

PLAY HELPS children develop awareness of their sensory-motor environment. (Credit)

Choosing good toys

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

Recently, when looking for a gift for a young child and anticipating an enjoyable experience, I left empty-handed and disappointed after what felt like hours. I told my pediatrician husband that the two of us should develop a line of well-designed educational toys. Nothing electronic, no bells, lights, whistles, dangerous small parts to break off or paint that could be toxic or chip, we would offer “good” toys.

It wasn't such a far-fetched idea, given that when our first child was a baby, I made him books and simple toys from everyday household items. He loved them, and could name 19 letters by the time he was 19 months old, so I knew my experiments were a success. Soon thereafter I became a “toy consultant” and I enjoyed every minute, choosing just the right toys for my child and other children. Trained in early child development, I simply did not like many of the toys on the market and felt that books and toys should be designed not just to entertain but also to educate and stimulate a child's mind.

Child's play is serious work! Play helps children develop awareness of their sensory-motor environment and learn to appreciate touch, textures, sights and smells while exploring their own little world. Through make-believe they develop independence and logic and learn to create a sense of safety, warmth, love and consistency, while honing their attentional skills, artistic and literary abilities, and developing into caring, feeling, social and emotional beings. They learn to cooperate with other children and adults and to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

As parents, we're tasked with helping our children, from an early age, grow through play. Sadly, in today's hi-tech world, as busy parents, it is easy to feel a child has to be “programmed” at all times. The art of simply playing – with pots and pans, building blocks, or crayons and paper – is being replaced by computer games, poor quality television shows and constant competitive after-school activities.

Focusing on your child's developmental needs will ensure that you'll pick the best toys. Ask yourself why you are purchasing a specific toy and what you hope to achieve. Make sure it is age-appropriate and actually can help your child develop some skill.

Often we think children must have the latest battery-operated, electronic gadget, when the best and least expensive plaything can already be found at home.

How often is the packaging more intriguing than the gift, or a present disappointing as it simply lacks excitement for a child who already has one too many toys?



Here are some thoughts about play, toys and books:

1. Make time daily to sit together, cuddle and read. Reading provides a wonderful bonding opportunity and promotes language development. The more you talk with your child, the greater his vocabulary. One can read to, or with, a child well into adolescence.

2. Get down on the floor, enter his world and play together. Toys are no substitute for your attention and quality time together.

3. Don't overwhelm your child with too many toys or toys with too many parts. If your child has too many toys, put some away and bring them out later.

4. Keep toys well organized and have your child (and his playmates) help put them away. Ensure that one toy is put away before others come out. Storage containers can be color-coded or labeled with pictures. Even the youngest child can help sort and put toys away.

5. Teach your children to give away toys they don't use or have outgrown to someone less fortunate. There are toy exchanges, and after-school programs are always looking for gently used games.

6. Let your child know that it can be hard to share toys. Before a play date, allow your child to put away some toys that he doesn't want to share, while letting him know that the others must be shared and that, as the host, he should offer his guests their choice of what to play with first. Make sure each child has the opportunity to play with the toy of his choosing.

7. Keep a project box with assorted objects of various colors, textures, stickers, paints, paper and other supplies. Our adult children still know where to find the supplies they need for creating a homemade card.

8. Make your own toys and books. Young babies enjoy contrasting black and white mobiles, colorful “baby faces” with big eyes, family pictures and looking at their reflection in child-safe mirrors. Older children improve their eye-hand coordination through dropping colorful shapes into a plastic lidded container with various sized holes. Finger painting, making music with spoons, and creating Cheerio necklaces are easy and fun activities. Toddlers will enjoy your homemade interactive alphabet picture book with different textured fabrics, shapes, and even a zipper for “Z.”

Older kids love cooperative board games where everyone wins. Family game nights and working together

on puzzles create wonderful memories.

9. Teach your child to express appreciation for each gift received by creating an old-fashioned thank-you note, which could include a picture of him playing with the gift.

10. Educate your children regarding advertising and consumerism. Teach them to be discerning listeners and viewers. Kids are like sponges and recognize brand logos long before they can read, and in this iGeneration can easily become materialistic consumers.

11. Electronic babysitters are no substitute for you. Children need your eye contact and undivided attention. Studies have shown reduced parent-infant communication and poorer quantity and quality of language development when comparing television exposure and electronic toys to traditional toys and books.

We know that enhanced technology, despite its benefits, can be detrimental to your child and your family. Sleep issues, reduced exercise, poorer social skills and decreased attention have all been reported in this age of excess screen time. While computer toys and games have a place for the older child, close monitoring is essential. Highly entertaining yet at times mindless, the attention these interactive toys demand is not only a distraction from developing appropriate social skills and good language development but can be detrimental to good interpersonal relationships.

Children increasingly play alone, and parents, allowing the child to be entertained by their electronic devices, inadvertently become disengaged from the vital aspects of parenting. Most have no idea what their children are doing.

12. Set and enforce appropriate limits with respect to time and usage of electronics. (I will save the discussion of adolescents' texting at 2 a.m. for another column.)

13. Remember, your child will internalize how you model using your own gadgets.

While we have gained the ability to connect as a society, we are losing the ability to connect within the family. This starts with your undivided attention when your child is young and continues well into adulthood. Reading to your children and having appropriate toys is a great place to begin. ■

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