

Ability Switches: The Nuts and Bolts

An ability switch, in simple terms, is an alternative to a button that requires fine dexterity to push. Many toys and appliances operate because of fine motor stimulation, prohibiting many people with fine motor challenges from finding independence with daily tasks. Ability switches offer the option to make things work with a simple gesture that an individual with special needs can master, and may not even require the use of hands and fingers.

There are many ability switches on the market designed to function for individuals with a wide range of special needs. There are also many adapted toys and appliances, manufactured to work with ability switches. Furthermore, there are adaptive devices that can help standard household appliances and battery-operated toys work with switches.

As Diana Hohmann COTA, (Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant) explains, the word “function” is key when introducing a switch to your child and teaching him or her how to operate it: “Using ability switches is not the end goal for children and adults with disabilities,” she says. “The

end goal is the task set before them, whether that’s using an adapted toy for fun or a practical household appliance. Ability switches make it possible for people with limited fine motor abilities to function in our fast-paced world.”

Diana explains that, in therapeutic environments, she often comes across care professionals who focus on the flash of switches rather than their function. “Push the button,” she hears them saying over and over again. And while the button might be shiny, it has a greater purpose: it is enabling rather than simply entertaining. “Don’t say ‘Push the button,’” Diana says. “Instead, say ‘Turn on the fan.’”

Why Buy an Ability Switch?

It feels good to be independent, doesn’t it? Children and adults with special needs enjoy a feeling of independence when operating adapted switches and making toys and appliances work with little to no assistance from caregivers. So the answer to the question of why you buy a switch is simple: you are adapting

daily living tools to individuals who can’t, themselves, adapt to use them.

A switch can make many small, previously difficult—or even impossible—tasks easy. Your child might benefit from a switch if his fine motor skills don’t permit him to manipulate small on/off buttons on his favorite mechanical toy. Using his switch with this toy, he gains a sense of control and independence. It’s a “Look what I can do!” moment every time he operates the switch, triggering the lights, sounds or movements of the toy. And that can be a very empowering experience for a child who’s used to getting help with many of his daily activities, including play.

But the hard part can be choosing the appropriate switch with many options on the market!

Choosing the Right Switch

Assess your child’s level of ability. Can he or she operate a switch with the touch of a finger or hand? If not, ask yourself if he can perform other small gestures such as tilting his head or squeezing his fist. The blue box offers up some handy questions to answer when you are choosing the right ability switch. Believe it or not, simple movements—like a nod, swipe or blow—can activate sensitive switches, making it possible for almost anyone in need to find a suitable switch.

“Another thing to consider is motivation,” Diana explains. “Ask yourself what things interest your child: what’s his favorite color and what kinds of touchy feely surfaces does he find pleasing. Many switches are brightly-colored or textured for tactile stimulation.”

There are two basic types of switches: Latch switches—which turn appliances on with an action and then require the same action to turn them off, and...

Assess Ability Level

Can your child:

- tilt his head?
- blow with his mouth?
- tap his foot?
- swipe his hand?
- roll a ball?
- squeeze his fists?
- perform a light touch with any part of his body?

This month's **FlagHouse Forum** focuses on how to choose the ability switch best-suited to your child's special needs – and the wonderful things he or she can do with it! FlagHouse is a premier global supplier of resources for special needs and education, as well as physical activity and recreation. We are happy to partner with EP to bring its readers this forum.

Switches that require the switch to be continually activated to keep appliances running, meaning that as long as they are engaged, they will make things go.

Choose latch switches for items that you want to run without constant monitoring, such as fans and music players. Choose type 2 for items used by individuals who can't focus on or understand long-term cause and effect relays; meaning that they need to see an action happening simultaneously while they operate the switch to understand that it's the switch that makes it work.

"Most toys work well with type 2," Diana explains. "It's a great delight for a child to play with a stuffed animal cat, for instance, and watch the cat walk forward or back when he operates his switch. Some animal toys even make noise. So, you'll be telling your child 'Make the cat MEOW' and he'll actually be causing that action in real time."

Remember, she cautions: don't say "Push the button." Say "Make the cat talk."

Connecting Your Switch to Adapted and Standard Activities

Many items come switch-adapted; but often others that don't can be modified to function with an ability switch. A product adapted at the manufacturing level usually has an external jack where you connect the appropriate ability switch. Adapted products are typically battery operated with simple cause and effect relays that generate lights, sounds or subtle movements (animal adapted toys often walk and talk, for instance).

You can modify standard toys and appliances using an environmental control unit, which allows you to connect an

appliance that isn't adapted with an ability switch of choice. A battery-operated product can be modified to work with a switch by using battery interrupters: cables with a contact plate that you place in the battery compartment of the toy, and a jack that you to connect to your ability switch.

Accessories such as these mean that

to focus on the function of the item, Diana repeats. Switches are empowering not because they teach your child he can make a switch work, but because they show him he use a switch to cause an action that makes his life better: cools him, entertains him, comforts him and more.

"Switches have the capacity to help people of all ages with special needs feel in control of their daily lives," Diana says. "Use these simple guidelines to select the switch and adaptor that will be easiest to use, and then encourage your child to operate his or her own toys and appliances. You'll get a smile, a sigh or a glimmer in his eyes every time!"

With operations in the United States and Canada, FlagHouse offers more than 20,000 products. It has served public and private sectors for over 50 years, including schools, parks, community centers, healthcare organizations, day treatment and residential care centers, military bases, and individuals. Catalogs include Flying Start™ (ages 5 and under), Giant Leaps™ (ages 5-20), Going Strong™ (ages 21 and over), PE & Rec, and CATCH® (Coordinated Approach To Child Health). For more information please call 1-800-265-6900 or visit www.Flaghouse.com. •

Diana has worked with FlagHouse for more than five years, currently as the Senior Brand Manager of Special Needs Pediatrics. As a certified occupational therapy assistant with more than a decade of experience, she worked extensively with children and specifically with children with autism. Diana is proud to be a member of the Special Olympics Young Athletes™ Advisory Board and a past recipient of the Sensory Processing Disorders Foundation's "Sensational Business Member of the Year" award.

Adapted Toys and Appliances

Toys:

- Animal Friends
- Bingo
- Bubble Makers
- Light / Sound Effect Systems

Appliances:

- Aromatherapy Diffusers
- Arts and Crafts Tools
- Fans
- Massagers
- Scissors

...and More!

you don't necessarily have to buy a new fan or radio when you introduce an ability switch into your child's daily regimen. Instead, you can buy an adaptor and use it with many different items around the house.

What Activities Work Best with Switches?

Once you've selected the right switch and adaptor, choose activities that will make your child feel independent, enabled and confident. A wide variety of adapted activities are available for purchase, from toys to small appliances. You want to choose an adapted or adaptable activity that performs a simple action. Look for toys that move, make noise or flash lights. Check out adapted fans, radios and more. The red box lists many popular adapted products you can find on the market. Always remember