

Choosing The Right Toy

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

The toy on the store shelf was grotesque – a creature with the face of a beast, the physique of Schwarzenegger, and a hollowed-out, spring-loaded arm capable of firing plastic missiles. Paul, 5, had to have it.

Mom was clever in her response. She led Paul to another aisle, where she showed him an art kit of paints, markers, and color pencils. “You can draw your own creatures,” she said.

Paul went for the idea. Mom carried the day. Art supplies will help Paul develop his drawing skills and creativity. An armed action figure provides only limited creative play opportunities and you may not want to encourage aggressive play.

Children are constantly working to learn about the world. The right toys can make the job easier. Toys can flex their imagination, stretch their creativity, and help them get ready for school.

But with so many toys and the vigorous marketing that surrounds them, choosing the right ones can be difficult. Knowing a few guidelines may help.

Building sets help children create their own toys. Blocks and Lego sets challenge children to use their imagination to create houses, trucks, or whatever else they dream up. Paints, crayons, glue, scissors, construction paper, modeling clay, and even egg cartons also present children with creative challenges that can be fun and rewarding.

Dress-up clothes, play furniture, dolls, toy kitchens, and tool sets help children practice grown-up life.

Some toys benefit children in other ways. Preschoolers like to feel control and power. Toys that make loud noises, or toys like punching bags that require physical strength, may help them feel powerful and strong. Soft toys that can be hugged may help children when they are upset.

Safety is another consideration. Toys for preschoolers should not have small parts that can be swallowed, especially if a young brother or sister is around. Toys should not splinter and, if painted, the paint should not chip off. All toys, particularly art supplies, should be non-toxic.

Read all labels, but don't rely on them as fact. This is especially important when judging the developmental appropriateness of a toy.

And be careful about advertising. If you've watched any amount of children's television it should be clear that toy advertisements are hard-sell, first and foremost. It's up to you, as parent, to be the final judge of the safety and developmental value of your child's toys.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.