



The Power of Play



Are your children just playing all day in child care? Where's the learning in that? Many people think children need to do worksheets and drills to be ready for school. But most young children aren't ready for this type of learning. They wiggle too much to keep their attention on worksheets and quickly forget what they learn.

Young children are ready and eager to learn how the world works, and they learn through play. Research tells us that play is much more than fun and games. It gives young children the best start for success in school. Play is concrete learning gained by manipulating real objects: not only toys, but also items such as boxes, pans, sticks, and rocks. Play is also social: Older preschoolers are ready to play with each other. When children play together, they learn lifelong lessons in how to get along with other people.

We all know that toys are fun. But take a closer look to see how toys can help your child grow. When children play with toys, they are growing mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically.



When your child plays with blocks, she is gaining a foundation for math and science concepts. Exploring sizes and shapes will help in understanding geometry. Gravity, stability, weight, and balance are all explored. When your child plays with cars and trucks, she is learning science concepts of velocity and momentum. Putting together a puzzle helps children learn problem solving, shapes, sizes, and colors. Sand or water play helps develop problem solving skills, measuring, and fine motor skills. Pretend or imaginative play encourages problem solving, practicing adult roles, language skills, and social skills.

So the next time you find yourself thinking, "They're just playing," you might remind yourself, "They're just learning math, science, problem solving, and language skills!"

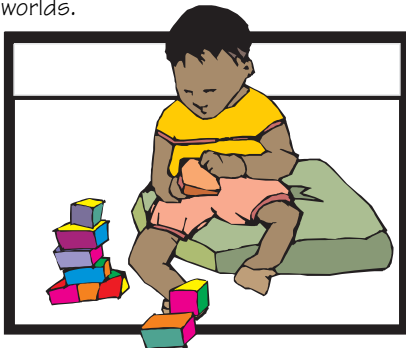
Top Ten Super Toys

You can help your children by providing them with toys that are good for their growth. What toys have the best play value for the money? The good news is some of the best toys are inexpensive or even free. These toys — and some everyday items you might not think of as toy — deliver play value for children across the ages.

1. THE EMPTY CARDBOARD BOX: Any size will do, but big enough to get inside is best. Those with lids are real winners.

2. BLANKETS: Make a tent, play peek-a-boo, have a pretend picnic.

3. BLOCKS: It doesn't matter if they are made of old milk cartons, cardboard, foam, or wood — blocks appeal to children from infancy through school-age. Babies like to explore them with their mouths, toddlers love to build tall towers to knock down, and preschoolers can build entire miniature worlds.



4. WATER: This top winner is great for children from birth through age five. Toddlers and preschoolers can “help” wash the dishes or simply play with water in a tub. Use recycled plastic containers to let children practice pouring. NOTE: When children are playing around water, safety is most important. **Stay close to your child when he is playing in or around water. Use “touch supervision” — this means always being within an arm’s length of your child.**

5. BALLS: Make sure you have soft ones to use inside as well as large

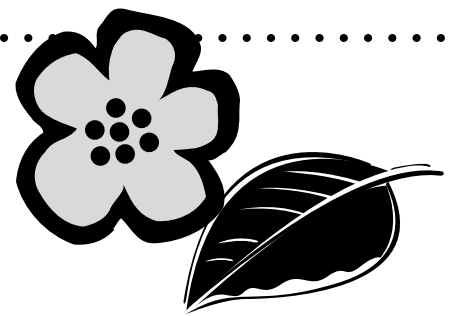


bouncy ones for outside play. Whenever children throw something — food off their high chair, or a crayon — it’s time to start a game with a ball. Set up targets for older children on the wall or in baskets.

6. MUSIC: This isn’t a toy at all, but an activity that works with children of all ages. Turn the music on and dance with your baby, twist with your toddler, and prance with your preschooler.

7. MUSIC-MAKING TOYS: From rattles to tambourines and triangles, simple percussion instruments have great play value. You can make your own instruments with beans inside a closed container, or rubber bands stretched across a box.

8. JUNK: Recycling can be one of your best sources of toys. Choose objects that are safe for infants to put in their mouths, and remove small or sharp pieces. Toddlers love to fill and dump, so keep those empty food containers and boxes. With some safety scissors, tape, and glue, older toddlers and preschool-age children can create their own playthings from recycled materials.



9. NATURAL MATERIALS: Natural materials such as wood, stones, leaves, and plants can become great toys. Just make sure that children under age three are only given things that are safe to put in their mouths.

10. YOU: Sometimes the very best play happens with no toys at all. Share a joke, a tickle, and a cuddle. It will put a smile on everyone’s face.

The best toys for children are powered by imagination, not by batteries. Walk into any toy store and you will see rows and rows full of “learning toys” that promise to teach your child letters, colors, shapes, and numbers. These toys are often not a good value. Once the initial excitement has worn off, they are forgotten and left to gather dust.

The toys children play with the most are the simple ones, and many are free. Encourage your child’s imaginative play by giving her clothes you don’t wear anymore to use as dress-up clothes. Toddlers love old bags and purses, and most will spend happy hours filling them with things and then dumping these things out. Many preschoolers enjoy dressing up and making pretend houses out of pillows and blankets. The best toys are the ones that children can create for themselves out of simple everyday supplies.

Buy toys that are appropriate for your child’s age. Sometimes we are tempted to get a child a toy that is designed for older children because we think our child is especially smart. The best way to encourage your child’s natural intelligence is to offer toys that are best for his age group and that encourage his imagination.



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