



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Guide to Holiday Shopping for Your Child with Special Needs

Two years ago I wrote my first shopping guide for children with special needs. I was hoping that by 2008 adapted toys would be mass produced and become a bit more mainstream. I keep hoping that I will see a doll in a wheelchair at every Toys “R” Us, and that I will be able to get switch toys at the local toy store. We have enough to do as parents of children with special needs, and having to order products off the internet months in advance because local stores do not carry appropriate toys just adds to our burden.

Adapted toys have not hit the local stores yet, so I am back to writing another holiday shopping guide. In reality, prices on adapted toy have actually gone up dramatically, especially when it comes to several of the main merchants. To deal with even higher prices, along with our poor economy, this year I am not only providing general suggestions, but also focusing on some alternative and less expensive sources for special needs products.

When You Have No Idea What to Buy

Some years I can come up with thirty things I want to buy my daughter, half of which are even in our price range. Other years, I just do not know where to start. There are several different ways to handle this problem. One is to use a Toy Guide for children with special needs.

Each year, several Special Needs Toy Guides are released to help families, relatives, and friends to buy appropriate toys for their loved ones. While these lists are only helpful to a point, they can guide you toward some of the more educational or adaptable toys.

Here is a sampling of Special Needs Toy Guides:

- ❑ **Toys “R” Us Toy Guide for Differently Abled Kids** – Each year, Toys “R” Us releases a new guide that describes how various toys they sell may be appropriate for children with special needs. It can be found in stores, inside Exceptional Parent Magazine, or online at <http://www.toysrus.com/shop/index.jsp?categoryId=3261680> This is a catalog of regular, unadapted toys that are coded with colorful icons to illustrate their appropriateness for different special needs populations. Once again, I was happy

- to see this year's printed issue filled with pictures of children with special needs. But I was again disappointed that virtually all of the toys in the guide would be unsuitable for my child, who has severe physical impairments. Toys "R" Us also has a beautifully designed and thorough online page for children with special needs that allows you to search by learning category and other parameters. It is available year-round at <http://www.toysrus.com/category/index.jsp?categoryId=2257808>.
- ❑ **Able Play Toy Ratings** – Able Play is an online database of primarily unadapted toys that are rated using a five star scale for different categories of learning (physical, sensory, communicative, cognitive). The searchable database can be found at <http://www.ableplay.org> There are many different search options available, including by disability, age, type of toy, and brand. This database was created by Lekotek, a national toy-lending program for special needs children. While this database does a great job of describing how typical toys may be used by children with disabilities, it is still disappointing that they have so few adapted toys in their database.
 - ❑ **Exceptional Parent Magazine Annual Toy Guide** – Exceptional Parent, a magazine for special needs families, puts out a yearly toy guide including both recommended toys and general suggestions for purchasing. See their website at <http://www.eparent.com/> for information on purchasing this year's guide, which can be found in the October edition. The magazine is also available on selected newsstands. This year's guide features a selection of toys, adapted devices, and other items and will give you some great ideas!
 - ❑ **Let's Play Toy Guide** – The American Foundation for the Blind, who helps develop the Let's Play Toy Guides along with the Toy Industry Foundation and other groups, has a "kid-tested" toy guide for children with all sorts of special needs, not just visual impairments. The 2008 version is available on their website at <http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=82> or can be downloaded from http://www.toyassociation.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=TIF_Home2&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=1388 Toys are labeled by disability categories. Almost all of the toys are unadapted and available widely. Fisher-Price has partnered with Let's Play and has its own guide for toys, available at http://www.fisher-price.com/us/special_needs/ As of this writing, Fisher-Price presents specific information to help guide you to pick the right toy, but the actual toy listings were not yet available.

Another good strategy is to ask a therapist, teacher, or another parent what he or she would recommend. Many times these individuals will have first-hand experience with a toy and can advise you if it will work for your child or not.

Finally, if you have access to a Lekotek or other toy-lending program in your area, go try out some toys. Watch your child and see what she likes best.

How to Let Clueless Relatives Know What to Buy

If you are like us, you have received mountains of useless clothes and toys from well-meaning relatives who do not understand your child's needs and abilities. While it is the thought that counts, sometimes we need to give our relatives a little bit of help. After all, most of them really do want to give your child an appropriate gift. They just do not know where to start.

When in doubt, tell them exactly what to buy and where to get it by making a wishlist. You can simply make a list and mail/e-mail it to your relatives and friends, or you can create an on-line wishlist using sites such as Wish Central [www.wishlistcentral.com], Kaboodle [www.kaboodle.com], and Amazon [www.amazon.com]. These sites allow you to create a wishlist with links and help friends and relatives to "reserve" a purchased item so you don't end up with three blue sweaters and five identical sign language books.

In general, I find it a little passé etiquette-wise to create a toy wishlist for my children. To get around this slightly guilty feeling, I create lists of therapy or school items that will be helpful and useful for my child, along with a few therapeutic toys. Examples of items you might want to list include everything from switch toys to communication aids to therapy balls or even splints. Make sure to include items in a wide variety of price ranges to accommodate all of prospective gift buyers.

Another option is to select a foundation or organization that is meaningful to your child, such as a foundation for a specific disease or a more general group like Easter Seals. You can request donations be made in your child's name in lieu of holiday gifts.

Sources for Special Needs Toys

The following is a list of several companies that sell special needs toys. Enjoy!

- **Abilitations** <http://www.abilitations.com/> A wide range of products from equipment to sensory toys.
- **Beyond Play** <http://www.beyondplay.com/> These are billed as toys for children 0-3, but there are many items for older children as well.
- **Flaghouse** <http://www.flaghouse.com> A great store full of special needs products and sensory items. Carries the Flying Colors line of adapted toys and switches.
- **Enabling Devices** <http://enablingdevices.com/catalog> A store for adapted toys, switches, and basic augmentative communication devices. Most products, unfortunately, are very expensive.
- **Southpaw** <http://www.southpawenterprises.com/> Experts in swings and other sensory items.
- **Integrations** <http://www.integrationscatalog.com/> A catalog of sensory and learning items from Abilitations.

- **Achievement Products** <http://www.specialkidszone.com/> A wide variety of products at slightly lower prices than most other places.
- **Super Duper** <http://www.superduperinc.com/> A company focusing on speech, language, learning, and special education products.
- **TFH Special Needs Toys** <http://www.specialneedstoys.com/usa/index.asp> A company with a wide variety of special needs products, many imported, including specialty sensory items and swings.
- **Different Roads to Learning** <http://www.difflearn.com/> Autism products, particularly ABA and speech-oriented.
- **Dragonfly Toys** <http://www.dftoys.com/> A wide variety of products, including software, switch toys, and other products.
- **Ablenet** <http://www.ablenetinc.com/> Switches, Communication devices, access products, and learning products.
- **Attainment Company**
<http://www.attainmentcompany.com/xcart/home.php?cat=253> Communication and assistive technology products.
- **Don Johnston** <http://www.donjohnston.com/> Products for learning, literacy, and assistive technology.
- **The Adaptive Child** <http://www.adaptivechild.com/> A wide variety of special needs products geared toward younger children.
- **Say It With Symbols** <http://www.givinggreetings.com/> Communication products and gifts.

Dolls that Look Like Your Child

While some parents of children with special needs disagree, personally I think it is important for a child with a disability or genetic disorder to have a doll that looks like her. Many of these dolls have emerged over the past few years, and other companies now sell adaptive equipment (such as wheelchairs or walkers) to use with a doll of your choice. I have listed a wide variety of sources for dolls and doll equipment below:

- German Down Syndrome Dolls: <http://www.downcreations.com/>
- Collector Down Syndrome Dolls: <http://down-syndrome.de/down23e.html>
- Down Syndrome Dolls: <http://www.downsyndromedolls.com/online/>
- American Girl Wheelchair:
<http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/ProductPage.jsf/itemId/140980/itemType/TOY/webTemplateId/3/uniqueId/276/saleGroupId/136>
- Constructive Playthings Wheelchair: http://www.cptoys.com/cgi-bin/cptoys.cgi.sh/WService=cptoys/cptoys.com/school/product.htm?stateInfo=?&dept_id=422&pf_id=FPH-1&utm_source=froogle&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=Updated20081013&utm_term=CP
- American Girl Crutches and Splints:
<http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/ProductPage.jsf/itemId/139914/itemType/TOY/webTemplateId/3/uniqueId/276/cx1/Y/XcellId/TRUE>

- Wheelchair, Crutches, Eyeglasses, Walker, Hearing Aids, Cane, and Braces: <http://www.lakeshorelearning.com> Item LA1200X
- Shadow Buddies (dolls with CP, pumps, ostomies, transplants, etc.): <http://www.shadowbuddies.org>
- Sew Able Wheelchair, braces, therapy equipment: http://www.sew-dolling.com/physical_therapy_dollequip.htm
- Sew Able Dolls with Prosthetic Legs or Chemo Dolls: http://www.sew-dolling.com/dollys_friends.htm
- My Twinn Doll Wheelchair: <http://www.mytwinn.com/genProduct.html/PID/4237939/ctid/17&>
- Down Syndrome, Ethnic dolls, and Adaptive Equipment: <http://www.pattycakedoll.com/site/480019/page/918781>
- Amazingly Realistic Dollhouse Wheelchairs: <http://www.littleassistance.com/index.php>
- BundieBunny with G-tube: http://www.bundiebaby.com/store_bunny.html
- Kathy's Kids - dolls with ostomies, lines, and tubes: <http://stores.ebay.com/Kathys-Kids-and-more>

Adapt or Make Your Own Toys

Adaptive toys can be unbelievably expensive. It is possible, and even easy in many cases, to adapt toys yourself. In some cases, all it takes is an inexpensive battery interrupter. In other cases, it takes a bit of soldering and tinkering. The following links are designed to help you get started:

- Adapting Toys: <http://www.ataccess.org/resources/wcp/enswitches/enadaptingtoy.html>
- Making a Switch: <http://www.ataccess.org/resources/wcp/enswitches/enmaking.html>
- Adapting Toys - Detailed Instructions: <http://www.scienceshareware.com/toys.htm>
- WikiHow Guide: <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Adapted-Toys>
- Hardwiring Toys: <http://www.smasupport.com/hardwiring-toys.htm>
- AdaptAble Minds: <http://www.adaptableminds.com/adaptingtoys.html>
- Sharenetwork Page: <http://www.sharenetwork.org/switch.htm>

It is also possible to make sensory toys using just a little bit of imagination. Attach metal kitchen spoons with hooks to a strip of metal and you have a musical mobile that can be hung anywhere. My father once made my daughter a beautiful set of textured bars by simply covering equal size pieces of wood with different fabrics and other textures.

Ebay Stores and Recycling Adaptive Toys

If you don't feel comfortable making switch toys by yourself or you simply are scared to death of the soldering iron like I am, you may want to look into other sources. One great source is to recycle your old unused adaptive toys by trading with another family.

Groups such as the online Special Child Exchange

[<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SpecialChildExchange/>] often feature families selling or trading unused adapted toys to other families.

Some entrepreneurial families have even begun to adapt toys and then sell them inexpensively on Ebay. In the past there have been multiple sellers, including Adaptive Playthings and K-Angel Design, but at this time it appears that only one seller is currently selling adaptive toys. You can see her listings at <http://myworld.ebay.com/laura436/>

Finding Sensory Toys in Regular Stores

My friend Erin is a master at finding sensory toys at regular stores. Her website, Adapted World [<http://adaptedworld.wordpress.com/>], lists a bunch of her greatest finds, ranging from speakers that light up when you touch them to a mood lamp that plays music when touched.

Sensory gifts can be found almost anywhere. One of my daughter's absolute favorite gifts was a Homedics vibrating mat that she sits on in a recliner. It is widely available and lots of fun. She also likes small massagers, gooey and spikey balls, and stuffed animals that vibrate or play music.

If you have an environmental control unit, such as Ablenet's Powerlink, you can adapt any toy that plugs in. The options are endless. At one time, my daughter loved to use it with a Pink Lava Lamp. Another favorite is a little radio she can turn on and off. She's also used it to operate a vibrating heating pad.

Good Luck!

We hope these suggestions help to make this a great economical holiday season for your family!