Universal Design Means Toys for Everyone

A child with disabilities needs to play just like any other kid. Does that mean you have to carry specialized toys to appeal to children with special physical or cognitive needs? “No!” says expert Sue Mistrett (left), director of the Let’s Play! Project in Buffalo, New York. According to Sue, parents of kids with special needs want well-designed, mainstream toys for their kids, and it looks like some manufacturers are getting the message.

by Kari Anderson

Could you give our readers some background about what you do and how that fits with toys and play?

Sue: The Let’s Play! Project is federally funded through the Department of Education, and our purpose is to identify supports that can help families of young children with disabilities rediscover the joy and the power of play. A lot of these families become almost totally focused on the clinical and medical needs that come with having a child with a disability. We found that when we asked parents to describe their child, the parents would talk about the diagnosis, the therapies and the skills being worked on, and we thought, “A whole piece of childhood is missing here! What about play?”

In the special-ed world, toys are often used either to build specific skills or as distracters. For example, if a therapist’s goal is to get a child to lie on his tummy, she might put an intriguing toy in front of him and to get him to stay on his tummy longer. The goal has not traditionally been play in and of itself.

We came in saying, “Hold on here! Play is missing, and play is critical to the development of all children.” So our goal became to figure out how to bring the value of play back to these families while at the same time recognizing that kids with disabilities may need some support in order to be able to play.

What are the roadblocks to play that kids with disabilities face?

Sue: Sometimes just getting a child to play can be a challenge. We hear from parents, “I go to the store and pick something out that’s very popular with other kids her age, and she can’t play with it.” That makes a parent feel totally inadequate. We also hear parents say, “My other kids instinctively knew how to play. How can I teach my child to play?”

Another roadblock has been the lack of appropriate off-the-shelf toys. When we started in 1995, there weren’t a
whole lot of mainstream toys that children with disabilities could freely interact and discover with, so parents had to purchase “specialized” toys from catalogs geared to children with disabilities. The kids were generally successful with these toys, but the parents found them stigmatizing because they didn’t look like the toys of other children.

What sort of toys were parents of kids with special needs looking for?

Sue: We had a lending library of toys that parents could try out to see what worked for their children. We’d offer them a range of specialized, catalog items as well as a range of well-designed, off-the-shelf toys. What we found was that even among families of kids with significant disabilities, parents chose off-the-shelf toys 75 percent of the time, and the toys worked for their children. Parents were telling us, “My kid can use this! This is exciting! What are some other toys like this toy that can help my child be successful?” So we started examining what features made these toys usable by a wider range of children.

While we were working on this, we discovered a group of engineers who were experts on identifying universal design principles that, when applied, would make any product more usable by more people, and we began to work together. These engineers had come up with seven universal design principles, which we applied to play. These design principles ensured accessibility and usability on the physical side, but what we thought was missing was the focus on play. So we identified several typical play outcomes, such as discovery, imagination, and social participation, and ended up with about 50 different features of toys that could indicate universal design.

We presented these features to four separate focus groups that included parents of children with and without disabilities, other toy buyers (including teachers and therapists) and toy designers. They worked to narrow down these 50 features into a concise, usable list. We’re still in the process of validating this research so we can come out with a simple-to-use tool that can help people differentiate between toys, based on their universal design characteristics.

How do you see people using this tool once it’s complete?

Sue: We originally thought that families and toy buyers might pick up this list of universal design features in a store and use it as they shop, but our focus groups told us, “We don’t think so! What we’d like is for you, the experts on toys and special needs, to rank these toys for us.”

We may end up using it to give feedback directly to toy companies. We’d like to give toy designers guidance (and specific guidelines) about what to keep in mind when designing their toys so that they’re incorporating universal design principles.

For example, high color is great for a lot of kids, but if a child is blind, that child is going to need texture and dimension, not flat plastic. A child with a cognitive impairment is going to need something that’s very simple so he’s drawn in and he can easily figure out how to use the toy. For kids with physical disabilities, usability and accessibility are important. Can the toy be used in different positions? Can a child with physical impairments get to it? Can she use more than one movement to make the toy work?

Most toys have age labels. How do these labels apply to kids who may be at different developmental stages than their age mates?

Sue: Age labels serve as just another barrier for kids with disabilities. Think of 4-year-olds who are still using infant toys. We need to change the way we think about the design of toys so we’re looking at play stages rather than ages. Aesthetic qualities are important. A child who is 6 years old might use a musical instrument that basically gives the feedback of a rattle, but the toy will look much more appropriate for her if it’s not babyish, and at 6 years old is there anything worse in the world than being called a baby?

We even have some building blocks in our lending library that are labeled for children age 15 months, but in our case a 4-year-old child might be using them. I think, “Does the manufacturer really mean that, or is this a toy that a child might return to over and over again?” Why put limits on it by saying this is for 15-month-olds? Even 5-year-olds go back and use the blocks in different ways to create much more complex things using the same materials. If the toy were labeled with a play stage of “Construction, building and imagination” as opposed to “15 months old,” it would reduce the barriers for kids with disabilities. Most children can use a toy before and/or after the targeted age with great benefits on both sides.

What specific stage labels would you suggest?

Sue: There are three main stages, as I see it. Stage one is sensory exploration. “What is it?” At this stage, children tend...
to use every toy in the same way; they’re pounding it, they’re banging it. It really doesn’t matter how they use a toy, because they’re simply exploring.

Stage two has to do with cause and effect. “What does it do?” Here is where a child interacts with a toy to see what can happen. Busy boxes are a good example; if I press this button, this pops up.

Stage three relates to imagination and creativity. “What can it be?” This is where kids can use objects in pretend play or use several pieces together to create something else.

Some toys can go between stages: construction toys, for example, are appropriate for all stages, and this is where you start to see universal design. A universally designed toy can grow with a child, it changes as the child changes, and it’s accessible – even for children with severe disabilities. These toys incorporate multiple colors and multiple materials for multiple uses. These are toys that don’t restrict a child by offering only one way to play. A universally designed toy promotes play across the different stages and provides ways of using and reusing toys over and over again.

Do you think there are a lot of universally designed toys to be found out there, if people just took the time to look?

Sue: I’m seeing more and more, because of several different influences. The safety commission was a boon to the disability field because it got rid of all those small parts on toys. Now we’re seeing nice, big, press-able buttons, which is awesome from a universal-design standpoint.

Another influence is the increase in electronics. Electronic toys are good for stages one and two (the sensory and cause-and-effect stages) because so many reactions can happen (such as sound, color, or animation) with very little physical movement on the part of the child. Electronic toys provide immediate control and the ability to interact, which is very exciting for kids. So many toys today have built-in switches; parents don’t have to go to a specialized-toy catalog to find them anymore.

We’ve also seen that vendors have “mined” items that were formerly only available in the specialized market and brought them out into the mainstream toy world. Things like curved-handled spoons were once only available in

specialty catalogs until someone said, “You know what? These would be good for all kids!” This has expanded the market on both sides, and that’s exciting because there are lots of common needs among kids.

There is also much more mainstreaming going on than ever before. Years ago, therapy sessions were always in clinics, and moms would bring their children in for speech therapy twice a week. Now those therapists come to the home, or they come to the child care centers where the children are. Families of kids with disabilities are no longer relegated to these segregated places; they’re out there, movin’ and groovin’ just like everybody else, and parents are asking more often, “What is there for my child to interact with? How can they play with the other kids?” We’ve really seen a big attitudinal shift in our country.

How can toy retailers help their customers who have kids with disabilities?

Sue: We’ve run focus groups where we’ve asked parents, “What would help you?” One of the comments from the groups was: “We know our kids have disabilities, so you don’t have to pussy-foot around that fact.” As far as terms that they liked or disliked, the “differently abled” tag wasn’t particularly popular because it emphasized the word “different,” but the term “special needs” was okay.

We suggested the possibility of having a special insignia on the packages of toys with universal design characteristics, but they said no. “Make it easier for us,” was one comment we heard. “Put the universally designed toys into one aisle; you can call it ‘special needs toys,’ ‘best toys’ or ‘universal toys’ – we don’t care, just make it easy to find in the store.”

Can universal design really make a toy usable by all children?

Sue: Are we literally talking about all kids? Probably not. We’re talking about more kids. I would ask a toy manufacturer, “Can you simplify your design so that more kids will be able to use your toy earlier or longer? Can you add another dimension or other materials that will intrigue a child who only uses touch to play? Toy design is improving, and parents are developing a more practiced eye as they look for more open-ended, flexible toys that allow their children in.