



## Why This Toy?

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We talked to Dr. Toy (Stevanne Auerbach) about the value of toys and what to think about before selecting a toy for your child.

### Why are toys important for young children?

Play is essential to babies, toddlers, preschool, and school-age children. Children need plenty of opportunities to play with a variety of good toys and materials and use their imagination. We need to respect and understand more about the world of play and its great value for all babies and children (and adults as well). Toys are an important part of every child's life. It is a wonderful feeling to give the right toy. Choosing the right toy from among the many possibilities can be very rewarding to both adult and child.

### What questions should parents ask before selecting a toy or children's product?

1. Is the toy/product safe? Are there any potential hazards? Is the product too small? Any sharp edges or loose ties? Is it nontoxic? Will it take rough treatment? Can it be easily cleaned? Does it meet Consumer Product Safety Standards? Is there a warranty?
2. Is the product fun? A toy or child's product is supposed to entertain the child. It should amuse, delight, excite, be enjoyable, and provide skills' practice.
3. Is the product appropriate? Is this toy or product significant now? Does the toy fit the child's age, skills, and abilities? Will it hold interest? Will the child be happy using the product?
4. Is the product well-designed? Is it easy to use? Does it look good? feel good?
5. Is the product versatile? Is there more than one use for it?
6. Is the product durable? Will it be something that will last a long time? Children play hard and subject their toys to a lot of wear.
7. Is the product enticing and engaging to the child? Does it offer an opportunity for fun, to learn, and to think?
8. Will the product help the child expand creativity? With the right products, the child can expand imagination in art, crafts, hobbies, language, reading, music, movement, and drama.
9. Will the toy frustrate or challenge the child? Will the child know how to use the product? Or will it be too difficult to use without adult assistance? Does the toy offer something new to learn, to practice, or to try?

10. Does the product match the package and the package match the product? If the toy does not match ads or packaging, it can be disappointing. Is age-grading clear? Is the item in the store like the product shown in the print media or TV advertisement?

11. Will the toy help nurture childhood? Does the product help the child express emotions, experience concern for others, and practice positive social interaction? Does it provide value to childhood? Or are there any violent, sexist, or other negative aspects to product?

12. What will the toy teach? Does it help expand positive self-esteem, values, understanding, and cultural awareness? Does it offer practice in skill building? eye/hand coordination? fine and large motor skills? communication? Does it educate the child about the environment? the community? the world? history? science and/or technology? other skills?

13. Can the product be cleaned and reused? If it is not washable, can it be cleaned in a practical way?

14. Is the toy affordable?

15. Does the price match the value received?

## What are special considerations when thinking about electronic toys and games?

Sometimes it seems that books have lost their appeal to children (and to adults), but this may be simply competition between traditional forms of learning and new electronics that appear compelling. Children need to read from books, hear stories read aloud, and also draw, write creatively, and play with many different kinds of products (paper, clay, art supplies, puzzles, blocks, dolls, soft toys like puppets, musical instruments, and many others) for optimal learning and for their own enjoyment. Electronic toys, regardless of how many bells and whistles and gadgetry, should not ever replace the experience of reading a book, enjoying a story, playing with real objects, and creating with their hands, whether finger painting or building a tower of blocks. Too often, electronics take over our attention and we forget to interact with a real person or take the time for conversation. I do think electronics are excellent tools for rapid exchanges about making plans, or quickly sending information, and even playing good games for brief periods of time. But electronics and high-tech toys cannot replace much needed personal contact and real human interaction. An example of this is playing a cooperative board game and having fun together as a family, as contrasted to playing alone on a computer or electronic game device. Social interaction is what is most valuable for full human development and well-being.

## What are some different types of toys?

Select toys that offer a good balance and enrich children's skills and creative opportunities. Include products that offer open-ended play like blocks, physical play like balls, silly toys like jack in the box for its fun and surprise responses, and, of course, electronics that are in balance with nontech toys.

**Activity toys** develop coordination, improve small and large motor skills, and balance. Begin with balls and beanbags; add a tricycle, bike, wagon, or skates. A jump rope and a kite are great for outdoor fun. Always check whether your child is ready for the activity. Also, don't forget the valuable experiences of gardening, nature walks, and exploring.

**Creativity toys** stimulate self-expression. The child can create with crayons, finger-paints, watercolors, clay and craft sets. Children learn from following directions, a sequence of activities, and gain satisfaction in completing a project. Don't forget activities like making something new with a cardboard box to stimulate imagination, singing or listening to or making music, or trying other creative projects.

**Learning toys** contribute to the acquisition of knowledge. These toys include books, tapes, videos, software, CDs, puzzles, and board games. The child should read books, listen to music, solve puzzles, and play games. Take time to read a story or create a puppet show. Discuss programs watched on TV or a recent movie attended. You can also build together with blocks and varied construction toys, play board games, and solve puzzles.

## When a child has a preference for particular kinds of toys, is that something to encourage or should parents try to get their child to expand?

It's best to expose children to many alternatives so that they can appreciate many styles while forming their own preferences. Older children have a wide range of interests. They continue to enjoy play, but are able to handle more complexity—in games, projects, products, and activities. You will learn a lot if you listen to what children like and why. You may not agree, but understand the preferences as a sign of their own personality growth and emerging peer relationships that are exceedingly important as they mature.

## What are “open-ended” toys, and why are they important?

Open-ended toys and activities like blocks, puppets, dolls, and art supplies stimulate creativity, sense of humor, sense of discovery, wonder, reasoning, social development, and much more.

## What's the role of fun or joy in selecting toys, or should a parent always be thinking of "education"?

Being a fully developed person requires a good combination of thinking, common sense, and experiences. We must also experience a full range of emotions to be fully human. It would not be good to be lopsided to one degree or another. It's better if we can solve problems, make good choices based on character and values, and feel glad and proud about finding solutions. Certainly children need to solve problems, express their feelings, and spend time each day in playful activities. If we are only rational and don't allow ourselves to express feelings, we drastically reduce and diminish the full human experience of joy and discovery. The world of toys provides learning and fun, surprises and skills, emotional growth, experiences of all kinds, and much more. Enjoy smart play and smart toys for a lifetime. Toys, puzzles, and games are good for children—and seniors. Playtime is, after all, good for a lifetime. Turn off the TV and Turn on playtime for more fun, memorable, and meaningful family time.

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Stevanne Auerbach, PhD, is known as Dr. Toy and is the author of *Smart Play/Smart Toys* (published in 15 countries) and *Dr. Toy's Guide*, [www.drtoy.com](http://www.drtoy.com), a website that offers useful, timely guidance on toys for all ages and from around the world. Dr. Toy is a former teacher and administrator with the federal government and was founder/director of the San Francisco International Toy Museum. [drtoy@drtoy.com](mailto:drtoy@drtoy.com)

**Audience:** *Family*

**Age:** *Early Primary, Infant/Toddler, Kindergarten, Preschool*

**Topics:** *Other Topics, Play, Toys, Materials, Games*

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