



# Play for all

## Constructive Play

Occupational Therapy  
Information Sheet

### 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, doing shoelaces



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

### 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- The child may become passive and withdrawn if unable to "go and get/ do".
- The child may use toys in different ways eg mouthing, banging, 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.

### 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 quiet: not enough/ too much stimulation.



## Strategies to assist Constructive play

### Reduce impact of physical limitations by:

- Appropriate supportive seating
- Glasses on if needed
- Any hand wrist or thumb splints on (if prescribed)
- Prepare—↓ tone (massage, stretches to relax)
- ↑ tone (vibration, brushing)
- Use of slopeboard to access more easily
- Mat or velcro under toy to stabilise (dycem/blutac)
- Increase thickness of utensil eg crayon. Pencils. Built up handles/grippers
- Crayon/paintbrush holders

### Promote participation by:

- Create play opportunities: involve other children
- Match the play to the child's ability: reduce complexity/ number of steps in task
- Use additional communication aids so child can make choices and direct the play.
- Aim at developmental level → **success!!! To promote further exploration**

### Engineer the environment by:

- Reorganize furniture for ease of mobility and safety.
- Organize good seating.
- Adapt 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 cut 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
  - Tray with lip, stabilise items by weighting them, easels/slope boards.
- Quiet corner if child becomes distressed/ 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)  
*Tricks 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

