The Best Toys for Children

What toys have the best play value for the money?

Some of the best toys are inexpensive or even free. These toys — and some everyday items you might not think of as toys — deliver the most play value for children across the ages.

Empty cardboard boxes: Any size will do, but big enough to get inside is best. Those with lids are real winners.

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

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 babies, twist with toddlers, and prance with preschoolers.

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 a rubber band stretched across a box.

Water: This top winner is great for toddlers, preschoolers, and young school-age children. They’ll love “helping” to wash the dishes or simply playing 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.

Balls: Make sure you have soft ones to use inside and 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.

Art materials: Include crayons, paints, paper of all sizes and colors, markers, children’s safety scissors, glue, and clay.

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 clean 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.

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.

Caution: Small blocks may be a choking hazard for children under age three. Use a toilet paper tube to check the size of toys. Toys that pass through a toilet paper tube are small enough to cause choking and should be kept away from children under three.
Collect clothes, shoes, purses, plastic dishes and pans, toy cars, trucks, farm and zoo animals, dolls, tool sets, medical kits, and dollhouses for children to use their imaginations and create their own play.

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.

Toys to Avoid

Toys that play for children – such as dolls, stuffed animals, and other toys that talk, sing, dance, or jump when a button is pushed; hand-held computer games that children play with by themselves; play computers that say the alphabet, colors, numbers, or make animal sounds.

Toys that teach violence – such as guns, swords, action figures of professional wrestlers, balls made to look like bombs, toys from horror TV shows or movies.

Toys that don’t allow children to choose how to play with them – such as play-dough molds that make shapes in only one way or construction toys that can only be built in one way.

Toys linked to TV programs, movies, music, and video games for teens and adults – such as dolls based on teen stars and pop music, “pretend” body piercings and tattoos, action figures, dolls, and other toys linked to PG-13 or R-rated movies.

Toys linked to advertising, candy, and unhealthy foods – such as toys with the name of a fast food restaurant on them and books or games based on junk foods.

Before You Buy

Is the toy made of sturdy materials that will hold up with lots of playing?

Does the toy shoot or throw things that may hurt a child?

Does the toy make loud noises that could harm a child’s hearing?

Does the label on a painted toy say “nontoxic”? 

Is the toy easy to wash and keep clean?

Does the toy work well?

Think about safety and how children will use a toy before you buy.