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Special Toys for Special Kids

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Toys are the “tools of the trade” for working with children with special needs. Through guided play, children with special needs learn skills that are the basis for of development. Here’s a short list of great toys organized by age:

Children Under 1:

Toys that demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships and object permanence — the concept that objects exist even if they are out of sight, like touch- or voice-activated toys that play music. Large manipulative toys like activity mats, snap beads, and stacking rings help babies to learn body awareness and eye-hand coordination.

Children 1 – 3 :

Encourage labeling and pretend play with shape and color sorters, baby dolls, animals and objects like play foods. Toys to encourage gross motor skills like tunnels, push/pull and ride on. Toys for oral motor development such as horns, whistles, harmonicas, bubbles, and pinwheels.

Children 3 – 5:

Pretend play and expanded language skills toys — puppets, dress-up sets, Mr. Potato Head, doll houses, cooking sets, barns, and garages. Toys that encourage fine motor skills — chunky crayons, chalk, paints, puzzles, Play-Doh, peg boards. Foster early literacy through big books, audio books, matching games, bingo/lingo. Toys that develop focus and attention — rain sticks, story books, basic computer games. Toys that promote gross motor skills like sit and spin, hop along balls, bean bag toss and toys that encourage early learning concepts like sand and water play toys.

Children 5 – 7:

Encourage fine, visual and perceptual motor coordination to promote literacy and writing skills, and games that require focus, vocabulary and rhyming to promote expressive and receptive language and concept development. Examples:

Etch-a-Sketch, interconnecting blocks, felt boards, finger puppets, large magnets, musical instruments, word games.

Children 7+:

Continue encouraging concept development, scientific exploration, math skills, money skills, and creative thinking with toys like a play cash register, 3-D models, balance scales, magnifying glasses, binoculars, bug boxes, gear toys.

Tried and True Classics:

A jack-in-the-box is a great toy for 6-month- to 1-year-olds. It provides that element of surprise to elicit a response and model early language for baby to imitate such as “Uh-oh!” “Pop!” “Bye-bye,” and open/close. It also provides an opportunity for baby to indicate by gesture, vocalization or verbalization a request for “more.”

Wooden blocks of different shapes, colors and sizes are good for stimulation of cognitive skills. Children, develop age appropriate play skills when they use the blocks to represent things found in their environment, and expand their play schemes when they use other toys in conjunction with the blocks. For example, making houses for dolls, tracks for trains, roads for cars. Blocks can help teach shape and color concepts, enhance creativity and stimulate and conversation about what they are building.

Finger-painting provides a multi-sensory experience. For young children we recommend “edible” paints like puddings. For older children, shaving cream offers an olfactory and a tactile experience. For school-age children traditional finger-paint lets them mix colors while experiencing the tactile and visual stimulation of the activity. Finger-painting in the bath tub makes for easy clean up. #

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