

## Kids Need a Healthy Diet of Fun Especially those with Special Needs

Play is the way children learn, develop and begin to understand the world around them. Children with special needs often have to overcome barriers in connecting to play, and run a higher risk of suffering from play deprivation. Experts and researchers are realizing play experiences directly impact the ability of a child to reach his full potential.

AblePlay, a website created by the nonprofit National Lekotek Center to help children with disabilities find appropriate play products, is committed to eliminating play barriers. They have categorized four kinds of play activities that can help children of all abilities. Parents and caregivers should think about them as similar to giving their child a helping of fruits, vegetables, protein, and carbohydrates as part of a healthy diet.

The AblePlay categories for toys and play products are: cognitive, physical, sensory and communicative. All children should have a healthy portion of each in their home and more of those activities that can help them with their individual developmental goals. Let's look a little closer at each:

### Cognitive

Like protein for the brain, toys can help a child learn, think, use his mind, plan, strategize and develop reasoning and mental skills.

Examples of Cognitive Developmental Goals:

- Cause and effect (block building and toppling, push button activity toys)
- Visual tracking skills (cars to push across the floor)
- Matching skills (puzzles, memory matching cards)
- Sequential order (Legos with simple step by step directions, graduated stacking rings)

### Physical

All children need to keep active, stretch their muscles and explore their bodies and abilities. Children with disabilities need physical exercise to feed their bodies just like they need their green vegetables. The good news is that play is a natural motivator and play products can often get a child to push beyond any barriers and reach their full physical potential. Plus play is an easier sell to a kid than spinach.

Examples of Physical Developmental Goals:

- Eye-hand coordination (ball games like baseball or bowling)
- Overall physical strength (outdoor and indoor play sets)
- Coordination (balancing toys)
- Balancing (bikes)

### Sensory

Sometimes children with special needs' sensory perceptions are disordered. This means that ordinary sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches may be irritating or even painful for them. Hearing may be hyper acute, or smell or touch. Toys and play products are a way to gently accustom a child to sensory experiences in a safe, fun

and playful way. Sensory stimulation is like fruit in a child's diet, you want to hit the right balance with anything sweet.

Examples of Sensory Developmental Goals:

- Auditory (electronic toys that have volume control to adjust to sensitivities)
- Lights (that glow or move capture attention, but be aware they can cause overstimulation or instigate seizures)
- Textures (can help with tactile issues and the ability to be touched. Look for toys with diverse textures like stuffed toys, activity blankets, blocks)

### Communicative

The ability to communicate may not be related to the ability to think, know and understand. The words required to express a child's needs and wants may be beyond their current ability. Toys and games are a great way to pull those words out and allow the child to begin to express himself. Group games are also a great platform for a child to experiment with language and social etiquette. Communication skills are like carbohydrates in children's diet, they need a healthy portion.

Examples of Communicative Goals:

- Social opportunities (games that encourage parallel play, sharing and cooperation)
- Phonetic component (electronic toys that speak or flash cards to teach words)
- Two-way communication (like Walkie Talkies)
- Interactive (board games)

Play is the job of the child and a platform for him or her to develop cognitive, physical, sensory and communicative skills. Parents and caregivers should take the time to make sure their kid's toy chest has within it the right combination for the needs of their child—just like their pantry needs a balance of food. Kids need a healthy diet of both food and fun.

AblePlay™ is a website at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) that researches, rates and provides comprehensive information on toys for children with disabilities. All play products are rated according to their cognitive, physical, sensory and communicative benefits. The mission is to help parents, families, and professionals make the best toy choices and purchases for the children in their lives.