TOYS

A comprehensive guide to finding the right toy for your child with special needs
“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”
— Fred Rogers

If play is the work of childhood, then toys are the tools of the trade. All children learn through play, but play does not come naturally to all children. It doesn't necessarily come naturally to adults, either! But with practice, adults can learn how to help children with special needs express their thoughts, feelings, skills, past experiences and dreams for the future while playing.

Sometimes the right toy can spark enough interest to start something new. Jason Ferrise explains in his article, “Toys should have meaning to each individual child. Without meaning, there is no assigned value to play with that toy.” The purpose of this essay collection is to narrow down the field of infinite toys to those which successfully target special interests and emerging skills. Here you'll find tried-and-true toys and activities recommended by experienced therapists and parents – yes, even toys for children who refuse to play with toys, or children who prefer to spend hours each day watching objects spin.

At home, toys may be used to expand circles of communication - the little exchanges of glances, gestures, facial expressions and vocalizations between parent and child. The idea of “circles of communication” was first articulated by Dr. Stanley Greenspan in his book The Child with Special Needs, in which he also outlined his research on a type of play therapy called Floortime. These circles are based on a trusting relationship and continue to grow as new skills are added.

In therapy, toys are often used to break the ice with a new therapist, and subsequently to work toward specific goals in fine and gross motor skills, speech, cognition, social skills and sensory integration. In this collection you will find discussions and explanations for each of those areas.

The ultimate goal of play is the development of everyday life skills:

- Understanding cause and effect
- Relating to another person
- Learning to adapt to new situations – or familiar situations with a twist
- Finding creative solutions to problems

Play is supposed to prepare a person for real life - a kind of dress rehearsal. Children with special needs require plenty of opportunities to rehearse for every possible scenario with a rotation of tantalizing toys. So the next time someone asks, “What should I get for your child’s birthday?” - You’ll have an answer.
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15 Great Online Toy Stores for Children with Special Needs

Author: Tzvi Schectman

Way back in 2011 we wrote up a list of online toy stores for children with special needs. In 2 years a lot has changed. We decided to dig around and see if we could come up with more toy stores selling products for children with special needs.

Here are 15 stores that provide great toys and educational products for babies, children and teens with special needs.

1. Ability Station
   Ability station provides special toys for many different special needs and skillsets. All toys are therapist approved for a child’s growth, development and fun.

2. Amazon.com
   Amazon sells anything and everything you could possibly think of (ex: Sigmund Freud action figure or UFO Detector). Tucked away in a corner of Amazon are 464 special needs multi-sensory toys.
3. **Fat Brain Toys**  
Fat Brain Toys provides a comprehensive listing of toys appropriate for specific disabilities. Caregivers of individuals with special needs can browse through the site and purchase developmentally appropriate toys, games and tools.

4. **Kado Kid**  
Kado Kid offers amazing education products that offer functions and fun while helping children develop. All of their items are from Weplay, a leading designer in early childhood products.

5. **Different Roads to Learning**  
Founded in 1995 by the mother of a child diagnosed with Autism, Different Roads to Learning carries over 500 products carefully selected to support the Autism Community. You’ll find everything from basic flashcards, books and timers to advanced social skills tools to support you at every step.

6. **eSpecial Needs**  
From oversized building blocks and bungee jumpers to snapwall playsets and sand and water activity tables, eSpecial Needs offers a variety of appealing active play toys for children with special needs, including autism.

7. **Fun and Function**  
Fun and Function designs sensory toys and therapy equipment for individuals with special needs to help children learn adaptive responses for what they may lack or crave. Looking for a gift for a child with special needs? Fun and Function has some recommendations.
8. **Gummy Lump**
Gummy Lump offers toys that make sweet memories: play food, wooden toys, pretend play & educational toys for toddlers & preschoolers! Featuring [Melissa & Doug](https://www.melissaanddoug.com/) and other [award winning toys](https://www.gummylump.com/)

9. **Playability Toys**
PlayAbility Toys designs and develops toys for children with special needs. Toys are geared towards children on the Autism Spectrum, individuals who are blind & visually impaired, cognitive challenges, hearing impaired, physical challenges, speech delay and more.

10. **Special Needs Toys**
Special Needs Toys offers a wide range of special needs toys, from mobile Multi-Sensory, to Swings, Trampolines and other Sensory Integration kits, Switches, rewards and small Sensory toys.

11. **Toys ’R’ Us**
Toys ‘R’ Us has a complete "Differently-Abled" Kids section. Categories include: Auditory, Creativity, Fine Motor, Gross Motor, Language, Self-Esteem, Social Skills, Tactile, Thinking and Visual

**General Toy & Education Stores**
These stores do not have a special needs toy section, however a number of their products are perfect for children with special needs.

12. **Lakeshore Learning**
Lakeshore is dedicated to creating innovative, educational materials that spark young imaginations, instill a sense of wonder and foster a lifelong love of learning. Although not specifically targeted towards children with special needs, a number of their products can be very helpful.
13. **Oompa**
At Oompa.com, you won’t find toys with batteries, over-stimulating blinking lights or commercially commissioned cartoon characters. You will find a well-edited selection of delightfully modern toys that are thoughtfully designed and superbly crafted.

14. **Growing Tree Toys**
Growing Tree Toys is a specialty toy store committed to providing educational toys that challenge, stimulate, and encourage children to express their creativity.

15. **Toys To Grow On**
Toys to Grow On has everything from baby & toddler toys to activity toys, art projects and educational toys for the preschool years. Whether you’re looking for unique learning toys or super-safe toys for infants and babies, you’ll find them at Toys to Grow On!
Eight Tips for Special Needs Holiday Toy Shopping

Author: Jason Ferrise

As the holiday season approaches the rush to find the perfect toys for children with special needs can sometimes be a nerve-racking mission. How do you pick the right toy for your little girl or boy? Here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

1. Consider Unusual Interests
Many children with special needs may not enjoy typical toys and instead may be more interested in items like fans, vacuums, or even plugs and cords. Taking their interests into consideration can give us insight into what to choose.

Try and consider what aspect of an unusual item holds the child’s interest. For example, if the child enjoys linear items like cords, strings and belts, we might wish to choose toys like wands, dolls that have lots of stringy hair, or pull toys that have a rope or string attached.

Toys should have meaning to each individual child. Without meaning there is no assigned value to play with that toy. “Toys should allow for the suspension of reality”
(Case-Smith, 2005, pg. 573), and allow the child’s imagination to take over.

2. Get Moving
Toys or games that get children moving and provide sensory input are a must from birth to two years, but are equally important throughout the lifespan. The body learns through movement and sensory experiences, and the body’s skill set improves with repetition and practice.

Athletic activities like football, basketball, baseball, soccer, hockey, gymnastics, swimming, and horseback riding are always a positive. Movement will help produce skilled and coordinated actions. Today’s electronic gaming systems are equipped with activities that allow for either imitated movement or movement in response to changing game parameters. Toys or games that require increased physical output will also help increase overall body strength.

3. Make Sense of Things
Toys should also foster sensory processing and address:

- tactile (touch)
- auditory (sound)
- visual (sight)
- vestibular (movement)
- proprioception (input to muscles and joints).

It is very important to know what types of sensory input your child likes or dislikes. Some sensory input can be disruptive to children and make them feel uncomfortable.

Some great tactile ideas include:

- Play-Doh
- Putty
- Shaving cream
- Finger paints
- Bubbles
- Sand
- Goop/gak/slime
- Textured balls
- Gel pull toys
Auditory Input
Auditory input should provide some form of sound or music which the children have to differentiate. Some examples include games like Simon that make a variety of sounds or musical CDs that provide fun dance instructions which the children have to follow.

Visual Input
Visual input should provide opportunities for differentiation between color, size, and shape, as well as the opportunity to identify, scan and track objects.

Vestibular Input
Vestibular examples are swinging, spinning, hanging upside down, and general large movements such as walking, running, and jumping.

Proprioceptive input
Proprioceptive input will provide sensory information to the muscle and joints of the body. Games that get children moving, jumping, running, rolling, catching, and kicking are just a few examples for proprioceptive input.

4. Motivate Motor Skills
Toys that promote the use of the hands and fingers are essential. Fine motor skills start to develop as an infant, gradually become more distinct leading into 18 months of age, and really start to blossom by age two to three and continuing into adulthood.

There are many toys available now that put the child in the driver’s seat for building or constructing an object or structure. Examples include:
- Legos
- Model cars and planes
- Robotics sets
- Electronics sets
- Arts and crafts
- Jewelry-making kits
- Coloring or painting with a brush
- Board games that require the use and manipulation of small game pieces

Whatever they might be, toys that engage the fingers and hands will enhance skills required for school work such as hand writing and art projects.
5. Learn for Life
Toys or games that provide education are a great way to get children learning without the structured classroom or home environment. Children learn constantly from birth, but the period from age 15 months to 2 years is a critical time to get children learning because they think they are playing when in fact they are learning.

Games or toys that promote learning should have a setup where the child has to answer questions or respond to cues. The games should require cognitive processing, such as answering with the correct animals, shapes, colors, or numbers. Games that use clocks to tell time or complete a task by certain amount of time also work well.

6. Release the Imagination
Toys should allow the child to escape to an alternate place where they can be silly. By age two children have emerging imagination skills and by age three their imagination really begins to take flight. Toys should allow a child to create, build, or design a concept that has meaning to them.

More importantly, toys should support their expressions, ideas, wants or needs in their daily life. Building, painting, drawing, and coloring are great ways to foster imagination and creativity. Toys that allow a child to build or design are also great. Dolls and action figures are unique as they allow the children to become someone else for that period of time.

7. Play Alone & With Others
Toys should also allow for independent play as well as combined play with other children. Initially, children play by themselves and eventually merge into parallel play and combined play. The age ranges for these types of play may vary depending on the child’s social skills, however, independent play usually begins before age two, and combined play starts between two and three years of age and older.

Independent play lets children feel in full control. Toys that promote combined play allow children to play in a more diversified manner and make for greater learning opportunities. Items like dolls, cars, or building blocks can be used both independently and for combined play.
8. Get Social
Toys should also help promote social behavior. Games, toys, and play activities should initiate language for communication between two or more individuals. Board games that engage the children in language such as “want to play” “You go first,” “what do you need?” or “I will win!” are a few examples of how language can assist with social behaviors.

Games that engage children in good sportsmen conduct such as “way to go,” “great job,” or “oh, that’s okay” are a few more examples. These types of activities are great as they can help bridge the challenges with social interactions and help make communication stronger and more understandable between two or more individuals.
10 Tips for Selecting Toys for Your Speech Delayed Child

As a speech-language pathologist, I am asked what toys I recommend most for children with speech and language delays all the time. Today, I’d like to share my 10 tips for selecting toys for your child with speech/language delays.

1. Ditch the Batteries

My first recommendation is to skip the batteries. If the toy requires batteries, you probably don’t want it. OR…if it takes batteries, you can take them out. One good example is the really cute farm set from a very popular toy maker. The toy set by itself is great! But the barn has batteries so that it can make noises. You don’t need the barn to make noises. You want your CHILD to make the noises! So…do like I do and just take them out.

There are a few exceptions to this, of course. My kids have a couple toys that use batteries that I have allowed them to keep (with batteries in). They have a couple toy cameras that take real pictures, a toy lap top (I could take the batteries out, but I’ve left them in), a toy vacuum (again, I could remove the batteries here too), a microphone that you can record your voice (so cool), and a “karaoke” type toy. Their toy drill also
requires batteries and it is such a cool toy-it actually works! So again…there definitely are exceptions but I would try to have most of your toys battery free.

2. Pick Open Ended Toys

What are open ended toys? They are toys that have no beginning, middle or end. They can be used in a variety of ways and allow your child creative freedom in how to manipulate and use them. These toys tend to be the more basic and traditional toys. Which is NEXT on my list!

3. Go Back to the Basics: Pick Traditional Toys

As mentioned above, the more traditional toys also tend to be more open ended in nature. Here are some examples of open ended, basic traditional toys:

- Wooden blocks
- Legos
- Cars, trucks, transportation toys (they do NOT need to make noise! That is what your child is for. Take the batteries out!)
- Simple train tracks and trains (we have wooden set with NO batteries. However, I do have a plastic set WITH and without batteries to use with clients. Let’s be honest..it *is* fun to watch the trains go around the track sometimes!)
- Play kitchen and play food
- Farm Set (no noisy ones or other animal sets that suit your child’s interests- dinosaurs for example)
- Doll House
- Mr. Potato Head
- Play Dough
- Dress up clothes
- Tool Set
- Tea Set
- Baby doll/baby blanket

4. Don’t Worry About Gender

I just talked about this in my recent post The Importance of PLAY for Speech and Language Development. When picking toys for your child don’t stick to gender specific toys. Let your girls play with trucks and trains and your boys play with toy kitchens and baby dolls. Here is some research on The Impact of Specific Toys on Play from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
“What set the highest-scoring toys apart was that they prompted problem solving, social interaction, and creative expression in both boys and girls. Interestingly, toys that have traditionally been viewed as male oriented—construction toys and toy vehicles, for example—elicited the highest quality play among girls. So, try to set aside previous conceptions about what inspires male and female play and objectively observe toy effects to be sure boys and girls equally benefit from play materials.”

I contributed to a great post all about why all children (even boys) should have a baby doll. You can read it at Mama OT.

5. Skip the “ABCs and 123’s”
On the subject of going back to basics…Go take a walk through Target or any big chain store’s toy department. There is this aisle (ok, several sometimes) with shelves stacked high with toys that say things like “Teaches the ABCs!” “Educational!” “Teaches Colors and Numbers!” and on and on.

Kim from Little Stories talks about these and calls them SCLANS and why our children don’t need them to learn their ABCs and 123’s. In fact, your children don’t need these types of toys. They tend to do ALL the “doing” with their lights and music and flashing lights. If your child has a speech and language delay, as a speech-language pathologist those skills are not at the top of my list of skills we need to target. I talk more about this in my post What your Toddler REALLY Needs to Learn (Hint: You Don’t Need Any of Those “Educational Toys”).

6. Use Toys that get Them Moving
It is so important to get your kids moving! Even when indoors. making forts and tunnels are great ways to keep them moving indoors, without actually having to *buy* specific “toys” for that purpose. We also have some ride-on toys that we allow in the house (we have tile/hardwood floors) that keep our children moving as well as balls (yes, even inside).

7. Don’t Forget to Get Outside
You don’t have to *buy* outdoor toys. Heading to the park is great and FREE! But sometimes you don’t have a park nearby or it is difficult to get you and the kids
there...so here are some of my favorite outdoor toys:

- **Water table** (A big bucket will do, or a small pool)
- Buckets, cups, spoons (again, these can just be from your kitchen...Tupperware works well!)
- Small shovel/hoe for digging
- **Ride on toys**
- **Play house** - This one is a bigger purchase. We have one and it can provide HOURS of independent, creative play!

8. **Less is More**

So here I have just listed some toy recommendations for you. But, the truth is that *less is more*. Your child does NOT need toys upon toys! In fact, too many toys can actually be a *big negative*. Believe it or not, children can get overwhelmed with too many toys and can end up moving quickly from one toy to another which can actually limit their play (and language) opportunities overall. But, sometimes we just have a lot of toys from holidays and birthdays. So how can you keep all these toys but still provide your child with ample opportunities for solid and meaningful play with each? See below.

9. **Consider a Toy Rotation**

One solution to having a plethora of toys is to do a toy rotation. We used a toy rotation in our last home for a while and it was GREAT. Wondering how these work? Check out [Little Stories](#) (a fellow speech-language pathologist) for a ton of information on *rotating toys*.

10. **Sometimes the BEST Toys are not “Toys” at All!**

You probably noticed that a few times I mentioned using things that aren’t traditional “toys” as toys (like making forts or using buckets for water play). This is because *sometimes the BEST toys are not *real* toys at all!* Pots, pans, wooden spoons, cardboard boxes, homemade forts with blankets and pillows... *these can be the BEST toys for your child*. Be creative. Think outside (or inside) the box. And sometimes **YOU** are the best toy for your child. Sing with him. Play patty-cake. Talk in a funny voice. Tell him stories. Be silly. Play hide and seek. Teach him finger plays. Play lap games.
25 Great Toys for Kids Who Don’t Play With Toys

Author: Karen Wang

Does your child play with toys? If so, this article isn’t for you. You should probably Google “hottest toys of 2013.”

- Is your child scared of blinking, beeping toys?
- Is your child unable to understand the rules of most games?
- Does your child lack interest in typical toys?
- Is your child delayed when it comes to basic play skills?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then keep reading.

All human beings learn through play. A delay in play skills means a delay in other skills. Toys are not necessary for play, of course. All that’s needed are two people interacting in a fun way. But children’s toys can be useful for engaging the attention of a child with special needs, and even more useful for expanding circles of communication and teaching other developmental skills along the way.

If you’re looking for gifts for a child who doesn’t play with toys, then here’s a list of what’s been most successful with my son and his buddies over the years.
Everyday items

1. Flashlight
My son was frightened by toys with blinking lights when he was little, but he has always enjoyed playing with flashlights. Turning the flashlight on and off exercises fine motor skills, and provides an opportunity to practice simple words like “on” and “off.” It also helped my son overcome his phobia of bright lights. The Mini Maglite is the right size for little hands, and it has a blink mode if you need to work on desensitizing to blinking lights.

2. Shark Sweeper
I know a few kids who don’t like toys, but they love vacuums. The Shark Cordless Sweeper is motorized but much quieter than a typical vacuum, plus it’s light and easy to maneuver. There’s a clear plastic cover in front of the bristles, so curious kids can watch it spinning. We had many hours of fun with this sweeper, and it sure got some good conversations started. Plus our carpets were super clean.

3. Handheld Massager
Occupational therapists often recommend vibrating toys for children with special needs, and the Ribbit massager by Homedics is great for all ages.

4. Real Tools
Play often starts with imitating adult activities. A set of garden tools with garden gloves or a real tool kit with a small hammer, screwdriver and file, along with a wood board, are a good way to teach a child to slow down and focus on fine motor activities. Of course, adult supervision is required at all times with these tools.

A Big Box of Cool Stuff

5. Raw materials
Let’s face it – most kids would rather play with a box than the toy that came inside it anyway. Collect your empty oatmeal canisters, cereal boxes and paper towel tubes. Help your child tape the pieces together and create something new out of cardboard and Styrofoam. Here’s a video that shows what happened when a teacher got rid of all of the toys in his classroom and replaced them with raw materials.
6. Box of toiletries
Since kids like to imitate their parents, collect some safe toiletries and allow some messy sensory play in the bathroom: scented lotion, aloe vera gel, baby powder, bandages and gauze, a bar of soap, shaving cream and an old towel to wipe it up when playtime is finished.

7. Box of office supplies
One year, my sister-in-law gave my older son a box of office supplies, all with the logo of his favorite office store. It took more than a year for him to work through the index cards, tape, pencils, highlighters, sticky notes, a ruler and much, much more.

Sensory Play

8. Disco Ball
Anyone who has visited the Friendship Circle’s Snoezelen knows that the lights and disco balls can be relaxing and entertaining for kids with special needs. So a small, rotating, multi-color disco ball is a fun addition to the sensory environment at home.

9. Body Sox
A body sock is made of stretchy fabric and has an opening so that a person can step inside. Its purpose is to encourage body awareness and creative movement. For my family, it has been successful on both counts.

10. Exercise Machine
If only I received a nickel for every time I had to drag my children away from the exercise machines at the rec center, I’d be rich! A mini-trampoline, child-size treadmill or air walker can get a child’s attention while working toward physical therapy goals.

11. Musical wand
My son had a phobia of bells when he was a toddler, so toys like the musical wand helped him explore metallic sounds while feeling safe and secure in my arms. The musical wand can be a tool for pretend play as well, especially when paired with a book like “Alice the Fairy” by David Shannon.
12. Punching bag
Instead of trying to stop aggressive behavior cold turkey, which is usually impossible anyway, a punching bag redirects the aggression in an appropriate manner.

13. IKEA egg seat
This egg-shaped seat was designed for vestibular and proprioceptive sensory needs, plus it’s perfect for playing peek-a-boo.

14. Stomp Rocket
The Stomp Rocket helps work out aggressive energy while teaching a simple science lesson. My kids never get tired of it. Sometimes they make their own paper rockets, too.

15. Kazoo
The box said, “If you can hum, you can kazoo.” So I bought it for $2. It opens the door to oral-motor skills.

16. Bean bag toss
I have a child who has the urge to throw things ALL THE TIME. Most toys are not safe for him because of this. I decided that he may as well improve his aim if he’s going to throw things, and a bean bag toss is safer than a baseball at this point. The bean bag target can be varied – for example, he can throw the bean bags at cards with sight words or letters of the alphabet.

Attention-grabbing quiet toys

17. Marble run
I’ve never met a kid who didn’t love a marble run. These toys help with visual tracking, and the best part is the building process with kids. But they’re not safe for any child who puts toys in his or her mouth.

18. Folk toys
I remember playing with traditional wooden folk toys at my grandparents’ house when I was little. When I was brainstorming to find toys that would get my son’s attention, I went back to my roots. Toys like the Jacob’s Ladder and Falling Boy engaged my son and really made him think about how they work.
19. Magformers
The magnets in this building set are encased in plastic, so there are no small pieces. The set encourages open-ended play, and it’s a good way to explore the sensory features of magnets. It’s one of the “quiet toys” that travels with us.

20. Magnetic gyro wheel
Kids can’t take their eyes off this toy, and it’s great for long road trips or kids who just want to watch something spin.

21. Whoopee cushion
Yes, it’s crude and vulgar. It’s also a quick way to get a speech-delayed kid to talk. You’ll probably get quite a bit of eye contact, too. At $1.75, it’s a lot less expensive than an hour of speech therapy!

22. Globe
If your child loves to spin things, get a globe. It will help with pre-literacy skills and open up new conversations about the world.

23. Hoberman sphere
I used the Hoberman sphere to teach my son the names for the colors and some simple opposite terms like “big” and “small,” “in” and “out.” It can be hung from the ceiling as a mobile that expands and contracts, but my kids prefer to hold it on the ground.

Introducing Pretend Play

24. Play silks or old scarves
Even children who don’t want to play dress-up like the texture of scarves and play silks. These are a good way to introduce open-ended play to kids who prefer to stick with a script.

25. Box of hats
Over the years I’ve collected all sorts of hats for my kids. Trying on different identities is the first step to pretend play.
Six Toys & Play Products to Help Develop Gross Motor Skills

Author: Ahren Hoffman

Play: An Important Role in Physical Development
For the average person the concept of play is considered helpful in assisting a child to grow, learn, develop and thrive. What many don’t know is that play is extremely helpful when it comes to physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Why is physical development important?
With every age and stage children learn and master new motor skills. Gross motor skills involve large muscle planning and coordination like walking, running and skipping. These skills are used every day to live, play and they provide children with the abilities they need to explore and interact with the world around them.

Gross Motor Skill Development
Exploration of environment such as playing on a playground is a way for children to advance their gross motor skills and improve their overall physical development. When a child is navigating a playground they are actually working on many gross motor skills without even knowing it. They are using coordination and large muscles to climb up the ladder and then slide down the slide. Agility and balance are used to walk across the
balance beam.

Toys and play products also facilitate physical development by triggering and repeating the play response. Here are 6 toys and play products that can help with gross motor skill development:

1. **Color Count Mini Trampoline**
This indoor trampoline includes colors and numbers on the jumping surface to incorporate cognitive skills into physical play. Trampolining promotes balance and coordination, spatial awareness and helps increase proprioception (body input and awareness).

**Price:** $95

2. **Me Too Playtent and See Me Play Tunnel**
Tunnels and tents encourage four-point crawling, bilateral coordination, and enables children to practice weight shifting and balance. These are great products for active gross motor play indoors!

**Price:** $40-$44

3. **Little Tikes Cozy Truck**
The Little Tikes Truck is a rugged plastic ride-on truck that requires motor planning, reciprocal leg movements and balance and weight shifting to get in and out of the truck. A plus to this truck is that it includes a removable floorboard and a handle for parents to push kids if they need assistance or a break from using their legs!

**Price:** $86.99

4. **National Sporting Goods YBike**
This bike has no pedals! This bike can be used as a segue into riding a traditional bike and aids in the child’s balance reaction through weight shifting, bilateral coordination both reciprocally and in unison, and their coordination skills.

**Price:** $79.99
5. **American Educational Products (AEP) Tactile Discs**

Tactile Discs are a set of 5 small and 5 large discs with different textures for sensory exploration for both hands and feet. Children can use the tactile discs to work on their posture, encourage balance and coordination. These discs also promote core strength, weight shifting and bearing while the child adjusts to stand on one disc or on two discs, with one or both feet.

**Price:** $74.50

6. **ThinkFun Roll & Play**

This is a great tool for toddlers. Young children can work on their colors and matching skills while promoting two-handed grasp, balance and bilateral coordination. The game includes 6 card categories that require movement such as “Wave bye-bye!” among others.

**Price:** $19.99

**The Importance Of Play**

“Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength” as stated in the American Academy of Pediatrics report, *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*.

Children have opportunities for play in their backyard, local playground, park or right inside their kitchen cabinets. Each child develops his gross motor skills at different ages and stages, but promoting play can assist the child to grow, learn, develop and thrive while mastering the milestones of physical development.
10 Toys and Household Items to Help Develop Fine Motor Skills

Author: Ahren Hoffman

For the average person the concept of play is considered helpful in assisting a child to grow, learn, develop and thrive. What many don’t know is that play is extremely helpful when it comes to physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

The Importance of Physical Development

With every age and stage children learn and master new motor skills. Fine motor skills involve small muscle planning within the hand and require eye coordination in order to manipulate objects. These skills are used every day to live and play. Fine motor skills provide children with the abilities they need to explore and interact with the world around them and develop the independence needed to perform daily activities.

Fine Motor Skill Development

Fine motor skills, as with gross motor skills, develop through practice. The best way to practice is through play- coloring a picture or playing with play dough, for example. When the motions are repeated enough, muscle memory is created and the movements become automatic.
Fine motor movements are the actions performed with the small muscles in the hands, fingers and wrists. Eye-hand coordination is promoted when a child colors a picture or writes her name with a pencil. Repeating this activity will help a child refine her fine motor movements and become more precise.

With the assistance and supervision of a caregiver, a child can play with a plethora of household items in addition to or instead of toys to fine tune small muscle movements.

**Three Household Play Ideas for Fine Motor Skill Development**

1. **Cheerios**
   Give your child Cheerios to pick up off of the kitchen table or highchair tray to eat or place into a bowl. For a little extra help, place the Cheerios on a cookie sheet or high chair tray that has raised edges.

2. **Magnets**
   Play with magnets on the refrigerator. Using tape, create a square on the refrigerator and have the child move the magnets inside the square.

3. **Rip Scrap Paper**
   Let your child rip scrap paper into pieces and count how many pieces they created.

**Seven Toy Ideas for Fine Motor Skill Development**

1. **Little Tikes Backyard Barbeque**
   It’s time to get cookin’! Fine motor skills are used as children grab, hold and place the individual food items on the grill and serve the food to their guests during imaginary play.
   **Price:** $39.99

2. **Schoenhut Puff-N-Play Melodica**
   This product is going to get all 5 of the senses working! Children must use their breath control to make music. Playing the keyboard can improve fine motor skills and increase coordination, specifically eye-hand coordination.
   **Price:** $25
3. **B. Toys Fish & Splish**  
Great for bath time fun! The size of the accessories makes them easy for little hands to hold with a whole hand grasp or more refined pincer grasp to hone in on fine motor skills.  
**Approx. Price: $25**

4. **One Step Ahead What’s Inside? Toy Box**  
This cloth box is a great tool for little hands to reach and also promotes small and large muscle movements. The box comes with 8 small objects, but adding in bigger and smaller objects with the help of a caregiver can challenge a child to use whole hand grasp or pincer grasp depending on the size of the object in the box.  
**Price: $39.95**

5. **ImagAbility Wee WEDGITS**  
Grasping and releasing is worked on while using eye-hand coordination when a child picks up and stacks a Wee Wedgit during play. Wee Wedgits are soft and can be manipulated to stack many ways for lots of fun!  
**Price: $14.99-59.99 (depending on # of pieces)**

6. **EduStic Pattern Smart**  
Pattern Smart is a fast-paced pattern-recognition game that develops familiarity with patterns and shapes naturally. Children use their eye-hand coordination to match the tiles to the pattern pictures. Isolated finger movements and pincer grasp can be promoted during play while moving tiles to create patterns.  
**Price: $26.99**

7. **Glittertoos**  
A new twist to stick-on tattoos! Place self-adhesive stencils on your skin, then brush the glue dab on some glitter to create your sparkly tattoo. Peeling the stencils will assist with strengthening the small muscles in the hands and refine eye-hand coordination.  
**Price: $15.95**
The Importance of Play

Children have opportunities for fine motor growth while brushing teeth, tying shoes, using a pencil or cutting with a child-friendly scissors. Each child develops his fine motor skills at different ages and stages, but promoting play can assist the child to grow, learn, develop and thrive while mastering the milestones of physical development.

“Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength” as stated in the American Academy of Pediatrics report, The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.
One of the key elements to gross motor skills is balance. Balance allows control of movements during stationary (static) as well as moving (dynamic) tasks like laying, sitting, crawling, walking, or running.

**How Balance Works**

Ears play a large role in balance due to the vestibular system, which arises in the inner ear and is responsible for processing movement, changes in head positions and the direction and speed of movement.

The vestibulocochlear nerve sends signals to the brain that control hearing and ultimately helps with balance. The ears receive assistance from the eyes, joints, and muscles too, keeping bodies balanced and upright.

Balance is something that needs to be learned through experimenting with body movements. There are many toys and play products that can motivate and encourage children to improve their balance. These toys and play products can help teach balance while sitting, standing or even moving- all critical skills for everyday life.
Here are toy ideas that will help with balance while sitting, standing or moving:

Sitting

1. **WePlay Rocking Bowl**
   Kids can promote core and arm strength while using the rocking bowl to balance. Don’t worry! Kids won’t tip over. The rocking bowl can be used upside down to climb, sit, stand or even hide under during active and pretend play fun. The rocking bowl has a wave design so that kids can’t pinch their fingers.
   **Price:** $199.99

2. **Tumble Forms**
   Chairs like Tumble Forms offer security, durability, and adaptability for children to access the world around them independently. Tumble Forms give a child the ultimate positioning for accessibility during interactions with friends and family.
   **Prices varied**

Standing

3. **First Toddle Baby Gym**
   This product encourages exploration for children just learning to walk. Favorite toys can be hung down the sides and the tray offers a place for other incentives to be placed for baby to walk, encouraging balance and muscle strength in the legs and arms. The First Toddle Baby Gym grows with your child- it can turn into a soccer net or basketball hoop to engage in pretend play and cognitive development.
   **Price:** $129.95
4. **Little Partners Learning Tower**

The Learning Tower offers parents peace of mind when little ones want to help! The sturdy step stool is adjustable in height and has non-tip construction. It is big enough for two kids to share space to play or help out. The Learning Tower offers accessories like the Playhouse Kit and Art Easel to expand play!

**Price:** $199.99 (accessories extra)

### Moving

**Trampolines**

There are many options for trampolines and picking the right one for your child's needs will start with research! Three basic options for trampolines may include:

5. **Springfree Trampoline**

Springfree offers excellent options for outdoor trampolines that can be used year around (yes, even in the snow!). The trampoline does not use steel for the frame or springs and the enclosure poles flex away from the net to ensure safety when trampolining. It’s a great way to learn balance, explore body movements and improve mood at the same time.

**Price:** $1,200+

6. **Little Tikes 3 Foot Trampoline**

An indoor trampoline like the Little Tikes 3 Foot Trampoline can be an excellent resource for burning some energy and creating focus and attention to tasks like homework or dinner for a child with lots of wiggles. The trampoline has a large jumping surface, handle bar for stability and padding for safety. It is perfectly sized for one jumper at a time and great for kids to get moving indoors.

**Price:** $79.99
7. **Bubble Bouncer**
This trampoline is made for the youngest of bouncers honing in on gross motor and balance skills from the start! The Bubble Bouncer is small in size, low to the ground and provides just the right amount of bounce for little ones. The handle is sturdy to help with balance and coordination and is removable to slide the trampoline out of the way.

**Price: $49.99**

**Balance Bikes**
Bikes are a great way for kids to learn about balance. There are a vast variety of bikes on the market to choose from. Some have moved outside of the “traditional” box and removed the pedals to help kids transition from plastic ride-ons to balancing on a bike with no pedals.

Not including the pedals on the bike allows a child to focus on balance and coordination while always being able to plant feet firmly on the ground without getting distracted. This encourages the development of spatial awareness, balance and basic motor skills in young riders. Some options for modern, “pedaless” bikes are:

8. **YBikes**
These bikes are offered in three sizes to serve different ages and stages. The *Pewi* is for little ones and includes 4 wheels for maximum stability; the *Balance Bike* offers 2 wheels and no pedals; and the *Extreme Bike* offers higher handle bars and a wider base to increase the level of difficulty promoting core strength and balance. Cool design of these bikes gives them street cred, too.

9. **Strider Bikes**
Strider Bikes are well known in the competition arena offering older kids bikes to work on tricks and stunts on trails and ramps. The SS-1 “Super 16” bike is light with no pedals allowing older kids to focus on the task at hand while building confidence along with balance.
10. **Glide Bikes**
Glide Bikes offers the Super Glider with no pedals for people over 6 feet tall. This option is great for older and taller kids that have not mastered the art of riding a bike, but still want to be included in the family bike rides. Never too late to learn balance skills that help maintain health and wellness.

**The Importance of Balance**
Balance is essentially communication between the mind and the muscles allowing the body to remain stable. This basic skill is developed through learning where the body is in space and then changing the center of gravity to match movements.

Teaching kids balance not only protects them against falls and injuries, but allows them to improve their response to changing forces, surfaces and elements. It is never too early or too late to teach children to master balance in their own body because maintaining stability throughout the course of everyday activities is a key factor in maintaining health and wellness.
Eight Great Toys That Help With Cognitive Development

Author: Ahren Hoffman

For the average person the concept of play is considered helpful in assisting a child to grow, learn, develop and thrive. What many don’t realize is that play is extremely helpful when it comes to physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Just as a child develops gross and fine motor skills, social and emotional skills, cognitive skills are practiced and promoted starting at infancy. Through play, children are gaining confidence, learning decision making skills and acquiring critical thinking skills that will prepare them for adulthood.

Learning Cognitive Skills

Children are naturally curious and constantly learning about the world around them. New noises, sounds and objects for them to discover. Cognitive development is the ability to process information, reason, remember and express emotions which can be promoted through many facets of play- dress up, board games and active play for example.
As children grow and learn new cognitive skills, they are able to integrate the new with the old, building their knowledge and understanding. The etymology of cognition means “to know” in Latin. Maybe that is why kids ask so many questions, so they “know” everything? Below are toy suggestions that can assist children in developing critical cognitive milestones and hopefully help them answer some of their many questions.

8 Toy Ideas for Cognitive Development:

1. **NogginStik by SmartNoggin**
   NogginStik is a toy that focuses on skills children need in the first developmental stages of their life. This rattle-like product encourages many other developmental milestones such as: auditory attention, sensory stimulation and grasping. When the NogginStik is tapped or shaken, a soft glow light changes colors between red, green and blue! Children can practice their eye tracking with the lights- creating those neuropathways that help develop the skills for reading.
   **Price:** $19.99

2. **Magic Moves by Educational Insights**
   The Magic Moves wand provides 90 fun commands, 26 musical tunes and incorporates light shows that flash to the beat of the music. The Magic Moves wand also surprises you with actions like, “Freeze,” “March,” and “Let’s Dance” in between actions. Fundamental learning is provided through auditory, visual and kinesthetic stimulation during play.
   **Price:** $19.99

3. **6-in-1 Town Center Playhouse by Little Tikes**
   Kids can use their imaginary play skills to play gas station, café, gym and more! The playhouse is big enough for lots of kids to play and explore.
   **Price:** $499.99
4. **Bright & Beyond Activity Cards by Ready Set Resources**

These activity cards promote cognitive skills, motor skills, language skills, self-esteem and sensory awareness using simple, everyday items found in the home. The cards are sturdy and laminated and include helpful illustrations and simple instructions for each activity. The Bright & Beyond Activity Cards provide fun, interactive experiences for kids!

**Price:** $10.00

5. **Pop Arty by B. Toys**

Pop Arty comes with 500 beads that snap-together in different colors, shapes, sizes and textures to make bracelets, necklaces, rings and more for creative play. Have children create reoccurring patterns with the beads to begin to learn about order, sequence and prediction. This toy provides kids with endless play to explore and create!

**Price:** $19.20

6. **ifocus Jungle Rangers by Focus Education**

Ifocus Jungle Rangers is a computer software game designed to improve a child’s focus and attention through memory and recall, sequencing and more. Jungle Rangers provides children with interactive characters that teach them the skills needed to play each section of the game. The games are intuitive— the child does not select his own level; the game identifies the player’s ability and advances when he is ready. The games are engaging to children who already enjoy video games, but also inviting to those children who do not typically play them!

**Price:** $199.95
7. **Scramble Squares by b. dazzle**
As the game states, “Easy To Play, But Hard To Solve.®”
Children need to manipulate the squares to make nine completed matching designs. Scramble Squares is a great game to build up to by starting with less pieces or even creating new games like memory to play!
**Price:** $1.00-$10.00

8. **Speed Stacks by Speed Stacks, Inc**
Speed Stacks are great for playing independently, on a team or challenging a peer. Speed Stacks challenge a child’s motor skills and cognitive skills at the same time by using speed and memory to stack and unstack as fast as possible!
**Price:** $21.00-$40.00

**Why is cognitive development important?**
Cognitive development naturally changes and becomes more complex as children grow. During the first years of a child's life, he will grow trillions of brain-cell connections, called neural synapses (Scholastic.com). Providing children with opportunities to explore and interact with the world around them through toys and play will encourage those brain-cells to connect and “wire” their brains as they grow into adulthood.

**The Importance of Play**
Nine Toys that Can Help Children who have Special Needs with Independent, Parallel and Cooperative Play

Author: Ahren Hoffman

There are many types of play that children encounter with age, environment and mood. As children grow, they evolve in their play abilities starting with independent play and moving through parallel play, cooperative play, and even competitive play. The sequence of play is an important role in child development and sets the foundation for learning how to interact and socialize with others into adulthood. Cooperative play or understanding group skills is the culmination of play stages during childhood.

The Different Stages of Play

Independent Play

Independent play is important because it teaches the child how to entertain himself and helps him become self-sufficient. The focus on independent play occurs during the toddler stage as the child is learning about self-exploration and honing communications skills. As the child plays independently, he becomes comfortable with play. Including peers in the play process provides a more complex play pattern for parallel play.
Parallel Play
Parallel play is another stage of development for independent play. Parallel play allows children to watch others covertly and explore new play ideas, words, sounds, ideas and actions. This naturally leads to interacting and engaging with others in cooperative play.

Cooperative Play
Cooperative play incorporates all stages of play allowing children to bounce from independent and parallel play to more involved group interactions through cooperative play. Cooperative play promotes turn-taking, sharing and social skills. It is the main focus of group skills needed to interact with others. Group skills are essential recreationally, educationally and in forming healthy social bonds from childhood through adulthood.

Toy ideas for independent, parallel and cooperative play
The following toys and play products are suggestions to help develop independent, parallel and cooperative play skills, ultimately honing group skills which are critical for social development and emotional well-being.

Toys for Independent Play
Toys related to independent play may be utilized in other stages of play as children gain confidence and advance in their communication skills. These elements are critical to interacting with others, developing turn taking while learning to share space and toys.

1. Creativity Cans
The Creativity Can is available for FREE at select retailers. Creativity for Kids developed this arts and crafts project in a can to inspire young imaginations. The small container is filled with miscellaneous craft supplies encouraging freedom to create with no right or wrong way to inhibit expression.
Price: Free

2. Rubbablox Building Blox
Blocks inspire pretend play and cognitive skills like problem solving which is essential for future stages of play. The Rubbablox are a velvety material which provides further fun to explore their tactile appeal!
Price: $49.95
3. **Melissa & Doug Number Train Floor Puzzle**
Big floor puzzles like the Number Train Puzzle provide kids with the freedom to spread out and play! The numbers on the trains provide order to the puzzle and assist kids with finding the next piece. When kids are ready to share space and puzzle pieces, the puzzle is big enough to work as a team to put together.
**Price:** $12.99

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**Toys for Parallel Play**

4. **Cranium Hullabaloo**
Hullabaloo keeps kids moving! The audio console calls out all the moves so kids use their listening ears and move their bodies as they follow along. Kids can interpret the instructions on their own or watch peers for more movement ideas!
**Price:** $22.99

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5. **Hasbro Play-Doh Plus**
Play-Doh is a great way for kids to create independently while sharing space and maybe even sharing the Play-Doh! The “plus” side of Play-Doh Plus is that the compound is brightly-colored, smells sweet and has a different texture than regular play-doh providing stimulating visual, tactile and olfactory sensations during play.
**Price:** $4.99/8 pack

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6. **Yogarilla**
OTis is the fun gorilla that teaches yoga poses! The large 6×8 laminated cards demonstrate 50 individual moves kids can try out on their own. More advanced stages of yoga with OTis allow options for partner moves once the individual poses are mastered.
**Price:** $34.95
Toys for Cooperative Play

7. Swing N Slide Play Sets
Swing N Slide offers many selections of play sets. Play sets offer kids a variation of activities like swinging, sliding, and climbing that teaches kids how to negotiate space, take turns and communicate with each other. Play sets offer kids the opportunity to work cooperatively- learning about the “rules” of playing together.
Price: Prices vary

8. Peaceable Kingdom Feed the Woozle
Feed the Woozle is a cooperative game allowing kids to work together while promoting sharing and mutual decision making. The game can be played in three levels leading up to full cooperative play!
Price: $19.99

9. Fortamajig
The Fortamajig teaches kids the art of working as a team involving creativity, communication and fun. Kids must use their knowledge of independent and parallel play practices to work together cooperatively to build the fort.
Price: $55.00

The Importance of Group Skills
Providing kids with opportunities for play at all ages gives them the tools they need to lead up to cooperative play, a major milestone in the developmental aspects of play experiences. The culmination of these play stages sets the foundation for group skills teaching kids how to interact, socialize and communicate with others starting from childhood, and setting the standard for social success into adulthood.
Five Toys to Promote Problem Solving for a Child with Special Needs

Author: Ahren Hoffman

Problem solving is an integral part of a child’s success, confidence and independence. Problem solving helps children discover the world around them; learn skills to relate to others and communicate effectively while achieving developmental milestones.

Physical, cognitive, social/emotional, sensory and communicative learning skills are promoted through different ages and stages of development. These skills encompass different aspects of developmental processes and all of them include problem solving.

Different types of Problem Solving

In our daily routine there are many different activities we take part in that require problem solving. Some examples are:

- Completing a task
- Engaging in academics
- Participating in athletics
- Interacting with peers
- Choosing an outfit to wear
- Playing with toys
Children have to problem-solve simple to complex challenges on a daily basis. Learning to problem solve provides kids with the techniques and tactics to avoid conflicts, develop empathy towards others and learn how to interact successfully with people, places and things.

Effective problem solving is essential for the development of a person’s physical, cognitive, social/emotional, sensory, and communicative abilities and the capability to make qualified decisions for themselves.

Toys that Promote Problem Solving

Here are five games that can help a child with special needs develop problem solving skills.

1. **uKloo Early Reader Treasure Hunt Game**

   uKloo turns a home into a game board! Reading is disguised during play honing pre-literacy skills as kids read the clues to find the surprise (placed by caregiver) at the end of the treasure hunt. Kids must solve the problem in order to find the next clue to finish the game. Stuck on a word? The Picture Helper Poster will help lead the way!

   **Price:** $15.95
   **Company:** uKloo Kids Inc

2. **Weplay Rock “N” Fish**

   Kids have the opportunity to work independently, competitively or cooperatively to play this fun and flexible game. Players are challenged to pick up the rocking fish while engaging balance, hand-eye coordination and patience simultaneously—all in an effort to catch these frisky fish.

   **Price:** Visit website for more information
   **Company:** Weplay
3. **Tangle Therapy**
An interactive hand-puzzle with interconnected curved segments that are rubber coated and fun to figure. Tangles can be twisted and rotated to keep active minds and finicky hands busy. Tangle Therapy is versatile and can be pulled apart to make and create new shapes!
**Price:** $13.99  
**Company:** Tangle Creations

4. **Yoga Spinner**
The wonders of yoga are explored in this fabulously fun game. Coordination and flexibility are enhanced while spinning through yoga poses, stretching and calming young bodies and minds.
**Price:** $15.95 
**Company:** Upside Down Games

5. **KORNER’D**
Is it a puzzle or a game? This puzzle game creates a new challenge to problem solve each time it is played. Match the tiles to the color board to uncover an abstract strategy game of puzzling perception.
**Price:** $14.99 
**Company:** Endless Games

**The Importance of Problem Solving**
Problem solving is foundational to a child’s learning capacity. Encouraging environments, creative caregivers and better yet, tempting toys help children build and enhance their problem solving skills. Toys provide convergent and divergent problems—convergent problems allow for one solution or one specific goal like playing with puzzles and divergent problems offer multiple solutions like building with blocks.

When children are encouraged to solve problems, they learn persistence, develop creativity and gain the confidence to think “out-of-the-box.” The playful problem solving experiences that toys offer also teach the age old lesson of “try, try, try again.” When the problem is not immediately solved, that’s a lesson worth learning.
Eight Toys that can help a Child with Emotional Development

Author: Ahren Hoffman

For the average person the concept of play is considered helpful in assisting a child to grow, learn, develop and thrive. What many don’t realize is that play is extremely helpful when it comes to physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Why is emotional development important?
When children play, they promote their social competence and regulate their emotions. During play children can practice their verbal and nonverbal communication, body language, release of emotions and build self-confidence.

Playing with others can also help children respond to their peers’ feelings, conflicts and points of view which all encourage emotional development. “In our play we reveal what kind of people we are.” Ovid (Roman Poet 43BCE-17CE).

Emotional development provides children with the abilities they need to explore and interact with the world around them and develop the independence to understand, process, and work through their feelings appropriately as they grow into adulthood.
Here are 8 toy ideas that will help a child with special needs develop emotionally.

1. **Kimochis**
Kimochis means “feeling” in Japanese. The Kimochis characters each have their own personality, a *Feel Guide* with play suggestions, and 3 feelings pillows that introduce emotional concepts. Children are sure to find a character that fits their personality! Kimochis characters help children understand their feelings and encourage kids to identify and express feelings in a positive manner.
**Price:** $25.00

2. **American Girl Dolls**
Dolls are a great tool to explore emotions and relationships in a safe way. American Girl provides girls with a doll that can be just like them! They are now offering more accessories and other customizable features like a Doll without Hair, hearing aids, EpiPen sack lunch or a therapy dog.
**Price:** $100.00+

3. **B. Toys Critter Clinic**
Kids can use their imaginary play skills to care and nurture the little critters in the hospital at the critter clinic! This is a great way to explore the basis of empathy.
**Price:** $20.00

4. **Aeromax My First Career Gear**
Kids love to explore the adult world through make believe and all the emotions inherent within it. The My First Career Gear collection offers many choices for kids to pretend play real life jobs. The costumes are easy to put on and take off for switching up pretend play in a jiffy!
**Price:** $15.00
5. **PlayCore Playsets at Lowes**

PlayCore offers many sizes, features and accessories to their outdoor playsets. Kids can pretend play almost anything using a playset as their guide! Outdoor play is a great way to learn turn taking and communication skills needed to increase their Emotional IQ.

**Prices: Vary according to size**

6. **Visual Timers**

What kid doesn’t want to have a meltdown when playtime is over? Using a timer, clock or app like these timers can help a child be more independent and guide their transition to the end of playtime…hopefully ending the emotional breakdown scenario.

**Price: $10-70.00**

7. **Hape International Eggspressions**

Reading others emotions is a valuable skill. Eggspressions provide kids with expressions! These little wooden eggs come with a lot of faces and an idea book for role playing activities for younger kiddos ages 2-4.

**Price: $20.00**

8. **Stages Learning Language Builder Emotion Cards**

These emotion cards show real life examples of kids and adults of all ages making facial expressions along with scenario pictures. These cards invite discussion about feelings and why someone would feel that emotion. The cards come with an activity booklet with detailed activity ideas. The emotion cards are a great way to teach appropriate reading and relating to others’ feelings.

**Price: $35.00**
The Importance of Play

Children have opportunities for emotional growth while playing with friends, siblings and caregivers in many environments. Each child develops his emotions differently, but promoting play can assist the child to grow, learn and develop emotions. “Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive and emotional strength,” as stated in the American Academy of Pediatrics report, *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.*
It is important for children of all abilities to go outside and enjoy the fresh air, green grass and birds chirping. Nature provides children with many opportunities for physical activity, creativity, and social and emotional connections. The out-of-doors gives children fresh ideas for play and expands their horizons to hone skills and explore all of their five senses in the environment.

The Benefits of outdoor play

Here are five ways children with special needs can benefit from outdoor play.

1. Nature Inspired Play
Children can use elements of nature to play. This type of play allows children to try out new actions, including exploring and manipulating objects. Children learn cause and effect as well as develop problem-solving skills through nature-inspired play.

2. Play in a Natural Setting
Children can use their traditional toys and play products and bring them outside! For example, stacking blocks on the grass will provide a tactile friendly appeal and tickle the child's senses during play.
3. Outdoor Active Play
Children can be physically active and use ‘locomotive play’ outside by going on a walk or a bike ride to support gross motor skills and engage muscles.

4. Creative Play in Nature
Children can be inspired by the outdoors to create arts and crafts projects. The projects could be inspired by items from nature and the nature can increase self-confidence to conceive, construct and create. This type of play allows a child to explore emotions and express them in healthy and productive ways.

5. Imaginative Play in Nature
Children can use their imaginative skills by pretending an object in nature is something other than what it is. Pretend play is an excellent way to hone negotiation skills, group dynamics and the ability to strive for a team goal.

Outdoor Play Ideas
Here are five great activities your child can play outside.

1. BINGO
Substitute BINGO chips with rocks, twigs, leaves and flowers found on a walk outside.

2. Lemonade Stand
Set up a pretend kitchen outside to use as a lemonade stand.

3. Hide-N-Seek
Simple games like Hide-N-Seek or utilizing a hula hoop outside will help incorporate movement and activity into outdoor active play.

4. Nature Collage
Children can collect items like leaves, twigs, flowers and other items outside to create a natural collage and other arts and crafts projects.

5. Charades
Children can play a game of Charades by acting, singing, or using parts of nature to have others guess what they are trying to reveal.
Outdoor Toys
Here are five toys that are great for outdoor play.

1. **FlipBINGO by Longstreet Enterprises**
FlipBINGO cards are large, laminated and have predetermined BINGO patterns for further accessibility and independent play. The cards are outdoor friendly and can be wiped off after use.

2. **Learning Tower by Little Partners**
The Learning Tower was designed to nurture a child’s independence and participation alongside parents and siblings to role model. The Learning Tower has added play house accessories to create an imaginary space for lemonade stands, popcorn stands and even arts and crafts.

3. **Learn to Turn Scooter by Little Tikes**
Little Tikes offers lots of outdoor products that help kids get out and get movin’! The Learn to Turn Scooter provides kids with extra balance to glide through nature with three wheels and includes a wide base for stability.

4. **Washable Sidewalk Glow Chalk by Crayola**
Chalk that glows in the dark! Sidewalk art that is created during the day can light up at night for more fun. Kids can explore their creative side even further by making the glow chalk first with the glow powder and chalk dust molds before they start their art.

5. **Playchute Parachutes by Pacific Playtents**
Parachutes are best used with others and can inspire imaginations! Kids can make up new games to play with the parachute or play classic games like “Waves” where the parachute is shaken to make a wave effect or “Mushroom,” where the parachute is lifted up and when it comes down everyone sits to be enclosed in the parachute mushroom cap.
The Importance of Nature in Play

The great outdoors is an excellent resource for children of all abilities. Free play allows children to explore their surroundings with their senses- sight, smell, touch, sound and sometimes even taste! Outdoor play is important because it is not typically structured play and there is a lack of adult direction- all positive aspects to learning self-confidence, negotiation, spatial relationships and navigating a new environment. Take time to get outside and play!
For the average person the concept of play is considered helpful in assisting a child to grow, learn, develop and thrive. What many don’t realize is that play is extremely helpful when it comes to physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

**Why is social development important?**
Social development is parallel to emotional development; they simply go hand-in-hand. When children play, they are learning to regulate their own emotions and feelings towards others in social situations. Children can practice their verbal and nonverbal communication, body language, release of feelings and build self-confidence through emotional development.

Social development affects a child’s specific reactions, responses, techniques and strategies used in social situations like playing on the playground or doing group activities at school. So often enough, social and emotional development are learned and used in tandem starting from birth through adulthood. The greatest influence on a child’s social and emotional development happens through relationships developed in adolescence as quoted by Ovid (Roman Poet 43BCE-17CE), “In our play we reveal what kind of people we are.”
**Social Development**

Every day experiences and interactions contribute to social development. Parents are the initial source for social development and continue to be the most influential in a child’s social awareness and acumen through their role modeling. Parents promoting their child’s extracurricular activities like sports and clubs help too!

The easiest way for kids to learn social skills is through play—sharing, negotiating, and resolving conflicts (sometimes with the assistance of a caregiver!). Attitudes and language development can also be promoted naturally through play experiences. Social development is just as important as meeting other milestones such as cognitive or physical development and is constantly evolving. Promoting healthy connections with peers and adults through social situations like play dates are critical to establishing self-esteem, communication skills, and healthy attitudes towards self and others.

**Here are 5 toy ideas that can help with emotional development:**

1. **Gather Round Dinner Game**
   This game is sure to combine fun and food to the dinnertime experience! This game just needs food and family to get started. Press the button on top and your next bite of food may be a vegetable or maybe you will have to tell about your most embarrassing moment of the day.
   **Price: $24.99**

2. **Zatswho**
   Zatswho lets you slip photos into a soft flexible frame that makes it easy to carry around while protecting the photo from little hands. The Zatswho is great to stash in luggage, backpacks or under a pillow. Children can learn about loved ones near and far with a caregiver or turn the frames over to learn shapes, matching or sequencing as children grow!
   **Price: $14.99**
3. **My Friendship Bracelet Maker**
This arts and crafts project has been kicked up a notch with the My Friendship Bracelet Maker! The My Friendship Bracelet Maker holds up to 10 strings (and keeps them organized) for making intricate bracelets for the more advanced bracelet maker or the artist. Young fashion accessory designers can also use just 3 strings for a more traditional approach to making bracelets to share with their friends!
**Price:** $15-$30

4. **My First Daily Planner**
Planners are a great way to keep social calendars in order! My Daily Planner organizes dates, seasons, and weather to help kids plan their days and even includes feelings to prompt them to express their moods. Pieces are all attached by Velcro to the cloth planner with pockets for storing all of the pieces.
**Prices:** $39.95

5. **Waboba Balls**
Waboba or “water bouncing balls” are used for active play in knee deep to waist-high water. Throwing a ball teaches kids the essentials of turn-taking, and paying attention to others. All of these elements are essential in healthy social exchanges. Each ball provides a different variation of water play to fit everyone’s needs- Extreme, Pro, Surf and Blast balls all amazingly bounce on water in a splash!
**Price:** $8.99-9.99

**The Importance of Play**
Children have opportunities for social growth while playing with friends, siblings and caregivers in a plethora of environments. Every child develops social skills, but promoting play can assist with the child’s reactions and responses in social situations.

“Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive and emotional strength,” as stated in the American Academy of Pediatrics report, *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds.*
Many people have a tendency to chew on anything they can get their hands on. It is very common to see children with special needs, particularly those with autism, chewing on something.

The Reasons for Chewing

Here are some reasons that chewing can be helpful for individuals with special needs.

1. Chewing can help with anxiety and can help calm down a child with special needs.
2. When overstimulated a child with special needs may feel the need to bite or chew to help regain balance.
3. Chewing may be due to a condition called Pica.
4. A child may be getting new teeth in or may have a cavity.
Where to find Chew Toys

Thankfully there are a number of chew toys available to help children with special needs. Below you will find 10 products from 10 different stores. Does your child have a favorite chew toy? Tell us about it in the comments below!

1. **Chewbeads Bracelet**
   Designed for babies and kids who love to chew on their mom’s jewelry, Chewbeads merges fashion with therapy by providing a soft, non-toxic jewelry, which is colorful, chic and, above all else, safe. Chewbeads are great for children with autism, sensory processing delays or oral motor delays. Bracelets are made with 100% silicone and are easily cleaned with dish soap & water, also dishwasher safe!
   - **Store:** Fun & Function
   - **Price:** $18.99
   - [See More Chew Toys](#)

2. **Kid Companions Chewlery**
   Chewelry is a fashionable, non-toxic, plastic piece of chewable jewelry that is a great tool to keep children from chewing on their pens and clothes! Each piece of Chewelry features a lanyard with a breakaway clasp that will release and can be re-attached with ease. Chewelry is safe, washable, bpa, pvc, lead and latex free.
   - **Store:** Kid Companions
   - **Price:** $17.49
   - [View More Chew Toys](#)
3. Dr. Bloom’s Chewable Jewels
Dr. Bloom’s Chewable Jewels were originally made by Dr. Helen Bloom Smith, a dentist and a loving mom. Focus was put on creating a fashionable design while paying special attention to using product materials that are made from FDA approved food grade silicone. Dr. Bloom’s Chewable Bracelet and Circle Slide Necklace come with latex free cording that is made with elasticity to allow for stretching.

Store: Amazon.com
Price: $17.50
View more Chew Toys

4. Red Chewy Tubes
Chewy Tubes provide a resilient, non-food, chewable surface for people who need to practice chewing or may be chewing on things that are inappropriate. Chewy Tubes are safe and can help redirect problem chewing behaviors and also help develop proper chewing skills. The color of each tube represents a different diameter. Red Chewy Tubes are the most popular color because they are a medium size diameter.

Store: National Autism Resources
Price: $7.99
View more chew toys

5. Chew Stixx Pencil Toppers
The Chew Stixx Pencil Topper fits any number 2 pencil, decreases lead exposure, is safe for teeth, is socially acceptable, is allowed in classrooms, increases attention, lowers anxiety levels, and has been proven to improve concentration skills in children constantly seeking sensory input. Excellent for streamline and special needs children.

Store: bellybum
Price: $6.95
View more chew toys
6. **ChewyQ**

Chewy Q’s are an innovative oral motor device designed to provide a resilient, chewable surface for practicing biting and chewing skills. Small and large jaws alike enjoy the tactile input offered by biting on Chewy Q’s for fun and therapeutic purposes. Helps improve jaw stability and provides valuable sensory input to the jaw.

- **Store:** eSpecial Needs
- **Price:** $5.95

7. **Lolli Chew Stixx**

Kids love these fun new lollipop-shaped chewy fidgets that feature an easy-grasp circular handle that is just the right size for little fingers! Comes in your choice of Smooth that has a slightly raised “spiral” pattern on the chewy surface, or Knobby that features lots of textured sensory chewy bumpies!

- **Store:** Therapy Shoppe
- **Price:** $7.99

8. **Cool Chews Race Car**

Cool Chews are a fun, socially appropriate alternative for kids who chew on their clothing, pencils, or other objects! These fun, non-edible shapes are great for kids who crave oral stimulation. Choose a speedy race car or beautiful butterfly. Each has multi-textured surfaces for a varied sensory experience. Cool Chews are made in the USA and are BPA, phthalate and latex free.

- **Store:** Sensory Smart
- **Price:** $8.00
9. **Sensory Jewelry**
This necklace is lovely as a color accent to any wardrobe, but it is also perfect for the collar chewers out there. This necklace is made with clean knit fabric, braided and knotted.

**Store:** Etsy/therapeuticthreads  
**Price:** $8.00  
View more chew toys

10. **Borris, Prince of Whales**
The Borris® plush toy is a chew-safe soft toy designed in a way that acknowledges the needs of children with Sensory Processing Disorder and Autism. Many children with unique sensory needs mouth and chew objects for oral motor input. Most plush toys are unsafe to mouth—and as a result, many parents are reluctant to give them to their sensory seeking children.

**Store:** Soft Clothing  
**Price:** $25

Top image Credit: B Kitty
21 Great Fidgets for Your Child With Special Needs

Author: Tzvi Schectman

Fidget toys are great self-regulation tools to help with focus, attention, calming, and active listening. We asked some of our contributing bloggers what widgets they would recommend. The results are some pretty neat fidget toys that will help your child with special needs. Check out all 21 below.

Karen Wang
1. Rainbow twist and lock blocks
2. Robot X-7
3. Wooden Jacob’s Ladder
4. Small PinFrame
5. Tangles
6. Cars and planes: Hot Wheels cars, monster trucks, motorcycles and airplanes are great fidget toys – very soothing when the wheels roll on the hands and arm, plus they’re 100% appropriate for kids in almost every social situation.
7. Silly Putty is an excellent quiet fidget toy in a school setting.
8. We also have a few dozen stretchy plastic lizards, frogs and snakes.
9. Haba makes wooden fidgets that are marketed as teething toys for babies – they’re safe for chewing.
Karen is a Friendship Circle parent and contributor to this blog. She is also a contributing author to the anthology “My Baby Rides the Short Bus: The Unabashedly Human Experience of Raising Kids With Disabilities”

Jeanette Jones, OTRL/MOT
10. Koosh balls
11. Marbles in a small bag
12. Squish balls - kids love the ones that an effect happens when you squish it (eyes pop out, or different colors turn on)
13. Ponytail bands
14. Soft pipe cleaners with ends cut off (not sharp)

Jeanette is an Occupational Therapist at the Kaufman Children’s Center.

Brenda Kosky Deskin
15. Stress balls: You can make them with cornstarch or sand and balloons.
16. Corks for people who like to pick at things.
17. Buckyballs but they’ve stopped making them as they’re too dangerous.
4. Pin Art Toys (i find ours addictive once I have it in my hands!)
18. Hoberman Spheres
19. Wikki Stix
20. Gear Ring: For older kids it’s hard to find items that will not be noticed by classmates.
21. Chewlery

Brenda is the parent of a child with Autism. She is a Founder and Editor of AutismBeacon.com, a one-of-a-kind website and online directory dedicated to providing vital resources and information to the international Autism community.
Melissa Ferry

I like tangles and they tend to work well for younger students. My older students tend to prefer my homemade ones (I fill balloons with rice, oatmeal, or flour)...they choose which one they want based on their sensory needs. It’s very funny how some kids can’t stand even to touch the rice one but love the flour, and then some kids are the exact opposite and need the stress relief the rice provides. The oatmeal I found is a nice balance between the two.

Melissa is a former Friendship Circle volunteer. She currently is a special education teacher for Mt. Pleasant Schools in Michigan.
More from Friendship Circle

Special Needs Resource Blog
With over 175,000 visitors a month, the Friendship Circle Special Needs Resource blog is one of the biggest special needs blogs in the world. Currently the blog has over 700 articles on special needs topics including: parenting, special education, products, therapy tips, videos and more. You’ll hear from parents, special educators, therapists, advocates, and those with special needs themselves. Whether you come to learn, share, or give your own opinion join us…. You are among friends.
Website: www.friendshipcircle.org/blog

Special Needs APPs
The Friendship Circle App Review provides a place where people can find great apps for children with special needs. With so many special needs apps now available it has become exceedingly difficult to find a site that makes it easy to search and browse for the perfect app. Browse close to 300 apps in such categories as Communication, Social Skills, Speech & Language, Behavior and more.
Website: www.friendshipcircle.org/apps

Michaela Noam Kaplan Great Bike Giveaway
Do you remember the day you learned to ride a bike? Do you remember the freedom you felt, the confidence you gained, the pride you had?

For the third consecutive year Friendship Circle is holding the Michaela Noam Kaplan Great Bike Giveaway, a national contest giving away adaptive bikes to children with special needs. We are partnering with bike companies from around the U.S. to provide some of the best adaptive bikes to the children and young adults who need them most.
Website: www.friendshipcircle.org/bikes
Facebook Giveaways
Friendship Circle is partnering with Special Needs Companies to give away free items every week. Every Monday at 12pm we announce the winner and immediately launch the next one. Make sure to read the contest rules for complete details on how to enter.
Website: http://bit.ly/fcgive

Friendship Circle Programs
Nothing makes children feel better about themselves than spending time with friends that truly care about them. Friendship Circle provides teen volunteers that are paired up with a child who has special needs. Together they participate in one of over 30 Friendship Circle programs and develop a real and lasting friendship.
Website: www.friendshipcircle.org/programs

Lessons For Life
The Lessons For Life program enables teachers to use Friendship Circle’s cityscape, known as Weinberg Village, as their classroom to facilitate teaching and learning life skills in a safe, life-like and interactive environment. Research continues to prove the successful comprehension of students when taught in a true-to-life setting. This is especially true for students with disabilities who are in need of alternative forms of education.
Website: www.friendshipcircle.org/schools

And Even More…….