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# Play for all

## Constructive Play

### A brief description

Constructive play involves the purposeful use of objects “What can I do with this object/ this set of objects?” Constructive play can be broader than just the making of a product. It can involve using everyday items or junk to play imaginary games.

Its development goes hand in hand with the development of the child’s fine motor/manipulation skills, planning and problem solving skills.

Constructive play activities are essential to give the child a chance to develop skills essential to engage in more refined activities eg writing or doing shoelaces.

### How does having a disability impact on a child’s ability with this type of play?

#### **Impact of disability:**

- Limited movement and strength in hands or arms may interfere with successful manipulation of materials and toys.
- Poor balance and limited mobility can make it difficult for a child to get to a toy or object, carry things, or use hands to play.
- Sensory impairments (vision, hearing, touch) can limit a child’s attempts at exploring and using toys.
- Communication difficulties may affect the child’s ability to understand and follow instructions.
- Some children with problem solving or planning difficulties may find it hard to plan a sequence of steps to complete a task.
- Cognitive delay may result in the child not knowing or being able to work out what to do with a toy or how to engage in pretend play.

#### **Impact on participation:**

- The child may become passive and withdrawn if unable to “go and get or do”.
- The child may use toys in different ways eg mouthing, banging or casting aside.
- The child may spend time playing with things they know and are comfortable with.
- May be fearful of new things or simply look lost or blank when given instructions.
- The child may show frustration, anxiety or social difficulties if unable to complete an activity.

### Occupational Therapy Information Sheet

Novita Children’s Services  
[www.novita.org.au](http://www.novita.org.au)

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#### Special points of interest:

- Signing may be appropriate for children with a receptive language problem.
- Hand splints may be prescribed by the OT to be used during play.
- Good trunk support and feet flat on the floor is important when sitting in a chair to play.

#### Useful references

Lear, Roma (1996)  
*Play helps-Toys and Activities for Children with Special Needs:*  
Oxford, England; Butterworth Heinemann.

Stagnitti, Karen (1999)  
*Learn to play. A practical program to develop a child’s imaginative play skills.*  
Coordinates therapy Services, Australia

## Constructive play

### **Impact of environment:**

Is the environment accessible:

- Can the child reach materials and toys?
- Can the child move around easily and safely eg in wheelchair, walking frame?
- Can the child join other children where they play?
- Can the child make use of existing furniture: table/chair height?
- Is the environment very busy/ noisy or overly quite: not enough/ too much stimulation?

## Strategies to assist Constructive play

### **Reduce impact of physical limitations by:**

- appropriate supportive seating
- wearing glasses if needed
- any hand, wrist or thumb splints on (if prescribed)
- increasing tone – massage and stretches to relax
- decreasing tone - vibration and brushing
- use of slopeboard to access more easily
- mat or velcro under toy to stabilise (dycem/blutac)
- increase thickness of utensil eg crayon, pencils or built up handles/grippers
- crayon and paintbrush holders.

### **Promote participation by:**

- Creating play opportunities by involving other children.
- Matching play to the child's ability by reducing complexity and/or the number of steps in the task.
- Use additional communication aids so child can make choices and direct the play.
- Aiming at developmental level success to promote further exploration.

### **Engineer the environment by:**

- Reorganising furniture for ease of mobility and safety.
- Organising good seating.
- Adapting play materials for greater success:
  - Pencil and paper—thick lines for cutting and vision.
  - Puzzles— coloured outlines on pieces to help with matching / large knobs.
  - Rather than cutting child may be able to tear.
  - Decrease weight of objects.
  - Scissors (easy squeeze, modified, supported on frame).
  - Increase size of beads to thread and/or use stiffer thread.
- Bring play and play mates to the child instead of child having to move.
- Place/keep toys, materials within easy reach by using trays with lip, stabilising items by weighting them and easels/slope boards.
- Having a quiet corner if the child becomes distressed or overloaded.

## Useful references

Case-Smith, Jane Pehoski, Charlane (1992)  
*Development of Handskills in the Child* The American Occupational Therapy Association

Dunn Klein, Marsha (1990)  
*Pre-Writing Skills Therapy* Skill Builders

Amundsen, Susan (1998)  
*Trics for written communication: Techniques for Rebuilding and Improving Children's School Skills* Coordinates Occupational Therapy Services, Australia

[Speak to your Occupational Therapist for more ideas](#)