

## Raising Playful Tots show #2 Mara Kaplan: 50 Toys in 50 days

Melitsa: I am really excited to be interviewing Mara Kaplan from Let kids play. Hi Mara. How are you?

Mara: I'm just fine. How are you today?

Melitsa: I'm good. I'm good. Before we jump into the questions. Can you take a minute to introduce yourself to everybody. How did you get to be so passionate about play?

Mara: I'd be happy to. I have two children one is 16 and one is 12. And my 16 yr old has profound disabilities. When he was young we spend a whole lot of time in therapy. Therapy is often play based it's not free play for the child to participate in so I really wanted to provide opportunities for children with and without disabilities to have an opportunity to just play. I helped with other mothers to create a center that was an indoor play space for children with all disabilities in Pittsburgh and I spent 13 yrs working there. And really saw children learn greatly from there activity in play.

Melitsa: Perfect that's so good. With your background in early childhood education and with your child with disabilities. You must have become quite expert in choosing the right toys and the right type of toys for your needs. Is there any advice that you can give to us? What would you suggest the best toys to. Because the market is just flooded with them there are so many. What do I look for?

Mara: Well. I look for toys that are open ended. Meaning children can play with them in multiple different ways. I also look for toys that grow with the child. So that it's not something that I'm just going to play with today or even the next month. But there are ways to grow I can play with it year after year.

Block are always the great example of that. As a **very young child**, all I'm doing is stacking one or two blocks and I'm ecstatic. By **the time I'm ten and eleven**, I'm using those same blocks. I'm creating huge masterpieces and bringing in other components to it. I believe that you don't want toys with licensed figures. I think it takes away from the imagination for the children and also doesn't grow with you. You can think about it....look back in 5 yrs will your children want to play the high school musical game. ... probably not. I think high school musical will be long gone by that time.

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I also like as much as possible to use natural materials. I like wood and real fabric. Things that feel good in your hands. That's not always completely possible because sometimes a good plastic toy can have it's benefits. The preferred toys don't need plugs and don't need batteries. But again, for some children of disabilities there can be exceptions to that rule.

Melitsa: I think with the blocks. I think a lot of us stop as the children get older. We think that they don't need blocks. But there are so many different types of blocks on the market these days.

There are the little blocks with the alphabet on that little children like to use. You can use those for the older children like you said. But there are also really big blocks that you can do these amazing city scapes with.

I think we should remember to go and look for those ones as well. When we think of blocks we think of the cubes or the small little blocks or the multi-coloured blocks. But you can get hundreds of blocks that are much bigger wouldn't you say?

Mara: Yes there are all sorts of interesting block sets out there. Whether they are using magnets or ball and socket connection or Lego that have all the intricate detail in them.

***My one thing I like to say though about some of those kids. Again, you don't want to buy something where you say, " I'm going to make the picture on the box and then I'm finished." Make the picture on the box that's fine But then throw them in with the rest of your blocks and just build whatever you want. Just following the directions on the kit doesn't really make for an educational experience.***

Melitsa: With all your toy knowledge is this what made you come up with 50 toys in 50 days? Can you tell us about this?

Mara: I love toys. I love to share what I know and I go to a Toy fair each year. It's the biggest conference about toys. I see everything that's new. I want to share that. In November and December, when people are thinking more about toys an gift.

Every day for 50 days. Starting November 2<sup>nd</sup>, this year, because it was a Monday. I

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describe a different toy or group of toys every day. Each week is a different topic. On Monday, I explain why the topic is important. For instance, in block week. I talked about everything we just talked about. For the next 5 days I talk about specific different toy.

On Sunday I wrap it up with everything I didn't get to talk about. So there's usually a list on Sunday. Here's another 5 types of blocks I didn't get to tell you about.

There is a week on green and eco-friendly toys. A week where I asked parents who are raising children with disabilities, What is the one thing they can't live without? There's a week on fidget and tactile toys. A week on going outside to play toys.

As we get down to the end. We're all running out of money. I do a week on toys that cost less than \$20 and end it with some ideas of games and activities we can do over the holiday vacation.

Melitsa: That's just perfect. It gives us so many ideas and examples to go to. I notice also on your blog, you recommend toys for children with disabilities and those without. How important is it to you that you should talk about both?

Mara: I live the life in my household where having toys for children with or without disabilities is critical. I think the rate of disabilities is increasing. As many of us know, the statistic now for the Autism spectrum 1 in every 91 children have or are some place on the Autism spectrum.

Children should be able to play together...it's not good for a family to create a set for those are your toys and those are mine. It's not economical feasible. It separates the kids out from one another. You want to buy toys that can be played in multiple different ways. You have your child with disabilities and your child without a disabilities playing together.

For instance, we have a keyboard. My 12 daughter plays songs on the keyboard. My 16 son hits the keyboard. It makes sounds and he's ecstatic. The keyboard is not an inexpensive toy. We've been using it for 10 years. Everybody is very happy with that toy.

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Another example are games. Look when you buy games, are there ways to change the rules so each child has their own set of rules and how they play the game?

It also works well for children of multiple ages. You have your 4 yr old who wants to play along with the 10 year old . Maybe the 4 yr old gets 3 rolls of the dice compared to 1 roll for the 10 yr old...or other ways you adapt the game. This way you get a whole family game night without boring the 10 yr old with a really juvenile game or exclude the very young child.

Melitsa: Those are really good ideas, thanks. You can find so many great toys in so many places. I remember when my children were involved in early intervention they had occupational therapy and speech therapy and the toys the therapist brought over were so much fun!

I had no idea that there were so many different types of toys you could buy in other places other than toy stores. I thought toy stores were the only places you could buy toys from. Since there are so many specialist places.

Do you have any recommendations for toy shops that share the same passions that we do for unstructured play, imaginative play and inclusion?

Mara: I have a couple, [Pocketful of Therapy](#). This is special needs online store. They are one of the few special need catalogues, where I have found the price isn't 15 times higher than I have seen in another toy store for the same game. Although they have lots of therapeutic toys and items on their site. They *also* have some wonderful tactile materials; art material plus good games for cognitive learning. This is one place.

It was started by **two occupational therapists** they are still out in the field working with kids. They know the most current information. Their website isn't the slickest one but I really like the quality of what they are offering.

The other two stores I would really recommend: [Fat Brain Toys](#) & [KazooToys](#). I have found that both of these family fun toys stores. Both started by parents who couldn't find what they were looking for out in the regular toy stores they both had really this same philosophy.... of high quality imaginative toys and have different ways to look at toys. Those are my two online favourites.

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I'm going to be honest, they will be more expensive than Target or Walmart.

My recommendation though is *buy less toys*.

*Buy high quality toys.*

**Spend the same amount of money.**

You'll going to get a longer play value for your dollars.

Melitsa: That's really good advice to give. We really like [Beyond Play](#).

Mara: Also another good site.

Melitsa: They had some really good ideas to use. At the beginning, I think I was always worried that these are early intervention toys. These aren't for my children especially once they moved passed some of the early intervention issues they had. But *when you actually look at the toys they had there but my goodness they are so creative & imaginative. I feel it's a shame that lots of people miss out on even seeing how some of these toys work.*

Mara: Beyond play is another very good special needs catalogue. There are lots of good special needs catalogues out there. However you do find that whenever you call it special needs they double or triple the price. Often you can find some of those activities on other sites for less money. So, go to those sites, look up what the toy is and see if you can find it some place else. If not go back and order from the special needs catalogue.

I don't think parents that are raising children with special needs need to spend to spend that much more money than their typically developing child.

Melitsa: Thanks for sharing today , Mara. It's been loving finding out these news toys or new to me that I would love to have for my children. You'll have to come back and talk about the accessible playgrounds and the nature playgrounds that you do.

I'd love to. I do have a website if you're looking for accessible playgrounds. There's a directory from around the country.

[www.accessibleplaygrounds.net](http://www.accessibleplaygrounds.net).

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Where can we find out more about your 50 toys in 50 days.

<http://letkidsplay.blogspot.com>. Every day there is a new entry.

My main website is [letkidsplay.com](http://letkidsplay.com) you can sign up for the newsletter. Every Monday you get the previous weeks toys recommended emailed to you. So if you don't have time every day to look at the website. This is a way to get a list of the toys sent to you.

This is really handy you can save them or even forward them on to relatives and friends. That's great!

You can forward them and say, on Tuesday she talked about a toy that my son would really like. Why don't you get that for him as a gift.

Melitsa: It gives them a chance to find somewhere new....because I know with my family they get stuck on, 'I don't know what toys to get. Or what thing to get...'..you can direct them to a shop or store or toy you like. That can start off a whole new ripple effect.... Oh I can try that one.

Mara: One thing I ask, I do 50 toys in 50 days because I love toys. I do ask if you like what I do. I ask that you start your shopping at my blog. There are links to all of those toy stores that we just talked about. If you start there it doesn't cost you a single cent to start there. It's just another click of the mouse. When I refer you to that toy store they give me a very small referral fee. Which enables me to continue doing the stuff that I love to do.

Melitsa: Where is the best place to contact you?

Mara: If you have questions via email: [Mara](mailto:Mara)

[If you're interested in me doing some personal shopping toy shopping also via email.](#)

<http://letkidsplay.com>

Melitsa: Mara Kaplan is a busy mom to a child with multiple disabilities, an educator and a passionate advocate for inclusion, unstructured, creative & imaginative play. Thanks for talking to us.

Mara: Thank you very much.

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