

TOYS FOR CHILDREN

Pre-school

Having examined how babies play with toys and which toys are particularly suited to babies at different stages, it is helpful to look at toys for older children. The same principles apply - toys should be fun and engaging, and children benefit from having access to a range of toys to facilitate development of their whole person and to suit different environments and moods .

With the yearly publication of the Dream Toys to 12 toys, it becomes easy to assume that a 'top toy' will be a good buy for any child, but this is not the case and children's stage of development is a key factor in determining whether or not a child will enjoy playing with and engage positively with a toy. Personality, peer pressure and other environmental factors will also impact on a child's interaction with a toy.

Peer pressure is still a relatively minor influence, and parents have the biggest say in which toys children have access to for this age group. However, children do make their preferences known and, especially if they have older siblings, they will often aspire to have toys which make them feel more 'grown up'. Parents are often guilty of over-estimating their children's ability and intelligence and will often buy toys which are too advanced for their child. However, children's abilities and experiences vary enormously in this age group and this makes it difficult to put specific age guidelines on toys (except for on a safety basis). For example, some pre-school children are able to complete complex jigsaw puzzles with more than 30 pieces, whereas others, who have not had a lot of experience with jigsaws, may struggle with the concept of fitting the pieces together and matching the colours etc. and thus be unable to do even a 4 piece puzzle without help.

Social development is considered to be the most important area of development for pre-school children so toys which encourage social interaction and skills such as sharing, turn-taking and communication are really good for this age group.

The National Curriculum is very play-based for the Foundation stage, but giving children opportunities to develop skills that will give them confidence in the classroom is still beneficial to their development.

These skills include both traditional academic skills

- holding a pencil correctly,
- understanding that words are written and that letters make sounds,
- counting
- shape recognition and self sufficiency abilities
- doing buttons,
- getting dressed
- eating with a knife and fork

Toys such as dressing dolls and play food are good ways of encouraging development in these areas. Arts and craft-based toys are good ways of increasing fine motor control and concentration as well as encouraging children to sit down at a table and share equipment, all of which will make the transition to school or nursery that bit smoother.

Infant

As children settle into school, they go through a period of change and often a growth spurt. This can all be very unsettling and children going through changes benefit from having familiarity around them to help them feel grounded. Toys which help children feel in charge of their life, e.g. things for their bedroom, little figure for role play (where children who are often required to follow adults' rules are able to dictate the play and actions of the little figures) can help children cope with the changes that they are dealing with. Den building and little tents give a cosy feeling to children and help them feel safe and grounded as well as providing a quiet place for relaxation.

Toys which involve counting and literacy skills will improve confidence at school, and toys which they can take into school to play with their friends at play time will help with the formation of friendships and increase the chances that a child will settle happily into school life.

Role play, both through puppets and miniature figures and dressing up clothes provide an outlet for creative and imaginative development as well as giving children a safe way of exploring issues that they are finding difficult -

friendships, bullying, sibling rivalry, confidence, etc. By acting out situations, children are often able to figure out their own solutions to dilemmas that they face.

Juniors

Friends play a key factor in children's choice of toys, but they will only really engage with a toy if it is developmentally appropriate for them. It is therefore important that parents don't give in to pester power to give junior children more 'grown-up' products as they are likely to end up being 5-minute wonders and would be much more appreciated when the child is at the right age to use the toys/products appropriately.

In contrast to younger children, juniors tend to be more settled in their routines and so actively seek novelty and challenges. Their strategic thinking and planning skills have developed to a level where they are likely to enjoy problem-solving and strategy games. Construction toys are generally well-liked and, especially for those children who have had early exposure to building activities, children will be able to make impressive constructions and gain a great deal of satisfaction from their achievements. Construction toys tend to be favoured by boys, but the plethora of creative products available for girls will produce the same confidence-building effect.

For junior children, social development is still important and they are learning skills such as empathy and team-building. There is a tendency to wrap children in cotton wool to protect them from the dangers of today's world. Toys offer a good way of introducing children to a more adult world in a safe, non-threatening way. Toys which help children take care of one another, and those such as out-door toys which help children make decisions about safety and risk all promote development of children's independence and enable them to approach the tricky teenage years with a solid range of skills to help them through adolescence.

Adolescents

An often over-looked group of children by the toy industry, these children are still in need of play and fun. Most teenagers report 'hanging out' as their favourite thing to do, but they really enjoy 'playing' with grown up products such as phones and computers. Analysis of teenage behaviour shows that, although they wouldn't admit it, teenagers use adult props to practice or play at being 'adult'. This is a really positive activity and should be encouraged within safe limits. Social interaction is reported to be the most important activity, especially for girls who bond through sharing experiences and talking through issues with friends. There are toys which enable friends to interact in a 'chat room' style but which have built in safe guards so parents can be sure that the dangers of the internet are kept at bay.

As children enter adolescence their sense of identity undergoes a spurt and they often 'rebel' against accepted images of themselves, wanting instead to define themselves by their own values. Music and clothes are common tools children choose to express themselves, but toys and 'gadgets' are also ways of helping these children explore their identity. High-tech toys are a particular favourite with this age group but there is a great deal of variety within the games market. Products which encourage social interaction, decision making and responsibility can be very positive, whereas the use of solitary games should be more closely monitored.

Parents can help their children develop their own sense of identity and by providing clear boundaries on the use of adult props (having agreements with children about the amount of credit on a mobile phone that they feel is reasonable, or the amount of time spent playing computer games, the websites that they feel are suitable etc) - this is usually more successful if done in discussion with a teenager so that he/she feels in control.

The recommendations above are not exclusive and parents shouldn't feel under pressure to provide their children with every toy on the market. However, by understanding what a toy provides for a child in terms of development, it becomes easier to choose a varied range of toys which will encourage a child's whole person development.