

# Training Briefs

## Using Training Toys in Your Sessions

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\*In *Training Briefs*, MOSAICA uses the term *member* to refer to individuals (including members, volunteers, and participants) providing service in National Service programs.

National Service program staff, site supervisors, and trainers share responsibility for member training and development. *Training Briefs* provide these individuals with useful information and innovative ideas for training and development.

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### New Team Member Joins MOSAICA!

**Elisa Luna**, MOSAICA's National Service and Leadership Development Component Director <[elisa@mosaica.org](mailto:elisa@mosaica.org)>, replaces Diane Cabrales on MOSAICA's National Service Training and Development Project. **Dan Balón**, Project Coordinator <[dan@mosaica.org](mailto:dan@mosaica.org)>, remains on the team as your first contact for all of your training and technical assistance needs. Please join us in wishing Diane the very best in the future!

To implement effective member\* training sessions, pay close attention to two essential components: "the what" — the training topic and teachable content — and "the how" — the training delivery approach and process. Another key ingredient to productive sessions is the facilitator's ability to create a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere that enhances both the content and the process. One easy way to help achieve this goal is to spice up the training environment with childhood toys such as play-doh, pipe cleaners, and colored crayons.

No one ever said that training sessions have to be boring! Remember that your members are adult learners (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 193–196) and bring much experience and many assets to training (see *Training Brief* #9, August 1998). Think inventively about how to keep members engaged and invested in your training sessions; reflect upon your childhood when learning was playful and recreate some of these positive and fun experiences.

Below are some reasons for incorporating toys into various aspects of your training sessions. In fact, you may wonder why you have not used toys before!

**Toys create a fun and relaxed environment.** Training sessions should provide participants an opportunity not only to learn new knowledge and acquire

relevant skills but also to have an enjoyable experience. Toys at the training table help set a tone that learning is fun, heighten participant interest in the training session, create comfortable space, and give participants the "license" to approach training in a different way. Before the training, pass out cans of play-doh and strings of pipe cleaners and emphasize that members may play freely with these toys during activities and throughout the entire session. A relaxed atmosphere helps facilitate optimal learning; and, with the use of experiential learning methods (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 85–86) and cooperative learning training activities (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 197–202), you increase the probability for reaching your training goals.



**Toys stimulate creativity and involvement.** Sometimes idea-generating activities such as brainstorming on newsprint are overdone and become boring; the simple introduction of a training toy may energize participants. For example, during brainstorming sessions, use a stress ball to call on participants to share an idea. The use of a physical object not only focuses listeners on the speaker, but also forces everyone to stay alert in case the ball comes their way. In addition, a stress ball helps the facilitator and participants visually monitor who participates the most or least. If one goal of the group brainstorming is to promote equal participation, the facilitator can establish ground rules such as "everyone must touch the stress ball at least once" or "no one person can touch the stress ball more than three times."

**Toys meet the needs of diverse learners.** Using toys during training activities offers participants with diverse learning styles alternatives to traditional training formats. Research shows that participants who spend most of their time being physically active (i.e., not only sitting at desks), often find it very difficult to maintain concentration for long periods of time. Having something to do with their hands heightens concentration and extends their attention span. Kinesthetic learners — individuals who prefer learning through hands-on activities — or those of high *visual-spatial intelligence*<sup>1</sup> — individuals who perceive and understand the world best through visualized objects, spatial dimensions, mental images, and hands-on creativity — may feel more comfortable with the use of play-doh and pipe cleaners than simply traditional training aids (e.g., paper, pencil, newsprint). When leading a training session on individual goal setting, consider having members use multi-colored finger paints or markers, along with traditional pens and newsprint, to express personal goals. Ideally, allow participants to choose among several modes of expression to reach the same training outcomes.

**Toys rechannel doodling habits.** Provide alternatives to common learning environment habits such as pencil-sketching and doodling which hinder participant attention in a training session. Hands-on training toys are quiet alternatives to the distracting noise produced by table tapping pens or bubble gum poppings. At the start of your session, encourage participants to occupy their hands with silent, proactive playthings while they focus their eyes and ears on the training topic. Before you know it, participants will be designing creative works of art while they remain engaged in the training session.

**Toys serve as rewards, reminders, and incentives.** Pass out training toys to participants to reward them for their involvement and their work during the session. Give a participant a stress ball used during the training session to provide a subtle reminder of accomplishments at the session; encourage the individual to

keep the stress ball in a visible place, such as at his/her desk or a regular meeting site. In addition, training toys can be effective incentives during (e.g., to reward prompt returns from session breaks) or after a training session (e.g., to help collect post-training evaluation forms).

Training toys can make a huge difference in energizing your training sessions. When you bring fun and creativity into the training environment, your members not only will stay engaged in the sessions but also will enjoy themselves!



### **Activity: Values Clarification with Play-Doh**

*Here is an activity you can use that helps members focus and establish program year goals around what's most important at their service sites.*

#### **Purposes:**

To have members identify and apply core values that represent their service sites. To have members create an action plan incorporating their site's values into their service.

#### **Supplies needed:**

Play-doh (at least one two-ounce can per participant in varied colors)

#### **Instructions:**

Have members think individually for 2–3 minutes about how they may represent their individual service sites through symbols they create out of play-doh. Give them 5–10 minutes to develop these play-doh images.

Have individual members share their symbols in a short three-minute presentation to the large group. Let them know that in their report, they should discuss why they chose the symbols and how the symbol represents at least three core values that are representative of their service site.

Facilitate a large group discussion about how members can apply the core values they shared. Have members identify similarities and differences within the program. Have them develop individual goals that incorporate their site's core values into measurable daily and long-term behaviors in their sites.

#### **Variation:**

In programs where members share the same site, have participants create symbols of their perspectives on service. This can be a useful teambuilding activity that helps bring diverse perspectives into one forum.

In addition to play-doh, try multi-colored pipe cleaners, string, or necklace beads.



<sup>1</sup> Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books