

With simple fixes toys fit special needs

By DON BOWERMAN



Isabelle Green, an orthopedic nurse, demonstrates a toy train with a specially adapted switch that will allow a handicapped child the pleasure of play. (Staff photo by David Frank)

It's a bright yellow plastic truck with an electric motor.

One of this year's crop of toys, any 11-year-old would want to play with it. But what if the child had a handicap and couldn't use the truck's control lever?

Kids love those spirograph drawing toys. But what if the pens on the spirograph were too hard to hold for a child with limited muscular control to hold? Perhaps it seems that handicapped kids can't play with toys like those they see advertised on television.

Not so, according to Oakland Schools' "toy lady," Isabelle Green. Toys can be modified for handicapped children, she said.

What's required can be as simple as placing over the electric truck's control lever, a tube with a styrofoam ball at one end for easy gripping. Fastening sponges to the spirograph's pens can solve another problem.

That's a sample of Mrs. Green's advice to parents of handicapped children in a new Oakland Schools program. An orthopedic nurse and resource consultant for the Physically Impaired Association of Michigan (PAM), Mrs. Green is available two days a month for free appointments with parents.

"I'm here as a consultant to work with parents on a lot of the problems such as 'How do I move this child?' 'He's very hard to dress,'" Mrs. Green said.

TOYS ALLOW handicapped children "some control over (their) lives," Mrs. Green said.

It's toys or television, she added. "There's no control over television. Just to sit in front of an idiot box is not very stimulating."

Until recently, Mrs. Green said, "a lot of the handicapped primarily watched TV and that's all they did."

"They had nobody to help them adapt things," she said. "Until four or five years ago, there was nothing for people who can't talk (due to diseases like cerebral palsy). They may have been very bright."

Mrs. Green said a major problem is assessing the many available toys.

"Handicapped people, because of just accessibility, have fewer choices," she said.

To demonstrate the choices available to handicappers this Christmas, Mrs. Green first went shopping.

Her purchases made a colorful pile on a table at Oakland Schools in Pontiac. She showed more than 30 games and toys, most still in the gleaming cellophane and bright cardboard packaging designed to lure passing shoppers.

"When I look at toys, I think of kids and how your kids can use them," Mrs. Green told the assembled parents and educators.

HOLDING THE yellow plastic truck, she gave the group a quick rule.

"Putting a handle on anything makes it more accessible," she said.

She rotated the truck to display its new speed control lever fashioned from a metal arrow shaft and topped by a styrofoam ball.

"The thing is that these toys are not for the handicapped," Mrs. Green said.

"These toys are available commercially in the marketplace for everyday people to use," she added. "With small modifications, they can be used by (the) physically handicapped."

Commenting on specific items in the collection, Mrs. Green said that "having a thing a kid can stay with — and not for immediate gratification — is kind of neat."

Painting and drawing toys such as the spirograph were in that category. So was a rubbing toy which produced pictures and could be modified by attaching clips, she said.

"There are an awful lot of games that with enough innovation can be played by the handicapped," Mrs. Green said.

Checkers could be played without hands, she explained, by attaching magnets to the checkers and moving them with metal tubes (arrow shafts) held in the mouth or attached to a helmet.

"ANY TOY that encompasses action and audiovisual is very good," she said, adding miniature pinball machines are examples.

Mrs. Green described items from specialty catalogs for the disabled that included a fishing pole holder for one-handed persons.

"There are a lot of little boys who would appreciate the fishing pole holder," she said.

A Nerf basketball set that could be used by wheelchair patients "develop upper extremities and breathing," she said.

"I'm nurse, so I always think of these things," Mrs. Green added.

Also available for wheelchair patients, she said, are bowling ball pushers and telescoping cue sticks that eliminate bending over billiard tables.

For blind children who want to ride a bike, she said a device could be purchased to "attach one bike to another."

A more unusual item for the blind was a sonic beeper allowing a blind person to follow a sighted parent or friend.

Prices of toys in Mrs. Green's collection range from \$2.50 for the cheapest to \$32 for the yellow truck.

BUT AT AN adjacent table, Nathaniel Peters, director of Oakland Schools' Reading and Language Clinic, demonstrated a \$2,300 computer game adapted for handicappers' use.

"I think we're just beginning to consider the possibilities of micro-computers," Peters said.

Programs for television game computers will be among items available to parents and teachers of handicappers in a toy library planned by Peters and set to open in two months.

Dolls are love's messengers

By MARGARET MILLER

A great love that death could not conquer is helping to fund services for children at Methodist Children's Village.

Louis B. Wiles of Wayne went to the Redford Institution to sell the extensive doll collection left by his wife, Letha, who died last spring after months of illness.

Then he gave part of the proceeds from the sale of some 300 antique dolls and furnishings to the Methodist Children's Home Society as part of the Letha Wiles Memorial Fund.

The fund had been started with memorials sent to the MCHS in her name after her death. The interest it earns will be used to supplement federal funds for the children with special needs enrolled in programs at Children's Village.

The invitational sale was conducted by Barbara Book of Birmingham and her Underground Collector office, who worked with Ann Burgess of the Methodist Children's Village Staff.

"We talked about the best way for Louis to pass on the collection that his wife loved," Mrs. Burgess said, "and decided that having a sale here at the village would be the way to do it."

"SHE WOULD HAVE loved this," said Wiles, smiling sadly as he looked around the array of dolls arranged in the beautifully furnished parlor. "This is class. Right up her alley."

He said he and his wife had a "warm spot in our hearts" for the Methodist home. It dated from the time early in their marriage when they were ready to adopt a child through its services.

"We were all cleared and ready to go," he recalled. "Then, as so often happens, my wife became pregnant. So we had our own sons."

He talked fondly of the two sons, Gary and Lynn, now young men, and their closeness with their other. And then he talked of his wife's late-in-life enthusiasm for collecting dolls along with the antiques they had chosen together to furnish their home.

"I think the dolls were a bit like her children after the boys were grown," he said. "We had them in every room. They had breakfast and dinner with us."

The doll collecting began about eight years ago, he said. "It was strictly a hobby, although she did sell some of the newer ones. It gave her a new lease on life. She bought them all over — at doll shows and at antique sales. There was an antique shop near our home that had

an auction every Saturday.

I don't think she ever let a doll get out of there."

WHEN ALL THE dolls were set up for the invitational sale, Wiles gave a nod of approval. But not quite all his wife's collection was there, he noted.

"I saved two old ones and two new ones, some of her favorites," he explained. "Our boys will be getting married some day, and having families, and I want them to have some of the dolls their mother loved."

"I've been blessed in so many ways to have been able to spend 33 years with her."

He said several people had elected to send memorials to the Methodist Children's Home Society as well as their home church, First United Methodist of Wayne. Some memorials also went to the group for Alternative Cancer Therapies.

"Letha had cancer," Wiles said, "but we were both convinced she was getting better. When she died it was from a heart attack."

"I know it was her faith in God that sustained her during those years of illness. And that's what has sustained me since she has been gone."

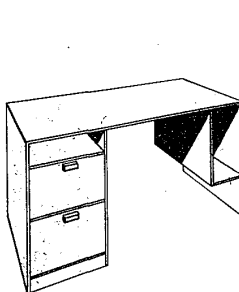


Margaret Walker gazes at dolls offered to the public through the Letha Wile Memorial Doll Sale. Ms. Walker of Farmington is the former national

president of the Questors. (Staff photo by Art Emanuele)

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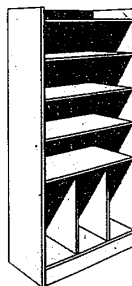
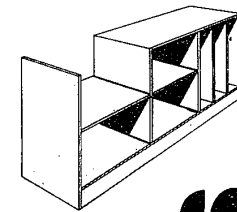
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