

PLAY IT SAFE

Choose the Right Toy for Your Child

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(originally written by Karen DeBord)

Toys are an important part of a child's environment. Children can turn anything — cardboard boxes, pots and pans, magazines, fuzzy dandelions, and plain old dirt into creative playthings.

Children need toys to help them develop physically and mentally. And by carefully selecting the toys you buy, you can give children safe, fun “tools” to help them do their work of growing up.

What makes a “good” toy?

A good starting point for choosing a toy, is the child's age. Although all children develop at a different rate, there are some age-related guidelines that you can follow (see pages 2-6).

Also, consider the durability of the toy, the amount of time you think it will hold children's interest, the level of creativity or challenge, and whether children can find new uses for it as they develop new skills. Examples of multiple-use toys that grow with a child are blocks, puzzles and puppets.

Good toys for children are attractive, well-constructed, durable and safe. They are matched to children's abilities, good for children of different ages, and useful in various ways.

Too many toys at one time can overwhelm children and make it hard for them to choose something interesting.

Toys affect what children think and learn about themselves and their world. Carefully selected toys allow children to feel successful and powerful, while encouraging them to use their imagination.

When selecting toys and books that represent human images, ensure that children can relate to the image, but also include diversity in skin color, gender and ability.

Messages in books and stories also should be read before purchase. How are problems solved and by whom? Are stereotypes absent? Are images of various types of people provided in story collections? Is violence minimized?

Toy safety

Be cautious when you choose toys. Toys that are safe for very young children are well-made with no sharp parts, splinters or parts that will pinch.

They should be strong enough to hold a child's weight and painted with nontoxic, lead-free paint.

Non-electric, shatter-proof and easily cleaned toys are good selections for young children.

Make sure the toy fits the hand but will not fit into the mouth.

There are federal safety regulations for toys. The United States Consumer

Products Safety Commission (CPSC) has information about toys that are most often involved in child injury.

The government requires that electrical toys have no shock or thermal hazards, severely limits the amount of lead in toy paints, and prohibits toxic materials in toys for children of all ages.

For children younger than 3, the government requires toys to be unbreakable (able to withstand uses and abuses), with no small parts or pieces that could become lodged in the throat.

Infant rattles must be large enough not to become lodged in the throat and constructed so as not to separate into small pieces. For children younger than 8, the government prohibits electrically operated toys with heating elements and sharp edges or points on toys.

The CPSC can remove toys from the marketplace even for hazards not covered by the regulations. In addition, the Toy Manufacturer's Association has set up voluntary safety standards that most toy companies follow. These include:

- Age and safety labels on toys;
- Warning labels on crib gyms advising that they be removed from the crib when babies can get up on hands and knees (to prevent strangling);

- Recommendations that squeeze toys and teethingers be made large enough so as not to become lodged in an infant's throat;
- Safety hinges on toy chest lids so that the lid will stay open in any raised position and not fall unexpectedly on a child;
- Recommendations that strings on crib and playpen toys be no longer than 12 inches so that the cords cannot become wrapped around children's necks.

Many manufactured toys include suggested age levels on their packaging. These age levels take into consideration a child's age, physical size, skill level and safety concerns.

Keep in mind, however, that these are only guidelines. By knowing your child's capabilities, you can match toys to his or her skill level and also provide challenges as the child develops.

To select a suitable toy for children, parents can look for and read age and safety labels on toys, explain and/or show children how to use toys properly and safely, and keep toys intended for older children away from young children who can be injured.

Check all toys periodically for breakage and potential hazards — throw away or repair damaged or dangerous toys immediately.

Store toys safely. Teach children to put toys away so that the toys do not become tripping hazards, and check toy boxes and shelves for safety.

In selecting toys, keep in mind the safety of the toy and whether it is geared to the child's age and skill level.

For further information on safe toys, write to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission in Washington, D.C. 20207, or call the toll-free hotline: 800-638-CPSC.

Pointers for choosing toys

Birth to 6 months

Infants and young toddlers learn about the world through their senses. They are interested in the sight, sound, smell, texture and taste of things. Infants bat at, grasp, bang and drop their toys. Infants use their hands and eyes to play. A good choice is something that is bright and safe to hold that also can be hooked to the crib so it won't fall. Mobiles and "crib games" that attach safely to the sides of cribs and that are large enough to grasp without swallowing fit the category, as do soft toys and fabric books.

6 to 12 months

Older babies begin to move and crawl and are interested in toys that let them try out their new, large-muscle skills. These babies enjoy jumping in sling seats and grasping for brightly colored objects.

"Childproofing" is a must for children this age. Remove as many hazards as you can, such as sharp or breakable objects and poisons, so that children can explore freely without fear of being scolded. Children who are constantly being reprimanded may begin to feel incapable and unsafe; they will soon pull back rather than freely explore, and you will be exhausted from constant worry.

Playpens or play yards are too confining during this stage, although they may sometimes be necessary for safety reasons.

Infants of this age enjoy stacking and nesting toys. Brightly colored rings and blocks, measuring cups, and pots and pans fit this stacking and sorting need.

Generally safe toys

- ✓ Unbreakable, large-end rattles
- ✓ Squeak toys with molded-in noise makers
- ✓ Washable dolls and stuffed animals with bright, embroidered features
- ✓ Brightly colored objects hanging in view (mobiles, for instance), but out of reach, with cords less than 12 inches long
- ✓ Brightly colored cloth or rubber balls with textured surfaces to grasp
- ✓ Unbreakable cups and smooth objects that can be chewed

Potentially dangerous toys

- ✗ Rattles with ends smaller than 1-3/8 inches in diameter
- ✗ Toys with easily removable parts that are small enough to swallow or that are sharp
- ✗ Toys made with poisonous paint, or with cords more than 12 inches long
- ✗ Stuffed animals with glass or button eyes
- ✗ Balloons

Ages 1 and 2

Give a toddler an expensive toy and chances are more interest will be shown in the packaging and box. Toddlers enjoy crawling inside big boxes. At the other end of the size scale, smaller objects (but not smaller than 1-3/8 inches) are often favorites, because the child can now pick things up with thumb and forefinger.

Toddlers like balls, dolls, plastic figures and toys with wheels. Push toys (toy carts, mowers, strollers) are more entertaining than pull toys, because the child can see the object while it moves and practice walking while pushing.

Near the end of the second year, a child can usually handle a big crayon or pencil and may enjoy "drawing." Praise your toddler's efforts and encourage him/her to create more "masterpieces" (as long as they're not on the walls).

Toddlers also enjoy shape sorters, wind-up radios and large climbing toys.

Generally safe toys

- ✓ Blocks with rounded corners
- ✓ Push-pull toys
- ✓ Books with cloth or stiff, pasteboard pages
- ✓ Non-glass mirrors
- ✓ Take-apart toys with large pieces
- ✓ Shape sorters

Potentially dangerous toys

- ✗ Same as for "Birth to 12 months" category, plus toys for older children that are within the toddler's reach
- ✗ Toys with strings more than 12 inches long
- ✗ Balloons

Ages 2 and 3

Preschool children like learning with their hands. At 2 and 3 years of age, a child's eye-hand coordination is better, and he or she will like building towns and towers with blocks. Puzzles, large beads, pegboard and lotto games help develop skills that help later in reading and writing. Children this age also enjoy drawing or painting on a variety of surfaces such as textured papers, sidewalks or fabric.

Preschoolers are learning to mimic adult behavior. They play house, teacher and firefighter for hours. Provide girls and boys with plenty of dress-up clothes, hats, bags and shoes — and a tall mirror so they can watch themselves act the parts of both real and imaginary people.

Books are always a safe bet for children from an early age. Children who are read to become better readers. Younger children need books that have simple stories with repetition and clear, whole, realistic pictures. Choose books that both you and your children will enjoy. As you read, stop and talk with your children about the ideas in the

books; relate these ideas to their real-life experiences.

Kiddie cars, tricycles and other riding toys are favorites (there should always be adult supervision). Small cars and trucks are popular toys. Building toys are interesting, especially those with many possibilities like large wooden blocks (sanded wooden scraps are just as satisfactory), large-piece puzzles and interlocking blocks.

Soft stuffed animals, dolls, kitchen sets and tapes of children's music are also good items.

Preschool children are developing simple gross motor skills and need space to use large balls to roll and throw; wagons to pull; ramps, ladders and steps to climb up; large bats and rackets to swing; and tricycles to ride.

Generally safe toys

- ✓ Peg boards with large pieces
- ✓ Wooden animals
- ✓ Large crayons
- ✓ Low rocking horse
- ✓ Dustless chalk and chalkboard
- ✓ Simple musical instruments
- ✓ Simple jigsaw puzzles with large pieces
- ✓ Blocks with numbers and letters
- ✓ Toys that aid color, size and shape identification
- ✓ Sturdy cars and riding toys

Potentially dangerous toys

- ✗ Toys made with sharp edges or easily breakable material
- ✗ Toys with small removable parts or poisonous paints
- ✗ Marbles, beads and coins
- ✗ Electrical toys
- ✗ Metal toys with unfinished slots, holes or edges that can cut
- ✗ Tricycles with seats more than 12 inches high
- ✗ Riding toys used in hilly areas or inclined driveways
- ✗ Balloons

Ages 4 to 5

Small-muscle coordination develops rapidly during this period. Children this age can manage toys like beads (to be strung on a string), and they can use scissors more accurately.

Nonviolent action figures encourage creativity without encouraging violent play. Small bicycles with training wheels and lower seats encourage large motor development.

Generally safe toys

- ✓ Those mentioned in 2-3 year category
- ✓ Toy telephones
- ✓ Unbreakable kitchen utensil sets
- ✓ Dolls with wrap-around clothing
- ✓ Construction sets with large pieces that connect easily
- ✓ Rugged, key-wound or friction-operated toys
- ✓ Blunt scissors
- ✓ Lacing cards
- ✓ Simple card and board games
- ✓ Non-electrical trains
- ✓ Toys with small parts that you have carefully examined for safety
- ✓ Tricycles with low-slung seats, used off roadways
- ✓ Pail and shovel
- ✓ Building blocks
- ✓ More advanced construction sets
- ✓ Cut-out paper dolls, hand and finger puppets
- ✓ Modeling clay
- ✓ Paints and paint books
- ✓ Non-electrical trains, battery-operated toys
- ✓ Kites
- ✓ Stencils, activity books, books with words and colorful pictures
- ✓ Simple musical instruments
- ✓ Play tents
- ✓ Tape recorder
- ✓ Small sports equipment
- ✓ Bicycle with 20-inch wheels and training wheels for 4- to 7-year-olds. *(Note: children should wear bike helmets.)*

Potentially dangerous toys

- ✘ Shooting toys that endanger eyes
- ✘ Lawn darts
- ✘ Riding toys in hilly areas or inclined driveways
- ✘ Tricycles ridden without supervision
- ✘ Broken toys
- ✘ Poisonous or oil-based paint sets
- ✘ Flammable or oversized costumes
- ✘ Fireworks of any kind
- ✘ Kites made of aluminized polyester film — this material conducts electricity
- ✘ Electrical toys (unless battery operated)
- ✘ Shooting toys and darts with pointed tips
- ✘ Poorly balanced tricycles or wagons
- ✘ Poorly maintained bicycle, or a bicycle ridden without supervision
- ✘ Bicycle used on roadways
- ✘ Bicycle that is too large for child
- ✘ Bicycle used without a helmet

Ages 5 to 7

Large-muscle skills are improving, as is a readiness to start group activities and be with friends of the same age. By ages 5 to 7, a child can often manage a bicycle with training wheels, small balls (baseball or tennis ball sized) and large ones. Games, puzzles, books, musical toys and art supplies are popular.

Generally safe toys

- ✓ Kites
- ✓ Battery-powered electrical toys with Underwriters Laboratory (UL) approval
- ✓ Puppets and puppet theater
- ✓ Jigsaw puzzles (50 to 100 pieces)
- ✓ Games requiring some reading
- ✓ Well-constructed, lightweight tool sets
- ✓ Dolls and doll equipment

- ✓ Sets demonstrating simple principles of science (magnets and magnifiers, etc.)
- ✓ Equipment for playing bank, store, filling station, etc.
- ✓ Hobby starter sets (aquarium, rock collection)
- ✓ Stencils
- ✓ Bicycle with 24-inch wheels for 7 to 10 year olds (*Note: Children should wear bike helmets*)

Potentially dangerous toys

- ✘ Kites made of aluminized polyester film (this material conducts electricity)
- ✘ Poorly made sports equipment
- ✘ Shooting toys and toys with loud noises (cap guns, etc.)
- ✘ Fireworks of any kind
- ✘ Electrical toys run on household current
- ✘ Lawn darts
- ✘ Broken toys
- ✘ Bikes or skateboards without helmets

Ages 8 to adolescence

School-age children enjoy shared activities and group play. They are beginning to understand rules, so playing games becomes more meaningful. Through board games, they learn math concepts and problem-solving skills. For the older child, playtime is a time to relax and just have fun away from school. Select toys and games that are challenging but are also just for fun. Children this age need a variety of toys, from dolls, trains, arts and crafts to board games and science toys.

Children this age have interests in arts, crafts, building and science. School-age children also love activities that lead to “real products,” such as pieces of jewelry, stenciled or painted

T-shirts or book bags made with their own creative efforts.

Dramatic props can be bought or found at second-hand markets and used for real performances. One striking trait of school-age children is their increased physical coordination and their interest in developing athletic skills. They need bikes, balls, bats, rackets and jump ropes that they can use in “real” games.

Make-believe is fun. Puppet costumes and silly stories are entertaining. By age 8, science and magic will challenge thinking. Hula hoops and skates will challenge large motor skills.

Generally safe toys

- ✓ Electrical toys with UL approval used on household current only after you have explained to your child how he/she should use the toy and how to use electrical plugs and outlets
- ✓ Bicycle with 26-inch wheels for kids older than 10 (*Note: All children should wear bike helmets*)
- ✓ Other sidewalk vehicles, skates, skateboards, etc. (*Note: Children should wear appropriate helmets, knee and elbow guards*)
- ✓ Well-constructed sports equipment
- ✓ Models (car, airplane, etc.) that children can put together
- ✓ Chemistry and other science kits
- ✓ Hobby and arts-and-crafts kits and materials, and board games
- ✓ Some projectile toys (for example, suction-cup-type dart guns)

Potentially dangerous toys

- ✘ Lawn darts
- ✘ Fireworks of any kind
- ✘ Sharp-edged tools
- ✘ Poorly constructed sports equipment
- ✘ B-B guns/air rifles, without gun safety instruction

