

# A Letter to Families about Toys and Games

Dear Families,

Toys and Games include puzzles, various table blocks, small construction materials such as LEGO pieces, board games, and collections of objects (including shells, bottle caps and buttons). When children use toys and games, they explore how things work, use their imaginations, strengthen and control the muscles in their hands, work cooperatively, solve problems, and learn content area concepts.

When children use toys and games in the classroom, we encourage them to talk about what they are doing. For example, we might say:

“Tell me about the design you made.”

“How did you get those rings to fit together?”

“Can you tell me how the blocks you picked out are the same?”

Such questions and comments help children develop thinking skills.

What You Can Do at Home

You play an important role by selecting toys and games that are safe, interesting, and appropriate for your child. More importantly, research shows that the most creative children are those who have had adults involved in their play. Here are a few ways that you can be involved in your child’s play with toys and games:

Observe. Watch as your child plays and notice his or her abilities and interests.

Play. Follow your child’s lead and join his or her play.

Imagine. Keep in mind that there is more than one way to play with a toy. Be creative!

Enjoy. This isn’t a time to drill your child or test what he or she knows. Just have fun being together, talking, and playing.

Good toys do not have to be expensive. You might collect various small objects such as buttons, seashells, rocks, and plastic bottle tops. Make suggestions such as “Put all of the buttons that are the same color in a pile,” or “Group all of the beads that are the same size.” Encourage your child to tell you about the design he or she is making, or to explain why things belong together.

Playing with toys and games at home promotes your child’s development in many ways. We welcome you to help us in the classroom by playing with our Toys and Games with your child: you can see for yourself how much your child is learning there.



# What Children Learn from Toys and Games

Toys and Games can promote children’s emerging skills in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, and technology. High-quality toys and games also encourage children’s problem-solving skills and creativity. Very young children develop skills as they handle materials repeatedly. As children get older, they begin to make patterns, sort, and classify. Here are some examples as they play with toys and games.

## Literacy

Enhance your child’s vocabulary and language by talking with them as they play with toys and games. For example, discuss the pictures on the puzzles or the truck they are building with LEGO pieces. Introduce descriptive words like shiny, dull, pointed, curved, rough, and smooth as children play with collections.

Help your child learn about letters and words by talking with them as they manipulate magnetic letters, letter blocks, and letter tiles. Describe what you see as children arrange and rearrange letters (e.g., “You made a word! You put a *m*, an *a*, and a *t* together to spell *mat!*”)

Strengthen your child’s knowledge of print by encouraging them to draw and write (using scribbles or transitional spelling) about designs and constructions they make.

## Mathematics

Help your child develop problem-solving skills as they construct, design, and assemble materials. Encourage them to put puzzles together, make designs with parquetry and pattern blocks, sort collections, and build with LEGO bricks.

Help children understand number concepts as they count beads, blocks, and stuffed animals. Use mathematical terminology as you compare quantities, e.g., *more*, *less*, *fewer*, and *same*.

Encourage your child to explore patterns and relationships by providing collectibles such as keys, buttons, and small cars so children can copy, extend, or create their own patterns. Offer open-ended materials such as interlocking blocks or links, pegs, colored cubs or tiles, and magnetic shapes and figures.



Use collections to support your child's understanding of data collection, organization, and representation. Show children how to create graphs by organizing collections of rocks, leaves, or toy cars.

#### Science

Teach physical science concepts such as balance, strength, and gravity, by encouraging them to build with construction toys.

Use puzzles and games that feature plants and animals as opportunities to talk about life science.

#### Social Studies

Encourage your child to play board games such as "Chutes & Ladders" or "Candy Land" to learn about spaces and geography. Many games help children understand directionality, which is necessary for reading maps.

#### The Arts

Encourage exploration of the visual arts by including open-ended construction toys so children can express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings in a concrete way.

#### Technology

Promote awareness of technology by including toys with moving parts such as gears, levers, hinges, and wheels. Help your child associate these toys with other objects they see in their surroundings.

## How Playing With Toys and Games Promotes Development and Learning

### Social-emotional

Children learn to cooperate with one another by sharing and taking turns as they play games and build intricate designs. They develop confidence when they successfully use self-correcting toys such as puzzles, sorting boards, and stacking rings.

### Physical

Children practice eye-hand coordination while lacing cards and placing pegs in pegboards. When children string beads and build with interlocking pieces of construction toys, they refine small-muscle skills.

### Language & Literacy

Children use words to explain how they are putting a puzzle together or sorting a collection of objects. They compare the sizes, shapes, and colors of objects as they play. While using beads, pegboards, puzzles, dominoes, and collectibles, they develop reading skills such as visual discrimination, matching, and following a left-to-right progression. As they use magnetic letters and alphabet blocks, children explore letters and words.

### Cognitive

As children build with table blocks and make designs with pattern blocks and parquetry blocks, they experiment with construction and invention and use problem-solving skills. They also expand their emerging math skills such as counting, seriating, matching, patterning, and classifying. In fact, the Toys and Games area is the mathematics hub of many classrooms.



## Creating an Environment for Toys and Games

You will see a wide range of toys and games in any store, catalog, and on-line. To make good choices for your child, think about variety and complexity as well as safety, durability, and price. Select toys that do not convey stereotypes, and certain toys should be avoided.

### Types of Toys and Games

Toys and games can be grouped into four categories: self-correcting, structured toys; open-ended toys; collectibles; and cooperative games.

Self-correcting, structured toys are those that fit together in a particular way, such as, puzzles. A child using this type can readily determine whether the toy has been put together correctly.

Open-ended toys have no right or wrong way of being used. They can be put together a variety of ways, depending entirely on the child's level of development. They promote problem solving and initiative. Many are excellent for supporting motor skills and eye-hand coordination. These toys also promote mathematics learning.

Collectibles are also open-ended materials that can be explored in a variety of unspecified ways. They are sets of similar objects. Attractive collections encourage children to sort, match, and compare in many inventive ways.

Cooperative games encourage children to work together to match pictures, numerals, symbols, and objects. Rather than winning or losing, these games give children opportunity to develop social skills while improving visual discrimination skills.

### Criteria for Selecting Toys and Games

As you select and purchase materials, keep the following criteria in mind:

**Safety** – The most basic requirement is that all toys be in good repair and safe. Do not offer toys with sharp edges, pieces small enough to be swallowed, and pieces that can be used as projectiles.



**Construction**– Toys should be made well and work as intended. All pieces of a puzzle or interlocking toy should actually fit together, and no pieces of a lotto game or domino set should be missing. Toys made from different kinds of materials – plastic, wood, metal, fabric, and rubber – give children a variety of sensory experiences.

**Versatility** – Interlocking and manipulative toys work in many ways. The greater the variety of ways in which a toy can be used, the longer it will hold children's attention as they develop new interests and skills.

Price – The cost of a toy should be balanced against its versatility. Some expensive toys may be good investments because they can be used in many ways and will last a long time.

Values – Toys convey values to children. The pictures and photographs on the toys and games should not depict stereotypes. They should respect diverse roles and experiences. We also strongly recommend that you select toys that do not glorify violence.



#### Levels of Complexity

Toys have varying levels of complexity. Toys and games should be challenging but not frustrating.

#### Toys and Games to Avoid

Toys and games affect the kind and complexity of children's play. When carefully selected, toys can facilitate creative and imaginative play. On the other hand, some toys have a harmful effect on children's development.