



Toy 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. Changes in today's childhood are undermining play. 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.

Toys, the tools of children's play, influence that play. 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. Many toys are highly structured and often linked to popular media images and programs. These toys channel children into imitative play, robbing them of opportunities to use their own imaginations, creativity, and problem solving skills.

Parents are constantly faced with decisions about what toys to buy and what toys to avoid. High-powered marketing and the influence of 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.



Violent or traumatic events such as natural disasters, the war in Iraq, acts of terrorism, and crime, affect everyone. Children receive different information about these events. 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 guidelines, p. 2)



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 toy stores that consciously don't sell toys of violence or toys that undermine healthy play.
- Take action — write a letter 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.

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 leisure-time 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

All toys listed are suitable for girls and boys. While our age guidelines represent the youngest age for safety and appropriateness, children can use many of these toys throughout their early years.


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.


A WORD ABOUT COOPERATIVE PLAY

Children learn many messages through play. When children's play is filled with competition, they learn that playmates are opponents and winning means that everyone else loses. When we support cooperation, children learn to live together better—respecting each other's ideas, finding solutions to problems, and working together toward a common goal. Example: Musical Chairs—When the music stops, take away a chair, not a child, encouraging 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.

Choose toys that promote . . .


 **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, toy vehicles, dress-up clothes (vests, hats, fabric squares), small stuffed and plastic animals, dolls, puppets, props to recreate real life (post office, restaurant, store), materials for creating small worlds (doll houses, castles).

- **Fun-with-Fruit • Peel-N-Play Veggies (Small World Toys)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$15**
Colorful plastic fruit and vegetable sets. Children can pretend to peel and slice, then fit back together again with Velcro.
- **Sassy Pet Sacks (Douglas)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$11-22**
Sacks are colorful soft carry-alls that invite imaginative play with the plush removable animals.
- **Giant Rainbow Blocks (ImagiPlay)** **Ages 2 & up** **\$40**
Set of 24 heavy-duty cardboard blocks with easy-fold assembly and easy-wipe coating. Similar blocks, made by different companies, are available at most independent toy stores.
- **Little Daydreamers Hats (Elope)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$9-25**
Large selection of adjustable hats inspire imaginative play and costume-making. Themes include: animals, insects, occupations, and creatures.

 **Manipulative play with small play objects.** Develops small muscle control and eye-hand coordination. Teaches about relationships between objects, essential for understanding math and science. Examples: construction sets and toys with interlocking pieces (Legos, Lincoln Logs), puzzles, pegboards, miniature models, parquetry blocks.


- **Magneatos (Guidecraft.com)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$30**
Jumbo magnetic construction set contains strong magnetic balls and rods for an endless number of configurations.
- **Glow-in-the-Dark Straws and Connectors (Roylco)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$15**
Creative building with 150 straws in three sizes, along with 80 black connectors.
- **Baby's First Blocks (Fisher-Price)** **6 months & up** **\$7**
Colorful plastic blocks in four shapes encourage sorting, stacking, and dump and fill play.

Choose toys that promote . . .


 **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.

- **Door Easel (ArtSkills)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$10**
Turn any door into a giant easel. Set comes with plastic door protector, markers, paper roll, and art supply bag.
- **Splash Art (Reeve & Jones)** **Ages 3 & up** * **\$14**
Children use a stylus filled with water to “paint” on the drawing surface. Paintings can be erased and recreated again and again. Great for traveling.
- **Harmonica (Kiddieland)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$7**
Colorful plastic harmonica plays 16 good-quality musical tones. Easy for children to handle and use.

* TRUCE recommended age

 **Physical play.** Promotes healthy body awareness and coordination and helps let off steam. Opportunities for social interaction. Examples: bikes, scooters and other wheeled toys, balls, bats, jump ropes, space trolleys, pogo sticks, giant chalk, swing sets, climbing structures, play tunnels.

- **Rody (Toy Marketing)** **Ages 18 months - 3 years** **\$40**
A durable vinyl hippity-hop shaped like an animal. Inflate according to the child’s weight.
- **Jump Stick (Toysmith)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$6**
A jump rope with a bar instead of handles creates the same action, but is easier to use.
- **Flat Bat (Marky Sparky)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$10**
Bat’s shape encourages contact. Includes a ball that bounces, made of a new material that is softer than plastic.

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

- **Hiss (Gamewright)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$10**
Colorful snake-making tile game for 2-5 players. Set up a shared “snake pit” for cooperative play.
- **Go Away Monster (Gamewright)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$12**
Game for 1-4 players encourages shape recognition, sharing, and cooperation as well as mastery over those nighttime monsters.
- **Rapelli (HaPe)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$20**
Flexible caterpillars with different-colored accents hide in the natural bamboo cylinder and are enticed out during the game, as the 2-6 players take turns with two different dice—one for color and one for direction.

Remember the Classics!

- table blocks
- ocean, farm, and rainforest animals and insects
- cars, trucks, boats, planes, and trains
- natural materials (shells, leaves, acorns)
- open-ended construction sets
- flashlights
- dolls with accurate features
- clay
- basic art supplies
- dress-up clothes and housewares
- bean bags
- balls
- playing cards
- puzzles
- medical kits

Consider this... when you shop for toys for your child, think about buying quality toys to donate to early education and care programs that have been devastated by disasters.

For more information, check TRUCE's website.

Support independent specialty toy stores that have made a commitment to high quality non-violent toys.

If you can't find stores that carry quality children's toys, you can contact the manufacturer on the web to order toys directly or to find a nearby location to purchase them. Also, see listing for ASTRA (www.astratoy.org) on p.8.



Toys and Toy Trends to Avoid

We have chosen examples of toys which dramatically illustrate some harmful toy trends. Many toys could fit into more than one category.

Toys have limited play value when they . . .

- ▶▶ Can only be used in one way.
- ▶▶ Encourage everyone to play the same way as determined by the toy designer.
- ▶▶ Appeal primarily to a single age or level of development.
- ▶▶ Will probably sit on a shelf after the first “fun” half hour.
- ▶▶ Will channel children into imitating scripts they see on TV or in movies.
- ▶▶ Do special high-tech actions for the child instead of encouraging the child’s exploration and mastery.
- ▶▶ Lure children into watching the TV program or other media linked to the toy.
- ▶▶ Promote violence and stereotypes, which can lead to disrespectful and aggressive behavior.
- ▶▶ Introduce academic concepts to children too early, keeping them from the kind of play that truly prepares them for later learning.

Don't believe every toy recommendation you read in parenting magazines. Some are tied to advertisers!

Try to avoid toys that . . .

Are packaged with a CD, video, or other media product. These toys draw children into even more screen time. Children learn that part of play is imitating the script they see, sabotaging real play time.

- **Silly Squirt (Fisher Price)** **Ages 2 & up** **\$15**
Squeezing the head of this electronic soft toy causes it to shake and say such phrases as “Bombs away” and “Let’s surf the web.” Comes with DVD of Miss Spider Sunny Patch Friends, linking play to TV scripts and using toys to market TV.
- **Play-Doh Doh-Doh Island (Hasbro)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$15**
This set of tropical-themed molds and playdough tools comes with video of Doh-Doh Island, undermining children’s creative play ideas and linking playdough to screen time.

Lure infants and toddlers into the electronic culture. Very young children learn best by interacting with people and materials and by seeing their direct effect on objects and the environment. Often billed as educational, many electronic toys control and limit play.

- **ABC Learning Block (Brainy Baby by Vtech)** **Ages 6 months & up** **\$14**
Use of toy limited to joystick, which controls music tempo and light, and push-button shapes which play lessons in letter names, rhyming, and vocabulary.
- **Parents Magazine Play and Learn Series (Battat)**
 - **Sing-Along Mike** **Ages 18 months & up** **\$10**
Box suggests using microphone to “Say hello to the new American Idol.”
 - **Record-a-Voice Cell Phone** **Ages 18 months & up** **\$8**
Records and plays back messages.


Make appearance and make-up the focus of the play. Promote stereotyped and sexualized behaviors. Equate self-worth with how you look and what you can buy—including being thin and wearing make-up and skimpy clothes.

- **Bratz Funky Fashion (MGA Entertainment)** **Ages 6 & up** **\$29**
Mannequin of head and torso that comes with make-up, tattoo paint, and hair styling equipment. Pictures on box show six ways to alter the body’s appearance.

 **Use electronics to take control of traditional play activities and materials away from children.**


Toys that promote creative play allow the child to shape and define how they are used and their play value can last a long time. Toys that tell children what and how to play can undermine creativity and learning and quickly become boring.

- **Little Touch Leap Pad Puzzles (Leap Frog)** **Ages 18 months & up** **\$13**
Puzzle pieces make a sound when pressed. Teaches children to expect puzzles to entertain.

 **Electronic book systems that promise to teach reading skills to young children.** These can subvert the learning of reading by taking attention from the language and story line and making children expect books to have gimmicks that entertain. They undermine the powerful learning that results from adults reading to children.


- **Leap Pad Learning System (Leap Frog)** **Ages 6-36 months** **\$30**
Put books on the equipment platform and they talk and make sounds. One book comes with system; others are purchased separately.

- **V-Tech Learning System (V-Tech)** **Ages 3-7 years** **\$60**
Claims it "teaches school skills through video game fun." Can hook kids on the fast-paced stimulation of video games at an early age. Many of the books are linked to TV programs and movies.

 **Make violent themes the focus of the play.** Often linked to TV programs, movies, and video games rated for older children, these toys make violence seem entertaining and fun and guide children into anti-social play that undermines positive lessons caring adults try to teach.

- **Star Wars Jedi Force—Mace Windu (Playskool/Hasbro)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$7**
Action figure comes with light saber and projectile grappling hook that is unsafe for young children. Promotes PG-13 movie to 3-year-olds.

- **G.I. Joe Valor vs. Venom—Agent Faces (Hasbro)** **Ages 5 & up** **\$15**
Part of a line of violent toys. Action figure comes with set of full-face masks to be used as disguises for various bad guys. Doll and 2 masks have dark complexion, hair and eyes, giving racist messages about the appearance of "enemies."

 **Turn children's bodies into weapons.** These toys leave children with no room to do anything in their play but fight and encourage children to bring their bodies into the action.

- **Bionicle 3-in-1 Power Gauntlet (Lego)** **Ages 6 & up** **\$20**
Strap-on arm plate with attached springboard launches dart, disc, and spinner projectiles.

 **Turn the TV into the controller of the play.**

- **TV Wild Adventure Mini Golf (Milton Bradley)** **Ages 6 & up** **\$40**

Set of plastic golf clubs and balls comes with a DVD, limiting children's own play scripts and turning even active play into screen time.

- **Nerf-N-Strike (Hasbro)** **Ages 8 & up** **\$40**
Attaching 3 blasters creates one giant gun that reaches from child's shoulders to waist. Comes with DVD of targets, encouraging children to shoot their TV screens.

Another trend to avoid:

Toys that promote gender stereotypes and divisions, which condition children to choose toys based on stereotyped packaging rather than on potential play value for either girls or boys.

For more information contact TRUCE: www.truceteachers.org
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**A Letter About Fighting Toys:
for Children & Adults to Talk About Together**

Some kids really love toy guns and toys with weapons on them. They have fun pretending to fight with them. A lot of teachers worry about weapon toys. They think that if kids play with these toys and pretend to fight and kill, it will teach kids that it's okay to hurt people and that fighting and hurting is fun. Kids often say, "We're only pretending. We're just 'playing.'"

Some teachers say kids in their classes pretend to be characters on TV. Kids act out kicking and fighting. Then kids often really do hurt each other. It gets scary. It isn't pretend, teachers say.

Many teachers are worried. They are angry that TV shows and ads make violent toys look cool so kids want to buy them. They say companies shouldn't be allowed to sell violent toys to kids on TV.

Teachers hope this letter will help families talk together about the toys they buy and make thoughtful choices.

- What do you think about what the teachers say?
- What do you think teachers, parents, and children should do about fighting toys?
- What can grown-ups do to help children be safe and learn not to fight?
- What ideas do you have about how children can play without fighting toys?

From Many Teachers All Over the Country



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. The process of putting together such an easy, yet imaginative and age-appropriate gift for a special child in your life can be very satisfying for you, too.

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.

STORY BOX

- favorite children's book
- cassette recording of adult narrating story
- cassette player
- headphones
- story characters (small plastic figures, puppets, stuffed animal)
- blank journal for creating original stories

WATER / BATH

- plastic funnel
- plastic tubing
- plastic eye dropper
- turkey baster
- spray bottle
- squirt bottle
- plastic sea animals
- plastic nesting cups
- measuring cups
- bubble bath packet

RESCUE/FIRST AID

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

SHOE BOX GARDEN

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

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.

COOKING

- small mixing bowl
- measuring cups/spoons
- rolling pin
- small whisk
- wood spoon
- spatula
- empty plastic spice bottles
- cookie cutters
- recipes
- apron

NATURE EXPLORER

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

Resources

ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Childhood

PO Box 444, College Park, MD 20741

301-779-1033; www.allianceforchildhood.net

- Promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development and play.

American Specialty Toy Retailing Association.

116 W. Illinois St, Ste 5E, Chicago, IL 60610

312-222-0984; www.astratoy.org

- Look here to find toy stores and toy manufacturers that produce and sell many Toys of Value on TRUCE's list.

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Judge Baker Children's Center

53 Parker Hill Ave., Boston, MA 02120

617-278-4105; www.commercialexploitation.org

- Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children.

Center for a New American Dream

6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 900, Takoma Park, MD 20912

1-877-68-DREAM; www.newdream.org

- Helps families consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice.

Commercial Alert

4110 SE Hawthorne Blvd. #123, Portland, OR 97214

503-235-8012; www.commercialalert.org

- Promotes policies and practices that stop harmful marketing to children, including "The Parents' Bill of Rights."

Commonsense Media

500 Treat Ave., Suite 100, San Francisco, CA 94110

415-643 6300; www.common sense media.org

- Rates media based on developmental criteria, including role models, commercialism, violence, and stereotypes.

Media Education Foundation

26 Center St., Northampton, MA 01060

800-659-6882; www.mediaed.org

- Provides educational videos on media literacy.

Playing for Keeps

116 West Illinois, Suite 5E, Chicago, IL 60610

877-755-5347; www.playingforkeeps.org

- Dedicated to improving outcomes and quality of life for all children by promoting healthy and constructive play.



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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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