Guidelines for Selecting Toys and Play Materials

Toys form the foundation of your learning environment, so it is important to select and purchase toys carefully.

The following Guidelines will help you to choose the right toys for your program:

1. *Does it fit with your philosophy?*
   By having opportunities to play with toys and play materials that fit your program goals, children are more likely to engage in play experiences that are meaningful and productive in your learning environment. If a toy is not a good match with your ideas of what should happen in an early childhood program, it may create play situations that make you uncomfortable. For example: a program that supports a nonviolent approach would not be a good candidate for a selection of toy soldiers or plastic guns.

2. *Is it durable for the kinds of play experiences you expect from your group?*
   Durability is a major factor in selecting toys for group care. Most toys are made for use in the home where one or two children may play with them. It is wise to select toys that will hold up under play conditions typical in your group. When purchasing a toy, go to stores that will allow you to take the toy out of the package and play with it. Do not be afraid to check out the durability.

3. *How easy will it be to clean?*
   When looking at a wonderful new toy, it is important to investigate how easily it can be cleaned. Toys and play materials need to be disinfected regularly. Even toys that can be cleaned easily may not hold up to the schedule of disinfecting that is commonly recommended in child care and preschool programs. Having toys that can be easily cleaned and disinfected can make your job easier and, at the same time, create an environment that protects the health of the children in your care, especially children who may be vulnerable to disease and infection.

4. *Is it safe for the children in your program?*
   Early childhood professionals need to be ruthless about selecting toys that are safe. Toys that might pass a safety test for an older child are not necessarily safe for a younger child, a child with poor coordination, or a child with immature play skills. In programs that include children of different ages and abilities together, it is imperative that toys are safe for ALL of the children.
Here are important safety considerations to keep in mind:

- Use toys and materials that are nontoxic.
- For children less than three years of age, avoid toys with small parts or parts that can break off easily.
- Be sure edges are smooth with no sharp objects or poorly conditioned wood.
- Imagine the different ways the children in your group may play with the toy; does it appear safe for all of these uses?
- Remove strings and cords that are long enough to pose a strangulation hazard.
- Do regular safety checks and repair or remove broken/frayed toys and materials.

5. **Can it be used for different kinds of play?**
   As you shop for toys, look for those that could be played with in different areas or that have multiple uses. Many toys come with directions or implied uses; this does not mean that you (and the children) cannot exercise some creativity and look for other ways to incorporate the toy into children’s play. Almost any toy can be used in a variety of ways.

6. **Can parts be repaired or replaced?**
   It is frustrating to children to not have all of the pieces that they need to play with a toy. Parts of toys will eventually be lost in a group care setting where many children play. The ability to replace parts is an asset when considering toy purchases. Some companies often offer to replace parts or to repair them when broken. Purchasing a new set will expand the value of the toy and makes a few missing pieces unnoticeable. Garage sales and secondhand stores are a good source for replacement parts.

7. **Does it incorporate different senses?**
   Young children learn through seeing, tasting, touching, hearing, and smelling, yet many commercially available toys only feature sight or sound. In an early childhood program, it is important to provide different kinds of experiences and to find toys that offer multi-sensory play experiences. An unusual texture, a prominent smell, an unusual movement, or a different sound can make a toy more inviting and increase the likelihood that young children will fully explore the toy. Children with significant disabilities depend on their senses to make sense of their surroundings (i.e. vision and hearing impairments). It is important to make a conscious effort to include toys that strengthen these senses.
8. Can children play with it independently?
In order for children to direct their own play, they must be able to manipulate toys and play materials independently. When selecting toys, the majority of them should nurture the child’s ability to be self-directed. Look for toys that encourage open-ended play or those that children can fit into their own play ideas. Children who have disabilities, the opportunity for independent play may be compromised because of limitations. It may be challenging to find toys that nurture independence for these children. Your learning centers and activity areas may need to be evaluated and additional materials added to address a wider range of abilities.

9. Does it promote interaction between children?
The nature of group care lends itself to creating an environment that includes toys and play materials that encourage children to interact and create additional opportunities for children to play together. Children with immature social skills or who need encouragement to interact benefit from exposure to natural, nurturing interactive play. Toys that require two or more children to make them work encourage social interaction (i.e., parachute, teeter-totter). Toys that include enough parts and pieces for a number of children to participate readily promote interaction (i.e., balls, blocks).