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Play and Learning for Children with Special Needs

by
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Fair Play for Children
for the Child's Right to Play

There's a fine line between play and learning for children with special needs.

On one hand, simply having your child play games is a great way to have fun and connect. On the other hand, when your child is asked to concentrate on specific lessons it may be more of a challenge.

Recognizing the intersection between playing and learning activities can be paramount to furthering the development of your special needs child. If a melding between the two can be implemented, then it is possible to obtain positive results.

The overall process is similar to hiding vegetables in a favorite food to get kids to eat their greens. For some children there could be a substantial change through playing and learning while for others, progress may be subtle yet just as significant.

Gearing Play Appropriately

There are a variety of applications regarding the specifics of building skills through play. It all depends on the child and their particular special needs symptoms.

Therefore, it is important to determine what would be the best choice per individual to make sure that the [play activity](#) is cohesive enough that the child is easily capable to participate.

Forcing play simply to learn a skill can be a losing proposition. Designing play per each child's abilities offers more possibilities for them to learn at their own pace and comfort level.

Peripheral Learning

There are a [variety of theories](#) regarding play and learning for special needs children but most agree that it can peripherally build skills. Whether cognitive, physical, social, structural or any other number of possibilities, attempting to learn through play is often highly successful.

Many parents know that getting a child to pay attention at any age is a difficult undertaking. For those raising kids challenged by a physical and/or mental affliction, the task can be much more demanding.

Therefore, once matched to a particular set of play/learn activities, your child will hopefully be so immersed in the play part they won't notice the learning part.

However, you will notice, especially when it's applied later.

Some Play Ideas for Learning

If you don't already have your own, these [play activity ideas](#) for learning might help get the ball rolling.

Again, each child and their abilities are different so if nothing here helps, think outside the box. Playing games is not rocket science, it's what your child learns that's important.

Puzzles - This is a great way to play a problem solving game while working on dexterity. Start with large piece puzzles and work your way to smaller ones.

Role Play - Social interaction is essential for your child's outside world success. Playing role play games that act out social scenarios can be fun and informative.

Drumming - According to an article in [Psychology Today](#) (3/10/11), the act of drumming helps:

- Encourage and fulfill social needs
- Communication needs
- Fine and gross motor skills
- Emotional needs
- Cognitive needs

Toys - There are many toys that special needs kids can play and learn from at the same time.

Designs like:

- Monster Toss which works eye hand coordination
- Cause and effect toys (push a button get a response) for verbal interaction
- Tent and tunnel setup for sensory integration impairment

- Limited movement toys such as the Infinite Loop, a plastic track and ball loop for upper dexterity and concentration (often used for those in wheelchairs).

The Arts - The National Center for Technology Innovation and Center for Implementing Technology in Education (CITEd) reports that:

“Many students with learning disabilities struggle to communicate their thoughts and feelings. They may have trouble finding the words or using language effectively. The visual arts, such as painting, drawing, music, and computer graphics, can give them a non-verbal way to express themselves and interact with other people.”

It Shows Up on Brain Scans

Dr. Ron Savage, Executive Vice President of the North American Brain Injury Society and expert on neuro-developmental disabilities explains the importance of [brain stimulation](#) which is enhanced by playing and learning activities.

“We now have evidence from neuro-imaging studies (e.g., fMRI, PET, and SPECT scans) that new neuro-pathways are created and connections among neurons are enhanced when the brain is stimulated,”

There are hundreds of ways to take advantage of the importance of play and learning for children with special needs. Try several until you have a list you can refer to that your child will enjoy and benefit from.

About the Author:

Felicity Dryer

born in Flagstaff, Arizona, Felicity Dryer was raised by her parents (more or less modern-day hippies) to always make her health a top priority. Throughout her life, she has focused on encouraging others to reach for and achieve their personal goals. Now she lives in sunny Los Angeles, where she is pursuing her career as a journalist, and continuing to help those seeking encouragement to keep moving forward to achieve their goals. You can follow her on [Twitter](#).

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