

Play is the primary occupation of children. However, some children may need assistance to participate more fully in play due to physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities. Adapting play tasks or play materials by customizing them to match the child's abilities promotes the child's optimal level of participation in play.

## **General Guidelines for Adapting Play Tasks or Materials**

- Determine the child's abilities during play. Watch the child interact with toys to determine what he or she is able to do.
- Determine the child's needs and identify the barriers limiting participation in play. What does the child want to do/ what do you want the child to do? What adaptations will increase ability to play with a toy?
- Consider the positioning of the child during play. All positions should be considered for play, including sitting, lying on stomach or back, standing, and sidelying. Some positions may be more appropriate for play depending on the child's abilities and needs and depending on the play task. These positions can be supported with wedges, corner chairs, pillows, towels, or donut-shaped pillows (Boppy cushions).
- Consider making adaptations to the physical and/or social environment such as limiting distractions like sounds or too many things to look at, rearranging toys, limiting/expanding space available for play, limiting/increasing number of other children and adults present during play, and modifying rules of play.
- When selecting toys for your child, consider features such as size of toy, ease of operation or manipulation, durability of toy, sensory features of toy (Does it provide visual, auditory, or tactile stimulation?), and adaptability of toy.

**Adaptive Play Strategies** (Adapted from C. Musselwhite. *Adapted Play for Special Needs Children*, 1986 & from P. Justice. *Simple, Low, No and Cheap Tech Ideas*, 1996).

- **Stabilize**- Attach materials to a stable surface. This can be done using a C clamp, Dycem (non-slip matting available from Sammons-Preston catalog), a clipboard, rubberized shelf liner, hot glue, velcro, duct tape, nails, or screws. Attach accessories with ribbon or elastic.  
Example- Small toys/ pictures can be backed with magnets and placed on a cookie sheet. Velcro can be placed on the front and back cover of a book to help it stick to the carpet so that the book won't move while pages are turned.
- **Enlarge**- Make objects bigger to aid vision and grasping. Make built-up handles on toys using cylindrical foam, bubble wrap, or sponge hair rollers. Use a copier to enlarge visual cues..

Example-Use color copier to enlarge board game such as Candyland. Spaces will be larger and easier to find and less accurate placement of game piece is required.

- **Prosthetize-** Add parts to aid in grasping. This can be done by attaching shower curtain rings, film canisters, drawer knobs, or thread spools to puzzle pieces or other toys to make them easier to pick up. Loop a ponytail "scrunchy" from one end of a spoon handle, over the hand grasping it, and hook onto other end to help maintain grasp of the spoon. A wooden dowel can be attached to the bottom of a film canister to make a "T" shape. Then a marker or glue stick can be inserted in a hole or "X" cut in the lid of the canister (which is now at the bottom) and the child can use the "T" to hold the marker/glue.

Examples - Hot glue small thread spools to puzzle pieces to create a "knob" for grasping. Glue popsicle sticks to top right hand side of pages of cardboard book to aid in turning pages. Cut foam ball in half and hot glue end of marker to it.

- **Reduce required response-** Minimize range of motion needed or complexity/frequency of response. Position items closer to child, require child to do only part of task, or require movement only in one direction.

Example- Have child draw a card or roll dice during a board game and then have someone assist in moving game piece to correct space on board. Use baking tray with sides to keep cars from falling over edge of table.

- **Make more familiar-** Relate activity to something child already knows to increase interest and motivation.

Example- Have child color picture of favorite cartoon character. Create pretend play routines around eating at favorite fast food restaurant.

- **Make more concrete-** Reduce abstract qualities of play task. Break down task into steps with visual cues or use objects rather than printed symbols.

Example- When doing arts & crafts, have a sample available or have several samples to demonstrate each step of task. Limit choices during play activities.

- **Remove unnecessary features-** Consider purpose of task and eliminate other features.

Examples- Use shapes that are all the same color for shape sorting. Duplicate Candyland by photocopying game board and then cutting out selected pictures. Glue pictures to large sheet of paper and draw your own path (it can be simpler than the one on the actual game board) to create your own customized Candyland game board.

- **Remove distractions-** Simplify backgrounds, reduce unneeded verbal cues, have only necessary materials out.

Example- Give child only two or three markers or crayons to use during coloring activity. Use black paper as backdrop for puzzles.

- **Add or enhance cues-** Increase things to see, hear, or feel by using bright or contrasting colors, adding texture to objects, or outlining coloring forms in glue or a darker color. Provide verbal cues as well as physical prompts.

Example-Use puffy paint to add texture to buttons on toys. After applying paint, use a hot hair dryer to “puff” paint up.

- **Improve safety and durability-** Avoid sharp items by padding corners with Velfoam (available from Sammons-Preston) or other soft material. Protect materials by laminating them or covering with clear contact paper.

- **Provide physical access-** Suspend toys so that they can be readily reached and manipulated by children in various positions (supported sitting or semi-reclining, side-lying, in prone stander).

Example- Toys can be suspended from activity frames made from PVC tubing.

- **Provide mechanical access-** Use adaptive switches for battery-operated toys.

Example- Use adaptive switch such as Jelly Bean switch to operate a tape recorder.

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Mann, W.C. & Lane, J.P. (1995). Using assistive technology for play and learning: Children from birth to 10 years of age. In *Assistive technology for persons with disabilities* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 129-165). Bethesda, MD: The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.

Musselwhite, C.R. (1986). Toy selection and adaptation. In *Adaptive play for special needs children: Strategies to enhance communication and learning* (pp. 35-49). Boston, MA: College-Hill Press, Inc.

Justice, P. (1996). Simple, Low, No and Cheap Tech Ideas. North Carolina Assistive Technology Exposition conducted at North Central Region ATRC, Greensboro, NC.

#### **Other Resources**

Burkhart, L.J. (1980). Home-made battery-powered toys and educational devices for severely handicapped children. Order from: Linda J. Burkhart, 6201 Candle Court, Eldersburg, MD, 21784.

Burkhart, L.J. (1982). More handmade battery devices for severely handicapped children with suggested activities. Order from: Linda J. Burkhart, 6201 Candle Court, Eldersburg, MD, 21784.

Exceptional Parent magazine. Published by Psy-Ed Corporation, 209 Harvard St., Suite 303, Brookline, MA 02146-5005. To place new orders call 1-800-247-8080.

Toys for Special Children. 385 Warburton Ave., Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, 10702. To place new orders call 1-800-832-8697.

Wright, C. & Nomura, M. (1985). From toys to computers: Access for the physically disabled child. Order from: Christine Wright, P.O. Box 700242, San Jose, CA, 95170.

Sammons-Preston/ Ability One (vendor) PO Box 5071, Bolingbrook, IL, 60440-5071. 1-800-323-5547. [www.sammonspreston.com](http://www.sammonspreston.com)