

# CHILD CARE

plus +

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*A Resource for Integrated Child Care Providers*

Vol. 4, No. 2

## + 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:

- durable enough to be used regularly by many children.
- the right size for your space or room arrangement.
- visually invites young children to play.
- versatile, with more than one use.
- 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 useability, such as pairing a balance beam flat on the floor with a raised one.

**Cooperative** When play materials require coordina-

tion 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 the toy. 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 allow several children to play 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, or 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 skills at varying developmental levels and for the practice which ensures that these skills can be used in a variety of situations. +



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## + SPOTLIGHT: An Inclusive Lending Library

Child care resource and referral programs across the country are responding to the needs of a growing number of families and child care programs who use their services. A resource library or toy lending library which may have been developed several years ago could now be out-of-touch with the current needs of its users. Lending libraries, like other services provided, must address the needs of populations with special needs, such as children who are homeless, infants and toddlers, and children who have delays or disabilities.

The primary goal of a toy lending library is to provide extra resources and support to child care programs. By lending large pieces of equipment or toys that are expensive or hard-to-find, the library ultimately supports the children and families who participate in community programs. Providing an assortment of equipment, play materials, and resources appropriate to care for children with disabilities or other special needs appears to be the biggest challenge. An inclusive lending library should consider the needs of all children. Specialized equipment, books, and other resources are available, but many of these are so specialized that they would have little use in a lending library serving a wide variety of needs. In fact, much of this equipment is so individualized (wheelchairs, walkers, etc.) that it is usually prescribed or ordered specifically for a child. While this type of specialized equipment is not appropriate for a typical lending library, there are some very important additions that can be made.

Many readily available toys and play materials can be used by children of differing abilities with minor adaptations. The idea is to create for a child with a disability or special need the same play experiences that are typically available in preschool and child care programs.

What does an inclusive toy lending library look like? In the process of making a resource library more inclusive, some programs have started by including specially-made toys, perhaps with switches, and adaptive or adaptable toys and equipment. In Missoula, Montana, the Special Needs Network obtained Child Care and Development Block Grant funding to purchase a number of items for the local lending library, including a tricycle with

accessories which make it adaptable--pedal grips, moveable and interchangeable handle bars--and a high chair which not only can be raised and lowered as the child gets older and bigger, but is generously padded to provide any necessary support. In Idaho, when the United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Library in Coeur d'Alene closed, Child Care Choices was on hand to incorporate a number of left-over home-made switches and battery-operated toys into their child care lending library. And in Boise, Child Care Connections collaborated with the local

UCP Library to avoid duplicating materials and to let child care providers know more about this UCP Library and how to use it.

So how can a program select appropriate items? Using the guidelines to the left, here are some ideas used by lending libraries across the country. Giant tumble balls, sometimes called therapy balls, are great fun for any child but also provide gross motor and balance experiences for children with motor impairments. A mobile stand made from PVC pipe was used to suspend toys for children with limited grasp and release skills. One library added a set of wedges and rolls which are useful in positioning children with a wide variety of motor impairments. A corner chair proved to be very helpful (and popular) because it provided a bit of extra support for children who could not quite sit alone yet. Other useful and practical acquisitions are adapted toys like puzzles with large knobs attached for handles, foam grip handles for paint brushes and other utensils, and

durable switches that can be connected to battery-operated toys and tape players.

Sometimes the adapted toy looks and acts just like other toys in your library, and sometimes it is a new idea adopted from therapists and special educators that works well in early childhood programs. As a general rule, the particular piece of equipment, choice of play materials, and type of toys selected is not as important, however, as their ability to provide play experiences that are accessible to children with a wide variety of developmental capabilities. This question may be used to guide each acquisition: Can the item(s) be easily used (or adapted for use) by children at different developmental levels?+

### **SELECT TOYS, EQUIPMENT, AND PLAY MATERIALS THAT: ADAPT A TYPICAL TOY.**

- wooden puzzle with large knobs attached to the pieces
- sponge rubber grip on jack in the box handle
- large bead on pull-toy cord
- large, easy-to-grasp game pieces for board games

### **EXTEND THERAPEUTIC OR SPECIAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCES TO THE PLAYFUL EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING.**

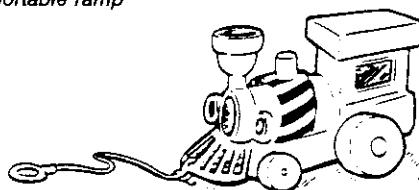
- large tumble ball
- free standing mirror
- balance beam

### **MAY BE USED ACROSS DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS OR WHEN A CHILD'S CHRONOLOGICAL AGE DOES NOT MATCH HIS OR HER DEVELOPMENTAL AGE.**

- padded high chair provides support for older child
- high chair that can be used at different heights
- age-appropriate toy to mouth, shake, or bang (cooking utensils, string of bells, drum, etc.)

### **MAKE IT EASIER FOR A CHILD TO USE TOYS AND EQUIPMENT ALREADY AVAILABLE.**

- suction cups to keep a toy in place
- rubber ball with a hole cut through it to insert eating utensils or a paint brush handle
- velcro on handle of musical instruments
- portable ramp



durable switches that can be connected to battery-operated toys and tape players.

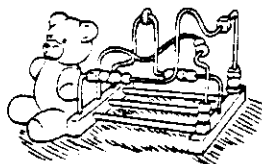
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## + FROM THE SOURCE: Who Knows Which Toys

Finding the right toys, adapting toys you already have, and looking for creative (and inexpensive) alternatives is part of providing appropriate early childhood experiences for young children with developmental challenges. Sometimes it can be difficult to find toys and play equipment that are appropriate for a particular child--especially if the child's disability significantly effects his or her ability to see, touch, or hold objects. Typical equipment found in preschool and child care programs may simply not fit the child's needs. This type of situation is where the child's parents, therapists, special education teachers, and other early intervention specialists can help.

Here are some tips to help you use their expertise:

- ★ Ask about the child's favorite toys and play equipment. You may have similar kinds of toys/equipment and be able to improvise to provide a similar play experience.
- ★ Find out if there are adaptations that can be made to any toys you already have. Large knobs or handles can be added to puzzles; a non-slip surface makes building towers easier; and other easy-to-do adaptations can be made with little or no expense.
- ★ Let other team members know what is not working and schedule a time to brainstorm. You can use their skills and expertise to identify new solutions.
- ★ When you come up with a good idea, share it. In a group care situation, you have the added advantage of input from other young children. You may find that, as you get to know the child, you have countless ideas to offer parents and other early intervention specialists as well.+



## + MAKING IT WORK: Special Care Notes

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 of 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 the materials. One way to access this wealth of information is by having parents complete *Special Care Notes* when they enroll their child in your program. *Special Care Notes* may be simply a list of your routines--meal time, diapering, outdoor play, rest time--along with space for parents to describe a child's specific needs and interests related to the activity or routine. You decide on the categories (perhaps with a few related questions), and the parents fill in information and strategies they have found effective for helping their child be successful.

For example, Darnell's mother wrote that, since he has low vision, bold colors are more pleasing for him than pastels; Amber's dad wrote that she is interested in anything she can blow through to make sounds; and 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 in getting some materials for himself. These notes can be amazingly useful to help you to individualize your play space, materials, and toys to better meet the needs of these wonderful and 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.*

## + NOTES FROM HOME:

### Including Adaptive Equipment

After weeks of searching for the "right provider," I found her! Small program--Nancy is warm and caring (and has cared for another child with spina bifida!), easy access to the play areas, great kids, close to my work; who could ask for more, right? All my problems were solved, right? Well, not exactly. Because Jelissa has spina bifida, she needs different kinds of toys and equipment to be successful in child care. John and I have gone to great lengths (and expense!) to make sure that she has what she needs. The problem came when we took her toys and equipment to the child care program and the other kids wanted a "turn" at the new items. I thought I would be okay with other kids using and trying out Jelissa's things. But I was not okay; I felt really protective of her and her "special" things. Somehow it did not seem right for other children to use equipment that was meant just for Jelissa.

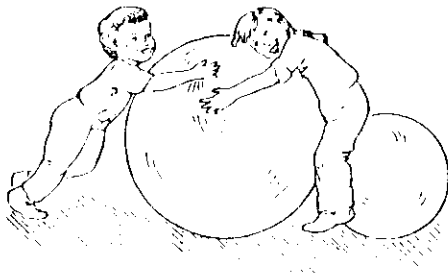
I was reluctant to talk with Nancy because I did not want her to think I was being too critical. When I got up my nerve to talk to her, however, I gained a completely new perspective on inclusion. She asked me to show her how to use and care for the equipment that we brought, and she told me how important it was for the children to learn about Jelissa's special equipment, too. She explained that children learn by doing, and the importance of their being able to touch, try out, and become accustomed to any piece of adaptive equipment. For example, by sitting in Jelissa's wheelchair, they learn about Jelissa and her disability. What's more, her "specialized" wheelchair becomes just another kind of chair. The wheelchair fits in because they know what it is for, and they have experienced how it works.

It still seems a little strange to see other children using Jelissa's equipment, but the children know that they can only use a particular item when she does not need it. And after the first few days, the newness wears off, and her things are not quite so popular. Now I see that the kids are learning a valuable lesson about adaptive toys and equipment, and Jelissa is thriving in a program where everyone is interested in her abilities (and her great stuff!).+

## + WHAT DO I DO WHEN . . . ?

**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 kind of toys are best to use?*

**ANSWER:** The answer lies in "how many" toys are available, not in "what kind." The very best examples of sharing I've seen among young children under five happen when each of the children have one of the same toy or kind of play material. In these cases, there has been a concerted 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, every child will be a part of the activity. You may even see the children "trade" or "share" markers. If, however, there are only two markers, someone will be 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 if it meant that I would not get to play anymore? We teach the concept of sharing as a way of helping children develop social skills. Sharing means to equally apportion; to use or enjoy

together with others. Sharing does not mean to give up the only toy there is! 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.

Here's how to put into practice the "one for every child" idea. The secret is to set up the environment so that there are plenty of materials for every child to play with, and maybe even an extra one or two to encourage children to trade. Obviously you will not be able to have one tricycle, one wagon, and one swing for every child, and there will be times when children will have to just "wait their turn." However, purchase materials with the "one for every child" rule in mind whenever possible. As a general rule, younger children appreciate identical toys (they all want the *red* truck) whereas older children get the same play value if there are similar toys available (one truck for each child, perhaps of different styles or colors). +

*(If you have a question about children with disabilities in child care settings, please send your question to CHILD CARE plus+.)*

**CHILD CARE plus+** is designed to enhance the integration of children with disabilities in child care settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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