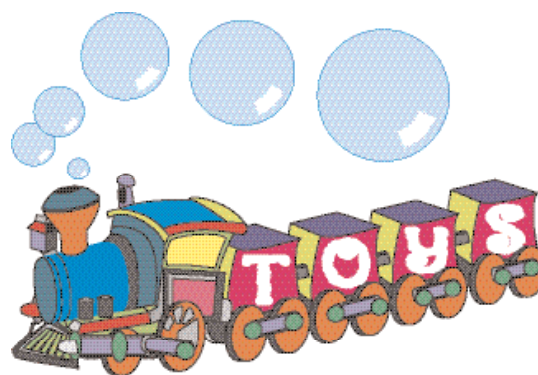


# AblePlay™



## helps parents select toys for their children with special needs

By **Diana Nielander, Executive Director, National Lekotek Center**

**W**ith the holiday shopping season fast approaching, an authoritative resource recently was introduced to help ensure success for the millions of parents, grandparents and others who have a simple wish –to see a big smile on the face of the child for whom they’re purchasing that “perfect” toy.

“It’s quite a challenge to select just the right toy for any child and it can be even more difficult when choosing a toy for a child with a special need,” said Diana Nielander, director of National Lekotek Center, which recently debuted the AblePlay Rating System, a no-cost online resource available at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org). (Please see “Top 5” holiday toy recommendations at the end of this story.)

“With so many products on the market, it can be difficult to get ‘beyond the box’ to identify the exceptional features of the toys. Understanding the products features so you can match them to the child’s abilities is important,” said Nielander of the National Lekotek Center, which provides direct services, support and information to children with special needs and their families in resource and play centers found worldwide. Lekotek is a division of Anixter Center, a non-profit organization in Chicago with the mission of assisting people with special needs to live and work successfully in the community.

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## AblePlay's Holiday 2006 Top 5 Toys for Children with Disabilities:

Dream Nouveau's Hop 'n Pop takes kids' natural fascination with bubble wrap and gives them a multi-sensory experience. It provides a special benefit for kids with autism and/or sensory disorders; they often have the ability to learn better after having stimulus that engages their large muscle groups. The manufacturer designates this toy, available at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org), for \$79.99, for children 18 months and older.

Rokenbok's Capable Commander is a special controller for kids with special needs that replaces the traditional controller that is used to operate the vehicles. (For many children with physical disabilities like cerebral palsy, the daunting task of holding and manipulating a standard remote control unit is frustrating if not impossible.) The manufacturer designates this toy, available at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) for \$199.98, for children eight years and older.

HaPe International's Bamboo Bialo is an engaging game of skill and chance that enhances fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination while encouraging cooperative play. The manufacturer recommends this toy, available at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) for \$24.95, for children four years and older.

Kushies, Inc.'s Zolo Beanstax helps kids develop coordination between their movement and mind, hand-eye coordination

and problem solving – all while having fun and interacting with others. The manufacturer designates this toy, available at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org), for \$35.99, for children one year and older.

WABA Fun's Superstructs is a construction set comprised of 160 large, vibrant and durable interlocking pieces that includes rods, connectors, and panels. Superstructs stimulates kids to develop creativity, eye-hand coordination skills and overall dexterity. The manufacturer recommends this toy, available at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) for \$29.95, for children three years and older.

For general guidelines on how to select a toy for a child with a disability, visit <http://www.lekotech.org/resources/informationon/toys/tentips.html>.

National Lekotek Center: The National Lekotek Center provides direct services, support and information to children with special needs and their families in resource and play centers that are found worldwide. Lekotek is a division of Anixter Center, a not-for-profit organization in Chicago that assists individuals with disabilities to live and work successfully in the community. Anixter Center recently was named the thirteenth largest charitable organization in Chicago by Crain's Chicago Business.



[www.snugseat.com](http://www.snugseat.com)

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nothing compares to a smile

- Fact: Walking is good for bones, muscles, lungs, heart, bowel and bladder
- Fact: Snug Seat Gait Trainers help teach special needs children the skill of walking
- Fact: Snug Seat Gait Trainers can be used to stretch tight hip, knee and ankle muscles
- Fact: Snug Seat helps parents and therapists get funding for the equipment they need
- Fact: Snug Seat Gait Trainers make walking fun!



Crocodile



Pony



Gator



Bronco



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Nielander added, "Toys that are well chosen will play to a child's strengths, help enhance his or her specific skills and offer the hours of sheer fun that a good plaything should provide."

In addition to an AblePlay rating, every toy on [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) consists of a comprehensive product review that explains important product features and offers creative and adaptive ideas for play.

AblePlay was developed for parents like Carol Hill of suburban Chicago. Her nine-year-old, Jeremiah, has Down syndrome.

"As a parent of a child with a disability, I can't afford to 'waste' playtime with toys that are not therapeutic in some respect, as well as being just plain fun," said Hill. "I select toys that help further Jeremiah's strengths and address areas in which he needs to make progress."

For example, Hill believes that a toy that incorporates a labyrinth, featured on AblePlay, may help Jeremiah improve his ability to visually focus on a particular

thing while engaging his intellect and problem-solving ability.

"It's very comforting to know that professionals who have therapeutic backgrounds and play expertise are involved in rating AblePlay's products," she said.

In order to make the information relevant for all children, each toy receives a rating in four disability categories — cognitive, communicative, physical and sensory. Ratings are awarded on a scale of zero to five stars, with the number of stars representing the depth of accessibility, appropriateness and overall use of a particular item.

Lekotek toy and play experts put each product through a rigorous evaluation process before calculating a rating and posting it on the AblePlay Web site. As part of the evaluation process, evaluators assess each toy with 5-8 children of varying disabilities during at least 5-8 play experiences.

Information about 50 - 75 toys and learning products are currently posted at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) and that number will continually increase. Since so many

more people are trying to streamline their holiday shopping by purchasing online, visitors to [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org), can purchase toys online directly from manufacturers after reading the comprehensive product reviews.

An essential strength of AblePlay is its objectivity and the sense of authority and expertise it commands. Parents of children with special needs can easily appreciate the value of AblePlay. They trust the Lekotek name, which has long enjoyed a reputation as an authority on toys and play for exceptional children.

Betsy Uzzell, also from Chicago's suburb recalls the ongoing search for just the right toy to stimulate and work on skills with David, her son who is deaf and now 16 years old. Specifically, she looked for products that helped him learn to take turns. She observes that most children learn how to take turns by listening to conversational cues, hearing how a conversation naturally goes back and forth between two people.

"When your child is deaf," said Uzzell, "you look for ways to teach that skill through play, which includes something as simple as rolling a ball back and forth. Importantly, "an activity such as rolling a ball paves the way for development of language skills."

AblePlay exists to help parents get the information they really need about a product, not just what the manufacturers put out there.

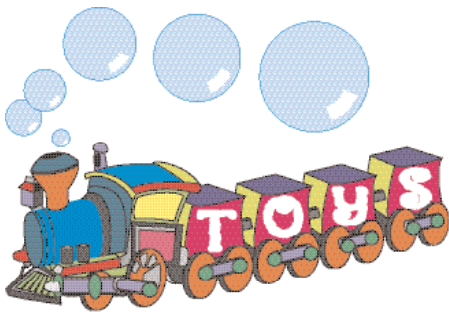
## Lekotek Offers Unique Play Experience for Exceptional Children

By Diana Nielander, Executive Director, National Lekotek Center

National Lekotek Center provides direct services, support and information to children with special needs and their families in resource and play centers that can be found worldwide.

Lekotek is a non-profit organization based in Chicago, Illinois, and is the administrative and training center for a nationwide network of 37 Lekotek centers housing family play facilities, toy lending libraries and computer play

resources. The National Lekotek Center is a division of Anixter Center. The mission of Anixter Center is to assist people with disabilities to live and work successfully in the community. Anixter Center is a leading provider of high-quality voca-



tional, residential and educational options, substance abuse prevention and treatment, and health care. Anixter Center was recently named thirteenth largest charitable organization in Chicago by Crain's Chicago Business.

Lekotek is loosely translated as "play library." In the late 1970s, two American special education professionals learned of the Lekotek concept at an educational conference. They were so inspired by the idea they traveled to Sweden to receive training in Lekotek methods. Under their guidance, the first American Lekotek opened its doors in Evanston, Illinois in 1980. Since that time, Lekotek has developed into a national network serving thousands of children with special needs and their families.

Lekotek welcomes children, primarily from birth to age eight, with a range of special needs such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, sight or hearing loss, intellectual disabilities, or chronic medical conditions including cancer, HIV/AIDS, or epilepsy. Lekotek's primary services are the play session and toy lending library. Lekotek family play sessions are held monthly in which Lekotek play specialists, trained by the National Lekotek Center, focus on facilitating family interaction through play.

The play session is designed to emphasize the creative use of toys and play materials, while promoting interactive play among all members of the family. Each month the family borrows a number of toys to be used in their home.

Parents have seen the toys demonstrated and feel comfortable using them and expanding on the child's play in their own environment. Parents are encouraged to bring siblings, grandparents and neighborhood children to Lekotek to promote maximum carryover between the play session and the child's home and community.

Nationally, Lekotek libraries contain more than 50,000 toys that Lekotek Leaders have analyzed and catalogued. Not only are Lekotek Leaders knowledgeable about commercial and educational

learn the basics early on.

Lekoteks can be found in Easter Seals, UCPS, children's hospitals and schools. Each program determines its own fee structure but it ranges anywhere from \$10 - \$250 per year. All programs have sliding scales to accommodate families that need assistance. There has been a recent resurgence of interest by programs and individuals on starting new Lekoteks. If you are interested in learning more about Lekotek, including how to start a Lekotek in your community, visit [www.lekotek.org](http://www.lekotek.org).

On a national level, the National Lekotek Center has developed a reputation as the foremost expert on toy and children with disabilities for the toy industry. For 15 years, Lekotek has worked to help companies understand the needs of children and serve as a liaison between parents and the manufacturers. For 13 years, the National Lekotek Center has partnered with Toys "R" Us on its Toy Guide for Differently-abled Kids. It has worked with dozens of other toy manufacturers to evaluate and design products within the marketplace including Mattel, Fisher-Price and others.

Lekotek's most recent project is AblePlay ([www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org)) which is a rating and website on toys for children. Finally, parents have a way to get the details they need about toys before the purchase them.

There is no doubt that the next quarter century will be exciting for Lekotek. Continuing its mission to use interactive play experiences, and the learning that results, to promote the inclusion of children with special needs into family and community life, Lekotek strives to strengthen families, build skills, ignite the human spirit and break down the barriers. Lekotek takes play seriously ...but not too seriously. ☐



toys, many have also designed specialized toys as well. Lekotek is expert at the adaptation of commercial to accommodate the needs of the children who have physical disabilities.

Computer play is also an important part of Lekotek. Introducing technology and adapted equipment, in a fun and non-threatening way, enables children to