



by Karen Stephens

Toy Safety and Selection: Choose Developmentally Appropriate Toys for Safer Play

There's more to choosing good toys for kids than considering price or availability. Beneficial toys fit your child's developmental abilities and are constructed with safety in mind.

Even when well supervised, young children can wiggle into danger. Select safe toys that offer worthwhile play and learning experiences, while also limiting dangers.

And remember, sometimes young children get into older sibling's toys. Teach older children how to store their toys safely for privacy and siblings' protection.

Listed below are things to consider as you select safe children's toys. Following those tips, you'll find a brief listing of best toys for developmental abilities within varying age groups.

Safety-First Toy Selection

- Even if a toy is a gift to your child, or a prize won at an event, read toy box labeling before allowing use. Note the toy's age and safety recommendations, but don't assume they accurately apply to your child. Be familiar with your child's personal abilities and inclinations when estimating safety.
- Be aware of recalled toys so you don't buy or accept one. (A listing of web site addresses is at this article's end.)
- Toys should pass a cylinder "parts tester" or empty toilet paper roll test. Toys for children aged two years and under, or older or disabled children very prone to mouthing toys, should *never* fit into the tester or they could lodge in the windpipe to cause choking.
- Toy construction should prevent hazards such as puncture, choking, cuts, strangulation, burns, shock, electrocution, or drowning. Require smooth, well-sealed edges. Avoid glass, sharp metal edges, and rigid, fragile plastic. Toys with smaller removable parts should be purchased only for children aged three years and older. For those under age eight years, avoid buying toys that have loose strings, straps, or cords longer than 7 inches. Balloons, especially when popped, can cause choking for infants through preschoolers. Battery or electrical toys should be limited to children age eight years and older.
- Purchase toys or dress up clothing made of fire retardant materials and only purchase non-toxic art materials.
- Children can mistake a real weapon for a toy. So that children learn not to approach or play with real weapons, avoid buying "look-alike" toy weapons, such as guns and knives. Even cap guns and BB guns pose dangers; resist buying them.
- If a toy makes sound, make sure it won't damage hearing. And remember, fireworks are never a child's toy.
- Toy packaging can be hazardous, too. After a toy is opened, safely discard all packing material out of children's reach.

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- Select toys that are easy to maintain. Damage can occur during play, so regularly check children's toys for safety. Fix or discard broken ones, never donate them to a charity or a child care center.

Toy Selection by Age and Abilities

By observing your child's play, you'll know what types of toys appeal to them most and will respond to their current abilities. Gender-neutral toys that are free of stereotypes offer broader play opportunities. Peaceful toys that encourage cooperation are more likely to support your family's values. Children love "hands-on" toys that engage their mind and senses; and remember, select toys that kids will have fun playing with, too!

The following are popular toys by age group. Close supervision is your best safety insurance. And after play, teach children to put toys safely away to limit trip hazards for the whole family.

Beneficial toys fit your child's developmental abilities and are constructed with safety in mind.

Babies up to 12 Months

Soft cuddly items, like stuffed animals, cloth dolls, or puppets (without detachable button noses and eyes), water play toys for bath time, crib gyms, floor activity quilts, soft mats to pat, plastic-coated books, rattles or sound-makers like squeak toys.

Toddlers: Ages 1 year up to 2 years

Items listed immediately above, plus: cloth-covered foam blocks, cardboard blocks, stacking toys, push-pull toys, pop-up toys, board books, two to four piece puzzles.

Preschoolers: Ages 2 through 5 years

Items listed immediately above, plus: balls, wooden blocks, construction toys — such as Legos®, pretend-play toys, nesting table toys, wheeled toys, non-toxic art and clay-like modeling materials, simple board and card games, up to 16 piece puzzles, train sets or activity play stations such as airport, farm, or zoo.

School-agers: Ages 6 to 10 years

Items listed immediately above, plus: complex card and board games, arts and crafts kits, car or airplane model kits, natural science collections, hand-held electronic/computer games, jump rope, computer, CD player, bike, chapter books and short novels, sports equipment, musical instruments, jigsaw puzzles.

Resources on the Web

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission Toy Recall Alerts — www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/prerel/category/toy.html
National SAFE KIDS Campaign — www.safekids.org/

Sources for Small Parts/Choke Tester Cylinder

Children's toy stores, Discovery Toys, family safety web sites and catalogs, fire or police department, some hospital nurseries.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.