

Selecting Toys for Preschoolers (3-5 year olds)

Choosing toys for three to five year olds isn't easy, for several reasons. The children themselves are vulnerable to marketing, the latest thing or what their friends have and they can put enormous pressure on parents. There is an incredible array of things to spend money on, especially when you add electronic equipment, computer games, videos and DVDs. Parents are also vulnerable to the variety of pressures placed by society: give their child a head start, prepare their child for school and help their child learn to read, to name a few. An additional complexity is the "novelty and gimmickry factor", to which adults are often more vulnerable than children. Something new or something novel is sometimes attractive to adults who justify it by saying the child needs it or is bored.

If we step back and think about the best environments for children to create, explore, experiment and learn in, they may not necessarily contain large numbers of commercial toys. Materials for play and learning may include some commercial toys, but will also include many other things too: equipment such as sand pits, water tables, easels, tables, chairs and other furniture and ramps. When funds for purchasing toys are limited, parents have to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of spending money on commercial toys versus investing in other types of materials and equipment.

There are several overlapping characteristics of worthwhile toys that can be considered before purchases are made. Some of these are the following:

Sturdy, durable and safe. The most basic criterion of course is that toys are safe. A loved toy in the hands of a three to five year old will undoubtedly be subjected to a lot of wear and tear. Loose parts, sharp edges, and broken bits can obviously be unsafe.

Multipurpose. Toys are best that can be used in a variety of ways. Put quite simply, ask yourself, is the toy good for only one thing? If so, then you may want to question its value. The term *open play materials* is often used to describe the characteristic of multipurpose. These toys usually allow for the child to use some creativity and imagination. Think, for example, of all the things a young child might do with a doll, a wagon, or a set of blocks.

Engaging. Young children are driven to explore, experiment, and find out. Good toys allow the child to get involved, to engage and be an active participant, rather than just be entertained. There is an every-increasing variety of commercially available toys (often battery operated!) that basically require no more of the child than that she press a button or turn a dial, sit back and watch. While these often capture the child's interest intensely initially, with its bells and whistles, lights, and perhaps movement, this interest soon wanes. These toys are often expensive, and do have appeal to adults, so think carefully about whether or not they are worth the investment. In general, the more a toy allows a child to do, the better it is.

Added value. There are many toys available for purchase that are no more than substitutes, and sometimes less desirable substitutes at that, for items around the house. Some of these are imitations of the real thing (for example handbags, dinner sets, sieves and other kitchen utensils), while others are items that can be very adequately substituted for by household objects (for example, containers, stacking sets, tubes, small tents and cubbies). Other commercial toys are things that can be easily improvised. Again, when considering investing in toys, try to be sure it is going to add possibilities and opportunities to the children's experience that are in addition to the wonderful opportunities and possibilities offered by what is already there. Try to ensure that the toy offers opportunities different to those offered by real objects. Three to five year olds like to use real objects, so whenever possible provide them instead of toy versions.

Encouraging of collaboration and communication. One aim for three to five year olds is that they learn to be with other children in a healthy way and to form relationships. There is no doubt also, children need to learn to be comfortable with themselves, to enjoy their own company and to not be overly reliant on others. Toys and other play materials can assist this. In making purchases, consider the importance of having a balance of both opportunities for a child to engage by himself and for working with others.

Acknowledging diversity. Children can learn to appreciate differences at a surprisingly early age. Giving a child toys from a variety of cultures enriches the child's experience and can strengthen understanding of difference.

Aesthetically pleasing. One of the values that most parents would want to nurture in children is a sense of beauty. Think about that when purchasing toys. Children can learn to appreciate the smoothness of wood, the beauty of natural colours, the feel of soft smooth fabric. Their world needs to be much much more than a sea of plastic primary colours!

Having said all of the above, some of the best toys that meet the criteria are blocks (wooden, plastic, soft and hard, large and small), construction and manipulative toys (lego, Duplo, and the many other kinds) that allow fitting together and taking apart, and props for dramatic and pretend play , such as vehicles, animals, dolls and fencing.

In short, think carefully about what you want to support and encourage in your child. Appraise toys before you buy them in terms of the extent to which they are necessary to achieve your aims.

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