

I. Why Toys Are Important

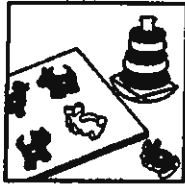
Toys, games, and puzzles include a wide range of materials that children can explore, put together, push and pull, stack and create—sometimes for long periods of time. Appropriate toys give children opportunities to practice new skills such as putting pegs into small holes, and to develop new skills such as matching pictures that are the same.

Toys are almost a basic requirement of family child care. It's hard to imagine a provider without such materials. A good toy is one that can be used in more than one way. In fact, the more ways in which such objects can be used, the longer they will hold a child's interest and the more value you get from your investment. This is why construction toys, colored pattern blocks, doll houses, and sets of people or animals are so popular. Children tire most quickly of gimmicky toys such as wind-up toys that can be used in only one way and fail to challenge their imaginations.

A good toy can be used by children at different stages of development; children will simply use them in different ways. For example, one-year-olds and four-year-olds both enjoy nesting cubes. One-year-olds typically put these toys in their mouths, drop them to see what happens, or dump them into a container. Four-year-olds, however, will fit the nesting cubes together, make elaborate designs and structures with them, and name the color of each cube.



Many of the skills children learn using toys help prepare them for later schooling. For example, when they play with toys children learn about math, patterning, and direction.



Here are some ways in which children grow and develop by playing with toys.

Children develop thinking skills by:

- using their senses to explore a toy (chewing on a plastic ring).
- identifying colors and shapes (playing with colored toys or using a game with geometric shapes).
- learning directionality (turning puzzle pieces so that they fit together).
- classifying objects according to size, shape, or function (playing with a button box and grouping buttons in a muffin tin).
- being creative and solving a problem (trying to create a space ship with a set of pick-up sticks).

Children develop socially by:

- sharing materials that interest them (using toys, games, and puzzles together during free play).
- playing cooperatively (playing a Lotto game with another child).
- taking responsibility (using materials carefully and returning them to their proper places).

Children develop emotionally by:

- experiencing their own power (pounding a toy with a plastic hammer and seeing it move).
- achieving satisfaction by completing a task (successfully completing a wooden puzzle).
- extending their imaginations and creativity (using parquetry blocks to create unique designs).

Children develop physically by:

- using small muscle skills (picking up colored cubes and dropping them in a plastic container).
- practicing visual skills (playing with a set of stacking rings).
- coordinating eye and hand movements (stringing wooden beads).

When children have time to play with toys, they manipulate, explore and experiment. They learn many concepts and develop important skills while having fun. In the next section we provide suggestions for creating an environment that encourages children's learning as they play with toys.