

Toys! Toys! Toys!



You probably know a lot about how to select toys and equipment for young children in a child care program or preschool. You look for things that are playful and affordable. In addition, it is recommended that toys for young children have the following basic characteristics:

- x Durable enough to be used regularly by many children
- x The right size for your space or room arrangement
- x Visually invites young children to play
- x Versatile, with more than one use
- x Safe for the age and stage of each child in your care

However, when you have children with disabilities in your program, you may need to consider additional important characteristics as well. Matching equipment, toys, and play materials with children's needs can often easily be accomplished by looking at materials you already have in a new way. Here is a list of features to help you.

Accessible - The equipment or toy should allow access and use by children of differing abilities. This means that each child can play in, on, or with the toy without help, although an infant, toddler, or child with limited motor ability may need occasional assistance. A teeter-totter with handlebars and a back rest promotes more independent use than one without.

Adaptable - It is more important that each child can do something playful with a toy than it is for children to all do the same thing or play the same way with the toy. A water table offers a fun sensory play experience for infants and toddlers and an equally satisfying experience as they increase their skills. Also, modifications can expand a toy's usability, such as pairing a balance beam flat on the floor with a raised one.

Cooperative - When play materials require coordination of effort, such as a parachute or wagon, children may be stimulated to communicate, to express their wishes, or decide together on rules for playing with them. Children may sit in the wagon alone, but to go anywhere, another child must pull them. While some children may need to be encouraged to choose partners, after several reminders, these children may begin to search independently for other children to play with.

Designed for two - Materials designed for two or more children offer both obvious and subtle messages to children about playing 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). Duplicates of materials (arranged together) also give the message of "twoness." A lone scooter board will most likely be used by a lone child; several scooter boards grouped together invite several children to play together at the same time (and may prevent some disagreements). Have enough blocks, paints, crayons, scoops, etc., for each child in small groups of children to use at the same time.

Interactive - The toy should encourage children to play close enough to see, hear, and touch each other. You can affect how well play materials optimize contact by how you arrange them. If children are face to face, they can communicate with each other verbally as well as nonverbally (smiles, frowns, hand signals). A dish pan full of sand or water may increase opportunities for children to watch each other's play, touch the same materials, and communicate about their play better than a large sand/water table. Easels placed side by side encourage more contact and maximize children's interaction better than ones that are back to back.

For young children, important skills are acquired from frequent contact with play materials and peers. The give and take during play activities and caregiving routines in your child care program allows for experiences which are necessary to learn appropriate play and social skills at varying developmental levels and for the practice which ensures that these skills can be used in a variety of situations.

Try It Out

When new children enroll in your program, or the child enrolled has unfamiliar needs, it takes a little time to completely understand what the child requires in order to benefit the most from the toys, materials, and routines in your program. Many times in this situation, the best resource you have is the child's parents. You can benefit from the parent's own experiences with what is the best positioning device, or how to ensure a child can play, and interact, and use play materials.

One way to access this information is by having all parents complete "Special Care Notes" when they enroll their child in your program. Frequently, "Special Care Notes" simply list everyday activities - mealtime, diapering, outdoor play, rest time - along with space for parents to describe their child's specific needs and interests related to the activity. You decide on the categories, perhaps adding a few related questions, and parents fill in information and strategies they have found effective for helping their child be successful during that type of activity.

For example, PJ's grandmother wrote that PJ goes to sleep best with his pacifier. Darrell's mother wrote that, since he has low vision, bold colors are more pleasing to him than pastel colors. Amber's dad wrote that she is interested in anything she can blow through to make sounds. Stefan's dad relates that he will play with anything he can reach easily or that can be set on his wheelchair tray, but that he has difficulty getting some materials by himself. These notes can be amazingly useful to help you individualize your play space, materials, and toys to better meet the needs of these wonderful, yet so diverse children.

SPECIAL CARE NOTES

Favorite games and toys:

Amber tries to whistle like Sam. Her Grandma gave her a kazoo. She loves to play with things she can blow.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *I want to teach the children in my program to share. It's an important social skill and one that all children need to learn. What kinds of toys are best to use?*

ANSWER: The surprising answer lies in HOW MANY toys are available, more than in WHAT KIND. The very best examples of spontaneous sharing among young children under five are seen when each child has access to one or two of the same toys or play materials. In these cases, there has often been an intentional effort by the child care program to follow a policy of "one for every child."

Picture a group of three children playing with markers. If there are three markers, each child will be part of the activity. You may even see them "trade" or "share" markers. If, however, there are only two markers, someone will feel left out. One way to understand why the "one for every child" idea works is to ask yourself this question: How motivated would I be to give up my marker when it means that I do not get to play anymore?

Caregivers teach the concept of sharing as a way of helping children develop appropriate social skills. But sharing actually means to "equally apportion" and "to use or enjoy together with others." Sharing does not mean to give up the only toy there is! For example, to truly share a cookie, it must be cut into the same number of pieces as there are children. To "share" a fireman's hat, the child must give it

away. The majority of young children do not have the maturity to understand that they should peacefully give up their opportunity to play with a toy so that another child can play instead.

The secret to implementing the "one for every child" idea is to set up the environment so that there are plenty of materials for each child to play with and maybe even an extra one or two to encourage children to trade. Obviously, you may not be able to have a tricycle, wagon, and swing for each child; there will naturally be times when children have to just "wait their turn."

However, caregivers can try to acquire materials with "one for every child" as a guide whenever possible. As a general rule, younger children appreciate identical toys (they all want the same *red* truck). Older children, on the other hand, get the same play value when there are similar toys available (one truck for each child, perhaps of various styles or colors).

