

How to Choose Toys for Your Baby

Kathy A. Hirsh-Pasek
Temple University

Roberta Michnick Golinkoff
University of Delaware

Authors of Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn and Why They Should Play More and Memorize Less (Rodale, 2003). Winner of the Books for a Better Life Award, 2004.

Baby aisles used to be reserved for carriages and diapers. Somewhere around the turn of this century, however, things changed. Toys decorated with ABCs and 123s promised newborns a head start in literacy and mathematics. E-books read to toddlers and computerized gadgets and gizmos assured brain growth giving children a leg up in the global world of the future. Where did the rattles and cuddly creatures of yesteryear go? In this new era, choosing toys that engage babies can be an expensive and daunting task! Here we offer keys to success in the toy store, sharing secrets that won't break the budget, and that come with child psychologists' seal of approval.

Know your customer: Some basic facts about babies

Science has produced stunning portraits of infant and toddler capabilities. Though infants appear inert, even newborns are dynamic explorers of their world. Newborns analyze speech, are calmed by music, and focus on interesting sights. By six months, babies are reaching and grasping, cooing and babbling, and beginning to move about. One-year-olds add standing to their repertoire, some first words, and a myriad of social behaviors that, without much language, command any adult within their imperial realm. If we understood infants and toddlers, we would not buy toys that treated them as empty vessels and that were designed to fill their heads with memorized *stuff*. Rather, children's toys would be props that spur activity and inquiry. Ask – does the toy I am about to buy assume that babies are passive or dynamically engaged in their world? Does this toy call for immobile viewing or energetic involvement?

Global principles for finding the best toys:

Toys should be 90% child and 10% toy

Once you know about your customer, it's time to evaluate the toys. The best toys enlist the child and ignite the imagination. For infants, toys that vary in textures (rough and smooth), produce sounds (bells and rattles), move (in the wind or have moving parts) and are brightly colored, top the list. Stuffed animals and mobiles that can be grasped or turned put our babies in the driver's seat. Toys that children passively watch are not ideal – at any age. As children get older, look for toys that allow for multiple uses with multiple components. As infants turn to toddlers, they increasingly make things by drawing or scribbling or constructing with magnet, train, or block sets.

Today's toys often have 10% input from a passive child who does little more than turn on a video or respond to a computerized gadget. Ask – does the toy I am buying put babies at command central or does the toy make all the decisions?

Toys can be au natural

Here is the best part: Perfect toys require little or no investment. Toy companies are not happy when we share this secret. For newborns – toes and fingers are fabulous toys. They move, feel and touch. Crumpled paper and pillow-mountains offer props for adventurous babies. Babies moving on their own like pots, plastic containers, and spatulas that create rhythms. Forts made from couch pillows encourage hiding and story time. Large boxes become taxi cabs and boats! Old clothes and masks make for great pretending. And, nothing beats water painting with a big paint brush on sidewalks or around a pool.

Spend less and get more

Of course, crumpled papers and pillow-mountains make poor gifts at baby showers and birthday parties. What might you BUY? Rattles, stuffed animals, mobiles, art supplies, and construction toys are long-standing favorites for good reasons. They help children learn language, math, and science concepts, and when used with a peer or parent, they also encourage important social skills.

Toys are opportunities for inquisitive minds

Somewhere at the dawn of the 21st century, we forgot that toys were for playing: that PLAY = LEARNING. It is time to resist the hype and buy toys that suit the active child, that allow for exploration rather than passive memorization, and that celebrate complexities inherent in the simple things in life. With these principles in hand and a dash of good instinct, the toys you buy will give childhood back to children