

Keep a Big 'Bag of Tricks'

All parents need a little magic at their fingertips

by Terri Mauro

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A long wait at the doctor's office. Slow service at a restaurant. An endless car ride. A few too many homework problems. That moment where a tantrum is coming on fast, but can still be diverted. These are the times when parents need a big "bag of tricks" -- a deep supply of items and ideas that can fill a moment or turn a head.

While a "bag of tricks" comes in handy with any child, it's particularly essential for children with special needs, who are often significantly less able to amuse themselves, negotiate transitions, or avoid meltdowns. A parent needs to be quick, versatile, creative, and resourceful to keep things smooth and stress-free. Planning ahead can help. Here's how to make sure you always have plenty of tricks up your sleeve.

Remember your ABCDs: Every item in your "bag of tricks" should do one of these, and preferably more than one: Amuse. Bribe. Comfort. Distract. They must be deployable at a moment's notice, because -- especially in stressful situations -- the space of time between the need for amusement, bribery, comfort or distraction and the onset of complete disaster can be brutally short.

Get some goodies together: Some of the items in your "bag of tricks" will be actual items, stuff you keep in your purse or pockets for emergencies. It doesn't hurt to have some on hand at all times -- that's why most of these are small -- and then to load up with extras when you know you might need them. Some possibilities:

Toy cars	Hard candy
Deck of cards	Pretzels
Flash cards	Small storybook
Little notepad and pen	Puzzle book
Dice	Raisins
Fidget toys	Animal crackers
Finger puppets	Doll
Keys	Magnetic travel game
Coins	Crayons
Photos	Stickers

Gather good ideas, too: Some of the items in your "bag of tricks" will be ideas that you can implement without any need for props. You may have to go through a few before you find one your child will run with, so keep a list if you can't keep them all in your head. Some possibilities:

20 Questions

I Spy

Taking a walk

Getting a drink from a water fountain

Looking out window

Saying something silly

Tickling

Blowing a raspberry on his or her arm

Clapping games

Pushing hard against each other's hands

Rock-paper-scissors

Whispering secrets

Asking questions

Word games where each person adds an item, alphabetically, and the next person must remember the whole string of words

What color am I looking at?

Tell me three things you did today

Let child choose what to do next

Math facts

A is for ..., B is for ...

Hide something in fist -- guess which hand?

Play with child's hair

Make that bag bottomless: Putting together a bag of tricks is one thing, maintaining it is another. As your child gets older, changes interests, gets bored with some things and taken by others, you'll want to keep changing and replenishing the goodies in your "bag." Remember, the items don't have to be big, they don't have to be fancy, and they only have to be able to run your child past a bit of boredom or a little rough behavioral spot. But they do have to have the power to Amuse. Bribe. Comfort. Distract. And that power can fade with overuse. The more stuff you've got up your sleeve, the better.