

Children learn through play

Toys are fun, but toys are also tools that help children learn about themselves and the world around them. Play is critical to the healthy growth and development of children. As children play, they learn to solve problems, to get along with others and to develop the fine and gross motor skills needed to grow and learn. Hospital staff often use play as a means of providing therapy to children. Play helps a child do the following:

- **Develop physical skills.** Gross motor skills are developed as a child learns to reach, grasp, crawl, run, climb and balance. Fine motor skills are developed as children handle small toys.
- **Develop cognitive concepts.** Children learn to solve problems (What does this do? Does this puzzle piece fit here?) through play. Children also learn colors, numbers, size and shapes. They have the ability to enhance their memory skills as well as their attention span. Children move on to higher levels of thought as they play in a more stimulating environment.
- **Develop language skills.** Language develops as a child plays and interacts with others. This begins with parents playing cooing games with their children and advances to practical levels such as telling make-believe stories and jokes.
- **Develop social skills.** Learning to cooperate, negotiate, take turns and play by the rules are all-important skills learned in early games. These skills grow as the child plays. As a result, children learn the roles and rules of society.

As a parent, what is my role in play?

Parents are their children's first and best playmates. Parents have a role in being involved in their children's play. Children tend to be more creative when their parents are involved in their play. The best play occurs when the adult plays alongside the child, rather than just providing the toys or supervising. Becoming part of a child's play may take practice. Some parents feel that they need to give up "childish" things and "grow up." However, this is not true for parents. Some suggestions for joining your child's play include:

- **Observe.** Watch your child closely to learn what he or she can do and has problems doing. Also, be aware of your child's favorite activities.
- **Follow.** Join in and play with your child so that he or she knows you are interested in what he or she is doing. You can add to the complexity of the play; however, let your child be in control and determine the direction of play.
- **Be creative.** Let go of the adult idea that there is only one way to play with a toy. Use toys in different ways, and you will be amazed at how many different ways you can play with one toy. Being creative will make playing more fun for you and your child.

What toys are appropriate for my child?

Parents also have an important role in choosing good toys. Below are some suggestions for appropriate toys for children of various ages. Be aware of your child's interests and abilities. Not all children enjoy the same kinds of play.

Birth to 1 year old

A baby learns about his or her surroundings by using all five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch). A child this age is also learning cause and effect. Toys this age group may enjoy include:

- Mobiles and safety mirrors;
- Rattles;
- Stacking toys;
- Simple pop-up toys;
- Picture books;
- Musical toys, squeeze toys;
- Infant swings; and
- Teething toys.

1 to 3 years old

A toddler moves around in the environment a lot (walking, climbing, pushing, riding). A strong interest in manipulating and problem solving with objects begins during this period and can be encouraged with:

- Push-pull and ride-on toys;
- Small tricycles and wagons;
- Simple puzzles, shape sorters, peg boards;
- Movement games;
- Large beads;
- Blocks, stacking rings;
- Picture books; and
- Crayons, markers and clay.

3 to 5 years old

Preschoolers love to be around other children and enjoy sharing many kinds of activities, including:

- Dress-up with accessories;
- Puppets;
- Large bead-threading and lace sets;
- Storybooks;
- Simple board games (Hi-Ho Cherry-O, Candyland); and
- Puzzles (no more than 24 pieces)

6 to 9 years old

A school-age child seeks out new information, experiences and challenges in play. A child in this age group is influenced by peers and is extremely social. This age group may prefer group activity items such as:

- Sports equipment;
- Bicycle and helmet;
- Roller skates with protective gear;
- Books;
- Simple model and craft kits;
- Board games (Sorry, Trouble, Parcheesi, Checkers);
- Coordination or memory games (Jenga, Simon, Perfection, Mastermind); and
- Building and construction sets.

9 to 12 years old

A pre-teen is independent, yet thrives on play with other children. A child this age knows how to play fair using advanced social skills and will be able to manage:

- Books;
- Card and board games;
- Sports equipment;
- Art supplies;
- Model kits/science kits; and
- Jigsaw puzzles.

Tips on selecting toys

Children are just as prone to fads as adults are. Many of the trendy toys will be played with briefly and then pushed aside. Toys that have withstood the test of time are good choices, but many new toys and manufacturers should not be overlooked. The following are questions you should ask about toys before buying them.

- Is the toy appropriate for the child's age, skills and abilities?
- Will it hold the child's interests?
- Is the toy well-designed?
- Is it safe? Are there any potential hazards such as sharp edges, parts that can be swallowed or loose ties? Is it non-toxic? Does it meet Consumer Product Safety Standards?
- How durable is it? Will it take rough treatment?
- Is the toy appealing? Does it have long-lasting play value? Is it versatile?
- Does the toy stimulate creativity? The right products in arts, crafts, hobbies, language, reading, music, movement and drama can help to expand a child's imagination, thinking and comprehension.
- Will the product teach?
- Does it help expand positive self-esteem, values, understanding and cultural awareness? Does it help encourage the growth of self-esteem or values in the child?
- Does it offer practice in eye-hand coordination or fine and large motor skills?
- Does the toy help teach communication skills?
- Is the toy affordable? Does the price match the value received?
- Will the toy frustrate or challenge the child? Does the toy offer an opportunity to think, learn something new, practice or try something that will be beneficial? Or will it be too difficult for the child to use?
- Will the toy help to nurture childhood?
- Can the child use the product by him or herself? Will it help him or her gain independent skills?
- Does the product help the child express emotions, experience care and concern for others, practice positive social interaction? Is there any violence, sexism or negative aspects to the product?
- Is the toy fun? Most importantly, will the child enjoy using the toy? Will it make him or her laugh? Relax? Feel good? Play is after all a time to have fun.

For more information

If you have more questions about how children learn through play, speak with a Child Life Specialist at the hospital.