



# ASTRA

## Newsletter

### BIGGEST, BEST NO EXAGGERATION

by Mary Sisson, Kazoodles

“**B**iggest convention ever!” “Best sessions yet!” “Most successful Marketplace in ASTRA’s 16 years!”

Comments like those heard around Connecticut’s MGM Grand at Foxwoods were not exaggerations. With 557 retailers representing 210 stores, 40 sales reps, 10 affiliates and 264 exhibiting companies, the numbers confirm this was the biggest.

And people kept coming. Word in New England apparently was out, as 55 people registered after the convention had started, far more than in any other year. And 188 retailers were first-time attendees.

“One thing I kept hearing over and over was the tangible energy at this year’s convention, right from the start,” said Terry Myers, convention committee chair. “I was concerned that not many people would show up for the first speaker on Sunday morning, but this proved to be untrue. The few who didn’t make it Sunday morning are regretting it. The feedback from (the Rick Segel session) was tremendous and I attribute the energizing to him.”

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### THE SEVEN ESSENTIALS OF SUCCESSFUL RETAILING

by Mary Sisson

**P**art retail wizard, part stand-up comedian, Rick Segel launched the 2008 ASTRA Marketplace and Academy with an energy that set the tone for the entire convention. Peppered with stories from his successful Boston-area dress shop, Segel gave retailers a wealth of ideas and a strong dose of hope for success in an economic downturn. “What’s changed in retail?” he asked. “The customers are more demanding.”

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# PLAY AND PREPARING FOR THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR

by Ellen Metrick, Manager of Business Development, National Lekotek Center

**B**ack to school can be a wonderful, exciting time, but it can also offer some social, transitional and educational challenges for children, including those who have special needs. As the summer winds down, it is an ideal time to introduce toys and play themes as a way to ease into the new school year. Here are seven summer goals that can help your customers who have children with special needs prepare for a successful time at school.

## Highlight a variety of back to school supplies

Now is the time to feature items like book bags, crayons, markers and other school-type items in your store as a vehicle to help children get prepared and think about their new school time routines. If a child uses a wheelchair, encourage him to shop for a new book bag now to make sure it fits on his wheelchair easily.

Children may have particular needs when it comes to writing materials, such as the thickness of the pencils or the shape of the crayons. There are some great ergonomics products available that can help a child grasp and operate writing and art tools easily.

## Remind and reinforce skill sets

Spelling, math and games that require early literacy skills can be offered as a way to make learning fun, revisit already acquired skills, and practice those skills before a child gets back into the classroom and needs to build on them.

## Shop in fun, not panic

Encourage your customers to avoid Labor Day panic shopping for school supplies. Post copies of local schools' supply lists in your windows or on a bulletin board for your customers to refer to. That way they'll know exactly what their children need at their school when they are in your store. (And this can also help you make sure you have the right products on hand.)

## The school year means getting into a schedule

Clocks and play products that introduce the theme of time are great for easing a child out of the lazy summer schedule and into the rigors of the school year. As children become better aware of time and schedules, they can become more self-directed and independent. Products that help organize tasks are great items to feature, like bulletin boards, reminder sticky notes and fun watches.

## Help children make the transition

Creative and imaginative play helps a child cope with the stress of new situations. Puppets, little figures and school buses can help a child acknowledge and work through her anxieties or insecurities about upcoming routine changes such as going on a school bus, meeting a new teacher, walking into a new classroom or making new friends.

## Get children used to being creative

Children need to feel confident to express themselves in art projects at school. Encourage parents to introduce craft and creative projects right around the kitchen table. Offer a variety of mediums to give children ample opportunities to use different products and become comfortable and familiar with how they can be held and used. That way, when they are used in the classroom, children already have a sense of what to do.

## Play games

Verbal games such as "Simon Says" help children work on listening skills, receptive language and following directions. Tabletop board and card games get children sitting at a table and learning how to follow directions, take turns and practice patience. This can help kids get ready for sitting at their desks, listening to the teachers at school and cognitively processing the information.

Helping your customers prepare their children of all abilities for a successful new school year can be hidden in some great summer playtime and fun. That level of care and concern is what specialty retailers offer better than anyone else.

*For insight on how retailers might select toys that can relate to children with disabilities, visit [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) and read one of Lekotek's AblePlay Comprehensive Product Evaluations. You can also e-mail Ellen Metrick at [emetrick@lekotek.org](mailto:emetrick@lekotek.org).*

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