

# BANANAS HANDOUT

## Some Thoughts on Toy Buying

A new toy is one of the pleasures of childhood. Shopping for a new toy can be just as fun for the adult. You will want your gift to be loved and played with for a long time so before you set out on your toy-buying adventure, keep these tips in mind to ensure that the child and the toy are a good fit.

Make sure the toy is **safe** and **durable**. You want it to survive your child's play, otherwise it's not worth buying. Request a demonstration at the store or at least examine mechanical toys closely.

Think **economically**. Expect that a major toy will last for years and be passed from one child to another. Major toy purchases include wooden blocks, easels and sturdy wheel toys. Look for well-made items rather than brand names and check on product guarantees and the store's return policy.

Consider the **fun factor**. Will your child enjoy playing with the toy? Many toy manufacturers classify toys by age, but these are broad generalizations so look beyond the label. Are the toy's setup and instructions clear for you and your child? Remember, too, that this year's "in" toy may not appeal to your child after the momentary thrill of recognition. Use your judgement and avoid toy fads especially during the holidays when children are bombarded with television advertisements.

### The Importance of Play

Play is often called children's work. Think of a toy as a tool which stimulates the imagination and helps a child actively learn about the world. What about the child's preferences, needs and interests? Some children enjoy playing alone for hours with a set of tiny plastic people. For other children, a toy to share with playmates is more appropriate. What toys have been popular with the child in the past? Choose a new toy that will stretch this interest further.

Some toys have multiple uses throughout early childhood, such as a set of colorful nesting cups. Infants love to look at these. One- and two-year-olds like to touch, chew on, and roll them. Three- and four-year-olds stack them, pour liquids into and out of them, or sort them by size and color. Five- and six-year-olds find them perfect for hiding things in. Choose toys with a variety of uses to challenge (but not

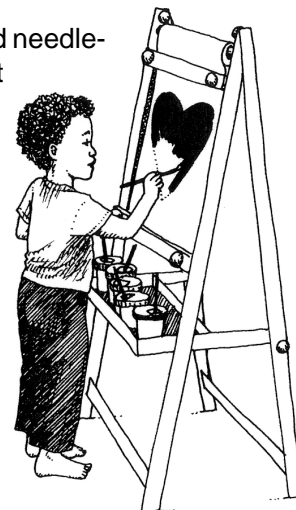
frustrate) your child. You want to find a toy that fits the child's developmental level.

### Alternate Shopping Experiences

Children like to imitate tasks they see adults performing. You can help this growing process by taking a stroll through the hardware store, art supply house, or sporting goods store. Depending on the child's age, here are some creative and inexpensive toy kits you can put together.

- A set of real and durable tools: small hammer, hand drill, wood scraps, wood glue.
- A ball of yarn and large knitting needles with a promise to teach the child to knit.
- Magic markers, drawing paper, envelopes, pencil sharpener, hole punch, safety scissors, tape.
- Magnets; some come in kits with simple science experiments included.
- Kitchen timers, bowls, whisk, hand-mixer.
- Rubber stamps and stamp pads. A commercial stamp can be purchased with the child's name.
- Paints and assorted brushes.
- Old clothes for dress-up.
- Musical instruments.
- Garden tools.
- Balls of varying sizes.

Try secondhand stores – paint and needle-and-thread can spruce up great finds there. You and your child can decorate a doll house with found objects and paper scraps. Create a pretend store from boxes and crates, then stock it with empty food containers and cartons; supplement with a cash register, play money and a grocer's apron. Sometimes the best toy is a large box from the appliance store for painting and climbing on. Use your imagination!



## The Joy of Reading

Don't forget **books**. There are affordable, attractive paperbacks for children of all ages. Even infants enjoy looking at a page from a picture book! Treating books with special care will enhance their value for a child and begin the process toward reading. As with toys, books should be selected with a careful eye toward each individual child's interest. If your two-year-old likes playing with trucks, choose a simple, colorful book featuring pictures of cars and trucks. Children enjoy both fiction and nonfiction books about their favorite subjects. Books give children knowledge, comfort, art appreciation, humor and joy.

## As a Child Grows...

Toy selection changes as children get older. Now they may know exactly what they want and the question becomes whether you can afford it or whether you think it's appropriate for them. Video games can be considerably more expensive than toys. Be honest and tell the child if a game is simply out of the question financially. Buying a toy that you will feel compelled to "police" is probably only setting you and your child up for conflict. If your family has a home computer or is planning to buy one, select software content you are comfortable with that is appropriate for your child's age and learning style.

Plan to spend time thinking about your toy purchases before you go shopping. The "perfect" gift can turn up unexpectedly, it's true (and sometimes is half the fun of shopping), but if you give some thought to your child's interests and preferences, you'll be in a better position to judge before you buy. Then enjoy watching as your child has fun playing and learning with your selection.



## Toy Safety

Toys should be chosen with care, especially for the very young. Safety considerations don't end with the purchase of a toy; proper maintenance and safe storage are equally important. Be a label-reader, particularly on toys that are labeled, "not recommended for children under three, due to small parts." Always discard plastic wrappings on toys immediately. Avoid toy boxes with heavy lids and those with no ventilation holes. Protect outdoor toys from rust.

## Toys to Avoid

- Those small enough to be swallowed; be especially vigilant about deflated or broken balloons, which are a major choking hazard.
- Toys that have detachable parts that can lodge in the windpipe, ears or nostrils; stuffed animals with squeakers that can be easily removed, etc.

- Toys that can easily be broken into small pieces or pieces with jagged edges; that have sharp edges or points; that are put together with straight pins, sharp wires, nails, etc.
- Glass or brittle plastic toys.
- Toys that have parts that can pinch fingers or toes, or catch hair.
- Items that are painted and lack a "nontoxic" label; avoid painted toys for infants altogether.
- Toys with long strings or cords.

## Toys to Monitor

- Anything that makes sharp, loud noises that can cause hearing damage, such as extra-loud sound effects or music, cap guns, etc.
- Darts, flying toys or toys that propel objects.
- Toys that use electricity or are otherwise meant to be used by older children.



The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) publishes a number of free publications on toy safety including *For Kids' Sake: Think Toy Safety* (in English and Spanish), and *Which Toy for Which Child, Birth-5 Years, and 6-12 Years*. Download these and other booklets from [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov) (click on "CPSC Publications"), or call the toll-free hotline, 800-638-2772.

The American Toy Institute offers two free booklets on its website, [www.toy-tia.org](http://www.toy-tia.org) (click on "Parents," then "Publications"). *Fun Play, Safe Play* focuses on the importance of play in child development and gives guidelines for safe and age-appropriate toys (in English and Spanish). *Let's Play: A Guide to Toys for Children with Special Needs* lists recommended toys selected by the Toy Industry Foundation in partnership with the Alliance for Technology Access and the American Foundation for the Blind.

Keep in mind that no law or agency can take the place of parents' experience, care and knowledge in choosing appropriate and safe toys.