



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Lekotek and Other Toy-Lending Programs for Children with Special Needs

by Susan Agrawal

The most important thing a child can do is play. Play is a catalyst for development in all areas, ranging from large and fine motor skills to social/emotional development and communication. Pushing buttons on toys, painting, interacting with other children, and participating in sports activities are just a few of the many ways that play helps children to develop skills, become more independent, and learn valuable life skills.

Lekotek—a name that combines the Swedish root “lek” meaning toy or play and the Greek suffix “tek” meaning library—is an organization that makes play accessible for children with special needs and their families. First developed in Sweden in the 1960s, Lekotek programs are prominent in Scandinavia and have spread to three dozen sites in the United States. Programs primarily use a model in which a trained Leader introduces individually chosen and adapted toys to a child and family, helping the family to use the toys both for therapeutic goals and to help include the child in the family structure. The mission of Lekotek is exactly that, to use “interactive play experiences, and the learning that results, to promote the inclusion of children with special needs into family and community life.”¹ Sessions are typically very inexpensive and billed on a sliding scale.

All Lekotek affiliates also have an extensive library of toys, including “off-the-shelf” toys, adapted or special needs toys and equipment, creative homemade adaptations, and in some locations, computer software and accessories. At the end of each play session, families are encouraged to borrow a selection of toys to use at home for the next month. These toys are then returned at the next session, and new toys are chosen.

While Lekotek is the most common toy-lending program in the United States, many regions offer similar programs through organizations such as Easter Seals, UCP, hospitals, public libraries, or therapy centers. A list of US toy-lending libraries can be found at <http://usatla.home.comcast.net/~usatla/>, though this list contains libraries of unadapted toys as well. Choose “Toy Library Directory” and then scroll to the right on the website to see services provided and populations served. Similar programs are available in Canada, the UK, Scandinavia, and selected other countries throughout the world.

A secondary benefit of a toy-lending program is the ability to try out adapted toys and devices for a month. Because these toys are typically very pricey—often hundreds of dollars for even the most basic toys—families are able to see how their children respond

to different toys before purchasing them. In addition, most Lekotek programs introduce children to switches, basic communicators, special needs software, and other similar devices that provide a foundation for children with disabilities to communicate, play, and learn in the future. These devices are often even more expensive than adapted toys and the ability to trial them for a month in the child's home is priceless.



A selection of Lekotek adapted toys and switches available for borrowing

My child has attended a Lekotek program since she was about 18 months of age. We began by borrowing selected adapted toys to work on cause and effect and to help her learn to activate a switch. Different switches have encouraged skills such as finger isolation, pulling, pushing, or rolling. We also borrowed a series of basic communicators, beginning with a two-choice Say It Play It and an eight button Cheap Talk. These devices helped to prepare my daughter for more sophisticated communication, now using her own personal Dynavox Communicator. Her Leader also chooses toys for her very thoughtfully, picking items that help her to interact with her younger brother or further occupational therapy goals.

Lekotek and toy-lending programs provide a fun way for children with special needs to experience play and try out adapted toys and other devices. My daughter's borrowed toys have significantly reduced the boredom she often feels throughout the day, while at the same time helping her to develop fine motor, gross motor, communication, and social skills. The power of play cannot be underestimated.

¹ <http://www.lekotek.org/lekotek/whatis.asp>