

Do We Need the Bells and Whistles?

Educational Toys May Be Coal in the Holiday Stocking

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Old-fashioned retro toys, such as red rubber balls, simple building blocks, clay and crayons, that don't cost so much and are usually hidden in the back shelves are usually much healthier for children than the electronic educational toys, says Temple University developmental psychologist Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. Photo by Joseph V. Labolito/Temple University

The recent recalls of various children's toys have parents and would-be Santas leery this holiday season, but it may just be the thing to push consumers to be more creative about the toys they buy their young children.

“Old-fashioned retro toys, such as red rubber balls, simple building blocks, clay and crayons, that don't cost so much and are usually hidden in the back shelves are usually much healthier for children than the

electronic educational toys that have fancier boxes and cost \$89.99,” says Temple University developmental psychologist Kathy Hirsh-Pasek.

The overarching principle is that children are creative problem-solvers; they’re discoverers; they’re active, says Hirsh-Pasek, the Lefkowitz Professor of Psychology at Temple and co-director of the Temple University Infant Lab. “Your child gets to build his or her imagination around these simpler toys; the toys don’t command what your child does, but your child commands what the toys do.”

As Roberta Golinkoff, head of the Infant Language Project at the University of Delaware says, “Electronic educational toys boast brain development and that they are going to give your child a head start. But developmental psychologists know that it doesn’t really work this way. The toy manufacturers are playing on parents’ fears that our children will be left behind in this global marketplace.”

Golinkoff adds that “kids are not like empty vessels to be filled. If they play with toys that allow them to be explorers, they are more likely to learn important lessons about how to master their world.”

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, co-authors of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*, offer parents the following advice, guidelines, and questions to ask themselves when choosing the proper toys for their young children:

-- Look for a toy that is 10 percent toy and 90 percent child -- “A lot of these toys direct the play activity of our children by talking to them, singing to them, asking them to press buttons and levers,” Hirsh-Pasek says. “But our children like to figure out what is going on by themselves. I look for a toy that doesn’t command the child, but lets the child command it.”

-- Toys are meant to be platforms for play -- “Toys should be props for a child’s playing, not engineering or directing the child’s play,” Golinkoff adds. “Toys must awaken the child’s imagination and uniqueness.”

-- How much can you do with it? -- “If it’s a toy that asks your child to supply one thing, such as fill-in-the-blank or give one right answer, it is not allowing children to express their creativity,” says Hirsh-Pasek. “I look for something that they can take apart and remake or reassemble into something different, which builds their imagination. Toys like these give your child opportunities to ‘make their own worlds.’”

-- Look to see if the toy promises brain growth -- “Look carefully at the pictures and promises on the box,” Hirsh-Pasek says. “If the toy is promising that your child is going to be smarter, it’s a red flag. If it is promising that your child is going to be bilingual or learn calculus by playing with it, the chances are high that this is not going to happen – even with a tremendous amount of parental intervention.”

-- Does the toy encourage social interaction? -- “It is fine for your child to have alone time, but it is great for them to be with others,” says Golinkoff. “I always look to see if more than one child can play with the toy at the same time because that’s when kids learn the negotiation skills they need to be successful in life.”

“This advice is not about marketing, but about what we know from 30 years of child psychology about how children learn and how they grow,” says Hirsh-Pasek.

Golinkoff adds, “The irony is that the real educational toys are not the flashy gadgets and gismos with big promises, but the staples that have built creative thinkers for decades.”

Source: Temple University

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