



THE ACT OF PLAYING is an important tool that influence's a child's life. The primary goals of childhood are to grow, learn, and play. It is often through play that children learn to make sense of the world around them. It is a child's "job" or "occupation" to play to develop physical coordination, emotional maturity, social skills to interact with other children, and self-confidence to try new experiences and explore new environments.

Occupational therapy practitioners have expertise in evaluating children's neurological, muscular, and emotional development; and determining the effects of infant and childhood illness on growth and development.

What Can Parents and Families Do?

Encourage **sensory rich** play by using balls, sand and water toys, slides, swings, finger paints, and magnets. During sensory play, children use their senses to incorporate smell, touch, sound, vision, and movement.

Encourage **manipulative play**, such as using play dough, LEGOs, and board games. Toys such as puzzles, pegboards, beads, and lacing cards help improve the child's eye-hand coordination and dexterity.

Promote **imaginative** or **pretend play** with things like dolls and stuffed animals, toy furniture, puppets, and telephones. Pretend play encourages creativity and role playing and provides an opportunity to rehearse social skills.

Choose toys that are appropriate to the child's age and/or maturity level. They do not have to be expensive or complicated to be beneficial. Common objects, such as pots and pans, empty boxes, spools of thread, shoelaces, and wooden spoons are readily accessible and encourage children to use their imagination.

Remember when choosing a toy to consider whether a child must be supervised while playing with it. Toys should not have small parts that break easily or can be swallowed.

What Can an Occupational Therapy Practitioner Do?

Help adapt toys or modify the environment to provide optimal sensory input without overwhelming the child.

Recommend toys and play activities that provide the "just right" challenge for the child, so he or she learns while having fun. The occupational therapy practitioner can also recommend ways to build on the child's strengths and abilities.

Offer play opportunities that encourage turn taking and problem solving. Consider family routines and priorities when recommending play strategies. Observe, identify, and develop play strategies that promote a healthy lifestyle and relationships.

Suggest toys that will help the child develop particular skills, while having fun. Recommend ways for family members to be more involved in the child's play. Suggest toys and play activities for children of all abilities and ages. Collaborate with educators and caregivers to enhance playtime at home, during recess at school, and during community outings.

Help determine what toys will be safe, developmentally appropriate, and fun for a particular child, based on an evaluation and in consideration of the child's and family's needs and goals.

Recommended Toys and Activities for Children and Teens

Infants	Rattles, mobiles, playmats, mirrors, crib toys, infant swings, teething toys, busy boxes, squeeze toys
Toddlers and Preschoolers	Blocks, stacking rings, pegboards, shape sorters, push and pull toys, balls, books, sand and water toys, large beads, movement games, toy cars and trucks, train sets, musical toys
School-Aged Children	Building sets, books, bicycles, roller skates, ice skates, board games, checkers, beginning sports
Middle Schoolers and Adolescents	Athletics, books, hobbies, crafts, electronics

Need More Information?

Occupational therapy practitioners promote play for all children, with or without disabilities. Play challenges could indicate a need for further assessment. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist, ask your physician, other health professionals, and your school district's director of special education for information on how you can access an occupational therapist in your area.

You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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