

TRUCE

2000-2001

Toy Action Guide

Play is essential to children's healthy development and learning. Children use play to actively construct knowledge and acquire life skills. The content of their play comes from their own experiences. Changes in today's childhood are undermining play. Because of the pervasive influence of the electronic media – such as TV, movies, videos, computer – children spend more time sitting in front of a screen and less time playing creatively with each other.

Toys are the tools of children's play. Toys influence play. Toys of value enhance children's natural ability to engage in imaginative, meaningful play by allowing them to bring their own ideas and solve their own problems. Many of the toys on the market today are highly structured and linked to TV and videos. These toys channel children into imitative play, robbing them of their own imagination, problem solving, and creativity.

Parents are constantly faced with decisions about what toys to buy and what toys to avoid. Peers, ads, and link-ups between products and the media pressure parents and children to buy every new toy from TV or movies, instead of making thoughtful decisions about which toys promote the healthiest play. This guide is intended to help parents promote their children's creative and constructive play by making informed choices about toys, and by working with other adults at home, school, and in the community to promote positive play and toys.



What Parents & Other Adults Can Do

In 1984, the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children's television. This made it legal to sell toys through TV programs. Since deregulation, most best selling toys have been linked to children's TV shows and other electronic media, many of which promote violence, sexiness, and buying more and more. Deregulation has made choosing toys and creating a healthy play environment harder for adults. Dealing with this challenge provides an opportunity to build communication and share values with children in a meaningful way. It also offers adults a chance to work together with schools and the community to create healthy play options for children.

parents & children

- Provide interesting activities, materials, field trips to encourage positive interests, hobbies.
- Define your values about violence and share them with your children.
- Shop at toy stores that consciously don't sell toys of violence or toys that undermine healthy play.
- Take action— write a letter to a toy company or store. (see below)
- Plan toy purchases together and limit impulse buying and overstimulating trips to toy stores.
- Provide uninterrupted daily playtime and organize play materials so they are easily accessible.
- Work together to make thoughtful decisions about the role of media in the home.

parents & other parents

- Support each others' efforts to reduce children's exposure to TV shows and movies that are used to market toys, especially violent toys.
- Support each others' efforts to avoid buying toys of violence or items with logos related to movies, TV shows, restaurants, etc.
- Share resources for activities, good toys and books, ideas for birthday gifts, events and outings with other families.
- Share strategies and ideas for alternatives to TV, especially at difficult times of day.

parents & teachers

- Provide information for parents on the importance of play and how toys and media affect it.
- Help parents find effective ways to promote healthy play and limit their children's involvement with TV, movies, videos, computer.

- Work together to develop school policies that promote healthy play (e.g., ample free play).
- Start a home lending book and tape program to provide positive leisure-time play options.

parents & community

- Create coalitions among existing community groups who support healthy play environments for children, plan a community forum on this issue.
- Organize efforts to voice concerns about harmful toys being marketed or advertised to children in your community (e.g., complain at stores, write letters to newspapers).
- Plan a violent toy trade-in, good toy and book fair or swap. Involve older children in your efforts.

Dear [Toy Company President/Toy Store Manager

I recently shopped at _____. I found [toy] harmful to children because of the lessons it teaches about violence.

As a [parent/guardian], I am deeply concerned about the escalating violence in our country and the role [your product] may play in promoting it. I will tell at least ten others about my concerns with [your product] and urge them to protect their children from it.

I hope you share my concerns about violence and children. I urge you to play your role in helping to reduce the epidemic of violence in homes, schools, and communities by refusing to sell toys of violence.

Sincerely yours,

Choosing Toys of Value

All toys listed are suitable for girls and boys. Age guidelines represent youngest age for safety and appropriateness. however, we have selected toys that children can use throughout their early years.

Toys have enhanced play value when they . . .

- Can be used in many ways.
- Allow children to determine the play.
- Appeal to children at more than one age or level of development
- Are not linked to video games, TV or movies
- 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 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.

Choose toys that promote . . .

➤ **Dramatic Play.** Helps children work out their own ideas about their experiences. Provides a powerful way of learning new skills and a sense of mastery. Examples: blocks, toys vehicles- cars, trucks, planes boats; dress up clothes, small animals, dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, props to recreate real life (post office, restaurant, store), materials for creating small worlds like doll houses, castles.

- **Brio Tractor Trailer w/ Bulldozer (Brio)** Ages: 18 months& up \$25
Two trucks for sand and dramatic play.
- **Groovy Girls & Groovy Boys (Manhattan Toys)** Ages: 18 months& up \$10-\$20
Brightly dressed, multicultural fabric dolls in a variety of sizes.

➤ **Manipulative Play with Small Play Objects.** Develops small muscle control and eye-hand coordination. Teaches about relationships between objects, essential for understanding math and science. Examples: construction sets and toys with interlocking pieces (Legos, Lincoln Logs), puzzles, pegboards, miniature models, parquetry blocks.

- **Brio Builder System (Brio)** Ages: 3 & up
Endless Building Possibilities is a great starter set with realistic tools and wooden and plastic building pieces. \$40
Toolbox has more tools and additional building materials, in plastic carry case. \$30
In addition, there are a variety of more representational construction-kits for older children (fire station, construction vehicles, race cars, etc.) Ages: 5-8 years Varying prices
- **Jigsaws in a Box (Lights, Camera, Interaction! Inc.)** Ages: 3-6 \$10-\$15
Box containing 4 small wooden puzzles, each w/ 12-24 pieces. Each set is based on a theme (vehicles, animals, dinosaurs, etc.)
- **Wiggly Giggly Collection (HandsOnToys, Inc.)** Ages: 3 months – 5 years \$2-\$10
A variety of balls and stackable rattles that shake, rattle and roll to create amusing sounds and visually interesting effects.

Support independent, specialty toy stores, that have made a commitment to high quality, non-violent toys.

► **Creative Arts.** Encourages self-expression and the using of symbols, a vital skill for problem solving and literacy. Examples: poster and finger paints, assortment of blank paper of all sizes and colors, crayons and markers, scissors, glue, recycled materials, stamps, clay, weaving kits.

• **Nature Patterns Blocks (T.C. Timber)** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$25**
Wooden pattern blocks in a variety of geometric shapes that are found in the natural world (i.e. hexagonal shape, beehive).

• **Kaleida Jewels (Global Toys, Inc.)** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$16**
144 colorful, sparkly holographic magnets in 6 shapes for creating patterns and pictures. Comes with a 10"x10" double-sided travel magnet board.

• **Clay Faces (Alex)** **Ages: 4 & up** **\$15**
Clay Modeling Activity Kit comes w/ 2 lbs of clay in 10 colors, 25 cutters, sculpting tool and rolling pin.

► **Physical Play.** Promotes healthy body awareness and coordination and helps let off steam. Opportunities for social interaction. Examples: bikes, scooters and other wheel toys, balls, bats, jump ropes, space trolleys, pogo sticks, giant chalk, swing sets, climbing structures, play tunnels.

• **Gripper Bowling Set (Saturnian Inc.)** **Ages: 18 months & up** **\$30**
Colorful, soft numbered pins w/ soft "gripper" ball. Appropriate for a wide range of ages, and for indoor / outdoor play.

• **Dart Ball (P.T.S., Inc.)** **Ages: 4 & up** **\$22**
Balls and large inflatable target with Velcro sticking action.

• **Colorful Balls (TC Timber)** **Ages: 9 months & up** **\$6-\$8**
Durable plastic in bright colors and designs—lady bugs, farm animals, etc.

► **Game Playing.** Teaches about taking turns, planning strategy, sequencing, rules, and cooperatiion. Examples: board games like checkers and chess, card games, jacks.

• **Hand in Hand/Pillow Pincher/Variland (Selecta Spielzeug)** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$25-\$29**
Wooden matching and sorting games with appealing, multi-cultural images of children.

• **Walk in the Woods (Family Pastimes)** **Ages: 3-7** **\$14**
Board game. Enjoy a walk in the woods—look at beautiful butterflies, pick apples, avoid poison ivy, solve problems together.

Remember the Classics! • table blocks • ocean, farm, and rainforest animals or insects

- construction sets (Legos, Lincoln Logs, etc.)
- people and animal props
- tool sets
- flashlights
- dolls with accurate features
- clay
- basic art supplies
- blocks
- cars, trucks, boats, planes and trains
- dress-up clothes and house-wares
- bean bags
- balls
- jump ropes
- playing cards
- puzzles
- tape stories
- medical kits
- musical instruments

► **Things You Can Do For Free** ◀

Reading Books. Provides exciting content to use in play and an essential foundation for literacy. Children enjoy telling, acting out and drawing their own stories. Visit your local library. Select books with meaningful stories and characters and positive values.

Play with Natural Materials. Using sand, water, mud, rocks, shells and leaves cultivates a love of nature and the environment. Extend play with buckets and shovels, bubble blowers, watering cans, plastic tubing, cardboard boxes for collecting and sorting, magnifying glasses, flashlight, butterfly net, balance scales

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Toys and Toy Trends to Avoid

We have chosen toys which dramatically illustrate the harmful toy trends. Some toys could fit into more than one category.

Toys have limited play value when they . . .

- ▶ Can only be used in one way.
- ▶ Encourage everyone to play the same way as determined by the toy designer.
- ▶ Appeal primarily to a single age or level of development.
- ▶ Will probably sit on a shelf after the first “fun” half hour.
- ▶ Will channel children into imitating scripts they see on TV or movies screens.
- ▶ Do special high tech actions for the child instead of encouraging the child's exploration and mastery.
- ▶ Lure children into watching the TV program or other media linked to the toy.
- ▶ Promote violence and stereotypes, which can lead to disrespectful and aggressive behavior.

Try to avoid toys that . . .

▶ **Make Electronic Technology the Focus of Play.** Many billed as educational, but most control and limit play, leading to “smart” toys, not “smart” children. Examples: dolls, stuffed animals, phones and books that talk when a button is pushed.

• **Electronic Hand-Held Video Games (Milton Bradley).** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$20**
These include games such as Candyland and Mr. Potato Head. A new twist on an old favorite. Traditional toys and board games become computerized leading to solitary play.

• **Soft and Smart Puppy Phone (Knowledge Kids Enterprises)** **Ages: 9 months & up** **\$10**
A cross between a stuffed toy dog and a phone promising to teach language and reasoning skills and “creativity”.

▶ **Hook Infants & Toddlers on TV, Computers, and Other Media.** Young children need to interact directly with people and materials and experience their direct effect on the immediate environment., not watch toys play for them. Examples: talking play computers that say the alphabet, colors or numbers.

• **Little Smart Storytime Rhymes – Leap Frog (V-Tech)** **Ages: 6months & up** **\$13**
Computerized books that undermine literacy by teaching young children to expect books to entertain them. Small fingers “press arrow buttons and bring nursery rhymes to life!”

• **Little People Animal Sounds Farm (Fisher Price)** **Ages: 11/2 & up** **\$30**
Classic little people farm with the addition of new technology which makes animal sounds. A video tells children how to play.

▶ **Lure Young Girls Into Pretending to Be Teenagers.** Promote stereotyped and sexualized behaviors — focus on appearance and bodies; equate self worth with beauty and appearance. Examples: Dolls based on real teenage stars and pop music; “pretend” make-up, tattoos, body piercing, jewelry.

• **Make-Up Mindy (HASBRO)** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$20**
A doll that comes with beauty mask, nail polish, and make-up, encouraging girls to “make her pretty over and over” again.

• **Superhero Buttercup: The Powerpuff Girls (Cartoon Network)** **Ages: 18 months & up** **\$15**
Small plush doll with “Laser-blast eyes”. When you push her tummy, she makes shooting sounds and says, “Smash! Smash! Right in the kisser” and “I think they are asking for a hiney whooping!”

▶ **Emphasize Violent, Grotesque and Sexual Images.** Adds to an unhealthy focus on anti-social play that undermines the lessons caring adults teach. Examples: Action figures of male and female professional wrestlers, science fiction or horror TV programs or movies.

• **WWF Buried Alive (JAKKS Pacific)** **Ages: 4 & up** **\$10**
Four action figures based on real-life wrestlers seen on TV, a burial mound with a pop-up casket, a casket with a removable lid, and a break- away tombstone.

- **Nerf Series Including Bungee Blaster and Double Crossbow** **Ages: 6 & up** **\$10**

Toys that claim to be safe (because they are made of soft, foam like materials) while encouraging dangerous play "Fire 2 missiles at once" or launch projectiles for "super cool fun".

► **Are Linked to Commercial Products and Advertisements.** Turn play into ads for products and ensure an early and easy market for brand-names. Examples: toys with the logos of fast food restaurants, chain stores, and junk food products.

- **Playdoh Fast Food Kits: Taco Bell and Chicken McNuggets Happy Meal Playshop (HASBRO)** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$10**

Children make the same junk foods they see on TV ads. The McDonalds Playshop comes with a coupon for a free Happy Meal.

- **Baby Lego-Disney's Baby Mickey (Primo)** **Ages: 6-24 months** **\$15**

Baby Mickey dressed in blue and Baby Minnie dressed in pink lure young children into the corporate world of Disney.

► **Take the Creative Play Out of Classic Toys.** Dictate what and how to play and undermine creativity and learning. Examples: Balls made to look like bombs, play-dough with molds to make items in only one way, construction toys with directions to build only one way.

- **Easy Bake Kitchen with CD Rom Play Set (Interactive)** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$3**

A simulated cooking experience that promises "No waiting, no mess" and "Instant fun for the littlest bakers" as children place the "bake set" on their computers and follow directions on the CD.

- **WWF Attitude Bears-Al Snow and other WWF figures (TITAN Sports)** **No Age** **\$13**

Small stuffed teddy bear holding the severed head of a little bear. Comes with trading card of the wrestler Al Snow who is holding the severed head of a woman.

► **Are Linked to TV Programs, Movies and Video Games Rated for Teens or Adults.**

Expose children to inappropriate content not designed for them.

Examples: Action figures, dolls and other products linked to PG-13 or R-rated movies or TV-14 programs.

- **X-Men Action Figures: Storm (Halle Berry) and Mystique (Rebecca Romijn-Stamos)** **Ages: 5 & up** **\$6**

6" Scantily clad action figures representing the primary heroines of this rated PG-13 movie.

- **Dragon Ball Z Super Glove (MGA Entertainment)** **Ages: 5 & up** **\$10**

From the Cartoon Network. A glove that turns your body into a weapon with "fireball hurdling sound effects" and "light burning from the finger tips".

► **Link Play to Candy and Unhealthy Foods.**

Encourages poor nutrition; condition children to expect a treat as part of play. Examples: Miniature boxes of sugar cereals and other snack foods, toys linked to fast food restaurants, candy necklaces, motorized lollipops, plastic animals with candy body parts.

- **Kellogg's Fruit Loops! Counting Fun Book (Barbara Barbier McGrath)** **Ages: Infants & Up** **\$6**

Cover looks like cereal box. Count out fruit loops by putting them into holes in the book. Also: *The M&M's Brand Chocolate Candies Counting Board Book* (Charlesbridge) and *The Hershey Kisses Counting Board Book* (Corporate Board Books).

- **Fisher Price Games-Oreo Matchin' Middles** **Ages: 3 & up** **\$7**

Players reach into cookie jar; find matching half of an Oreo cookie. The box promises "24 OREO cookie halves" to future consumers.

A Letter About Fighting Toys:
for Children & Adults to Talk About Together

Some kids really love toy guns and toys with weapons on them. They have fun pretending to fight with them. A lot of teachers worry about weapon toys. They think that if kids play with these toys and pretend to fight and kill, it will teach kids that it's okay to hurt people and that fighting and hurting is fun. Kids often say, "We're only pretending. We're just 'playing.'"

Some teachers say kids in their classes pretend to be characters on TV. Kids act out kicking and fighting. Then kids often really do hurt each other. It gets scary. It isn't pretend, teachers say.

Many teachers are worried. They are angry that TV shows and ads make violent toys look cool so kids want to buy them. They say companies shouldn't be allowed to sell violent toys to kids on TV.

Teachers hope this letter will help families talk together about the toys they buy and make thoughtful choices.

- What do you think about what the teachers say?
- What do you think teachers, parents and children should do about fighting toys?
- What can grown-ups do to help children be safe and learn not to fight?
- What ideas do you have about how children can play without fighting toys?

Thanks, From Many Teachers All Over the Country

For more information contact: TRUCE PO Box 441261, West Somerville, MA 02144

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Shoe Box Gifts for hours of creative play

Usually, giving gifts to children means buying manufactured toys at a store. Here is an alternative gift idea that you can easily put together. Shoe box gifts are collections of small, familiar items that are organized around a play theme and presented in an appealing way. They also show that expensive toys in fancy packages aren't necessarily the best. The process of putting together such an easy, yet imaginative and age-appropriate gift for a special child in your life can be very satisfying for you, too.

Making Shoe Box Gifts

- Decorate an empty shoe box and lid (gift wrap, stickers, etc.)
- Choose a theme and put a clear label on the box which includes both a simple word and picture of the theme.
- Most of the items we suggest are found at hardware stores, pharmacies, stationary stores, and art/crafts stores, supermarkets.
- Use small containers, zip-lock sandwich bags, or building dividers with small pieces of cardboard to make "compartments" for the various items in the shoe box. Young children appreciate organization-being able to return everything to its "place."
- Most of these suggestions are appropriate and safe for children to use independently; however, objects in some kits may require adult supervision and/or aid (e.g., food coloring).

Shoe Box Gift Theme Ideas: Use these or create your own

BABY BOX

(to be used with a baby doll or stuffed animal)

- newborn disposable diapers
- empty plastic baby food jars
- baby-size spoon
- plastic baby bottle
- infant clothes & blanket
- small wash cloth
- pacifier & rattle
- bib

RESCUE/FIRST AID

- flashlight
- bandaids
- ace bandage
- sling
- eye patch
- gauze
- stethoscope
- surgical mask

OFFICE

- stapler (4 or 5 yrs. & up)
- hole puncher
- tape
- post-its or message pad
- small clipboard
- receipt book
- sticky-back blank labels
- key ring with old keys
- pens/pencils/markers
- ink pad & stamp

PLAY DOUGH

- buy a can of playdough or make your own
- garlic press
- plastic knife
- popstick sticks
- wooden dowel
- plastic lids
- small tray/plate
- buttons/beads
- plastic animals

Resources

BOOKS

- Bronson, M. (1995). *The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8: Selecting Play Materials to Support Development*. Washington, DC: NAEYC (www.naeyc.org).
- Carlsson-Paige N. and Levin, D.E. (1990). *Who's Calling the Shots? How to Respond Effectively to Children's Fascination with War Play and War Toys*. Gabriola Island, BC, CAN: New Society (www.newsociety.com).
- Levin, D. E. (1998). *Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*. Washington, DC: NAEYC (www.naeyc.org).
- Ready at Five Partnership, *Moving Young Children's Play Away from TV Violence and Bringing Parents Into the Picture*, available through Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org).
- Walsh, D., (1995). *Selling Out America's Children*. Minneapolis: Fairview Press. Available through the National Institute on Media and the Family (www.mediaandthefamily.org).

ORGANIZATIONS

Center for a New American Dream

6930 Carroll Ave, Ste. 900

Takoma Park, MD 20912 www.newdream.org

- Publishes booklet: "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture"

Commercial Alert

1611 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Suite 3A

Washington, DC 20029

202-296-2787 www.essential.org/alert

- Helps parents defend against harmful marketing & commercialism.

Lion and Lamb Project

4300 Montgomery Ave., Suite 104

Bethesda, MD 20814 301-654-3091 www.lionlamb.org

- Promotes healthy play & non-violent toys. Publishes Parent Action Kits Violent Toy Trade-in Manual

TRUCE is a national group of educators deeply concerned about how children's entertainment and toys are affecting the play and behavior of children in our classrooms.

TRUCE's goals are:

- ✦ To raise public awareness about the negative effects of violent and stereotyped toys and media on children, families, schools and society.
- ✦ To work to limit the harmful influence of unhealthy children's entertainment.
- ✦ To provide children with toys and activities that promote healthy play and non-violent behavior at home and school.
- ✦ To create a broad-based effort to eliminate marketing to children and to reduce the sale of toys of violence.
- ✦ To support parents' and teachers' efforts to deal with the issues regarding media.

For more information about what you can do and to make a contribution to cover our printing and disseminating costs, write: **TRUCE, PO Box 441261, Somerville, MA 02144**
www.wheelock.edu/truce; e-mail: truceteachers@aol.com

TRUCE is endorsed by: California AEYC Peace Committee; Cambridge Peace Commission; Cambridge-Somerville Child Care Alliance; Center for Children's Media; Concerned Educators Allied for a Safe Environment; Lesley College Peaceable Schools Center; Lion & Lamb; New York AEYC Anti-violence Committee; Television Project; TV-Free America; War Resisters' League.

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*Teachers **R**esisting **U**nhealthy **C**hildren's **E**ntertainment*

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