

Play Activities for Children

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Play is the way that children learn to understand themselves and the world around them. A child is never, 'just playing', but is doing what a child is supposed to do in order to develop physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually and creatively. In this column, play excludes video and computer games. While these activities are fun and attractive to children, they do not provide opportunities for interaction, feedback, imagination or creativity. Most experts would agree that parents should limit 'screen time' and provide opportunities for more active, interactive, imaginative play.

How can a parent choose appropriate toys? Ask yourself a few questions before buying a toy, for example:

- Is this toy safe for my child's age?
- Is the toy appropriate for my child's attention span, physical ability, and interests?
- Will my child use this toy once, or over and over?
- Is the toy well made and sturdy?
- Is the toy easy to clean?
- Does it relate to my child's interests, or introduce a new area to explore?
- Is the price worth the play value?
- Does the toy reflect our family's values? (For example, your beliefs around violence, gender roles, or the environment)

Many of us parents have had the experience of purchasing an expensive, attractive toy, only to find that our child becomes bored with it rather quickly. Sometimes a large cardboard box, provides more fun and enjoyment than the contents did, as the box becomes a tunnel, a fort, a spaceship or a race car, by our child's remarkable imagination. So, what should parents provide for children as play materials, that are fun, interactive and encourage development? Always considering safety first, children should have a variety of toys and materials to choose from.

For providing opportunities for fine motor skill development, have puzzles, beads, board and card games, books, and creative materials such as crayons, paints, glue, and paper.

To encourage language development, have lots of books and pictures, and pretend play items such as dolls, puppets, stuffed animals, and dress-up clothes.

To encourage health and fitness, be sure you have some active play equipment, such as a riding toy, balls, or bean bags. Use music to encourage movement and dance. Allow your child to play with water toys (with supervision), with sand, clay and play dough to encourage sensory development, imagination and creativity.

Don't forget about music and sounds-children love to experiment with noise-making items and musical instruments.

Blocks of differing shapes and sizes encourage problem solving and planning. Don't just stop with interlocking blocks, try larger wooden blocks, or clean milk cartons and cardboard tubes. And of course, large cardboard boxes.

Dolls and stuffed animals can provide hours of imaginative play, as well as an opportunity to model gentleness and caring.

Board games are available for all ages, and provide opportunities for language development, interaction, learning social skills such as taking turns and following rules, and are something families can enjoy together.

Have fun!

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