

# Toys 'R' Us puts out catalog with special needs at heart

BY MARY BETH FALLER  
The Stamford Advocate

Kids with special needs love toys as much as any child, and some can play with many of the same things as typical kids. But how do you know what's appropriate? One place to start is the Toys "R" Us Toy Guide for Differently-abled Kids.

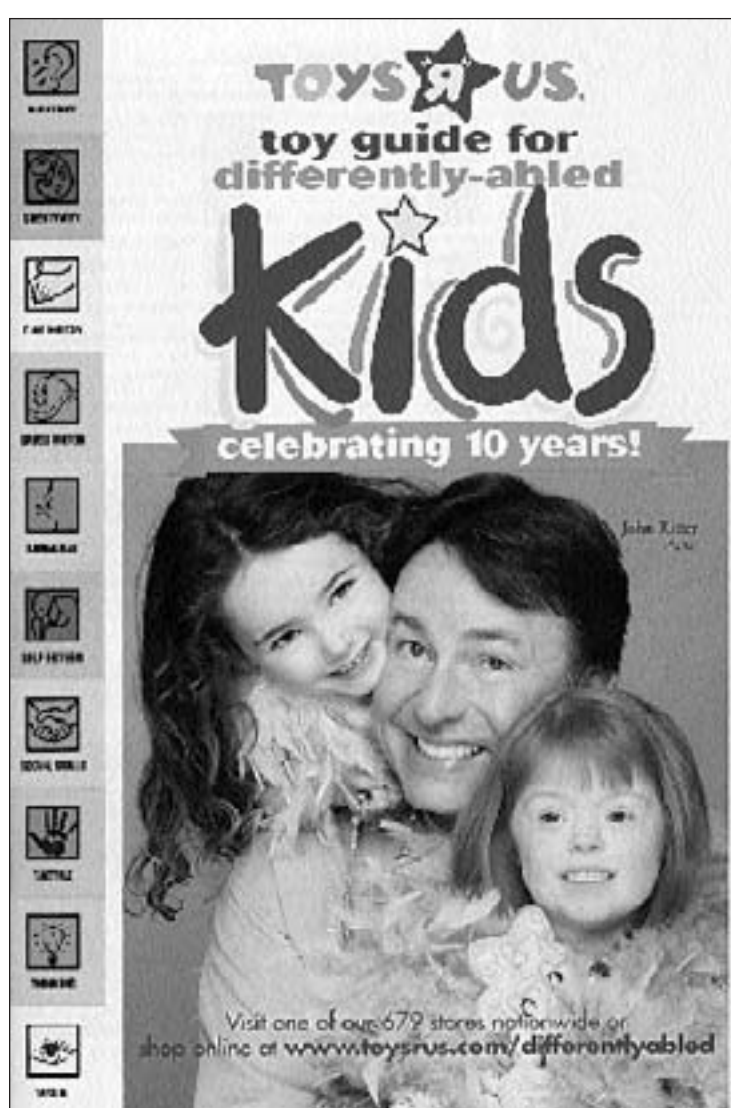
The giant retailer's catalog lists more than 85 toys that have been assessed and approved by the National Lekotek Center, a nonprofit agency devoted to play for special-needs children. This is the 10th year that Toys "R" Us has published the guide.

Susan McLaughlin, spokeswoman at New Jersey-based Toys "R" Us, says that years ago, when the company began featuring children with disabilities in its advertising, customers began calling and asking which toys would be best for kids with special needs. So the company decided to publish a catalog, in partnership with Lekotek.

"Every year we pull together a number of toys that are great sellers, or are classics, and send them to Lekotek. They evaluate them and tell us what to include," McLaughlin says. The evaluation process often includes having kids play with the toys to see how well they do, says Diana Neilander, business manager at Chicago-based Lekotek.

"Some don't make the cut, and the reasons vary greatly," she says. "Sometimes the toy is difficult to activate consistently, or the directions are difficult." A toy might be great, but if the button to turn it on is too tiny, a child with limited mobility can't play with it. A few classics make the catalog perennially, such as blocks, Boggle Junior and Grow to Pro Basketball by Fisher Price.

Neilander particularly likes the Discovery Sounds Hammer by Little Tykes, which makes silly sounds when banged and costs \$5.99. "Some children with sensory issues need auditory and tactile input for their body to get the information it needs — and so when you're banging, you're hearing a noise and you're feel-



The cover of the Toys "R" Us Toy Guide for Differently-abled Kids features someone each year with an interest in special-needs people. This year, actor John Ritter, whose older brother has cerebral palsy, posed. Ritter, who died several months after the photo shoot, is seen with daughter Stella on his left and Megan Anne Schiedler, right.

ing the pound of the hammer in your hand."

Each toy is rated according to which skills it will develop: tactile, fine-motor, creativity, thinking, etc., with symbols listed in the guide.

"Rather than just say 'this is good,' we try to give parents examples of why," Neilander says. The Discovery Sounds Hammer hones thinking, visual, auditory and gross-motor skills.

Finding toys for older kids with disabilities is a challenge. Neilander recommends the Leapfrog products, and says Paint N Swirl also is a good choice.

"It's an easy-to-do art project where you don't have to close your hand around a pen or pencil or paintbrush." All of the toys are part of the regular Toys "R" Us inventory. "One thing we found is that kids with different abilities want regu-

lar toys: 'The kid down the street has a Barbie. I want a Barbie,'" McLaughlin says.

Every year, the cover of the Toys "R" Us Toy Guide for Differently-abled Kids features someone with an interest in special-needs people. One year it was hearing-impaired actress Marlee Matlin and another time it was TV personality Maria Shriver, who is active in supporting the Special Olympics.

This year the company asked actor John Ritter, star of the popular TV show "8 Simple Rules For Dating My Teenage Daughter." Ritter, whose older brother has cerebral palsy, agreed, and the cover photograph was shot in the summer. Ritter appears wrapped in a pink feather boa with his daughter Stella, 5, and model Megan Anne Schiedler, 5, who has Down syndrome. The catalogs were on their

## Special considerations for choosing right toys

1. Multisensory appeal: Does the toy respond with lights, sounds or movement to engage the child? Are there contrasting colors? Does it have a scent? Is there texture?

2. Method of activation: Will the toy provide a challenge without frustration? What is the force required to activate? What are the number and complexity of steps required to activate?

3. Places the toy will be used: Will the toy be easy to store? Is there space in the home? Can the toy be used in a variety of positions such as side-lying or on a wheelchair tray?

4. Opportunities for success: Can play be open-ended with no definite right or wrong way? Is it adaptable to the child's individual style, ability and pace?

5. Current popularity: Is it a toy that will help the child with disabilities feel like "any other kid?" Does it tie in with other activities such as books and art sets that promote other forms of play?

6. Self-expression: Does the toy allow for creativity, uniqueness and making choices? Will it give the child experience with a variety of media?

7. Adjustability: Does it have adjustable height, volume, speed and level of difficulty?

8. Child's individual abilities: Does the toy provide activities that reflect both developmental and chronological ages? Does it reflect the child's interests and age?

9. Safety and durability: Does the toy fit with the child's size and strength? Does it have moisture resistance? Are the toy and its parts sized appropriately? Can it be washed?

10. Potential for interaction: Will the child be an active participant during use? Will the toy encourage social engagement with others?

in Sweden in the 1960s, includes 35 play centers around the United States (none are in New York or New England) as well as a telephone help line.

"How do you bring play in so the child is an active participant and not just looking from the sidelines?" Neilander asks.

Besides working with the toy industry, the group will take individual phone calls from parents. "One family called and said their daughter loved to watch their dog play catch, but she couldn't throw the ball. So we worked with them to set up a ramp and a switch so she could release the ball and it would roll down the ramp and the dog could catch it.

"For a child who is unable to hold a doll, Lekotek can come up with creative ways for child to hold that doll, and when a parent sees the child being able to have fun, they can have fun."

Neilander credits the Toys "R" Us guide for influencing the industry to make toys more inclusive. Not only have manufacturers produced dolls that portray disabilities, such as Barbies and Cabbage Patch Kids, but they have started to make all their toys easier to use.

"It's a mindset for them to think about what might make this product easier for a greater number of children who have a vast spectrum of abilities," she says.

The Toys "R" Us Toy Guide for Differently-abled Kids is available at stores or online at [www.toysrus.com/differentlyabled](http://www.toysrus.com/differentlyabled). For information about the National Lekotek Center, call (773) 276-8644 or visit [www.lekotek.org](http://www.lekotek.org). The Lekotek toy resource help line is (800) 366-PLAY.

special challenges faced by family members of people with disabilities.

"When you have a child with a disability, your world is made up of doctor's appointments and therapy appointments," says Neilander. "There's not a lot of time for the family to be together."

Lekotek is about finding ways to include everyone in the fun. The group, founded

way to stores in September when Ritter died suddenly of a heart ailment.

"It was so sad," McLaughlin says. "We contacted his family, and they wanted to go forward with the guide. So we put out signs in the stores saying, 'With love and laughter we remember John Ritter.'"

Ritter contributed a letter for the catalog, in which he mentions understanding the

# Get a jump on fitness resolution now

BY NANCY SUNDRAM  
Special to the Record-Eagle

You know it's coming — that inevitable resolution at New Year's to eat better, get into the gym and take off those pounds once and for all.

So why not get a jump on it during the holiday season and make a start at a new you before New Year's?

It's worth thinking about for several reasons, including that this is the time of year with the most incentives to join a gym. The following is just a sampling of what some of the area fitness studios are doing.

Carey Carlson and Leah Arnold are co-owners of **Women's Fitness & Health Co.** (938-4474), which has locations in Acme and Interlochen. With registered dietician Jennifer May, they offer complete packages for fitness and health that have a three time a week, 30-minute exercise routine as a focus to fit the lifestyles of active women. There are special mother and daughter rates, and through the holiday season, there are no enrollment fees for membership.

Traverse City's **Fit For You** (922-7285) just ended another of their two popular, yearly nutrition contests, where participants put \$50 in a pot, then weigh in once a week for eight

weeks. If you've lost any weight each week, you could be one of the finalists splitting up the funds at the end. They'll do another one in the spring, but in the meantime, they have a New Year's Six -Week Challenge. You work with groups of three, and at the end of the six weeks, you could be the winner of a membership package. The other incentive is working as a team toward your individual fitness goals. Owners Jeff and Vern Gauthier says this short program is getting strong response so far, and they're hoping that anyone who enrolls will take the commitment and make it into a habit.

At **Centre Ice** (946-4063) in Traverse City, owner Helayne Marchand says they'll be celebrating their first anniversary with a two-for-one package that means you need a partner to attend with you. March believes that can be a critical factor in motivating someone to regularly attend a gym, and with a special that offers eight visits for \$40, the cost is just \$2.50 per person per session. They also have group exercise classes, corporate rates, yoga and personal training (which you can get a session of for free if you sign up for a six or 12-month membership).

**The Northern Michigan Pilates Studio** in downtown Elk Rapids provides a wide range of exercise classes, tai chi and yoga, in addition to Pilates. Owner Judith Vilaquette says there's a good reason for Pilates being one of the most popular exercise approaches around, and credits its appeal as extending to every age group. At her facility, you can use drop-in or punch card programs to get oriented to Pilates, which has many different levels of challenge.

**Curves** in Interlochen (276-6047) allows you to get a complete aerobic and strength training workout in 30 minutes. Their system is built around easy-to-learn hydraulic resistance machines, so there are no cumbersome weight stacks to change or manage. Owners Mike and Rita Skelly say there is an emphasis on fun at their studio, and that many members say their time at Curves is one of the best half-hours of their week. Through the rest of the month, you can attend for free and take 50 percent off the service fee. In January, they'll be giving away free Curves designer bags and 50 percent off the service fee.

**Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.**



# XMAS GIFT IDEAS



**BOYNE FLEECE**  
NOW \$19.99

**TITLEIST NXT GOLF BALLS**  
ONLY \$27.99

**GREAT SKI PACKAGE ROSSIGNOL AXIUM SALOMON S710 SCOTT POLE**  
ONLY \$299

**ASK US ABOUT DISCOUNT LIFT TICKETS**  
FOR BOYNE RESORTS

**JUNIOR HELMETS BY GIRO & BOERI**  
FROM ONLY \$59.95

**HATS, GLOVES AND TURTLENECKS**  
FROM ONLY \$12

**SCOTT JUNIOR VOLTAGE GOGGLES**  
ON SALE FOR \$26

**ALL STRYKE & COLUMBIA SKIWEAR**  
NOW 20% OFF

**SELECTED 2004 KIDSWEAR**  
ON SALE NOW

NOV 248.347.3223 | BLOOMFIELD HILLS 248.338.0803 | TRAVERSE CITY 231.941.1999  
WWW.BOYNE.COM/SKIGOLF PLUS VISIT OUR SKI & GOLF OUTLET AT 4329L CRESCENT DR, NOV