

Overview

No doubt you have read about the vital role of parents in their children's lives. Indeed, parents are their children's first and foremost teachers. What exactly does that mean? In the early years especially, parents offer love, guidance, and support to help children acquire self-confidence, self-esteem, and independence. But they and other caregivers may not realize how play activities help young children grow and develop. The goal of this course is to enable you to harness the power of play to teach children about themselves and the world around them.

This course includes seven lessons. The first lesson examines the importance of play. Lesson 2 discusses special considerations that can affect the child's play. Lessons 3 through 5 link the child's development with the development of play at different ages: newborn to 6 months, 6 to 18 months, and 18 months to 5 years. Lesson 6 suggests ways to create a nurturing play environment. Lesson 7 explains how to select toys and activities that suit the child. The course features an Appendix that suggests additional play ideas. Peruse this section, and select activities based on your child's

age and development. The course also features a Resource List that offers reading suggestions, contact information for vendors, and related Web sites.

This course suggests a variety of play activities that engage all the child's senses. Titled "The Toy Chest," you will find these activities in Lessons 3 through 5. Although chapters alternate the use of the masculine and the feminine, remember that the information applies to both genders. Although your goal is to use play to help the child develop, safety should remain a primary concern. Keeping the child safe is a never-ending process. Therefore, The Hadley School for the Blind urges you to closely supervise the child's play at all times.

No prerequisite is necessary before starting this course. Nevertheless, if you are not a parent, Hadley strongly encourages you to work with a child who is visually impaired so you can benefit fully from the information presented in the course. To complete the course, you will need the materials that The Hadley School for the Blind has provided and writing materials in the medium of your choice. If you are taking the audiocassette

version of this course, you will need your own cassette recorder.

The self-tests that conclude each lesson are for your personal development only. Do not mail your answers to your Hadley instructor. Rather, check your comprehension by comparing your answers with those provided.

You are required, however, to submit the assignment that concludes each lesson. Whenever possible, use real-life examples and engage the child in the game or activity. If you are not the child's parent or legal guardian, use only the child's first name to preserve the confidentiality of the information you are sharing. If you mail your assignments, use the mailing labels enclosed for your convenience. The enclosed contact information card indicates your instructor's fax number and email address in case you prefer to send your assignments electronically.

Lesson 7: Toys

Lesson 1 explained how play promotes learning. Lesson 2 examined special considerations that may affect the child's play. Lessons 3 through 5 discussed the connection between a child's development and the development of play at specific ages. Lesson 6 gave suggestions for creating a suitable play environment that also involves family members and peers. Previous lessons have often mentioned the need to provide toys that appeal to all the senses. But how can parents and caregivers choose the perfect toy that reflects the child's interests and encourages his development of new skills?

This lesson examines toys and activities that offer a multisensory experience, yet are durable and safe. It explains how you can adapt toys to the child's individual learning style, interests, and needs. Finally, it discusses the benefits of homemade toys. Familiarizing yourself with the information in this lesson will enable you to organize activities that meet the individual needs of the child.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- a. choose interesting toys that are durable and safe
- b. adapt toys to meet the needs of the child
- c. examine the benefits of homemade toys

Choosing a Toy

Many parents say that their child has more toys than he needs. If you spend some time with children, you know that some toys become instant hits and cherished favorites. Others are forgotten all too soon.

What makes one toy a treasure and another trash?

Many toys are expensive, but price does not necessarily mean high quality nor does it guarantee enjoyment. In general, toys that children treasure are engaging as well as durable and safe.

How do you choose toys that appeal to a particular child? You first need to examine two things: the child it is intended for and the toy itself. Previous lessons have already focused on the child. Now take a look at the toy itself.

When carefully chosen, many commercial toys are practical, appropriate, and fun. Yet they are often

expensive considering that children's needs and interests change. Toys that have a long-term appeal are sound investments. At times, however, the child needs a particular toy to meet a very specific need. Is it worth the investment then? You might decide it is. Or you could try to borrow the toy from a neighbor, a toy-lending library, or the child's early intervention program or school.

You can get ideas by looking at classrooms and therapy centers. Garage sales, flea markets, and secondhand stores are other good sources for toys. These toys may not be in perfect shape, but they are less expensive. What's important is to look for toys that are whole and functional. Toys that are missing pieces or do not work correctly will only frustrate the child.

Consider toy libraries too, which are gaining popularity. Some public libraries offer more than books; they lend toys, puppets, theme kits, videos, CDs, and cassette tapes. You might also find toy libraries in hospitals, in early intervention or school programs for children with disabilities, and in traveling vans. For instance, consult the Resource List for contact information on a toy

library with developmental play therapy ideas for families of children who have disabilities.

What Makes a Good Toy?

Good toys are sturdy and durable, so they stand up to the wear and tear of children. Toys that break easily frustrate the child and waste the parents' money.

Children are more likely to care for toys that are well-made and last a long time.

Good toys are child-size. For example, rattles should fit easily in a baby's grasp and be light enough so that he can control his arm movements when holding them.

Toddlers and preschoolers need toys that they can carry and pieces that fit easily in their hands. Push-and-pull toys and toys with pull cords should be designed with the child's arm reach and height in mind.

Good toys appeal to all the senses. They're interesting to look at, listen to, chew on, and touch. Children with low vision need toys with bright, clear colors and good contrast. Such toys have simple design lines and minimal fine detailing. Babies and young children prefer primary colors—red, yellow, blue—and then secondary colors—green, orange, violet—before they progress to

pastels. Visually impaired children also need objects that are easily recognizable by touch. For example, toy figures of family members should resemble mother, father, sister, and brother.

Good toys are versatile and adaptable; that is, they have more than one use and appeal to the child at different developmental levels. For example, a toy house appeals to a toddler because he can put in or take out figures as well as open and close its doors and windows. A preschooler can enjoy the toy house, but he may use it for imaginary play, using the figures as his family. Don't forget that many gender-specific toys appeal to children of both sexes. Indeed, many girls enjoy toy cars and trucks, and boys can play with dolls and cooking utensils.

Good toys have a cause-and-effect quality, which means the toy responds when the child does something to it. For example, a xylophone produces beautiful mellow tones when struck. A doll talks when the child pulls the string. A puzzle fits together smoothly and logically to create an interesting picture. A top spins and whirs across the floor when a lever is pressed to release it from its chute. The cause-and-effect quality

of a toy is very important because it helps children realize that they can cause things to happen. It gives them power and control over their environment.

As a fully sighted individual, you may favor toys that are nice to look at. Touch and sound are going to be more important to the child, however. So take a potential toy and explore it with your eyes closed. Can you distinguish its parts with your hands? Does it have a variety of textures to feel, or does it merely feel like a plastic lump? Does it make sounds that are pleasing? Always imagine how the child “sees” the toy. So many toys are visually appealing, but when the child cannot discern the painted details, the toy becomes a “lump,” which makes him lose interest.

What Makes a Toy Safe?

Safety is another essential quality to look for. Safe toys are made of durable, nontoxic, and washable materials. They have no sharp edges, glass, or brittle plastic pieces that easily break off. Stuffing or filling is firmly sewn in so the child cannot pick at it or pull it apart. Button eyes are sewn firmly on. Ribbon, lace, or other string-like decorations are less than 12 inches long and secured in place. Safe toys do not have small loose

parts that can cause asphyxiation. If the child is prone to seizures, avoid toys that might bring on a seizure, such as toys with strong vibrations, blinking lights, or rhythmic, spinning designs.

Safe toys have packages with appropriate ages clearly marked. Pay particular attention to packages that state “not meant for children under 3.” This usually means that the toy has tiny parts that could become lodged in a small child’s throat. Of course, this implies that by age 3 most children are not putting toys in their mouths. Parents and caregivers need to exercise caution, however, because some visually impaired children mouth toys longer than their sighted counterparts.

Always inspect toy packages for safety information or instructions. Parents and caregivers ultimately decide if a toy is safe. For instance, they might decide that a certain toy is suitable but only under adult supervision, meaning the toy should be out of reach at all other times. In addition, you can obtain up-to-date information on toy safety, product recalls, or consumer alerts by contacting the Consumer Product Safety

Commission. Consult the Resource List for contact information on this organization.

You can get many ideas by talking to other parents. You can also observe both visually impaired and sighted children at play. See what they play with, and consider your choices from there. When choosing a toy, keep in mind the needs of the child. Visually impaired children need toys that enable them to use all their senses. They need toys that are interactive, durable, and safe.

Adaptive Toys

Parents can often adapt toys to make them more interesting, appropriate, and appealing. Some adaptations are quite simple. For example, placing a bright green sticker on a red ball makes it more visually interesting, or outlining an asphalt square with white cloth tape enables the child to discern boundaries. Other adaptations take more effort, like gluing large beads over the tiny knobs of puzzle pieces so they are easier for small and uncoordinated fingers to grasp. You could also glue large beads on a puzzle that has no knobs. Voilà! You have an adapted puzzle! Some adaptations require more skill and effort—for example,

attaching a lever to a music box's windup switch. Rather than having to rotate the wrist and twist the switch, the child can push down on the lever to turn the switch, a skill that takes less effort.

As much as possible, watch the visually impaired child and a sighted child play with the same toy. By simply observing how the children play with a toy, you will often see opportunities to make changes. Determine what adaptations the child needs by first asking yourself a few questions such as:

What could make this toy more engaging and interactive?

How can you give the toy more tactile or auditory appeal if the child is visually impaired?

What changes would make the toy easier to manipulate if the child has limited dexterity?

Once you have answered these questions, get creative. If the child who is seated can attend to a brightly colored ball when it is at eye level, find a way to suspend the ball in front of her. Can you attach a string to the ball and suspend it from a chair back or doorway? Always keep safety in mind, however, and

remember that certain toys should only be used under adult supervision.

Some children, especially those with cerebral palsy or other physical disabilities, need more sophisticated adaptations that allow them to manipulate toys. For example, adaptive switches enable them to use battery-operated and some windup toys. Adaptations might include switches, joysticks, or sipping and puffing on straw switches. The Resource List includes contact information for vendors that sell adaptive toys and switches. It also suggests books that offer instructions on how to adapt toys.

Keep the needs of the child in mind when determining what adaptations allow him to interact with and manipulate toys. Some adaptations are simple, and others are more complicated. Let the unique needs of the child guide your approach.

Homemade Toys

Another way to provide toys that meet specific needs and interests is to make them yourself. Most people think that such toys are difficult to make. Perhaps you feel that this would be time-consuming, or that the

materials would be hard to find. In some cases, that can be true. Nevertheless, you can make most homemade toys with materials you already have or could find easily.

Benefits of Homemade Toys

For the most part, these toys do not require a lot of time or money, or any special talent or equipment. If a toy is for a very specific short-term need, why spend a lot of time or money on the project? You won't be too upset when a tambourine made of two paper plates with bottle caps in between and laced together with yarn falls apart within a week. All you need for success is a toy that holds the child's interest. Homemade toys offer many advantages:

- They are inexpensive.
- They are made mostly with materials found around the home.
- They don't take a lot of time to make.
- They encourage siblings to get involved because children love to construct things.
- They meet the unique needs of the child.

A homemade toy is special because it's a sign of your love. Moreover, it enriches the child's play experiences

because it is so well suited to his needs. Consult the Resource List for information on reading material, vendors, and organizations that may help you get started. Finally, check your local library, bookstore, or art supply store for additional ideas on how to create your own toys.

Materials

Making homemade toys does not require a lot. Mostly, you need a working space and a variety of materials. Depending on your situation, you could set up shop in a corner of your basement or garage, or in a closet. Then assemble materials over a period of time. Family and friends may already have some of these materials, or they may be willing to save them if they know what you need. Why not use the following lists to get you started? You may be surprised at how many items you already have.

Paper Goods

poster board in assorted colors

cardboard

crepe paper

party napkins

tissue paper

construction paper in bright colors

computer paper

colored cellophane (Keep the cellophane from holiday baskets.)

wallpaper books (Ask your local supplier to give you old books that feature geometric prints, bright colors, and stripes.)

waxed paper

adhesive paper, clear and printed

nonskid shelf liner

newspaper

paper cups and plates

catalogs and magazines

greeting cards and envelopes

junk mail (Kids love to open their own mail!)

stickers (often found in junk mail)

cardboard tubes (from toilet paper, paper towels, aluminum foil, and plastic wrap)

gift wrap

old playing cards

Containers

oatmeal boxes

salt containers

gift boxes

matchboxes

jewelry boxes

candy boxes

shoe boxes

cardboard packing boxes, large and small

milk cartons, large and small

Household Objects

sponges

dish scrubbers

vegetable scrubbers

sifters and sieves

spoons—wooden, plastic, ladles, slotted, measuring

aluminum foil and pans

coffee cans and lids

margarine tubs and lids

spring-type clothespins

cotton balls

berry baskets

foam meat trays and containers from fast-food
restaurants (Note that these need to be thoroughly
cleaned to prevent disease.)

straws

metal cookie sheets, muffin tins, and baking pans

magnets

bells

plant hooks

wire and plastic coat hangers

balls—Ping-Pong, tennis, rubber, foam

plastic bottles—squeeze bottles, pump bottles (e.g.,
from hand lotion), bottles with removable lids (e.g.,
screw on, snap off)

film canisters

Sewing and Craft Items

fabric scraps and pieces of all colors, textures, and
prints

elastic

buttons

zippers

hook-and-eye closures

felt

ribbons, rickrack, lace, raffia

yarn, thread
beads and baubles
empty thread spools
clasps
belt buckles
polyester batting

Wood

sticks
scraps
shavings
sawdust
dowel rods
planting stakes

Foods

dried beans—lima, kidney, pinto, navy, soy
dried peas—green, yellow, black-eyed, split
dried lentils
popcorn kernels
cornmeal
corn kernels
rice
dried pasta in assorted shapes

dry cereal in assorted colors and shapes

Making homemade toys shows the child that you care enough to take the extra time and effort to do something special for him. Homemade toys don't require a lot of time or skill, and the materials used can usually be found around the home.

Summary

This lesson described how to choose toys that are durable and safe. It explained how you can adapt toys to meet the special needs of the child. Finally, it discussed the benefits of homemade toys and offered suggestions for materials to make these toys.

Self-Test

Indicate whether the following statements are true or false. If the statement is false, reword it to make it true.

1. High-priced toys are high-quality toys that the child will enjoy.

False. High price does not necessarily mean high quality, nor does it ensure that the child will enjoy the toy.

2. The toys you choose should be child-size so that the child can easily grasp them and control his arm movements when holding them.

True

3. Good toys only have one use and appeal to the child at a specific developmental level.

False. Good toys are versatile. They appeal to the child at different developmental levels.

4. Safe toys do not have small loose parts, or ribbons more than 12 inches long.

True

5. Toys with strong vibrations, blinking lights, or rhythmic, spinning designs are always good choices because they involve all the senses.

False. Such toys may appeal to the child who is visually impaired. They should be avoided, however, if the child is prone to seizure.

6. Children with additional disabilities do not need more sophisticated adaptations to manipulate toys.

False. Children with additional disabilities may need more sophisticated adaptations that allow them to manipulate toys.

7. Adapting toys is usually complicated and requires special skills.

False. Some adaptations are very simple and do not require special skills—for example, putting a bright green sticker on a red ball to make it visually appealing to the child with low vision.

8. A benefit of homemade toys is that much money is not being spent on toys for short-term needs.

True

9. The materials for homemade toys are generally expensive and hard to find.

False. Most of the materials for homemade toys are inexpensive and readily available.

10. Homemade toys can be custom-designed to meet the developmental needs of the child.

True

If you answered most of these questions correctly, you are prepared to complete the assignment. If you found the self-test difficult, however, review this material before moving on.

Assignment 7

Complete this assignment in the medium of your choice. Begin by giving your full name, address, and phone number. Also indicate the course title, Assignment 7, your instructor's name, and the date. Then provide your answers. Be sure to indicate the question number along with each answer. If you are not the child's parent or legal guardian, remember to use only the child's first name to preserve the confidentiality of the information you are sharing. Instructions for sending assignments can be found in the Overview to the course.

1. List five characteristics of a good toy. Give one example for each.
2. How can you determine if a toy is safe? Give five examples of such toys.

3. Choose a toy. Describe it, and explain how you could adapt it to meet the specific needs of the child described in Part A of Assignment 1.
4. Create a homemade toy. Describe the materials used and the specific needs that the toy meets based on the child's age and development.

Once you have completed this assignment, mail, fax, or email it to your instructor. This concludes the course "Learning Through Play." The Appendix that follows offers additional ideas for play activities. With the information presented in this course, you can now harness the power of play to teach the child about himself and the world around him.