



In our attempt to create a generation of children who are brilliant, talented over-achievers, it's easy to forget that the real work of children is play. It is through play, especially unstructured play, that they develop skills they will need throughout their lives such as sharing, taking turns, creativity and using their imagination. Through toys, children experiment, develop new skills, and experience a sense of accomplishment.

There are more toys to choose from than ever before, and it can be difficult to choose the perfect gift that a child will enjoy, that allows for creativity, and that is safe.

There's a general tendency to think that educational toys are somehow better than more "traditional" toys. However, "true toys" like blocks and dolls are encouraged because they allow for the creativity and imagination that many of today's "toys" don't permit due to their proscriptive nature. Think about the DVD-based board games which are the hot sellers and how they are simply entertainment that tests a player's knowledge of trivia and ability to watch movies. This is in contrast to the strategy of games that were most popular a generation ago like checkers, chess, jacks, hopscotch and backgammon. Also, playing together with your child might help build your relationship with her in fantastic ways.

Toys that promote physical activity such as jump ropes, bicycles, roller skates, and sports gear are all recommended, especially in the face of the obesity epidemic.

Children are most likely to appreciate and play with toys that are appropriate for their age and development. Toys that are designed for children younger than you intended might be too simplistic, might not be challenging enough, or may be seen as too baby-ish for older kids to hold their interest. On the other hand, toys that are for children older than your gift recipient might contain parts that present choking hazards, might be too complicated for them, or might rely on skills that the younger child simply doesn't possess yet.

Consider checking out the Consumer Product Safety Commission website at www.cpsc.gov.

They have consumer's guides for selecting suitable toys by age.

There are always safety concerns such as the risk of choking on small parts, strangulation from toys with long strings or cords, and falls from riding toys like wagons and skateboards. I don't even need to mention lead-based paint and magnets that are hazardous when ingested.

The Toy Manufacturers of America voluntary product standard that establishes safety requirements and tests but not all manufacturers belong to that organization. Furthermore, some of the tens of thousands of toys that are imported every year have failed some of our most basic safety standards.

As the gift-giving season draws upon us, let's remember that we will all have to live with the choices we make during this holiday season (reconsider that drum set); and that we would all do well to seek out "true toys" that depend on the children to bring to life. Even though play is traditionally the work of children, adults would probably do well to let themselves play a little more too.

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