

DIVINE COMPASSION AND DEVELOPMENTAL PLAY: INTEGRATING QURANIC PRINCIPLES IN INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This concept paper explores the integration of Islamic ethical principles with play-based interventions for children with special needs, positioning faith-informed pedagogy as a vital resource for inclusive education. Grounded in Quranic values of mercy (rahmah), dignity (karamah), inclusion (shumuliyyah), patience (sabr), justice ('adl), moral cultivation (ta'dib), and consultation (shura), the paper highlights how these principles can guide educators and parents in fostering holistic development in cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects through developmentally appropriate and spiritually enriched play activities. Drawing on both classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary educational research, the proposed framework emphasizes scaffolded learning experiences that respect each child's dignity, autonomy, and individual learning pace. Practical strategies include adapting play materials to accommodate diverse abilities, embedding moral and spiritual narratives into play scenarios, and cultivating supportive peer interactions to reduce stigma. The approach also underscores the role of the home, school, and community in creating a consistent environment of acceptance and empathy. By bridging Quranic values with evidence-informed pedagogical methods, the paper contributes to global conversations on culturally responsive special education. It advocates for an education model where compassion is not merely an ethical aspiration but a structured, actionable component of intervention design, offering a model adaptable to various cultural contexts beyond the Muslim world.

Keywords: Quranic principles, inclusive education, play-based learning, special needs intervention, culturally responsive pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Children with special needs often encounter layered challenges within both secular and religious educational contexts. These include limited access to differentiated learning environments, persistent social stigma, and a scarcity of pedagogical tools that accommodate their diverse developmental needs. In Islamic educational settings, such challenges are further compounded by the absence of practical models that harmonize inclusive teaching with the ethical and spiritual imperatives of the Quran and Sunnah. The Quran offers a profound moral and pedagogical foundation in the field of special needs, emphasizing mercy (rahmah), dignity (karamah), inclusion (shumuliyyah), patience (sabr), justice ('adl), moral cultivation (ta'dib) and consultation (shura), the values that call for compassionate engagement with all learners.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified these principles in his interactions with individuals of varying abilities, demonstrating empathy, patience, and a commitment to nurturing their holistic well-being. Despite this rich legacy, contemporary interventions for children with special needs rarely incorporate Quranic ethics in a structured, developmentally appropriate manner, particularly in the realm of play-based learning.

Play is a vital modality for cognitive, emotional, and social development. For children with special needs, it serves not only as a therapeutic tool but also as a means of expressing agency, building relationships, and experiencing joy. Research in developmental psychology affirms that play enhances neural connectivity, supports executive functioning, and fosters emotional regulation that are especially critical for children with learning differences, sensory sensitivities, or behavioral challenges. Moreover, play provides a non-threatening context for practicing communication, problem-solving, and adaptive skills, making it an ideal platform for inclusive learning.

In faith-based contexts, play can also serve as a bridge between spiritual values and developmental needs. When guided by Quranic principles and prophetic ethics, developmental play evolves into a spiritually enriching practice that affirms the child's innate disposition (*fitrah*), nurtures their sense of belonging, and cultivates virtues such as patience (*sabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), and empathy (*ta'awun*). It transforms the learning environment into a sanctuary of healing and growth, where every child is seen not through the lens of deficit, but through the lens of divine compassion and potential.

This paper responds to the urgent need for faith-informed educational models by proposing a framework that integrates Quranic principles into developmental play interventions for children with special needs. It aims to equip educators, caregivers, and parents with spiritually resonant strategies that support cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development. By bridging Islamic ethics with inclusive pedagogy through play-based intervention, it contributes to a more compassionate and holistic vision of special needs education that is both theologically grounded and pedagogically sound.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Play is widely recognized as a cornerstone of early childhood development, with extensive research affirming its role in enhancing cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. For children with special needs, play assumes even greater significance due to its therapeutic, adaptive, and inclusive potential. Structured play interventions have been shown to improve attention span, memory, and fine motor coordination in children with developmental delays (Lifter et al., 2011). Sensory-rich play environments also support neuroplasticity and executive functioning, offering children opportunities to engage with their surroundings in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways.

Importantly, play also supports the development of agency and identity. It allows children to explore roles, make choices, and assert their preferences, critical for developing autonomy and self-worth, especially in contexts where they may otherwise feel marginalized. Despite its proven benefits, play is often undervalued or underutilized in special needs education, particularly in religious or culturally conservative settings where academic rigor may be prioritized over experiential learning.

Islamic educational philosophy, rooted in the Quran and Sunnah, offers a rich ethical framework that supports inclusive and compassionate engagement with all learners. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes mercy (rahmah) and dignity (karamah) as divine attributes and human rights (Quran 17:70). These values call for educational practices that honor each child's unique potential and protect their emotional well-being. The Quranic view of the human being as a composite of body, mind, and soul (Quran 95:4; 30:30) aligns with developmental models that advocate for integrated growth across cognitive, emotional, and spiritual domains which can be done through play-based interventions.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) modeled inclusive pedagogy through his gentle interactions with children, his use of storytelling, humor, and tactile engagement, and his respect for individual differences. His approach reflects the essence of play-based learning relational, joyful, and developmentally attuned. Despite this rich legacy, contemporary interventions for children with special needs rarely incorporate Quranic ethics in a structured, developmentally appropriate manner.

While secular models of play-based intervention are well-documented, the integration of Quranic ethics into such frameworks remains an emerging field. A few pioneering studies and conceptual models offer promising directions. Emerging research in Islamic psychology suggests that play infused with spiritual values such as gratitude, trust in Allah (tawakkul), and empathy (ta'awun) which can enhance emotional resilience and moral development (Rothman & Coyle, 2018). Scholars like Al-Attas and Al-Ghazali emphasize the importance of nurturing the fitrah through experiential and ethical learning. Play, when guided by Quranic principles, becomes a tool for cultivating virtues and affirming divine purpose.

Faith-based play which can be embedded in play-based interventions models can also help bridge the gap between therapeutic goals and cultural or religious sensitivities, making interventions more acceptable and effective in Muslim communities. However, there remains a significant gap in operationalizing Quranic values within structured play interventions for children with special needs. Grounded in faith and child development, these values honor each child's dignity, support their growth in every way, and reflect the caring spirit of Islamic education.

QURANIC AND PROPHETIC FOUNDATIONS

Islam offers a profound ethical and pedagogical framework that affirms the dignity, worth, and developmental potential of every human being, regardless of ability. The Quran and Sunnah are replete with principles that call for mercy (rahmah), dignity (karamah), inclusion (shumuliyyah), patience (sabr), justice ('adl), moral cultivation (ta'dib) and consultation (shura) values that resonate deeply with the ethos of special needs education. When applied to play-based interventions, these intervention approaches provide not only spiritual legitimacy but also practical guidance for nurturing children in ways that honor their innate disposition (fitrah) and support their holistic growth.

- The Quranic Foundations of Inclusive Play

This spiritual foundation begins with Surah Al-Alaq (96:1–5), which opens with the divine command to “Read in the name of your Lord who created,” underscoring the universal right to education and the sacred nature of learning. For children with special needs, play serves as a gateway to this right. It offers an accessible and joyful approach to learning that supports their developmental needs through exploration and expression. It affirms that learning is not limited to formal instruction but can thrive through imaginative activities, sensory engagement, and meaningful relationships.

Building on this, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:153) encourages believers to “Seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient.” This verse speaks directly to the emotional and spiritual resilience required of caregivers and educators supporting children with diverse needs. It also affirms that divine companionship is present during times of struggle, offering a source of strength and comfort that can be deeply empowering for families facing developmental challenges.

The Quran’s commitment to inclusion is further emphasized in Surah An-Nur (24:61), which explicitly states, “There is no restriction on the blind, or the disabled...”, a powerful affirmation of accessibility. This verse invites educators to design learning environments where children with special needs are not merely accommodated but actively engaged. When guided by Quranic ethics, play-based interventions allow these children to participate meaningfully, build relationships, and be valued within the learning community. Inclusion, in this light, becomes not just a policy but a spiritual imperative.

Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13) adds another layer of meaning by reminding us that “Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous.” Here, spiritual worth is decoupled from physical or cognitive ability and linked instead to piety and character. The verse also celebrates diversity: “We created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another.” Inclusive play fosters this mutual recognition, allowing children of all abilities to interact, collaborate, and learn from one another in ways that reflect the Quranic vision of community and interdependence.

Surah An-Nahl (16:78) deepens this perspective: ‘And Allah brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers while you knew nothing, and He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts so that you might be grateful.’ This verse affirms that sensory and cognitive development are divine gifts. Strategies that incorporate play, particularly those involving sensory and motor engagement, help activate these faculties and support children with special needs in developing their abilities in harmony with their natural potential. It also promotes gratitude as an educational outcome, encouraging children to value their strengths and relationships through joyful experiences.

Finally, Surah Al-Rum (30:30) affirms that “Every child is born with a pure and unique natural disposition (fitrah).” Play honors this fitrah by offering non-coercive, joyful learning experiences that align with each child’s developmental stage. It allows children to explore, imagine, and grow in ways that are spiritually and emotionally nourishing, reinforcing the Islamic view that education must be tailored to the learner’s nature and needs.

- Prophetic Practice and the Ethics of Play

The Sunnah further strengthens these values. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ showed deep compassion and respect in his interactions with individuals of varying abilities. His encounter with Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum, a blind companion, resulted in the revelation of Surah Abasa, which offers a lasting lesson in humility, inclusion, and the importance of recognizing the value of every person. His conduct consistently reflected empathy, a commitment to accessibility, and a focus on inner character rather than outward appearance.

Another frequently cited verse, “Allah does not burden a soul more than it can bear” (Quran 2:286), offers comfort and spiritual grounding for families navigating the complexities of raising children with special needs. It affirms that every challenge is met with divine wisdom and proportion, encouraging caregivers to approach their roles with hope and trust. "The Prophet ﷺ also highlighted the developmental significance of play. In a hadith narrated by Ahmad and Abu Dawud, he said: 'Play with your child for seven years, educate him for seven years, and befriend him for seven years.' This guidance affirms that play is a crucial stage in early childhood, serving as a means for nurturing love, shaping moral character, and strengthening emotional connections. His personal example of crawling and allowing his grandchild to ride on his back during play illustrates that emotional and social engagement through play is not only acceptable but also deeply rooted in the prophetic tradition.

Moreover, the hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim reminds us: “Indeed, Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but He looks at your hearts and deeds.” This encourages educators and caregivers to value the inner potential of children with special needs, beyond academic metrics. Play enables these children to express their values, cultivate good character, and participate in acts of kindness and creativity, contributing meaningfully to their communities and spiritual development.

In sum, Quranic and Prophetic teachings do not merely permit play-based interventions, but they elevate them. When rooted in divine compassion and inclusive ethics, play becomes a sacred tool for nurturing the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth of children with special needs. It transforms education into an act of worship, care into a form of mercy, and learning into a journey toward wholeness.

PLAY-BASED INTERVENTION: WHY IT MATTERS

Play is a powerful medium for learning, especially for children who face developmental challenges. It strengthens cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and social interaction, which are areas frequently affected in children with special needs. Through play, children learn to solve problems, express emotions, negotiate roles, and build relationships. These experiences are not only therapeutic but foundational to lifelong learning and well-being. For children with special needs, play offers a safe, adaptive, and joyful space where they can explore their environment, communicate their needs, and develop a sense of agency. From an Islamic perspective, play is not merely recreational, it is a form of nurturing (tarbiyyah), mercy (rahmah), and moral cultivation (ta'dib), aligned with the child's natural disposition (fitrah). The Quran affirms that every child is born with a pure and unique nature (Surah Al-Rum 30:30) and play honors this divine blueprint by allowing children to learn in ways that are developmentally attuned and spiritually resonant.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself modeled playful engagement with children, affirming that joy, affection, and relational bonding are integral to early development. His example teaches us that play is not a distraction from learning but it is a sacred form of connection and growth.

Integrating Quranic principles into play-based interventions allows educators and parents to foster trust, attachment, and spiritual connection. It transforms play into a spiritually meaningful experience, where children can embody values such as *sabr* (patience), *shukr* (gratitude), *ta'awun* (cooperation), and *ihsan* (excellence) through interactive and imaginative activities. For example, cooperative games can teach empathy and teamwork, storytelling can convey moral lessons, and sensory play can nurture mindfulness and gratitude for Allah's creation.

Moreover, play-based interventions grounded in Islamic ethics offer a culturally and religiously congruent framework for inclusive education. They affirm the child's dignity (*karamah*), protect their emotional well-being, and support their spiritual identity. This is especially vital in Muslim communities, where therapeutic models must align with religious values to be fully embraced and sustained. By embedding Quranic principles into play, educators and caregivers create environments that are not only developmentally appropriate but also spiritually nourishing spaces where children with special needs are seen, heard, and valued as complete human beings.

Viewed from this perspective, play serves as a bridge between developmental science and divine compassion. It supports children's growth in cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual areas, while providing families and educators with a comprehensive tool for inclusive and faith-informed intervention. Rather than being a secondary or optional method, learning through play that is guided by Quranic ethics offers a primary pathway for nurturing the full potential of every child.

PLAY MODALITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

To translate this theoretical framework into practical application, it is essential to highlight specific play modalities, their corresponding developmental benefit, and their alignment with Quranic principles. The following table illustrates how various types of play can be intentionally designed to support children with diverse abilities while embedding Islamic values into their daily learning experiences.

As Table 1 demonstrates, play becomes more than an activity for enjoyment or therapy but serves as a bridge between developmental goals and Quranic ethics, allowing inclusive education to be both pedagogically effective and spiritually meaningful.

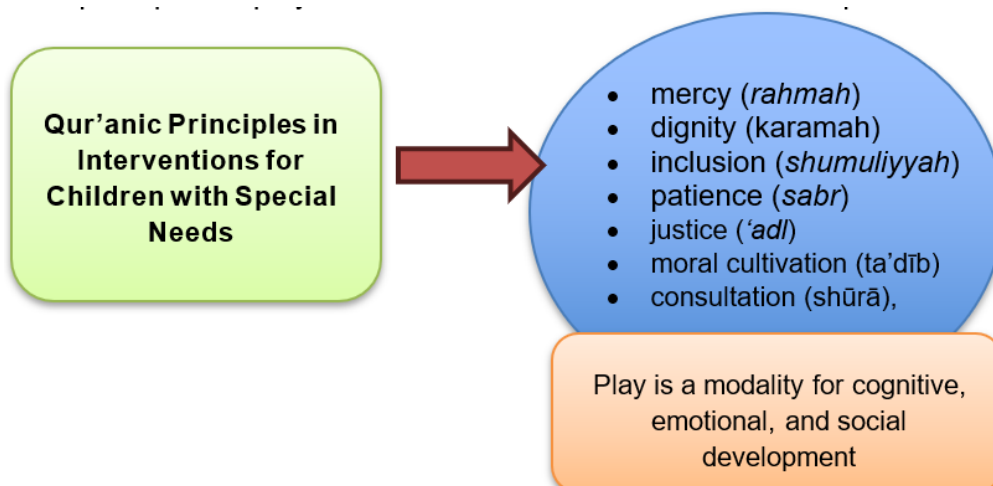
Table 1: Play Modalities, Developmental Benefits, and Quranic Alignment

Types of Play	Developmental Benefit	Qur'anic Alignment
Role Play	Builds empathy, problem-solving, communication, and moral reasoning (Lifter, et al., 2011; Al-Attas, 1999)	<i>Ta'dib</i> (moral cultivation); Prophet ﷺ used stories and parables to guide values
Sensory Play	Enhances self-regulation, fine motor skills, and mindfulness (Ray et al., 2001)	<i>Shukr</i> (gratitude) for Allah's creation (An-Nahl 16:78)
Cooperative Games	Promotes teamwork, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and inclusion (Lifter et al., 2011)	<i>Ta'āwun</i> (cooperation) "Help one another in righteousness" (Al-Ma'idah 5:2)
Storytelling	Strengthens language, imagination, and memory; conveys moral lessons (Rothman & Coyle, 2018)	Prophet ﷺ used narrative to teach <i>sidq</i> (truthfulness), <i>sabr</i> (patience), and <i>rahmah</i> (compassion and mercy)
Unstructured Play	Encourages creativity, autonomy, and exploration of interests (Piaget, 1962)	Affirms <i>fitrah</i> (natural disposition) (Ar-Rum 30:30)
Structured Play	Provides scaffolding, predictability, and targeted skill development (Lifter et al., 2011)	Reflects <i>'adl</i> (justice); ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all

• **Quranic Foundations for Inclusive Play-Based Education**

The integration of Quranic values into inclusive education offers a spiritually grounded framework for supporting children with special needs. Central to this approach are the principles of mercy (*rahmah*), dignity (*karamah*), inclusion (*shumuliyah*), patience (*sabr*), justice (*'adl*), moral cultivation (*ta'dib*) and consultation (*shura*) which collectively shape a pedagogy of compassion, equity, and respect. When embedded within play-based interventions, these values elevate educational practice beyond developmental utility, transforming it into an ethical and holistic endeavor. Figure 1 explains the Quranic value of *rahmah*, *karamah*, and *'adl*, and how they relate to play-based interventions for children with special needs.

Figure 1: Quranic principles in play-based interventions for children with special needs



Rahmah, frequently invoked in the Quran through the divine attributes Ar-Rahman and Ar-Rahim, signifies profound compassion and care. In educational contexts, rahmah calls for empathetic engagement with learners, particularly those experiencing developmental or cognitive challenges. It encourages educators to cultivate emotionally safe environments where children are guided with patience and tenderness. Within play-based learning, rahmah is reflected in non-coercive activities that prioritize joy, emotional regulation, and relational trust, affirming that every child is worthy of love and support.

Karamah, as articulated in Surah Al-Isra (17:70), affirms the inherent dignity bestowed upon all human beings: “We have certainly honored the children of Adam.” This principle demands that children with special needs be recognized not for their limitations, but for their unique strengths and potential. Inclusive education rooted in karamah rejects deficit-based models and embraces pedagogies that honor individuality and agency. Play-based interventions aligned with karamah empower children to make choices, express themselves creatively, and experience success in ways that affirm their self-worth and spiritual value.

‘Adl, or justice, is a foundational Quranic imperative that calls for fairness, balance, and equity. In the realm of special needs education, ‘adl mandates equitable access to learning opportunities, differentiated instruction, and the dismantling of systemic barriers. It insists that every child be given the tools and support necessary to thrive. In play-based settings, ‘adl ensures that activities are inclusive, adaptive, and participatory where no child is marginalized, and every learner contributes meaningfully to the learning community.

Together, these values form a sacred triad that reimagines inclusive education as a spiritually anchored practice. They guide educators to create environments where children with special needs are not only accommodated, but cherished, where learning is infused with mercy, dignity, and justice, and where every child is seen as a bearer of divine trust (amanah) and potential. This Quranic framework offers a compelling foundation for Islamic-inclusive pedagogy, particularly in contexts seeking to harmonize faith, developmental psychology, and educational equity through play-based interventions.

- **Practical Applications for Educators and Parents**

Play is a powerful medium for learning, particularly for children who experience developmental challenges. It promotes cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and social interaction, which are often affected in children with special needs. Through play, children learn to solve problems, express emotions, negotiate roles, and build relationships. These experiences are not only therapeutic but foundational to lifelong learning and well-being. For children with special needs, play offers a safe, adaptive, and joyful space where they can explore their environment, communicate their needs, and develop a sense of agency.

From an Islamic perspective, play is not merely recreational it is a form of tarbiyyah (nurturing), rahmah (mercy), and ta’dib (moral cultivation), aligned with the child’s fitrah (natural disposition). The Quran affirms that every child is born with a pure and unique nature (Surah Al-Rum 30:30), and play honours this divine blueprint by allowing children to learn in ways that are developmentally attuned and spiritually resonant. The Prophet Muhammad SAW himself modelled playful engagement with children, affirming that joy, affection, and relational bonding are integral to early development. His example teaches us that play is not a distraction from learning, but it is a sacred form of connection and growth.

Integrating Quranic principles into play-based interventions allows educators and parents to foster trust, attachment, and spiritual connection. It transforms play into a spiritually meaningful experience, where children can embody values such as *sabr* (patience), *shukr* (gratitude), *ta'awun* (cooperation), and *ihsan* (excellence) through interactive and imaginative activities. For example, cooperative games can teach empathy and teamwork, storytelling can convey moral lessons, and sensory play can nurture mindfulness and gratitude for Allah's creation. Moreover, play-based interventions grounded in Islamic ethics offer a culturally and religiously congruent framework for inclusive education. They affirm the child's dignity (*karamah*), protect their emotional well-being, and support their spiritual identity. This is especially vital in Muslim communities, where therapeutic models must align with religious values to be fully embraced and sustained. When educators and caregivers incorporate Quranic principles into play, they create environments that are developmentally appropriate and spiritually enriching. These are spaces where children with special needs are recognized, listened to, and appreciated as whole human beings.

Inclusive education, when guided by Quranic ethics, finds its most natural expression in play. When play-based interventions are adapted to the needs of children with diverse abilities, they become more than just therapeutic tools; they are transformed into inclusive pathways to belonging, dignity, and growth. Rooted in *rahmah* (compassion and mercy), *karamah* (dignity), and *'adil* (justice), such interventions enable children with special needs to participate meaningfully alongside their peers while developing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual strengths. By embedding Quranic values into practical strategies like cooperative games, sensory play, or storytelling, educators and parents can cultivate environments where intervention and inclusion are intertwined, and where every child is recognized as a bearer of divine potential.

In this light, play becomes a bridge between developmental science and divine . It enables children to flourish cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually, while offering families and educators a holistic tool for inclusive and faith-informed intervention. "Play based learning that is guided by Quranic ethics is not a secondary or optional strategy. It is a central pathway for nurturing the full potential of every child."

CONCLUSION

Integrating Quranic principles with play-based interventions offers a spiritually resonant and developmentally sound framework for supporting children with special needs. This approach not only nurtures cognitive, emotional, and social growth but also affirms each child's place within the *ummah* as honoured, capable, and spiritually valuable. It transforms education into an act of *rahmah* (mercy), *karamah* (dignity), and *'adl* (justice), aligning pedagogical practice with the ethical imperatives of the Quran and Sunnah.

For educators, this framework calls for intentional design of inclusive learning environments that reflect both developmental best practices and Islamic ethics. Activities should be differentiated to accommodate diverse abilities, with play used as a primary modality for engagement, expression, and moral formation. Educators are encouraged to incorporate storytelling, cooperative games, sensory exploration, and imaginative play that embody Quranic values such as patience (*sabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), and empathy (*ta'awun*). Classroom routines should be infused with compassion, flexibility, and respect for each child's *fitrah*, allowing learners to flourish in ways that are both pedagogically effective and spiritually meaningful.

For parents and caregivers, the framework offers practical guidance rooted in prophetic wisdom. Engaging in play with children, especially those with developmental challenges, is not only permissible but encouraged as a form of tarbiyyah (nurturing). Simple acts of shared joy, storytelling, and physical play can foster emotional bonding, spiritual connection, and behavioral growth. Parents are advised to approach their children with gentleness, patience, and trust in Allah's wisdom, recognizing that every child is a unique amanah (trust) with divine potential. Home environments should be structured to support sensory and emotional needs, while also cultivating virtues through everyday interactions.

Ultimately, this concept paper calls for a fundamental shift in special needs education, one that connects developmental science with divine compassion. By grounding educational practices in Quranic ethics and the example of the Prophet, educators and parents can create inclusive environments that reflect the true essence of Islam, a faith built on mercy, dignity, and hope. In doing so, they support the holistic development of children with special needs and contribute to an educational landscape that is more compassionate and spiritually enriched through play-based interventions.

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