



# Play and the Child with Cerebral Palsy

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**Definition:** The term cerebral palsy refers to any one of a number of neurological disorders that appear in infancy or early childhood and permanently affect body movement and muscle coordination but don't worsen over time. -

*Source-National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke*

## Common Characteristics

Cerebral palsy is characterized by an inability to fully control motor function, particularly muscle control and coordination. Depending on which areas of the brain have been damaged, one or more of the following may occur: muscle tightness or spasticity; involuntary movement; disturbance in gait or mobility, difficulty in swallowing and problems with speech. In addition, the following may occur: abnormal sensation and perception; impairment of sight, hearing or speech; seizures; and/or mental retardation. Other problems that may arise are difficulties in feeding, bladder and bowel control, problems with breathing because of postural difficulties, skin disorders because of pressure sores, and learning disabilities. –*Source-United Cerebral Palsy*

## Implications for Play

- Ask the therapist about positioning your child for play and what appropriate adapted equipment, such as wedges, rolls, bean bag chairs, and Tumble Form equipment, may be used. Show these ideas to teachers and other caregivers.
- Make certain your child changes positions frequently. Children should play on the floor as well as in a chair.
- Position your child with both arms forward when playing with toys. If you are guiding the child's hands, make certain that the child can see what is happening.
- Talk to your child at the child's eye level.
- Give your child ample time to respond to what you say.
- Maintain a good balance between noisy, active play and quieter, less strenuous activities.
- Present toys that encourage your child to reach and grasp with the hand that is more difficult to use, but allow the child to use whichever hand he chooses.
- When helping your child put on clothing, put the more affected arm or leg into the clothing first. Move slowly, never forcing movements.
- When walking with your child, take the more affected hand.
- Encourage two-handed activities such as rolling clay or throwing a large ball, but do not insist that the child use both hands.
- Children with physical difficulty need to get stimulation from as many sources as possible; provide toys that have interesting things to see, hear and feel.
- Adapted toys can be purchased or made which will allow your child to manipulate or control play. Velcro pieces sewn on mitts or blocks, pegs attached to puzzles and switch toys should be available to give your child a sense of real control over the environment.
- Be careful when choosing pop-up toys, rattles, and electronic toys. Some of these toys can startle your child, making play impossible.

## Characteristics to Keep in Mind When Shopping for Toys

- Suction cups on the bottom of toys are helpful to stabilize the toy. You can buy suction cups in a craft store and screw them on yourself. Gluing them on is not recommended because it is difficult to find glue that will adhere securely to rubber or plastic. (Adapted toys should only be used with appropriate adult supervision.)
- Look for toys that have large handles or knobs to grasp. They are typically easier to use. In addition, there are large-handled paint brushes available in stores that are easier to hold.



- Look for toys that are easy to activate. Complicated actions can be frustrating. Particularly appropriate are electronic and switch toys that can be activated with a light touch from a closed fist.
- Look for toys that can be used with one hand if it is difficult for the child to do two-handed play. For example, musical instruments such as shaker or tambourine.

**Specific Toy Suggestions for Children with Cerebral Palsy**

**\* Note:** For your convenience, we have listed some products and companies that may be relevant children who have disabilities. This is not an endorsement or an all-inclusive list and some items may no longer be available. Please refer to our list of adaptive toy companies on our website, [www.lekotek.org](http://www.lekotek.org).

- **One touch Remote Car** This type of car has one very large remote control device. Hit it once and the car will drive forward; a second hit and the car will drive around in circles. Stop it by simply lifting your hand off the control.
- **Peg Puzzles** For some children, a puzzle can be very frustrating if they are unable to take the pieces out. Find wooden puzzles that have extra-large knobs to make it easier to get the pieces in and out. Not only does this enhance motor skills, but it is also aids in increasing self-esteem and confidence.
- **Magnetic toys** such as Magna Tiles, Tomy Gearation (*please make sure pieces are large to avoid choking hazards*)
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*\*Please note that some of the older books may have outdated language that is not person first or politically correct*

**Books for Children with Cerebral Palsy:**

**The Balancing Girl, B. Rabe, 1980.**

- A first grader who is very good at balancing objects while in her wheelchair and on her crutches thinks up her greatest balancing act ever to benefit the school carnival.

**Free to Be... You and Me, M. Thomas, 1989.**

-A collection of stories, poems, and songs which demonstrate that people can choose to do or be whatever they desire

**Howie Helps Himself, J. Fassler, 1975.**

-Though he enjoys life with his family and attends school, Howie, a child with cerebral palsy, wants more than anything else to be able to move his wheelchair by himself.

**I'm the Big Sister Now, M. Emmert, 1989.**

Nine-year-old Michelle describes the joys, loving times, difficulties, and other special situations involved in living with her older sister Amy Emmert, who was born severely disabled with cerebral palsy.

**Kids Explore the Gifts of Children with Special Needs, Westridge Young Writers Workshop, 1994.**

**My Buddy, Osofsky.**

**Nick Joins In, J. Lasker, 1980.**

When Nick, confined to a wheelchair, enters a regular classroom for the first time as a result of U.S. Public Law 94-142, he and his new classmates must resolve their initial apprehensions about mainstreaming.

**Someone Special, Just Like You, T. Brown, 1984.**

**Books of Interest to Parents of Children with Cerebral Palsy:**

**Cerebral Palsy: A Practical Guide, Marion Stanton**

**Cerebral Palsy: The Child and Young Person, G. Hosking, L. Cogner, M. Smith**

**Children with Cerebral Palsy: A Parents' Guide, E. Germalis**

**Coping with Cerebral Palsy: Answers to Questions Parents Often Ask, J. Schiechkorn.**



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## **Play and the Child with Cerebral Palsy ...*(continued)***

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**Handling the Young Cerebral Palsied Child at Home, Nancie R. Finnie, FCSP**

**Positioning for Play: Home Activities for Parents of Young Children, Rachel B. Diamant, MS, OTR. Therapy Skill Builders, 602-323-7500 (V/TDD).**

### **General Books for Parents:**

**The Early Intervention Dictionary, Jeanine G. Coleman, MEd**

**From the Heart: On Being the Mother of a Child with a Disability, Jayne DB Marsh and Carol Boggis**

**The Language of Toys, Sue Schwartz, PhD and Joan Miller, EdD**

**Uncommon Fathers: Reflections on Raising a Child with a Disability, Donald J. Meyer**

**Tot Sock Hop: Movement, Songs, and Words, Barbara D. Trube, MEd. Plus audiotape.**

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