

Toys enrich and facilitate the play of children. Five ways in which children use toys in their play are listed below, along with examples illustrating each use. In a single play situation, a child may use the same toy in many ways.

Toys as Props for Pretending

Children use toys to help them pretend. A vast number of toys have been created for use as pretend objects including toy telephones, miniature kitchen appliances, dolls, dress-up costumes, small trucks and cars, miniature farm sets, etc. These toys, like props in a theater production, set the stage for the child's imagination. They can be used in many ways by the child and have no limit on how to play with them.

Toys as Props for Creating

Children use toys to help them build and create. Blocks, construction sets, and art materials are encouraging to the child's need to create. In some cases the toy enables the child to produce a specific product (model airplane kits, for example), but more often these toys can be used over and over again by the child to create different products or to simply enjoy the process of creating.

Toys as Developmental Challenges

Toys present challenges to children. Children are attracted to toys that ask them to practice, refine and develop their abilities. Babies that hold and shake rattles are perfecting their skills in looking, reaching, and grasping. They are developing an understanding of cause and effect. The child who seeks out riding toys is practicing new abilities in the areas of balance and coordination. Toys that present developmental challenges are often appropriate for a shorter period of time in a child's life because once the child has mastered the skills, he or she will begin to seek new challenges. Being aware of a child's development helps in choosing appropriately challenging toys.

Toys as Outlets for Expressing Emotions

Because verbal skills develop gradually, children often express their emotions without words through their play. Almost any toy can be an emotional outlet for the child. Banging down the doors of a busy box, punching a stuffed animal, or kicking a ball enables the child to get rid of feelings of frustration and anger. Acting out scary events with toys can help the child express and master fears. Hugging a doll, petting a stuffed animal, or pretending to call a friend on a play phone provides an avenue for children to express love, affection and caring.

Toys as Props for Social Interaction

Playing together with toys gives children the chance to interact socially. Some toys encourage interaction by requiring more than one person to operate the toy. For example, see-saw, board games, and walkie-talkies need more than one child to make them work. Other toys, such as blocks, dolls, miniature kitchen equipment, and balls invite group play.