



TRUCE

2006-2007

Toy Action Guide



Play is essential to children's healthy development and learning. Children use play to actively construct knowledge, meet social/emotional needs, and acquire life skills. The content of their play comes from their own experiences. Because of the pervasive influence of the electronic media — TV, movies, videos, DVDs, computers, video games — children spend more time sitting in front of a screen and less time playing creatively with each other. These changes in today's childhood are undermining play.

A WORD ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

As the adults in children's lives, we can help them appreciate our natural environment. Children are curious about the world around them, finding joy in a leaf, acorn, or rock they discover while outside. Children learn from the behaviors we model for them. We can provide a model that demonstrates our commitment and responsibility to our environment.

cont. on p. 3

Toys, the tools of children's play, influence that play. Toys of value enhance children's natural ability to engage in imaginative, meaningful play by allowing them to try out their own ideas and solve their own problems. However, many toys rob children of opportunities to use their own imaginations, creativity, and problem solving skills. These types of toys are often linked to popular media images and programs.



Parents are constantly faced with decisions about what toys to buy and what toys to avoid. The influence of high-powered marketing and popular culture interfere with thoughtful decision-making at the toy store.

This guide is intended to help adults promote children's creative and constructive play by making informed choices about toys, and by working with others at home, school, and in the community to promote positive play and toys.

Violent or traumatic events such as Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, acts of terrorism, and school shootings, affect everyone. Some children experience these events directly, others receive information about them. Some children are included in discussions, some overhear adults' or other children's talk, some hear or see it on the news. Many young children may be confused or frightened and try to work out their feelings and understanding in play. Adults can observe and guide the play by responding to what children say with simple, accurate information and keeping the play within safe physical and emotional boundaries.

(See guidelines, p. 2)

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What Parents & Other Adults Can Do

Since the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children's television in 1984, it has been legal to sell toys through TV programs. As a result, most best selling toys are linked to children's TV shows and other electronic media. Many of these promote violence, focus on sexy behavior and appearance, and encourage 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, trips to encourage positive interests, hobbies.
- Define your values about violent toys 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.
- Plan toy purchases together and limit impulse buying and overstimulating trips to toy stores.
- Provide uninterrupted daily play time 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

- Discuss the importance of play and how toys and media affect it.
- Suggest ways to promote healthy play and limit children's involvement with TV, movies, videos, DVDs, computers, video games.
- Work together to develop school policies that promote healthy play (e.g., ample free play).
- Start a home lending book and toy library to provide positive play options.

parents & community

- Create coalitions among existing community groups which 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.

Helping Children Use Their Play to Safely Work Out Scary Events

When young children see scary things in their own lives or in the media (news or entertainment), it's normal for them to bring what interests, confuses, or frightens them into their play to try to work out their ideas and feelings. Here are guidelines to help you respond effectively when such play occurs.

- Watch children as they play, to learn more about what they know, are struggling to understand, and may be worried about.
- If the play gets scary or dangerous, gently intervene and redirect it. For example, ask how people might help each other, and provide toys, such as rescue vehicles and medical equipment. [See Rescue / First Aid Kit, p.7]
- Try to follow the children's lead in the roles that you take rather than taking over the play. Help them come up with ways for extending the play.
- After the play, talk with children about what they played. Reassure them about their safety. Clear up confusions. Answer questions simply.



Choosing Toys of Value

This year, our focus is on classic toys. Many classics, such as blocks, provide more play value than newer, high-tech toys. As always, all toys listed are suitable for girls and boys. While our guidelines represent the youngest age for safety and appropriateness, children can use many of these toys throughout their early years.



Toys have enhanced 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.
- ▶ 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 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.

ENVIRONMENT

Apply the motto of reduce, reuse, recycle to gift and toy giving.

- **Reduce:** *Involve children in weeding through the toys they have outgrown. Donate to local organizations or hold a toy swap event.*
- **Reuse:** *By simply changing one aspect of a toy, you can make old toys seem new again. Ex. When interest in blocks lags, introduce props. Soon, children themselves will begin to think creatively and find new ways to play with old toys.*
- **Recycle:** *Renew everyday items by transforming them into toys. Use recycled materials to create instruments, toys, and other creations.*

Consider this... when you shop for toys, look for environmentally-friendly products.

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. Blocks are a classic toy that children never outgrow. Adding props encourages, inspires, and extends children's play. Props have the ability to help children recreate real life experiences as well as invent imaginary ones.

• Unit Blocks (Plan Toys, distributed in USA by BRIO)	Age 3 & up	\$40
Set of 50 blocks come from renewable rubber wood harvested from environmentally friendly plantations.		

• Rainbow Blocks (Guidecraft)	Age 3 & up	\$45
14 pieces of sturdy wooden frames with translucent colored plexiglass panels.		

Props for Dramatic Play:

• Animals (Schleich)	Age 2 & up	\$2-\$5
Many different kinds of domestic and wild animals that are hand painted with exquisite detail.		

• Die-cast Vehicle Play Sets (MotorMax)	Age 3 & up	\$16
City-Construction-Emergency-Space themes neatly packed in a see-through backpack for storage.		


• Family Affair (Ryan's Room)	Age 3 & up	\$15
Six member family of bendable wooden dolls. Family sets represent diverse racial and cultural groups.		

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.

• Makit (Schylling)	Age 3 & up	\$20
Strong, larger pieces of classic version of Tinker Toys.		

• Fabulous Village (Haba / T.C. Timber)	Age 18 mos. & up	\$28
56 colorful blocks---bigger pieces than similar sets--- safer for younger children.		


Choose toys that promote . . .

 **Creative arts.** Encourages self-expression and the use of symbols, a vital skill for problem solving and literacy. Develops fine motor skills. 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.


- **Magnetic Table Top Easel (Alex)** **Age 2 & up** **\$50**
Multiple use for painting, drawing, and magnetic play.
- **Super Saxoflute (Quercetti Intelligent Toys)** **Age 3 & up** **\$12**
Build your own instrument---interchangeable pieces---make your own sound.

Book about creative activities for children:

- **The Best of Making Things (Ann Sayre Wiseman-Handprint Press)** **Age 4 & up** **\$15**
A handbook of creative discovery for the whole family.
- **Making Music (Ann Sayre Wiseman-Storeykids)** **Age 5 & up** **\$10**
Quirky assortment of good sounds from found objects.
- **Look What I Did with a LEAF (Morteza E Sohi-Naturecraft)** **Age 4 & up** **\$7**
Works well with a science activity that includes an outdoor walk.

 **Physical play.** Promotes healthy body awareness and coordination. Provides opportunities for social interaction. *Reduce, Reuse and Recycle* ♻️ ideas for toy swaps: bikes, scooters and other wheeled toys, climbing structures.

- **Headlamp (Schylling)** **Age 6 & up** **\$6**
Hands-free way to see in the dark. Turn off the lights & create an indoor obstacle course using chairs, pillows, empty cartons or explore the woods while camping.
- **Roll-a-Rounds (Fisher Price)** **Age 3 months & up** **\$8**
Set of 6, 1 1/2 to 2 inches in diameter. A classic toy that encourages palm grasp and early eye-hand coordination.
- **Gertie Balls (Small World Toys)** **Age 2 & up** **\$7**
The selection of balls come with different textures that are easy to catch and can be used indoors. They are very durable and about 9 inches in diameter.
- **Skyo (Rhino toys)** **Age 3 & up** **\$5-\$10**
An ultra thin flying ring for the whole family that is easy to catch and throw. Comes in 2 sizes.

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

- **Harvest Time (Family Pastimes • www.familypastimes.com)** **Age 3-7** **\$15**
Players work cooperatively to plant and harvest before winter. All Family Pastime games offer realistic challenges. Players help each other; they don't play against each other. This encourages developing critical thinking skills.

THE VALUE OF COOPERATIVE PLAY

Children learn many messages through play. When children's play is filled with competition, they learn that playmates are opponents and winning means that everyone else loses. When we support cooperation, children learn to live together better—respecting each other's ideas, finding solutions to problems, and working together toward a common goal. Example: Musical Chairs—When the music stops, take away a chair, not a child, encouraging sharing of remaining chairs. Almost all games can be changed with a goal of a shared outcome, accomplished by all players finishing rather than one individual winning, the rest, losing.

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

If you can't find stores that carry quality children's toys, you can contact the manufacturer on the web to order toys directly or to find a nearby location to purchase them.



Toys and Toy Trends to Avoid

We have chosen examples of toys which dramatically illustrate harmful toy trends. Many 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 in movies.
- ▶▶ 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.
- ▶▶ Introduce academic concepts to children too early, keeping them from the kind of play that truly prepares them for later learning.

Do You Hate Nagging?
 Using logos on toys teaches young children to make choices based on name brands not on the value of the product. "Branding" can lead to:

- unwise buying choices
- unhealthy habits
- nagging!

* "Branding" examples

Try to avoid toys that . . .

Exploit parents' desire to be "good parents." Take advantage of parents by promising to make kids smart by teaching the alphabet or numbers at too young an age. These toys undermine the development of appropriate play.

- **Numbers & Shapes Discovery Cards (Baby Einstein)** Age 9 mos. & up \$10
Flashcards with pictures that promise to teach babies numbers and shapes. Linked to Baby Einstein DVDs and videos.
- **Telephonics (Leap Frog)** Age 18 mos. & up \$20
Keyboard, book and telephone all-in-one unit that claims to teach letters, spelling, letter order.

Turn TV into the controller of play. Toys that plug into TV sets so children interact with the TV screen, turn playtime into "screen time." Frenzied pace and programmed actions can increase children's expectation for elaborate bells and whistles and make children observers rather than participants in their own play.

- **Plug It In and Play T.V. Games (Jakks)** Age 5 & up \$14-30
Each game comes with a unit that plugs into the TV set. Games are based on a popular TV series or movies such as: Pac-Man, Power Rangers, Sponge Bob, Care Bears, Dora the Explorer, Spiderman, Shrek, and Star Wars.
- **TeleStory: Interactive Storybook System (Jakks)** Age 3 & up \$18 +**
Mini-book cartridges fit into the TeleStory console that connects to a TV. As children use the console to interact with the story on the TV screen, the characters (all based on TV and movie characters like Sponge Bob and Lion King) come alive. ** plus cost of additional mini book cartridges.

Lure infants and toddlers into the electronic media culture. These toys control and limit play and creativity and get children used to being entertained. Very young children learn best by interacting with people and seeing their effect on real things. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends no screen time before age 2.

- **Sesame Beginnings DVD Series (Sesame Workshop) *** Age 6 mos.- 2 yrs. \$12 & up
Videos for babies and line of products-linked to the videos including stuffed toys, books, first birthday party kit. Videos for babies go against recommendation of the AAP and connect babies to media-linked products almost from birth.
- **V.Smile Baby: Infant Development System (Vtech)** Age 9 mos. & up \$40
Control panel, which fits in baby's lap, connects wirelessly to receiver that hooks into TV set. Contains five games that promise to teach colors, numbers, and more.

Don't believe every toy recommendation you read in parenting magazines.
 Some are tied to advertisers!


 **Make appearance, makeup and sexiness the focus of play.** Channel girls into very narrow play scripts where how you look—including being thin and wearing make-up and skimpy clothes—and what you can buy, is what matters most. Focus on highly sexy appearance and behavior confuses children.

• **Bratz Forever Diamondz Funky Fashion Makeover (MGA Entertainment)** **Age 6 & up** **\$30**
 Plastic head and torso, with jewelry and makeup, including lip gloss, nail polish, eye shadow, and glitter gel, for doll as well as child. Whole line of other Bratz Forever Diamondz products including video game and dress-up clothes.

• **My Scene Dolls (Mattel)**

A cross between Barbie dolls and the highly popular Bratz dolls, these very skinny, big-lipped dolls are “dripping from head to toe with faux diamonds...and hot fashions.”


- **Mall Maniacs** **Age 6 & up** **\$10**
 “Get crazy, go shopping” focuses play on shopping for sexy things.
- **My Bling Bling Bikini** **Age 6 & up** **\$10**
 Celebrity Lifestyle dolls with provocative swimwear with focus on the spa life.

 **Make violent themes the focus of play.** Often linked to TV programs, movies, and video games, these toys make violence seem entertaining and fun. Channel children into imitating violent TV scripts and anti-social play that undermines positive lessons caring adults try to teach.

- **Nerf n Strike Nite Finder EX 3 (Hasbro)** **Age 6 & up** **\$8**
 Plastic gun-like “blaster” that shoots suction cup projectiles up to 35 feet for “high precision target practice.”
- **X-men Stealth Beast with grappling hook launcher (Toy Biz)** **Age 4 & up** **\$7**
 Action figure comes with comic book (appropriate for children much older than 4). Grappling hook shoots small projectiles.

 **Heighten gender divisions between boys and girls.** Dictate that specific toys and interests are only for boys or only for girls. Encourage rigid gender divisions and stereotyped play. Lead to choosing toys based on gender, not play value of a toy.

- **Better Building More Fun (Lego)** **Age 4 & up**
Pink 190 pieces \$9 Primary colors 487 pcs \$14
 Girl’s version is pastel colored pieces of specific things that dictate what to make. Boy’s version has primary-colored, generic pieces allowing for more open-ended play.

 **Link non-nutritious food to toys and play.** Create an easy market for unhealthy, brand-named foods and their logos and early brand loyalty. Products like these undermine healthy eating and contribute to obesity and eating disorders.

- **McKids Play Food Set (McDonalds Corporation) *** **Age 3 & up** **\$10**
 37 pieces of McDonald's high fat and sugar food items. Promotes brand loyalty and unhealthy nutrition.
- **Just Like Home Fast Food Series (Geoffrey Inc.) *** **Age 3 & up** **\$15**
 40 Pieces of plastic food from fast food establishments, including Pizza Hut, Chuck E Cheese, Dairy Queen, Betty Crocker, Subway
- **Roll Around Swirling Surprise Gumballs (Fisher Price)** **Age 6 mos. & up** **\$22**
 Noisy, flashing, electronic toy that contains plastic balls with toys and candy inside.

[* See box on p. 5]

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**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?

From Many Teachers All Over the Country



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 or appropriate-sized 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, stationery stores, art/crafts stores, supermarkets.
- Use small containers, ziplock sandwich bags, or build 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.

STORY BOX

- favorite children's book
- cassette recording of adult narrating story
- cassette player
- headphones
- story characters (small plastic figures, puppets, stuffed animal)
- blank journal for creating original stories

SHOE BOX GARDEN

- plastic-lined shoe box
- potting soil
- seed packets
- small watering can
- popsicle sticks
- garden tools
- gardening gloves

NATURE EXPLORER

- nature guides with pictures of birds, trees, woodland animals
- small sketch book and colored pencils
- binoculars
- plastic magnifying glass
- camera (toy or real)
- vest or small backpack with pockets
- small ziplock bags
- bag of bird seed

RESCUE/FIRST AID

- flashlight
- bandaids
- fabric strips/ bandages
- ace bandage
- sling
- eye patch
- gauze
- stethoscope
- surgical mask

BLOCK PROP BOX

- small recycled boxes
- wood/dowels cut in various sizes
- paper towel tubes
- scrounge materials: old keys, plastic bottle tops, buttons, fabric scraps
- for sign making:*
 - cardboard
 - construction paper
 - tape
 - marker
 - index cards / post-its

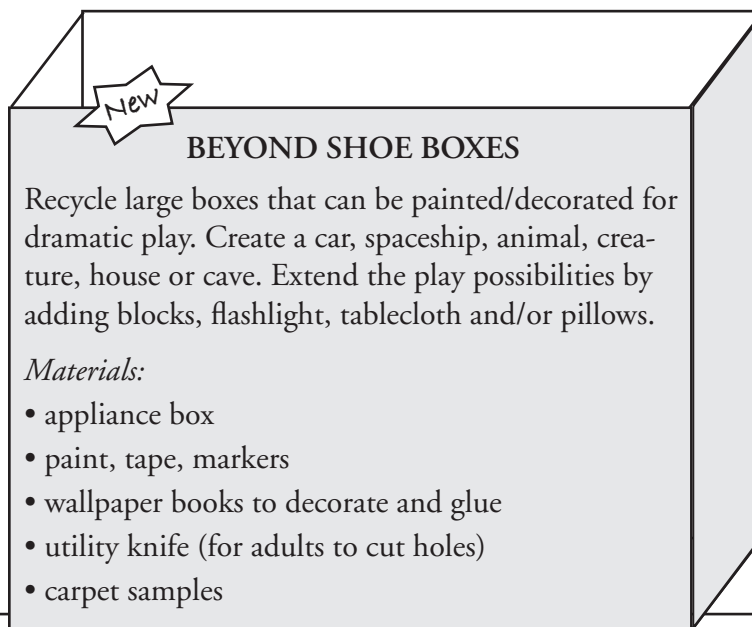
PLAYDOUGH

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

PLAYDOUGH RECIPE

1 cup flour
1 Tbsp. oil
1 cup water
1/2 cup salt
2 tsp. cream of tartar
food coloring

- Mix ingredients in saucepan.
- Cook on low heat. Stir constantly until playdough pulls away from sides of pan.
- Scoop playdough onto wax paper. Knead until smooth.
- Store in airtight container.



Resources

ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Childhood

PO Box 444, College Park, MD 20741
301-779-1033; www.allianceforchildhood.net

- Promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development and play.

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Judge Baker Children's Center
53 Parker Hill Ave., Boston, MA 02120
617-278-4105; www.commercialexploitation.org

- Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children.

Center for a New American Dream

6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 900, Takoma Park, MD 20912
1-877-68-DREAM; www.newdream.org

- Helps families consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice.

Commercial Alert

4110 SE Hawthorne Blvd. #123, Portland, OR 97214
503-235-8012; www.commercialalert.org

- Promotes policies and practices that stop harmful marketing to children, including "The Parents' Bill of Rights."

Commonsense Media

500 Treat Ave., Suite 100, San Francisco, CA 94110
415-643 6300; www.common sense media.org

- Rates media based on developmental criteria, including role models, commercialism, violence, and stereotypes.

Media Education Foundation

26 Center St., Northampton, MA 01060
800-659-6882; www.mediaed.org

- Provides educational videos on media literacy.

Playing for Keeps

116 West Illinois, Suite 5E, Chicago, IL 60610
877-755-5347; www.playingforkeeps.org

- Dedicated to improving outcomes and quality of life for all children by promoting healthy and constructive play.

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TRUCE is a national group of educators deeply concerned about the impact of children's entertainment and toys on 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 issues regarding media, toys, and play.

For more information about what you can do, to give us feedback, or to let us know how you are using the guide, please contact us:

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