

# Toy sellers and makers offer more options for autistic kids

December 22 2016, by Joseph Pisani

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In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, owner Bethany Mathis stands near a number of interactive games at Time 4 Toys, while her son Hayden, 14, tests out a game, in Flowood, Miss. A mother of three, including a special needs child, Mathis and her husband decided to establish a toy store that offered entertaining and challenging games and toys for children of all ages, but also catered to the growing number of kids on the autism and special needs spectrum. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

Toy stores, with bright lights, loud sounds and crowded aisles, can be

hard to manage for children with autism or other sensory issues. For parents, finding toys that match their kids' skill sets and will hold their attention can be a process of trial and error. Big toy sellers and specialists are both trying to provide some better options.

Hasbro, for instance, offers tips on how parents can teach autistic children to play with Mr. Potato Head or a My Little Pony set. Toy maker Melissa & Doug offers stores special catalogs.

A Toys R Us in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, turned off its music for three hours on a recent Saturday morning and turned its break room into a quiet zone as part of an event planned with the Greater Philadelphia Autism Society. The company's 100 stores in the U.K. have been offering similar hours for one day a year since 2014, and Toys R Us plans to bring similar events to more of its 900 U.S. stores. Chuck E. Cheese's, the chain with arcade games and rides, similarly plans to turn off the music and dim the lights at 40 Northeast restaurants for a couple of hours one Sunday a month starting in January, as part of a trial run.

In the meantime, small stores designed specifically for children with sensory issues are popping up as well.

"The need for a store like this is even bigger than I thought it would be," says Bethany Mathis, who opened Time 4 Toys last month after having a hard time finding toys for her 8-year-old son with sensory processing issues. The walls at the store in Flowood, Mississippi, are painted in soft colors and kids can test out the toys.



In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, Paxton Mathis, 8, plays with a bright-colored molding clay at Time 4 Toys, in Flowood, Miss. The youngest child of store owner Bethany Mathis, Paxton, who has sensory processing disorder, often tests out some of the multipurpose toys offered in his mother's toy store. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

An estimated one in 68 children have autism or a related disorder, according to a government study based on 2012 data. That's up from one in 150 a decade before. Symptoms of autism vary widely, and can range from mild social interaction problems to repetitive behaviors to difficulty speaking or even the inability to speak. This can make choosing toys even harder than it is for unaffected kids.

Jamilah Rahim opened Spectrum Toy Store in Chicago this year after she realized no toy stores were meeting that need. As an in-home behavioral therapist, she saw parents spend money buying toys online that their children ended up not being interested in. At her 700-square-



foot store, kids can sit and play with any of the toys and parents can see if they like them before buying.

"It's more of an experience than just a one-stop shop for them to buy toys," says Rahim, who still works as a behavioral therapist part-time, which helps her discover new toys to stock.

Meghan Hetherton drove four hours to visit the store from her home in Eaton Rapids, Michigan. Two of Hetherton's four children are autistic, and when she takes them shopping at big stores, her 4-year-old son hums to cope with the crowds and noise. Hetherton often finds herself apologizing to store workers.



In this Thursday, Dec. 15, 2016, photo, Jamilah Rahim poses for a portrait in her Chicago store that specializes in toys for kids with special needs. At the

700-square-foot Spectrum Toy Store, kids can sit and play with any of the toys and parents can see if they like them before buying. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

"I shouldn't have to," she says, but "store employees just don't understand." At Spectrum Toy Store, her kids pulled toys from the shelves, played with putty and tried on chewable silicone jewelry before she bought some. "They were able to be themselves," says Hetheron.

Dimming the lights and turning off the music can help some autistic kids, but others may still be affected by a big space, says Dr. Eileen Crehan, a postdoctoral fellow at the autism program at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. She's noticed that movie theaters and ballparks are also offering sensory-friendly days. "It's sort of catching on," says Dr. Crehan.

After hearing from employees and customers, Hasbro Inc. teamed up with The Autism Project two years ago to teach parents and caregivers how autistic children can play with its toys. The company launched a site called Hasbro Toybox Tools with videos and downloadable instructions for some of its more popular toys, such as Baby Alive dolls and the Chutes and Ladders board game.

"Play doesn't always come natural with kids with autism," but it's important to their development and helps them learn to socialize with others, says Sandra Pierce-Jordan, the executive director of The Birchtree Center, a nonprofit in Newington, New Hampshire, that works with autistic children.



In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, Hayden Mathis, 14, son of store owner Bethany Mathis, demonstrates a double-maze board activity play system that helps develop motor skills, learning and concentration for all children, at Time 4 Toys, in Flowood, Miss. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

Emily Berman says she has had to teach her daughter how to pretend to eat plastic toy foods or how to move a toy train on its tracks. Her daughter is non-verbal, making it hard to pick out toys, says Berman, who is a life coach in Encinitas, California.

"I wish I knew what she wanted," she says. Berman has bought toys suggested by behavioral therapists and buys many items online. "A lot of it is trial and error," Berman says.

Another toymaker, Melissa & Doug, began printing a dedicated catalog about five years ago after it noticed an increase in letters and calls from parents of autistic kids who said their children loved the company's wooden puzzles or stuffed animals. It also added a section to its website



that lets shoppers browse for toys by specifying the skills the child needs to work on. Melissa & Doug says some stores have added special sections in their stores, and that notes come in from parents whose kids spoke for the first time playing or had other developments.

"It's really fulfilling," says co-founder Melissa Bernstein.



In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, Paxton Mathis, 8, plays with a remote car at Time 4 Toys, in Flowood, Miss. The youngest child of store owner Bethany Mathis, Paxton, who has sensory processing disorder, often tests out some of the multipurpose toys offered in his mother's toy store. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)



In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, owner Bethany Mathis demonstrates a multi-action cube designed for children or adults on the autism spectrum or even people with restless hands, one of several toys that both challenge and entertain children, at Time 4 Toys, in Flowood, Miss. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)





In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, owner Bethany Mathis demonstrates a sand mixture in a small play box that is designed for children or adults on the autism spectrum or even people with restless hands, one of several toys that both challenge, relax and entertain them, at Time 4 Toys, in Flowood, Miss. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)



In this Thursday, Dec. 15, 2016, photo, Jamilah Rahim poses for a portrait in her Chicago store that specializes in toys for kids with special needs. At the 700-square-foot Spectrum Toy Store, kids can sit and play with any of the toys and parents can see if they like them before buying. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2016, photo, owner Bethany Mathis, right, shows Andi Cruthirds one of several toys that both challenge and entertain younger children, at Time 4 Toys, in Flowood, Miss. Time 4 Toys is making its place among toy stores that offer entertaining and challenging games and toys for children of all ages, and also caters to the growing number of kids on the autism spectrum. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

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