



Teachers Resisting Unhealthy
Children's Entertainment

TRUCE PLAY AND TOY GUIDE

This guide will help parents
and educators...

- Promote children's creative and constructive play
- Work with others at home, school, and in the community to support positive play
- Make informed choices about toys

Play Belongs in School

There is a lot of pressure on teachers to shorten or cut playtime and recess. This is done to create more time for teaching academic skills that prepare children to pass high-stakes tests.

Quality play promotes skills that are necessary for later academic success — critical thinking, problem-solving, curiosity, persistence, creativity and a love of learning. Young children need time to play in school to develop these vital skills.

See "Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School" at www.allianceforchildhood.org and "Reading Instruction in Kindergarten: Little to Gain, Much to Lose" at www.deyproject.org.

ENDANGERED PLAY

Play is essential for children's healthy development and learning. Children use play to try out new ideas, actively construct knowledge, learn new skills, and grow socially and emotionally. Through creative play, a child lays the foundation for later academic learning.

The content of children's play comes from their experiences. Since today's children spend a lot of time with screens—TV, movies, tablets, DVDs, computers, and video games—they spend less time playing. And when they do play, they often imitate what they see on screens instead of creating their own play scenarios. This loss of creative play undermines optimal development and learning.

In this age of technology, media, and marketing inappropriate toys to children, play is more important than ever. This guide helps parents promote rich and meaningful play and choose quality toys and play materials. Teachers will also find this information helpful.



PROMOTING HEALTHY PLAY

Choose Toys that Promote Creative Play

Play provides the setting for children's learning. Genuine learning happens when children bring their personal skills into a play situation, run into a difficulty, work out that problem, master something new, and bring that new understanding into new play situations. This cycle of problem-finding and problem-solving can be called the **play-learning spiral**. Doing this comes naturally to children in free play situations.

Toys of value enhance children's natural ability to engage in imaginative, meaningful play that allows them to try out new ideas, solve their own problems, and find their own solutions. When children play this way, they are developing a solid foundation for success in school and in life.

Choose Toys that Promote Positive Social Play

Toys like balls, blocks, and imaginative dress-up clothes encourage children to play cooperatively and positively with each other.

Competitive play teaches children that playmates are opponents and winning is the primary goal. Cooperative play helps children learn to respect each other's ideas, to find solutions to problems, and to work toward a common goal.



As You Choose Toys, Model Respect for the Environment

- ◆ Reduce: Involve children in sorting through the toys they have outgrown. Donate or hold a toy swap.
- ◆ Reuse: Put away toys when children lose interest—and reintroduce them at a later date.

- ◆ Recycle: Transform everyday items into instruments, art materials, and toys.



Help Children Safely Use Play to Respond to Scary Events

When children see frightening or confusing images in the media or at home, they often use play to understand their thoughts or feelings. Here's how adults can help:

- Watch children as they play to learn more about what they know and what is worrying them.
- If the play gets scary or dangerous, gently intervene and redirect it. For example, ask how people might help each other. Provide toys that can help make things better, such as rescue vehicles and medical equipment. Follow the children's lead. Help them come up with ways for extending the play.
- After they play, talk with children about what they played. Reassure them about their safety. Clear up confusions. Answer questions simply.

WHAT PARENTS & TEACHERS CAN DO



Parents & Children

- Spend time every day playing with your child. Go outside to play whenever you can.
- Plan toy purchases together to limit impulse buying and overstimulating trips to toy stores.
- Provide uninterrupted, daily playtime, and make play materials easily accessible.
- Create a “screen-free zone” in your home where children can play.

Parents & Other Parents

- Share this guide with others.
- Support each other’s efforts to avoid buying toys of violence or items with logos related to movies, TV shows, or other media.
- Work together to reduce children’s dependence on screens and media-linked toys.
- Share ideas for constructive activities, toys, books, birthday gifts, events, and outings.

Parents & Teachers

- Express your opposition to a heavy focus on teaching young children academic skills at the expense of play.
- Support schools’ efforts to promote play.
- Organize a parent evening about the

importance of play and distribute this TRUCE Play and Toy Guide.

- Work together to develop school policies that promote healthy, creative play, and help schools to obtain an array of quality toys and play.
- Start a home lending library for books and toys which provide and model positive play options.

Parents & Community

- Create coalitions among existing community groups to support healthy play for children.
- Plan a community forum to promote public awareness about constructive play.
- Plan an event for swapping violent toys for constructive toys and books. Involve older children in these efforts.
- Post on Facebook and other social media, complain to stores, write to newspapers, and call TV stations if you see violent, sexualized, or offensive toys or advertising directed at children. Explain the issues by using facts from this guide.
- Contact Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www.commercialfreechildhood.org) for assistance in voicing your concerns.



THE ROLE OF TOYS IN PLAY

Toys have high 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.
- 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.
- Can be used by children to play alone, as well as with others.
- Can be enjoyed by all children, regardless of gender.



Shopping Tips

- Be thoughtful. Read our media and play guides at www.truceteachers.org to become better informed.



- Search out classic toys at yard or garage sales. With just a little cleaning up, the toy may be as good as new.
- Beware of toy shopping with your children. Understand the enormous impact of marketing to children today. Children may beg for the latest, heavily marketed toys that they spot at the store, but often those are the very toys that should be avoided.

TOYS & TRENDS OF VALUE

Specific toys listed in each category below are examples of toys that support healthy play. These suggestions are intended to be used as guidelines for making your purchasing decisions, not as product endorsements.

In fact, rich and creative play does not necessarily require expensive toys. Each category below suggest homemade play materials as well as commercial toys.

LET'S WORK TOGETHER!

TOYS THAT FOSTER TEAMWORK

Adapt your favorite board games to achieve a common goal. Play together, rather than against each other. There is no need for winners or losers. The game ends when all players have had a chance to finish.

Alternatively, the players can agree to work together to accumulate a group score.



- Feed the Woozle Board Game. Peaceable Kingdom. \$20.
- Count Your Chickens Cooperative Board Game, \$14

LET'S PRETEND!

TOYS THAT PROMOTE DRAMATIC PLAY

Together, children can use an old sheet or blanket to drape over chairs and tables to create a house, animal den, or cave. They can pretend a large cardboard box is a castle, house, or space ship. Limited only by their imaginations, children can use old scarves or fabric pieces as blankets, capes, parts of forts, costumes, flags and much more.

Or consider buying toys such as:

- Royal Capes. Magic Cabin. \$34.
- Play Silks. All ages. 7 silks from Magic Cabin, \$69. Nylon scarves from DreamSpun Kids; 6 for \$29.
- Pretend Kitchen Set. Learning Resources, \$25.
- Hand Puppets. Sets of 4 with zoo, farm, royalty, or fairy tale themes. Melissa & Doug, \$20.



LET'S BUILD!

TOYS FOR CONSTRUCTING

Children learn to work together, negotiate, and achieve a common goal by doing a puzzle or building together.

Or consider buying toys such as:

- 60-Piece Unit Block Set. Melissa & Doug. \$54.
- Lauri Locktagons. \$12.
- Foam Blocks. Starts at \$12.
- Magnatiles. \$51 for 32-piece set.
- Lincoln Logs. Hasbro. \$21.
- Bristle Blocks. \$15.
- Three Bears Family Counters. Learning Resources, \$17. Use these or other small figures to populate constructions.



TOYS & TRENDS OF VALUE

LET'S DRAW!

TOYS THAT INSPIRE CREATIVE ARTS

Affordable crayons, markers, glue, and paints can be purchased in discount and drug stores. Newspapers make a great background for many drawing and painting projects. Children can create a mural together on a large piece of paper. Use sidewalk chalk outdoors! Home-made playdough requires a few simple kitchen ingredients.

Or consider buying toys such as:

- Kinetic Sand, Sandbox, and Molds. \$18.
- 3-in-1 Magnetic Artist Easel. Cra-Z-Art. \$40.
- Travel Art Set. Alex. \$9.



LET'S MOVE!

TOYS THAT PROMOTE ACTIVE PLAY

Going to a playground, playing catch, jumping on a chalk-drawn hopscotch grid, searching for insects – all these activities promote physical development, coordination, imagination, and appreciation of nature. Indoors, play musical chairs with a noncompetitive twist. When the music stops, take away a chair, not a child, to encourage sharing of remaining chairs.



Or consider buying toys such as:

- Phlat Ball. Goliath. \$10-\$15.
- GlowWubble. Wubble. \$13.
- Crazy Legs. Endless Games. \$16.
- Hopper Ball. Little Tikes. \$12.
- Jump Rope. \$2 and up.

BEWARE OF THE SCREEN TRAP!

Screens are everywhere and kids love them, but they can lure children away from play. Some apps and games say they are educational, but they often can trick children into following pre-programmed scripts instead of creating their own play adventures. TRUCE hopes this guide will help support healthy, active play for your children throughout the year!



TOYS & TRENDS TO AVOID

AVOID TOYS THAT...



- Are linked to video games, computers, TV or movies dictating a play script rather than allowing children to develop their own ideas.
- Can only be used in one way, encouraging all children to play the same way.
- Look exciting but quickly become boring because they only require children to push a button and watch what happens.
- Do the playing “for” children, instead of encouraging exploration and mastery.
- Lead children to spend more time with TV or other media, letting the screen take control of their play.
- Lure children into watching the TV program or other media which is linked to the toy.
- Promote violence and sexualized behavior, which can lead to aggressive and disrespectful play.
- Separate girls and boys with highly gender-divided toys.
- Introduce academic concepts at too early an age, leaving less time for creative play that best prepares children for academic learning.

The toys listed in each category below are dramatic examples that illustrate harmful toy trends. When you shop for toys, ask yourself if the toy fits into one of these categories. If it does, then consider another choice, using our recommended Toys of Value list.

SO SEXY, SO SOON

TOYS THAT MAKE SEXINESS AND APPEARANCE THE FOCUS OF PLAY

Toys like Barbie Rainbow Hair Doll, Lulu’s Makeup Set, or Dream Dazzlers encourage even the youngest little girl to style hair, put on makeup, and be concerned with how she looks. “Glam girls should always be ready for beauty on the go!” shouts one promotion.



BUY, BUY, BUY!

TOYS THAT PROMOTE CONSUMERISM

The only purpose of toys like Shopkins or Dream-Works Trolls seems to be to collect them all. Their motto is: “Once you shop, you can’t stop!”

WANT FRIES WITH THAT?

TOYS WITH A JUNK FOOD FOCUS

Toys like Playdoh Double Desserts, Hello Kitty Birthday Party, and various Shopkins sets encourage kids to play with pretend junk food, perhaps enticing them to crave real junk food.

BANG...YOU'RE DEAD!

TOYS THAT PROMOTE VIOLENCE

Many toys with ties to Star Wars, Avengers, and other violent media characters encourage aggressive, violent play.



TOYS & TRENDS TO AVOID

BRANDS THAT BETRAYED

TRADITIONAL TOYS THAT NO LONGER PROMOTE CREATIVE PLAY



Classic, beloved brands like Playdoh, Duplo, and Lego now offer toys linked to media like Star Wars, Disney Princesses, Batman, and Hulk, encouraging children to recreate the movie or show, but not their own stories or creations.

Note that traditional toy sets from these lines still exist.

PINK IS FOR GIRLS, GUNS ARE FOR BOYS

TOYS THAT PROMOTE GENDER DIVISION



Walk into any big box store and you immediately know you're in the "girls' aisle," which is awash with pink. Girls' toys are not only pink but may be often concerned with princesses, appearance, and domestic play, while boys' toys often have a

tough, aggressive theme, or are concerned with vehicles, or sports. Choose toys that can be used and enjoyed by both genders.

MEDIA MANIA

TOYS THAT INFLUENCE KIDS TO IMITATE NOT CREATE THEIR OWN STORIES

Numerous toys tied to Star Wars, Frozen, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Minions, Avengers, and other media characters encourage children to recreate the movie or program, exactly as they have seen it. This kind of play robs children of the freedom to create their own scenarios and frequently leads to arguments about how to precisely imitate the scripts of movies and shows.



SWIPE, TAP, & STARE

WHEN TECHNOLOGY REPLACES PLAY

All the child does is turn on the toy and watch it play games designed and programmed by adults, thus removing any creativity from the child to make up his/her own games. Some new high tech toys now gather information or even videos of the child, raising serious concerns about privacy.



TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment) is a national group of educators deeply concerned about how today's children's entertainment and toys are affecting the play, learning, and behavior of the children in our classrooms.

Please copy and distribute this guide. No permission is needed.

For more information and to find other TRUCE publications, including our "Seasonal Family Play Plans" and "TRUCE Guide for Using Children's Books to Promote Play," visit www.truceteachers.org, find us on Facebook at TRUCE Teachers, or contact us at truce@truceteachers.org or 160 Lake View Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.