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**HEALTH BEAT: YOUNGSTERS WITH DISABILITIES**

## **Finding the right toys for disabled children**

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December 12, 2006

Like any child, George Mamantov of Chicago loves toys, but it's not easy finding him the right ones. Born with a chromosomal disorder, the 3-year-old has trouble physically grasping things and isn't yet talking.

But when his mother, Laura Tillotson, discovered AblePlay.org, a Web site that rates toys for disabled children, she quickly found half a dozen holiday gift ideas she knew he would love.

"Anyone gets overwhelmed in a toy store but especially the parent of a special-needs child," said Tillotson, who shared the gift suggestions with George's grandmother over Thanksgiving. "You just don't know if something is going to be appropriate."

Holiday toy shopping often is frustrating for parents with disabled children because while there are thousands of choices, matching them to the child's varying ability can be a challenge.

AblePlay.org provides parents information that goes "beyond the box," said Diana Nielander, executive director of the National Lekotek Center, the non-profit Chicago organization that developed the Web site. Before purchasing, parents can learn about the size of a toy's buttons, the toy's adjustability and the number of steps it takes to activate. They can find information organized by disability category, including skill development and play ideas.

The Web site also provides a link to the Lekotek Web site, where visitors can find 10 questions to ask themselves before buying toys for children with disabilities.

"It's looking more in-depth at a toy in ways the manufacturer never would," Nielander said.

Nielander's son has sensory-integration problems, so she uses AblePlay to seek out toys with texture and tactile features. Tillotson said her son has "communicative" and "cognitive" limitations, so she typed those words into the search engine. AblePlay suggested a handful of appropriate off-the-shelf toys, including the Hop 'n Pop Activity Play Mat, which unzips so bubble wrap can be inserted.

Tillotson, an editor at a non-profit magazine, loves the site because "it gives you tips on what to do with a particular toy to make it adaptable to your child," she said. "They had information I could print and keep with the toy."

An important aspect of AblePlay is that the approximately 50 rated toys are not specially adapted; they are the same ones found in the local toy store or at the neighbor's house. But they also can be purchased directly from the manufacturer on the Web site.

Disabled children "want to be included in the same way," Nielander said. "If all the parents need is more information, that's what we can give them."

The range of the kinds of information parents need, however, is huge. Some of the 6.2 million disabled children in the

U.S. have physical issues (cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis) while others struggle with sensory disorders, such as hearing and visual impairment. Children on the autistic spectrum have problems with communication, while those with Down syndrome or attention-deficit disorder have cognitive troubles.

The National Lekotek Center, which offers play-based services to children with disabilities and their families, saw a need for the toy-rating information after parents began calling their help line with questions about how to find the best toys.

"They'd call and say, 'My child loves dinosaurs, but he can't do this and this and this. What shall I buy?'" Nielander said. "I think most people like shopping, but when buying a toy for a child with a disability, people kind of want to be told what to get. There's no right answer."

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