



## Toys, Play & Young Children Action Guide

Play is essential to children's healthy development and learning. Children use play to actively construct knowledge, meet social/emotional needs, and acquire life skills. The content of their play comes from their own experiences. Because of the pervasive influence of the electronic media — TV, movies, videos, DVDs, computers, video games — children spend more time sitting in front of a screen and less time playing creatively with each other. These changes in today's childhood are undermining play.



Parents are constantly faced with decisions about what toys to buy and what toys to avoid. The influence of high-powered marketing and popular culture interfere with thoughtful decision-making at the toy store.

This guide is intended to help adults promote children's creative and constructive play by making informed choices about toys, and by working with others at home, school, and in the community to promote positive play and toys.

### *Play Belongs at School!*

Playtime and recess are being shortened or even cut under growing pressure to use structured methods to teach academic skills and prepare children to pass exams. Quality play experiences help children develop critical thinking, problem solving skills, curiosity, persistence, and creativity. These skills contribute to a solid foundation for academic success in elementary school.

### **Children Work It Out Through Play**

*Violent or traumatic events such as natural disasters, wars, and economic crises affect everyone. Some children experience these events directly, others receive information about them. Some children are included in discussions, some overhear adults' or other children's talk, some hear or see it on the news. Many young children may be confused or frightened and try to work out their feelings and understanding in play. Adults can observe and guide the play by responding to what children say with simple, accurate information and keeping the play within safe physical and emotional boundaries.*

*(See box on p. 2)*

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## What Parents & Other Adults Can Do

Since the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children's television in 1984, it has been legal to sell toys through TV programs. As a result, most best selling toys are linked to children's TV shows and other electronic media. Many of these promote violence, focus on sexy behavior and appearance, and encourage buying more and more. Deregulation has made choosing toys and creating a healthy play environment harder for adults. Dealing with this challenge provides an opportunity to build communication and share values with children in a meaningful way. It also offers adults a chance to work together with schools and the community to create healthy play options for children.

### parents & children

- Provide interesting activities, materials, trips to encourage positive interests, hobbies.
- Define your values about violent toys and share them with your children.
- Shop at stores that sell toys that promote healthy play and consciously don't sell toys of violence.
- Take action — write a letter /email to a toy company or store.
- Plan toy purchases together and limit impulse buying and overstimulating trips to toy stores.
- Provide uninterrupted daily play time and organize play materials so they are easily accessible.
- Work together to make thoughtful decisions about the role of media in the home.

### parents & other parents

- Support each others' efforts to reduce children's exposure to TV shows and movies that are used to market toys, especially violent toys.
- Support each others' efforts to avoid buying toys of violence or items with logos related to movies, TV shows, restaurants, etc.
- Share resources for activities, good toys and books, ideas for birthday gifts, events, and outings with other families.
- Share strategies and ideas for alternatives to TV, especially at difficult times of day (before dinner, for example).

### parents & teachers

- Discuss the importance of play and how toys and media affect it.
- Suggest ways to promote healthy play and limit children's involvement with TV, movies, videos, DVDs, computers, video games.
- Work together to develop school policies that promote healthy play (e.g., ample free play).
- Start a home lending book and toy library to provide positive play options.

### parents & community

- Create coalitions among existing community groups which support healthy play environments for children. Plan a community forum on this issue.
- Organize efforts to voice concerns about harmful toys being marketed or advertised to children in your community (e.g., complain at stores, write letters to newspapers).
- Plan a violent toy trade-in, good toy and book fair or swap. Involve older children in your efforts.

#### Helping Children Use Their Play to Safely Work Out Scary Events

When young children see scary things in their own lives or in the media (news or entertainment), it's normal for them to bring what interests, confuses, or frightens them into their play to try to work out their ideas and feelings. Here are guidelines to help you respond effectively when such play occurs.

- Watch children as they play, to learn more about what they know, are struggling to understand, and may be worried about.
- If the play gets scary or dangerous, gently intervene and redirect it. For example, ask how people might help each other, and provide toys, such as rescue vehicles and medical equipment. [See Rescue / First Aid Kit, p. 7]
- Try to follow the children's lead in the roles that you take rather than taking over the play. Help them come up with ways for extending the play.
- After the play, talk with children about what they played. Reassure them about their safety. Clear up confusions. Answer questions simply.



## Choosing Toys of Value

### Choose toys that promote. . .

#### *Meaningful learning*

Children's play is often influenced by the toys they use. Toys of value enhance children's natural ability to engage in imaginative, meaningful play by allowing them to try out their own ideas and solve their own problems. Toys of value can offer children the kind of learning which will help them succeed in school.

#### *Respectful play*

Children learn many messages through play. As educators, we believe it is important to select toys that promote cooperative play.

When children's play is filled with competition, they learn that playmates are opponents and winning means that everyone else is a loser.

When we support cooperation, children learn to live together better—respecting each other's ideas, finding solutions to challenges, and working together toward a common goal.

#### *Respect for the environment*

Apply the motto of reduce, reuse, recycle to gift and toy giving.

- **Reduce:** Involve children in sorting through the toys they have outgrown. Donate to local organizations or hold a toy swap event.
- **Reuse:** Put away toys when interest lags. Reintroduce at a later date.
- **Recycle:** Renew everyday items by transforming them into toys. Use recycled materials to create instruments, toys, and other creations.



*Consider this... when you shop for toys, look for environmentally-friendly products.*

### A Word About The Environment

*Adults can help children appreciate our natural environment. Children are curious about the world around them, finding joy in a leaf, acorn, or rock they discover while outside. Children learn from the behaviors we model for them. We can provide a model that demonstrates our commitment and responsibility to our environment.*

### Choose toys that provide opportunities for...



#### *Dramatic play*

Helps children work out their own ideas about their experiences. Provides a powerful way of learning new skills and a sense of mastery. Examples: blocks, dress-up clothes, fabric pieces, dolls, puppets, props to recreate real life (post office, restaurant, store), plastic and stuffed animals.

#### *Manipulative play with small play objects*

Develops small muscle control, eye-hand coordination, and visual discrimination – skills needed to read and write. Teaches about relationships between objects, essential for understanding math and science. Examples: construction sets and toys with interlocking pieces (basic Legos, Lincoln Logs, K'nex), puzzles, pegboards, pattern blocks.

#### *Game playing*

Teaches about taking turns, planning strategy, sequencing, rules, and cooperation. Examples: board games like checkers and chess, card games, jacks.

#### *Creative arts*

Encourages self-expression and the use of symbols, a vital skill for problem solving and literacy. Develops fine motor skills. Examples: poster and finger paints, assortment of blank paper of all sizes and colors, crayons and markers, scissors, glue, recycled materials, stamps, clay, weaving kits. Collaborative art experiences are easy and simple. The process of creating together doesn't always require a lasting product. [See Sensory Fun & Collage Shoe Boxes, p. 7.]

#### *Physical play*

Promotes healthy body awareness and coordination. Provides opportunities for social interaction. Use *Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle* ideas for toy swaps: bikes, scooters and other wheeled toys, climbing structures.

## Create cooperative play experiences...

### *Dramatic play*

Together children can use an old sheet or blanket to drape over chairs/tables to create a house, animal den, or cave, and decorate with fabric markers. Use Shoebox Ideas (p. 7) to create cooperative play opportunities, for example "Shoe Box Garden," which could develop into joining a community garden.

### *Manipulatives*

Children can learn to work together, negotiate, and achieve a common goal by building with small blocks (making a town) or doing a puzzle together.

### *Game playing*

In addition to commercial cooperative board games, adults can change the rules for traditional games. There is no need for winners or losers or to keep score, or there can be a group score, which is an agreed upon goal. The game ends when all players have had a chance to finish.

### *Creative arts*

When children paint or draw, they can be given a larger piece of paper to create a mural together.

### *Physical play: Musical Chairs*

When the music stops, take away a chair, not a child, to encourage sharing of remaining chairs. Almost all games can be changed with a goal of a shared outcome, accomplished by all players finishing rather than one individual winning, the rest, losing. Adapt your favorite games to a achieve common goal—play together, rather than against each other.



### **Toys have enhanced play value when they . . .**

- ✓ Can be used in many ways.
- ✓ Allow children to be in charge of the play.
- ✓ Appeal to children at more than one age or level of development.
- ✓ Are not linked to video games, TV, or movies.
- ✓ Can be used with other toys for new and more complex play.
- ✓ Will stand the test of time and continue to be part of play as children develop new interests and skills.
- ✓ Promote respectful, non-stereotyped, non-violent interactions among children.
- ✓ Help children develop skills important for further learning and a sense of mastery.
- ✓ Can be used by children to play alone as well as with others.
- ✓ Can be enjoyed by both girls and boys.



Support independent specialty toy stores that have made a commitment to high quality non-violent toys. (See Resources, p.8)





## Toys and Toy Trends to Avoid

### Toys have limited play value when they . . .


- ✗ Can only be used in one way and/or encourage all children to play the same way.
- ✗ Are limited to a single age or level of development.
- ✗ Are fun for the first 1/2 hour and then rarely get played with again.
- ✗ Do the play “for” children, instead of allowing for children’s unique exploration and mastery.
- ✗ Lead children to spend more time with TV or other media, and/or let the screen take control of their play.
- ✗ Promote violence and stereotypes, which can lead to aggressive and disrespectful behavior.
- ✗ Lure children into watching the TV program or other media linked to the toy.
- ✗ Introduce academic concepts too early and replace the kind of creative play that best prepares them for learning.


### No Substitute for the Real Thing!


Little treadmills and other exercise equipment for children, much of which is electronic or hooks up to a TV, are being marketed as the new way to get children moving and address child obesity issues. Exercise specialists and psychiatrists are warning that these pricey products are not a substitute for outdoor play and exercise. They are concerned about the physical and emotional harm that can come from isolating kids from the outdoors and other children.

*This year we focus on **bossy toys** that control play and limit creativity, imagination, and problem solving. Instead of listing specific toys like we did in past years, we show how five kinds of bossy toys undermine children’s play.*


### Avoid toys that promote . . .


 **Media Mania: Toys and games linked to media.** Traditional toys and games with themes from TV shows and movies encourage children to imitate what they see on the screen instead of using their imagination. Each time they play with a branded toy or game, children are reminded to nag for more products that go with the brand. And each time a new movie or TV show is released, they think they need all the new toys or games that are linked to it. Examples: the classic game Uno features the Hannah Montana TV show and Lego is promoting Star Wars, Batman, and Indiana Jones movies. Often these linked-to-media toys introduce young children to content rated for older children.

 **Bang, Bang...You're Dead!: Toys that make violence the focus of the play.** Children gain control over scary experiences through play, including play with violent themes. But toys, like Iron Man Firing Missile and Stealth Launch Batmobile projectile toys, replace creative and constructive play. Often taken from violent media rated for older children and targeted to boys, they promote play that imitates screen violence. They also teach children to use violence to solve problems, make violence seem easy and fun, and make the world feel like a scary and violent place.

 **So Sexy So Soon: Toys that focus on sexiness and appearance.** Toys like Bratz dolls and Disney princesses narrowly focus girls into play scripts about shopping, appearance, and being sexy—including being thin, wearing make-up and sexy clothing. Tag lines like “Beauty is our duty” tell girls to act older at younger ages and that how they look determines their value. This confuses children and promotes rigid gender stereotypes, negative self-image, and eating disorders in girls. Toys that imitate superstars through sexy clothing, make-up, cell phones, and microphones encourage identification with sexually provocative role models. [Continued on p. 6]

[Continued from p. 5]

 **Bells & Whistles: Traditional activities linked to electronics.** Electronic toys take control of play, have limited ways of use, are outgrown quickly, and can make traditional toys seem boring. They promise to teach children skills using methods that are untested by research. For example, digital art sets that use computers to replace creative art also remove the problem solving, imaginative, sensory experience traditional art materials provide. The onslaught of electronic “reading kits” with CDs, DVDs, and flashcards, like Hooked on Phonics Discover Reading Sets, can undermine the benefits of language development, love of reading, and parent-child bonding that comes from parents reading a simple book to children.

 **Baby Madness: Electronics aimed at infants and toddlers.** For infants and toddlers, learning is done best by interacting with people and materials in their environment and seeing the effects of their actions. Electronic toys teach babies that play is done for them, and keep them from creating their own “smart” actions and ideas. Electronic “teaching” toys, for children as young as 6 months, claim to teach letters and sounds despite the child’s lack of developmental readiness or research supporting these promises. Electronic music centers and busy boxes distract

and may entertain, but replace human interaction and curiosity, the true building blocks of learning.

**Beware of Branding**

using logos on toys and clothing teaches young children to make choices based on name brands, not on the value of the product. “Branding” can lead to:

- unwise buying choices
- unhealthy habits
- nagging!

### **Buyers Beware: The Scoop about AGE RATINGS on Toy Boxes**

Many parents use age recommendations on toy boxes to help with toy purchase decisions. But did you know that manufacturers can put any age rating they choose on a toy box? And early childhood experts are rarely consulted. Do not rely on age ratings alone. Rely on what you know about your child. Toys with small parts are required to have an age warning label, not related to the age recommendation.

**Baby DVDs Fail the Test!**  
*Even though the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no electronics for children under the age of two, manufacturers claim watching Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby-type videos helps babies get smarter sooner. But the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood (CCFC) filed a complaint with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) saying there is little research to support these claims and some research that finds these items can even delay development. In 2008, the FCC agreed with CCFC and told these companies to change their advertising claims.*

### **Cause for Celebration!**

After a year long action and over 5,000 emails sent from Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) members, Bratz items will no longer be sold through Scholastic book clubs and book fairs. Thank you to those TRUCE members who participated in this effort.

Visit CCFC at: [www.commercialfreechildhood.org](http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org)



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## Shoe Box Gifts for hours of creative play

Usually, giving gifts to children means buying manufactured toys at a store. Here is an alternative gift idea that you can easily put together. Shoe box gifts are collections of small, familiar items that are organized around a play theme and presented in an appealing way. They also show that expensive toys in fancy packages aren't necessarily the best.

**Think Outside The Box**

In these difficult economic times, here is an appealing way for promoting quality play without spending a lot of money.

### Making Shoe Box Gifts

- Decorate an empty shoe or appropriate-sized box and lid (gift wrap, stickers, etc.)
- Choose a theme and put a clear label on the box which includes both a simple word and picture of the theme.
- Most of the items we suggest are found at hardware stores, pharmacies, stationery stores, art/crafts stores, supermarkets.
- Use small containers, ziplock sandwich bags, or build dividers with small pieces of cardboard to make compartments for the various items in the shoe box. Young children appreciate organization—being able to return everything to its place.
- Most of these suggestions are appropriate and safe for children to use independently; however, objects in some kits may require adult supervision and/or aid (e.g., food coloring.)

### Shoe Box Gift Theme Ideas: Use these or create your own.

#### SENSORY FUN

- hypoallergenic, unscented shaving cream
- plastic tray
- food coloring
- popsicle sticks, clean combs, plastic fork, etc.
- smock or old T-shirt [Adult sprays piles, lines, or other shapes on tray. Children sculpt, smooth, draw, and write.]

#### SHOE BOX GARDEN

- plastic-lined shoe box
- potting soil
- seed packets
- small watering can
- popsicle sticks
- garden tools
- gardening gloves

#### NATURE EXPLORER

- nature guides with pictures of birds, trees, woodland animals
- small sketch book and colored pencils
- binoculars
- plastic magnifying glass
- camera (toy or real)
- vest or small backpack with pockets
- small ziplock bags
- bag of bird seed

#### COLLAGE KIT

- roll of wax/craft/freezer paper
- recycled gift wrap/ribbon
- children's glue or tape
- fallen pinecones, other natural materials
- scrounge materials: old keys, plastic bottle tops, buttons, fabric scraps, etc.
- craft feathers, glitter, etc.

#### RESCUE/FIRST AID

- flashlight
- bandaids
- fabric strips/ bandages
- ace bandage
- sling
- eye patch
- gauze
- stethoscope
- surgical mask

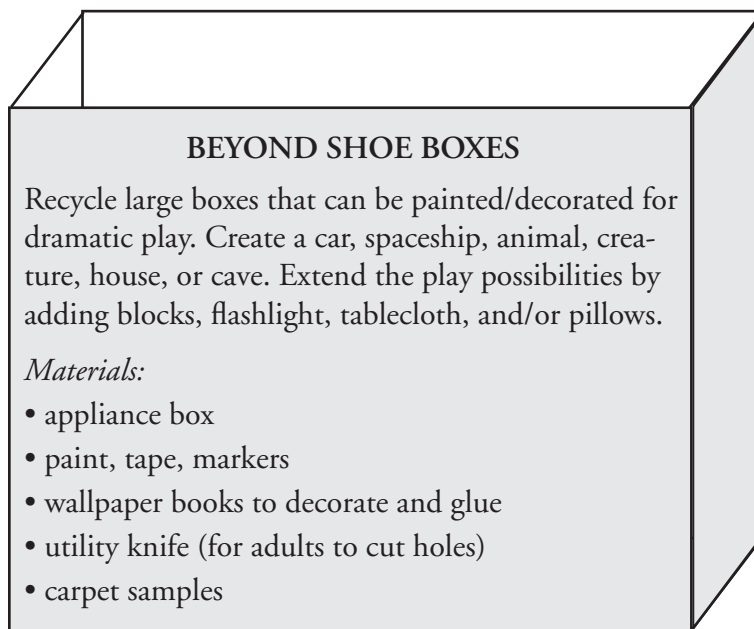
#### PLAYDOUGH

- buy a can of playdough or make your own
- garlic press
- plastic knife
- popsicle sticks
- wooden dowel
- plastic lids
- small tray/plate
- buttons/beads
- plastic animals

#### PLAYDOUGH RECIPE

1 cup flour  
 1 Tbsp. oil  
 1 cup water  
 1/2 cup salt  
 2 tsp. cream of tartar  
 food coloring

- Mix ingredients in saucepan.
- Cook on low heat. Stir constantly until playdough pulls away from sides of pan.
- Scoop playdough onto wax paper. Knead until smooth.
- Store in airtight container.



# Resources

## ORGANIZATIONS

*Alliance for Childhood* •www.allianceforchildhood.net  
• Promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development and play.

*American Specialty Toy Retailing Association* •www.astratoy.org  
• Look here for toy stores and toy manufacturers that carry many quality toys.

*Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood*  
Judge Baker Children's Center •www.commercialexploitation.org  
• Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children.

*New American Dream* •www.newdream.org  
• Helps families consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice.

*Commonsense Media* •www.commonsensemedia.org  
• Rates media based on developmental criteria, including role models, commercialism, violence, and stereotypes.

*International Play Association* •www.ipausa.org  
• Works to protect, preserve, and promote play as a fundamental right of all children.

*Media Education Foundation* •www.mediaed.org  
• Provides educational videos on media literacy.



## DVDs

• *Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood & Corporate Power* Media Education Foundation; www.mediaed.org

• *Where Do the Children Play?* Michigan Television; michigantvtelevision.org

## BOOKS

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**TRUCE** is a national group of educators deeply concerned about the impact of children's entertainment and toys on the play and behavior of children in our classrooms.

**TRUCE's goals are:**

- ▶▶ To raise public awareness about the negative effects of violent and stereotyped toys and media on children, families, schools, and society.
- ▶▶ To work to limit the harmful influence of unhealthy children's entertainment.
- ▶▶ To provide children with toys and activities that promote healthy play and non-violent behavior at home and school.
- ▶▶ To create a broad-based effort to eliminate marketing to children and to reduce the sale of toys of violence.
- ▶▶ To support parents' and teachers' efforts to deal with issues regarding media, toys, and play.

For more information about what you can do, to give us feedback, or to let us know how you are using the guide, please contact us:

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