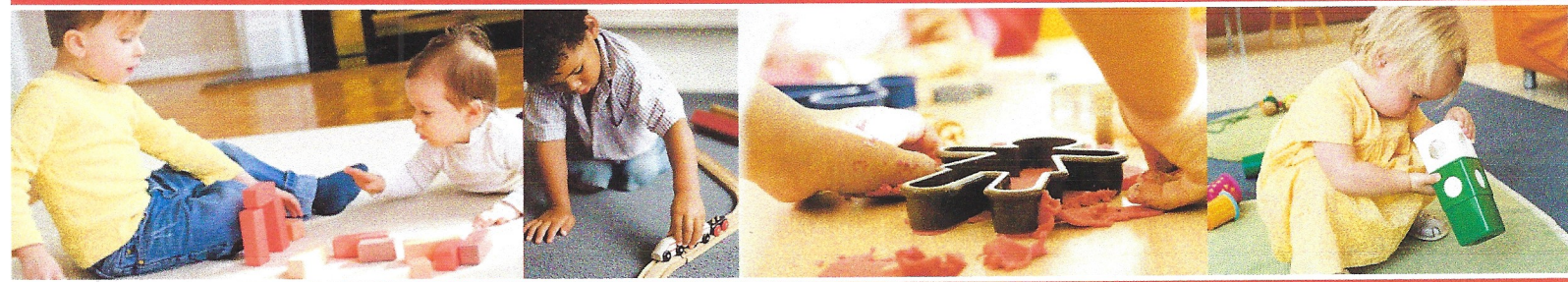


HOW TO PICK A TOY: Checklist for Toy Shopping



Play is an important occupation for children. Through play, children learn about the world and themselves. Toys are the tools of play. The right toy can engage a child's sense of curiosity, creativity, and imagination. Toys can also be used in play to help children develop physically, mentally, and socially. Occupational therapy practitioners are experts in promoting participation in activity, including play. The following checklist was developed by occupational therapy practitioners to assist you in selecting toys that can help your child learn and develop while having fun.

If you can answer "yes" to many of the questions in this checklist, your toy purchase will likely be a developmentally appropriate toy that is worth the cost.

Questions	Yes	No	Suggestions and Examples
Is the toy safe and age appropriate?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Look at the suggested age range. If the age range is too "young" for your child, he or she may get bored quickly. If a toy is too "old," he or she might get frustrated and give up. Toys that are too "old" could also pose a safety risk due to small parts that can become choking hazards.
Is the toy durable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the toy washable? Will it still work after many months of heavy use? If parts or pieces are lost or broken, how much will it cost to replace them?
Can the toy be played with in more than one way?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that offer unlimited possibilities can promote your child's creativity. Examples: <i>Blocks</i> can be built into towers and walls, knocked down and crashed into, lined up to make trains, traced on paper to make squares, and can even substitute for play food in the kitchen. <i>A sandbox</i> invites children to pour, dig, or build castles.
Does the toy appeal to several senses?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multi-colored toys with sounds, lights, different textures, and parts that move can capture a child's attention. These toys are usually easy to use, invite children to play in new ways, and encourage them to play longer without becoming frustrated. Example: <i>An activity cube</i> encourages children to play with the bead maze, push buttons, open doors, or put shapes into the shape sorter—without moving to another toy or losing interest.
Can the toy be used in more than one place?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that are easy to carry and store make it possible to play anywhere. Examples: <i>Crayons, markers, and write-on boards</i> are great to take on a trip or to a restaurant and help children develop their drawing and writing skills. <i>Sidewalk chalk</i> can also help children develop these skills and can be used at an easel, in the driveway, at the park, or at the babysitter's house.
Can the toy be used in more than one position?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Can children play with the toy while sitting, standing, or lying on their tummy or side? Example: <i>A baby gym</i> with removable toys can be played with in an almost any position. Plastic rings can be used to move the toys to different heights and areas of the gym that encourage the baby to explore and stretch when reaching for a toy in a variety of positions.

Questions	Yes	No	Suggestions and Examples
Does the toy involve the use of both hands?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that require children to use both hands can help improve coordination. Examples: <i>Construction toys, craft kits, and models.</i>
Does the toy include moving parts, buttons, or gears?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that include ways for children to use their hands and fingers help build the small muscles and coordination needed for writing, computing, drawing, counting coins, and similar tasks. Examples: <i>Lacing cards, LEGOs, and puzzles.</i> Be sure to review these toys for safety: small and removable pieces can present a choking risk.
Does the toy encourage activity and movement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that include ways for children to use their arms and legs help build the large muscles and coordination necessary for catching, throwing, kicking, running, jumping, and climbing. Examples: <i>Balls, toss and catch sets, bicycles and riding toys, and jump ropes.</i>
Does the toy encourage thinking or solving problems?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that encourage your child to solve problems and complete steps in a certain order also give you the chance to provide feedback. Examples: For babies and toddlers, consider <i>shape sorters, puzzles, and cause-and-effect toys</i> (e.g., <i>Jack in the box</i>). For older children, <i>board games, science kits, and cooking kits</i> may provide an opportunity to work on thinking skills in a fun and exciting way.
Does the toy promote communication and interaction?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toys that encourage dramatic play and imagination help build social skills and allow children to try out new behaviors. Examples: <i>Toys like dress up clothes or costumes, playhouses, kitchen sets, work benches and tools, and puppets</i> can help your child learn cooperation, negotiation, and asking for help.
Is the toy appealing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider the toy's color, shape, size, and popularity. Will the toy be something your child will want to play with often and over a long period of time? For older children, you may want to choose a toy that is well liked by their friends.
Is the toy worth the cost?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some of the best "toys" are items you already have at home that don't cost much. Consider whether you can substitute the toy that you are considering buying with something you already have at home. Examples: <i>Colorful plastic cups</i> can be stacked and sorted, and <i>plastic containers and lids</i> can become puzzles. You can play peek-a-boo with a <i>dish towel</i> , turn a <i>coffee can</i> into a shape sorter or a bank, or use <i>chocolate pudding</i> poured over tinfoil in a cookie sheet as finger paint.

The right toy can help to support a child's development and build confidence, all while being fun. Occupational therapy practitioners are skilled at evaluating a child's developmental strengths and needs and selecting toys that provide the "just right" challenge.

Need More Information?

For ideas on how to develop play skills to promote health and well being, check out AOTA's tip sheet, *Building Play Skills for Healthy Children and Families*, available at www.aota.org/playtips, which provides information and ideas on play from early childhood through high school and beyond.

Occupational therapy practitioners help children of all ages and abilities. For more information, go to the Web site of the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

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THE ACT OF PLAYING is an important tool that influence's a child's life. The primary goals of childhood are to grow, learn, and play. It is often through play that children learn to make sense of the world around them. It is a child's "job" or "occupation" to play to develop physical coordination, emotional maturity, social skills to interact with other children, and self-confidence to try new experiences and explore new environments.

Occupational therapy practitioners have expertise in evaluating children's neurological, muscular, and emotional development; and determining the effects of infant and childhood illness on growth and development.

What Can Parents and Families Do?

Encourage **sensory rich** play by using balls, sand and water toys, slides, swings, finger paints, and magnets. During sensory play, children use their senses to incorporate smell, touch, sound, vision, and movement.

Encourage **manipulative play**, such as using play dough, LEGOs, and board games. Toys such as puzzles, pegboards, beads, and lacing cards help improve the child's eye-hand coordination and dexterity.

Promote **imaginative** or **pretend play** with things like dolls and stuffed animals, toy furniture, puppets, and telephones. Pretend play encourages creativity and role playing and provides an opportunity to rehearse social skills.

Choose toys that are appropriate to the child's age and/or maturity level. They do not have to be expensive or complicated to be beneficial. Common objects, such as pots and pans, empty boxes, spools of thread, shoelaces, and wooden spoons are readily accessible and encourage children to use their imagination.

Remember when choosing a toy to consider whether a child must be supervised while playing with it. Toys should not have small parts that break easily or can be swallowed.

What Can an Occupational Therapy Practitioner Do?

Help adapt toys or modify the environment to provide optimal sensory input without overwhelming the child.

Recommend toys and play activities that provide the "just right" challenge for the child, so he or she learns while having fun. The occupational therapy practitioner can also recommend ways to build on the child's strengths and abilities.

Offer play opportunities that encourage turn taking and problem solving. Consider family routines and priorities when recommending play strategies. Observe, identify, and develop play strategies that promote a healthy lifestyle and relationships.

Suggest toys that will help the child develop particular skills, while having fun. Recommend ways for family members to be more involved in the child's play. Suggest toys and play activities for children of all abilities and ages. Collaborate with educators and caregivers to enhance playtime at home, during recess at school, and during community outings.

Help determine what toys will be safe, developmentally appropriate, and fun for a particular child, based on an evaluation and in consideration of the child's and family's needs and goals.

Recommended Toys and Activities for Children and Teens

Infants	Rattles, mobiles, playmats, mirrors, crib toys, infant swings, teething toys, busy boxes, squeeze toys
Toddlers and Preschoolers	Blocks, stacking rings, pegboards, shape sorters, push and pull toys, balls, books, sand and water toys, large beads, movement games, toy cars and trucks, train sets, musical toys
School-Aged Children	Building sets, books, bicycles, roller skates, ice skates, board games, checkers, beginning sports
Middle Schoolers and Adolescents	Athletics, books, hobbies, crafts, electronics

Need More Information?

Occupational therapy practitioners promote play for all children, with or without disabilities. Play challenges could indicate a need for further assessment. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist, ask your physician, other health professionals, and your school district's director of special education for information on how you can access an occupational therapist in your area.

You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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Building Play Skills for Healthy Children & Families



What is play, and why is it important?

Play is can be defined as “any spontaneous or organized activity that provides enjoyment, entertainment, amusement or diversion” (Parham and Fazio, 2008, p. 448). Play is one of children’s major occupations—how they occupy their free time and learn. It is an important activity for your child because play helps to facilitate positive growth and development. Physical health, social and emotional well-being, and positive mental health are promoted through play. When a child plays, he or she experiences new ways to solve problems and learn skills needed to become a healthy adult. Research has shown that children who participate in play frequently grow quickly, experience higher achievement in school, and develop healthy habits for adulthood. A comparative study of 11,000 third graders found that those who participated in more than 15 minutes of recess per day behaved better in the classroom and were more likely to learn than their peers who had little to no recess opportunities. (Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009). Using daily routines and activities throughout the day, encouraging the happiness and joy that can be experienced through play, and simply allowing children to be playful can enhance their health and well-being.

How can families develop play skills to promote health and well-being?

Early childhood

Play teaches infants, toddlers, and preschoolers about their bodies and about the effects of their actions on the world around them. Play promotes growth and development through movement and exploration. Family members are the child’s first playmates.

- During their first few months, babies enjoy colorful mobiles, rattles, vocal play such as talking and singing, and games involving moving their arms and legs. Encourage your baby to participate while lying on his or her back, belly, or side, or while supported on your lap.

- As babies learn to reach, grasp, and sit on their own, they enjoy mirror play, balls, and toys that involve squeezing, stacking, and pulling apart. Babies also enjoy interactive games like peek-a-boo, music, and books. Water play with toys that float and plastic letters to stick on tile walls provides bathtime fun.
- Because babies enjoy and learn through putting toys in their mouths, make sure they play with toys that are age specific and are made without small parts.
- As children learn to walk and run, they enjoy chasing and hide-’n-seek, climbing, and pull toys.
- Toddlers develop hand skills by dropping shape toys into slots and scribbling with crayons. They also enjoy books and toys that make sounds. They begin to imitate by using, for example, a toy telephone or hammer.
- Imitation and pretend play increases during the preschool years, through use of dress-up, puppets, and toy cars and trains. Preschoolers enjoy construction games such as building toys and puzzles, which further develop their coordination skills. They enjoy playground time and riding toys. They play with materials with different textures such as finger paints and sand. Games during the preschool years teach turn-taking and getting along with others. These activities also help children develop language skills.

Elementary school

The elementary school years are an important time for learning to play by rules and participating in cooperative activities such as sports teams. Motor skills are being fine tuned, and there is an increased interest in developing hobbies. Play often serves as a way of developing friendships and expressing one’s unique personality. Finding a balance between formal play (e.g., participating on a sports team) and informal play (e.g., participating on the playground) allows for play time to be both active and creative.

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Try these ideas to build skills and expression:

- Participate in board games and sports activities with your child; this helps your child to learn to follow rules.
- Have various craft materials readily available to spark creativity and interest.
- Offer options for extracurricular activities that include both physical and creative exploration (e.g., sports teams or performing arts experiences).
- Provide play opportunities that include both structured and less structured choices (e.g., being on a school team or playing soccer in the backyard with neighborhood friends).
- Encourage your school to support recess as a necessary part of every child's day. This is a good time for physical movement that can promote learning and positive behavior.
- Like recess, active play before homework time can prepare your child for learning.
- Don't forget to keep play activities fun! If you lose that element, it is no longer play.

Middle School

The early teen years mark a time of exploring social relationships. This is teens' form of play. Teens tend to like group activities, such as spending time with friends, listening to music, talking, and going to the mall. This time with friends allows them to improve social, movement, and mental skills; gain an understanding of themselves as individuals; and practice new skills in different environments without continuous parental supervision. These opportunities can promote a sense of well-being. Young and older teens also enjoy after-school activities, such as clubs (drama, music, art, athletics) and work (volunteer and paid).

- Encourage your child to join school and community-based clubs and after-school activities.
- Participate in leisure activities with your teen, such as table tennis or biking, to help strengthen family ties and offer opportunities to build communication.
- Ask questions about your child's preferences in movies or music to indicate your interest and to spark conversation.
- Consider your own habits and routines of leisure and whether they include physical activities and model a balanced lifestyle of work and play. You are a role model for your teen.

High School and Beyond

During the high school years, play promotes cooperation and opportunities for teamwork. Through play, older teenagers are able to get to know themselves better and pinpoint their inter-

ests and strengths. As school and social pressures increase at the high school level and beyond, leisure activities can reduce stress, and offer a sense of belonging and a chance to develop their goals. Encourage your teen to balance homework with leisure time to promote a healthy lifestyle addressing both mental and physical wellness.

- Encourage limited screen time (TV, computers, MP3 players) and increased physical activity to help prevent or reduce problems associated with obesity and depression.
- Find a good fit between the demands of the leisure activity and the skills and interests of your teen. For example, depending on your child's personality, physical abilities, and interests, he or she may prefer more physically demanding activities like swimming, whereas other children may prefer debate or drama clubs that challenge verbal and other cognitive skills.
- For all age groups, offer healthy, balanced meals as the fuel needed for physical activity.
- To prevent injury for all age groups, be mindful about the use and proper maintenance of appropriate safety equipment, such as helmets for biking. Know the signs of concussion. Encourage stretching before and after vigorous exercise.
- Low-cost, easily accessible leisure pursuits such as chess and basketball offer lifelong participation through community leagues and recreational centers.

Play helps to build coordination and strength as well as creativity and social skills. Play also helps to develop emotional well-being and increases a child's ability to explore, problem solve, and create. Occupational therapy practitioners are important health care providers who value play in families, schools, and communities. They assess all areas of activity to promote health, growth, and development. They are skilled at observing, identifying, and developing play strategies and healthy habits for children and their families and building towards successful participation in adulthood. Occupational therapy services help babies, children, and adolescents live life to its fullest. ■

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