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FAMILIES

Quote

"You can really get your kids excited about the giving process."

Anna Fader

blogger, Mommy Poppins

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HOLIDAY DECISIONS

Choose toys kids — and you — will love

By Fiona Santolanni

For the Poughkeepsie Journal

It's not easy being "Santa," especially this year, in light of the many recent toy recalls. With the dizzying array of toys and games on the market, how do we, as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, find the best gifts for the special children in our lives? What are the secrets to breaking through the mass-market quantities to find distinctive, quality pieces that will delight your children and stand the test of time?

There is a smarter strategy to the seek-and-find process to lead you to toys and games that are educational, non-commercial, even award-winning. This holiday season, resolve to pur-

chase toys that will enrich our children, bring our families together and get us away from the TV.

Safety first

Lead paint. How many times have you heard these words over the past few months?

While this is the primary cause of recent product recalls, other items made in China, as well as other countries, have been pulled from the shelves because of small magnets and other potentially hazardous ingestible pieces.

As consumers, we need to become more vigilant about the toys and games we buy by seeking information, readily available on the Internet. The U.S.

Toy seller shares favorites 9E

Consumer Product Safety Commission lists the toys that have been recalled at www.cpsc.gov. A major new consumer-focused Web site, www.Toyinfo.org, also provides recall notifications and updates, buying tips and more. A national toy information call center, 1-888-884-8697, supplements this site, and is staffed by professionals who can answer questions about toy safety.

Toys made in the U.S. and Europe are generally more reliable, since we have higher safety standards. A toy meets the European safety standards if the capital letters "EC," "EU" or "EN" are on the package. Regardless of where the toy was manufactured,

this symbol means it has passed rigorous European testing.

Ultimately, however, it's the parents' responsibility to supervise their children's activities. Any toy is potentially "hazardous," especially if the child is left alone.

Quality counts

You don't want your gift to be the child's first toy of the season to break from the ruthless wear and tear it will receive. Regard the quality of the item before you buy it, which is usually reflected in the price. Handmade toys are almost always of the highest standard. Look out for the names of reputable manufacturers, consider the materials used and the country of origin.

Get the seal of approval

You don't need a degree in childhood development to pick a quality toy. Leave the selection process to the experts, and look for toys labeled as "Award winner" or "Toy of the Year" from reputable organizations such as Oppenheim Toy Portfolio (www.toyportfolio.com) or Dr. Toy (www.drtoy.com/main/index.html).

Age does matter

When it comes to toys and games, one size does not fit all. Look at the recommended age range on the packaging, and take heed. A toy recommended for "Age 8+" may confuse and frustrate your 6-year-old. Each child develops at different

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Choices: Look for quality games, toys

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speeds, however, and another 6-year-old may be ready for the challenge.

Think before you buy

When you purchase a toy, think about the recipient. What will the child learn from this product? Is it a "smart" product that will engage the child's mind, and does it invite active doing and thinking? Does it "fit" the developmental needs, interests and skills of this particular child?

Delve further into the child's interests. If he loves playing with pirate action figures, consider other items with a pirate theme, such as a puzzle to encourage strategic thinking or an activity book that hones reading skills. The ultimate in imaginative play is "pretend," so consider giving him a pirate costume and props so he can become the captain of his own ship.

Fun is name of the game

Instead of going for all the bells and whistles, look for a toy that requires creativity. The less the toy does, the more the child does. Instead of sitting back and letting the toy do all the work, let your kids be the spark behind the game. Well-designed products are versatile, can be used in a variety of ways and offer more than one use.

Stay away from the products that capitalize on the popularity of TV characters and look for truly different items. Not only will your gift be noted, remembered and used, but you'll also avoid the potential of giving the child a duplicate toy to one they already own.

The educational factor

You've picked up a toy from the shelf; now ask yourself, "What does this toy teach?" The best toys and games are those that support basic intellectual and/or physical skills; expand positive self esteem, values, understanding and cultural awareness; encourage creativity and imagination; and build character through fair play. This is the time to return toys that promote violence and other negative behavior back to the shelf.

Get them moving

Toys and games that promote physical activity and playing out-

Toy picks

Fiona Santoianni, owner of Toys and More in Wappingers Falls, shares a few of her favorite toys and games:

For babies

Twilight Turtle — This constellation night-light transforms any room into a peaceful night sky. Comes with three soothing color options and a Star Guide. \$32.99 Made by Cloud B. www.cloudb.com

Stack 'n' Nest Cups — Wonderful Taggie item that has three soft stacking and nesting cups with a twist and a surprise. You can match up the circles and the squares on either side to create a lion and cute cow ... and a surprise mouse inside. \$24.99 by International Playthings. www.intplay.com

For toddlers

Lift Off Rocket — This rocket features lights, sounds and three separate areas of play — cockpit, living quarters and cargo area. Hear the lift-off sequence, realistic rocket sounds and see the boosters light up. The cargo hold opens so the space buggy can zoom down and explore alien terrain. The living compartment has a bed and kitchen, and the top is where the two astronauts fly their missions! \$39.99 by Interna-

tional Playthings. www.intplay.com

For preschoolers

This age is all about movement. One toy moves and grooves along with them and the other helps them slow down.

My Little Sandbox — Children will enjoy hours of imaginative, quiet, creative fun. The 10" x 10" x 2" hardwood sandbox, play mat, ultra fine sand, rake, shovel, bucket and lots of themed accessories allow for some Zen-like playtime. 10 different themes. \$26.99 by Be Good Co. www.begoodcompany.com

For elementary school-age

Quadrilla — This marble run is all about curves and circles. 13 curved tracks in three different sizes and two funnels are certain to inspire many afternoons of wholesome playtime. Infinite marble runs in one great set! \$90-\$200 by HaPe. <http://hapetoys.com>

For families

Blokus — This is my all-time favorite family game. You try to get the most points by putting down the most squares. There are four colors of squares. It takes spatial reasoning, strategy and luck. \$32.99 by Educational Insights. www.educationalinsights.com

doors are ideal for any age group, since children are highly susceptible to adopting sedentary habits at this time of their lives.

Re-visit some of the classics, such as sleds, hula hoops, pogo sticks or skateboards — which to this new generation of chil-

dren may seem exciting and new.

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Toy Trends: What's New for Your Kids

Ghost written for client; appeared the *Poughkeepsie Journal* in February 2005

Erasable crayons, pint-size bowling, and the Rubik's Cube, reborn. What toys and games will your child be playing with over the next year? As owners of an educational toy store, and as mothers, we are always in search of toys that will enrich our children, bring our families together, and get us away from the TV. With that mind set, we attended the recent Toy Fair in New York City, where 2,000 different vendors from 4 continents introduced 100,000 new toys.

Emerging from the bustle were several noticeable trends that will make you long to be a kid again.

What's Old is New Again -

Remember Etch-A-Sketch and the Rubiks Cube? They've both had a face-lift and are ready for the 21st century. Etch-A-Sketch, by The Ohio Arts, is now wired for television. You can trace a picture, connect the dots, and draw a sketch on your TV screen. Then just shake the controller, and the picture disappears. Rubiks Cube is celebrating 25 years as the worlds #1 puzzle. This time around, it comes in three different sizes, including the new 5 x 5 "Brain Bender". The PayDay game is also back for its 30th anniversary.

Get Up and Get Out –

Toy manufacturers are responding to the nationwide problem of childhood obesity by re-inventing athletic play, with everything from instructional sports videos to kid-sized equipment. The "Huggy Sports" line from Hooray includes golf, baseball, ring toss, and even bowling for little hands. These products are handcrafted from durable, eco-friendly material, and can be used indoors or out.

The "Big Bubbler" from Spin Master is great fun on an outing to the park. It looks like a light saber and produces massive bubbles when pulled through the air.

Teaching Life Skills --

As more parents realize how critical it is to communicate with their kids, a growing number of products are available to help. Games such as "Mind Your Manners" by SmethPort Toys introduce children to real-life situations, and encourage conversation. Looking to help your child with verbal skills? With "Green Alligators" from Vida Games, children as young as four are challenged to describe the item on their cards to other players.

"Always Play Fair", a game for ages six through twelve, combines fair play, sportsmanship and character education. Players move ahead when they do the right thing; a slip-up results in a move back. What make this game unique are the pledges. Players take a "fair sportsman" pledge online, and receive a pledge pin and patch in the mail.

Moonjar is a helpful tool to get kids talking not only about their dreams and goals, but about ways to achieve them. The colorful moneybox teaches basic money skills through the concepts of spend, save, and share. Newly available is "Noom and Raj (moon and jar spelled backwards) Start a Business: The ABC's of Money." "That first product demonstrated the power of family discussion — the inspiration for our new line," says Moonjar Founder and CEO, Eulalie Scandiuzzi.

Books With a Twist –

Sitting down with a good book is becoming more interesting as well as interactive, with books that sniff, spin, and unlock. The "Nose Knows" series from Innovative Kids are fun, interactive mystery books that come with finger puppets with magnetic noses that click onto the page when pointed to the correct answer.

Tired of boring old flashcards? Innovative Kids has put a new spin on them. "Math Gear" books let you choose a multiplication table, then you turn number wheels to solve the problem. An added bonus -- no more lost cards. The same company has introduced the "Code Master" series. When you read the book, you are given clues to crack the code that unlocks the box. Inside you'll find games, maps, and more.

"Imagine If..." a "Toy of the Year" award winner from Thumbprint Adventures, provides a great start for young readers to create their own stories. Children choose the elements of their tale: a dragon playing drums on a volcano; a firefighter with paintbrushes in the jungle.

Inspiration for the Three-Foot-Tall Artist –

Faber-Castell has introduced erasable crayons, and the world of pre-school artistry will never be the same. They work with special erasers which come in easy-grip shapes and fun colors. The crayons are triangular shaped, which help improve fine motor skills. The "Aquadoodle" mat lets kids draw using water in a doodle pen. The water turns blue on the mat, then dries in ten minutes, leaving a blank canvas. With no ink and no mess, it is perfect for car trips, restaurants, or Aunt Helen's house.

Many of these toys and games are available now at local toy stores, while others are expected on the market over the next several months.

For more information, visit the manufacturers' websites:

www.cleverkits.com

www.spinmaster.com

www.innovativekids.com

www.etch-a-sketch.com

www.moonjar.com

www.creativityforkids.com

www.packypplayfair.com

www.smethporttoy.com

www.vidagames.com

www.thumbprintadventures.com

www.huggybuggy.com

Fiona Santoianni and Jean Zoeller are both mothers and co-founders of Toys and More, an educational toy store in Wappingers Falls.