temperature changes from one day to the next.

- ✗ Increase visual contrast. If a child has difficulty seeing the hole for a puzzle piece or cannot distinguish between two parts of a snap, use paint or a marker to make the hole where puzzle pieces fit darker or 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.

Promote independent play. Many play experiences require children to be fairly independent; adaptations can give children information about what is expected.

- ✗ Store toys where children can get them without help. Store toys on low shelves, in open containers, and in the general area in which they are used. If animals or people are popular in the block area, consider storing them in the block area.

- ✗ Give children information about how to play. Starting a structure or arranging toys as if someone has been playing with them gives children information about how to begin, such as a doll sitting in a high chair with a bib and feeding equipment on the tray.

- ✗ Secure toys near the child. Wrist rattles, a ball hung from the ceiling, and toys attached to a stroller or wheelchair with plastic links are good examples. Toys should not be secured near a child any longer than she is interested in playing with them, however. Once a child becomes tired of a toy attached to the wrist, it is an annoyance, not a play thing!

One Parent's Story

My wife, Mari, and I have learned so much about our son's needs that it is sometimes hard to remember that not everyone has had our "on-the-job training." Erick is a very active 5-year-old and always wants to be in the middle of activities at Marigold Montessori Preschool. We chose the program because of the Montessori emphasis on individual pace and needs, and Erick has thrived there. They seem to be able to "forget" Erick is blind and give him opportunities to try everything the program offers.

Imagine our surprise when we had a conference with Erick's teacher and found that she had been struggling to find ways to allow Erick to be more involved with the creative art activities she offers. We have always found our son to be very creative, but this dilemma made us realize that part of Erick's creativity is able to be realized because we discovered small adaptations that make it possible for him to show us this wonderful talent. We needed to learn to "share" with our son's teacher, rather than make her go through the same trial and error that we did.

Now, Erick is creating right along with the rest of the kids, using textures (sandpaper, pipe cleaners, glitter) to "draw," manipulatives (clay, wood, wire) to "sculpt," and scent (vanilla, chocolate, perfume) to direct his play in the Living Skills area. What one time seemed to be a daily hurdle for both Erick and the teacher now has become a wonderful way to expand the options for all of the children in the program. All because we shared . . .

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *I really like my child care program! I have been very careful in what I choose for the program and feel that it is "just right." I just attended a session at a conference about adapting for children who have disabilities. Do I have to adapt? When do I have to adapt? And how will I know what needs adapting?*

ANSWER: It is crucial for you to understand that including young children with disabilities should not change your program into something it isn't. Adaptations do not necessarily mean large changes in the routines, play materials, or environment. Adaptations are made for individual children based on what each one needs in order to fully participate in the program.

You should also understand that child care providers make "adaptations" all the time! Giving a toddler a sippy-cup instead of his bottle is an adaptation: taking extra time with a group of children who all have "that nasty cold" is an adaptation: and providing a number of different sizes and kinds of paint brushes means that each child can find one which is specially adapted to his or her needs.

So . . . WHEN do you adapt? When it is clear that the child will not be successful with what is currently available. For example, when a child with a visual impairment likes to play with particular puzzles and has difficulty finding the ones she likes in the stack of

puzzles, you could put a Velcro dot on the edge of her favorites to make them easier to find by feeling the edges.

And HOW do you know WHAT adaptations to make? Parents and specialists working with the child can give you some hints that have been helpful for them. And use your own knowledge of what children like to play with and how they play to guide your observations of whether or not a child is successful in his or her play. The child who may *never, ever* put her finger into finger paint can be offered a number of adaptations that can still make finger-painting successful for her: rubber gloves, a spoon, paint brushes, sponges, etc.

The important thing is to recognize that the adaptations you make help ensure that children in your program are able to get all the benefits from a program that is "just right."

