



TRUCE

2007-2008

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.

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 box on 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 toys that promote and enhance 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. While our focus is on cooperative play, toys and materials listed below can be used by children playing alone as well as with others.

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.

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, dress-up clothes, fabric pieces, dolls, puppets, props to recreate real life (post office, restaurant, store), plastic and stuffed animals.

- **Farmer's Market (Mighty World Adventure)** Age 3 & up \$20
Market stand and food accessories set with two people figures. Easy snap-fit assembly.
- **Medical Kit (Battat)** Age 3 & up \$16
Travel case with 11-piece medical tool set for house calls as a doctor or veterinarian.
- **Bilibo (Active People)** Ages 2-7 \$30
Sturdy, versatile shell-shaped (15"x 15"x 12") plastic toy for rocking, spinning, or as an accessory for role-playing. Use indoors and outdoors, for active and dramatic play.
- **Smaller version (set of 2, 5"x 5"x 3")** Ages 1 & up \$12
can be used for dramatic play.

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, and visual discrimination, essential for reading. Examples: construction sets and toys with interlocking pieces (Legos, Lincoln Logs), puzzles, pegboards, miniature models, parquetry blocks.

- **Working Trucks (Valtech)** Age 3 & up \$33
Connect magnetized truck parts to form 20 different truck combinations.
- **Krinkles (Battat)** Age 3 & up \$23
Interlocking plastic shapes for creative building. 85 pieces in a carrying case.
- **Night Animals-Inside/Outside Puzzle (The Straight Edge, Inc.)** Age 4 & up \$10
Nocturnal animals' eyes glow in the dark. Includes explanations of the food they hunt at night.


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.

Creating COOPERATIVE PLAY experiences



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. Adapt your favorite games to achieve common goal—play together, rather than against each other.

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. Collaborative art experiences are easy and simple. The process of creating together doesn't always require a lasting product. [See Sensory Fun & Collage Shoe Boxes, p.7.]


- **Rub-a-Dub Draw in the Tub (Alex)** **Age 2 & up** **\$7**
Six bathtub crayons with sponge. Wipes off easily on shower walls, tile surfaces, yourself.
- **Band In A Box (Melissa and Doug)** **Age 3 & up** **\$20**
Ten musical instruments in a wooden storage box.

 **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.

- **Team Walker (Weplay)** **Age 4-99** **\$89**
Unique set includes four pairs of colorful connecting, ski-like foot holders, 15.5" x 5", with adjustable rubber foot straps and handles. Move together, coordinating each step. Made of recycled plastic.
- **Leaping Frog (International Playthings, Inc.)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$20**
Includes toy trampoline, six lily pads and six beanbag frogs. Aim for lily pads when tossing frogs onto trampoline. Players can add up points to meet a group goal.

Books that encourage physical activity in the natural world.

- **The Tremendous Tree Book (Brenner/Garelick-Boyd's Mill Press)** **Age 3-6** **\$9**
Enhances a nature walk or camping trip by providing complex information about trees in a way that children can understand.
- **Under One Rock (Fredericks-Dawn Publications)** **Ages 4-10** **\$8**
Inspires children to explore city and rural environments.
- **The Kid's Nature Book (Milford-Williamson Publishing)** **Ages 4-10** **\$13**
365 indoor and outdoor activities and experiences.

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

- **Huuhuh! (Haba)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$19**
Cooperative board game with wooden ghosts in three different colors. Players take turns rolling a die and helping to get the ghosts back into the castle before the sun rises.
- **EarthQuake (Family Pastimes • www.familypastimes.com)** **Ages 5-7** **\$15**
The Rescue Team helps animal and human families get back to their homes. 1 to 6 players.
- **Yard Sale (Family Pastimes)** **Ages 4-7** **\$15**
Match up items at a yard sale to make complete, useful things, so nothing gets taken to the dump. 1 to 8 players.

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:** *Put away toys when interest lags. Reintroduce at a later date.*
- **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.

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

Toys have limited play value when they . . .

- ▶▶ Can only be used in one way and/or encourage all children to play the same way.
- ▶▶ Are limited to a single age or level of development.
- ▶▶ Are fun for the first 1/2 hour and then rarely get played with again.
- ▶▶ Do the play "for" children, instead of allowing for children's unique exploration and mastery.
- ▶▶ Lead children to spend more time with TV or other media, and/or let the screen take control of their play.
- ▶▶ Promote violence and stereotypes, which can lead to aggressive and disrespectful behavior.
- ▶▶ 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 too early and replace the kind of creative play that best prepares them for learning.

This year we focus on toys that limit cooperative play. Most of these toys lead to isolation from others, disconnection from real world experiences, and are connected to electronics. We chose dramatic examples of many possible toys on the market that can fit into each "Toys to Avoid" category listed below. Some of the toys we highlight fit into more than one category.

Avoid toys that . . .

Make violence the focus of the play.

Targeted to boys and often linked to media rated for older children, these toys encourage using violence as a method to solve problems, make violence seem entertaining and fun, guide children into anti-social play, and make the world feel like a scary place where you need to fight. Feeds into a culture of fear and violence.

- **UltraCorp (Lanard)** Age 3 & up \$6
Gruesome 12" figures, with big muscles and weapons.
- **Spiderman 3 Electronic Web Spinning Blaster * (Hasbro)** Age 5 & up \$20

A large gun that blasts spirals of web fluid into the air like the movie character.

Make appearance and sexiness the focus of the play.

Channel girls into acting older at younger ages and into a narrow focus on appearance, including: being thin and wearing make-up and sexy clothing. Promotes the idea

that how you look and what you wear determines your value. This focus on sexy image and behavior confuses children and can lead to negative self-image and eating disorders.

- **Bratz "Magic Make-up" (MGA Entertainment)** Age 6 & up \$20
Makeup for young girls and their Bratz dolls. Encourages girls to imitate the look of these highly sexualized dolls.
- **Digi Makeover (Girl Tech)** Age 6 & up \$69
Comes with a digital camera that plugs into the TV, allowing young girls to see how they look with different styles of hair and makeup.

Lure young children into media rated for older children.

Tied to TV programs and/or movies, these toys encourage children to play out confusing and scary content, act like older children and adults, and think media for older audiences is meant for them.


- **Play Town Wooden Figure Play System* (Learning Curve)** Age 1 & up \$5-\$6
Large-headed 3" figures of Hulk, Spiderman, and other characters from PG-13 movies.

Beware of Branding

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!

* shows toys that illustrate "Branding"

 **Use trusted TV programs to attract young children to toys for older children.** Seeing a familiar logo on a toy that should be for older children can convince adults to trust the toy and persuade young children that they want it.

- **Tickle Me Elmo* Barbie (Mattel)** **Age 3 & up** **\$20**
Barbie doll wearing a t-shirt with Elmo logo. Comes with miniature electronic Tickle Me Elmo doll. Uses Sesame Street name to take very young children away from baby doll play into the older content of Barbie play.

 **Claim to teach academic skills to very young children, exploiting parents' desire to be good parents.** Take young children away from the play they need to form the strong foundation needed for later learning.

- **Click Start My First Computer (LeapFrog)** **Age 3 & up** **\$60**
Keyboard plugs into TV. Refocuses children's natural learning from creative experiences to more screen time.
- **Laugh and Learn Storybook Rhymes (Fisher Price)** **Age 6 months & up** **\$13**
Plastic, battery-operated books that claim to teach the ABC's, numbers, colors, and first words to infants and toddlers.

 **Turn traditional creative toys into programmed play with violence.**

Traditional open-ended toys can be used in many ways. They grow with the child and let children be in charge of what happens. Structured toys tell children what and how to play. They're even worse when they tell children to imitate violence.

- **Lego Exo-Force Series (Lego)** **Age 7-14** **\$30**
A line of violent toys connected to an Internet site with scripts to conduct wars.

- **Optimus Prime Battle Rig Blaster (Transformer)** **Age 7-14** **\$29**
A large toy truck that transforms into a weapon. Comes with three darts and features "easy conversion to dart blaster."

 **Make children dependent on screens for play.**

Toys that plug into a TV or computer remove options for creative play.

- **Easylink Internet Launch Pads* (Fisher Price)** **Age 3 & up** **\$33**
Plugs into computer connecting young children to websites and online games. Three-year-olds have too much to learn about the real world to get hooked on the virtual world of the Internet.
- **Jammin' Gym Class (V-Tech)** **Age 4 & up** **\$30**
Children step on pad connected to TV which dictates the child's movements. The V-Smile Learning Center requires equipment (\$50) which is not included.

[* See box on p. 5]

Toy Recall

Millions of toys, all manufactured in China, have been recalled over the last few months. These include many of the most familiar and best selling toys made by Mattel, Fisher Price, and RC2, representing characters from Sesame Street, Dora the Explorer, Thomas and Friends, and Barbie. These recalled toys were easily accessible, found on aisles in Target, Walmart, Toys "R" Us, and other major retailers. Many were found to have excessive levels of lead, a substance banned in the US since 1978 due to the danger it poses to young children's brains and nervous systems.

The following sites will give you information about recalled toys you may have in your homes and classrooms as well as action you can take to prevent such risks to children's safety in the future.

**Sign on here to receive real-time email notices from the Consumer Product Safety Commission about recalled toys:*
<http://www.democracynaction.org/dia/organization-sORG/momsrising/signUp.jsp?key=2647>

**Sign the petition telling Congress that the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) needs the tools and authority to ensure our children's safety:*
<http://www.democracynaction.org/dia/organizationsORG/momsrising/signUp.jsp?key=2362>

Baby DVDs Fail the Test!

Manufacturers claim watching Baby Einstein, Brainy Baby and similar DVDs/videos helps babies get smarter sooner. But University of Washington researchers found that for every hour per day spent watching baby DVDs/videos, infants learned 6 to 8 fewer new vocabulary words than babies who never watched.

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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

Think Outside The Box

- 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.

SENSORY FUN

- hypoallergenic, unscented shaving cream
- plastic tray
- food coloring
- popsicle sticks, clean combs, plastic fork, etc.
- smock or old T-shirt [Adult sprays piles, lines, or other shapes on tray. Children sculpt, smooth, draw, and write.]

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

COLLAGE KIT

- roll of wax/craft/freezer paper
- recycled gift wrap/ribbon
- children's glue or tape
- fallen pinecones, other natural materials
- scrounge materials: old keys, plastic bottle tops, buttons, fabric scraps, etc.
- craft feathers, glitter, etc.

BLOCK PROP BOX

- small recycled boxes
- wood and dowels cut in various sizes
- paper towel tubes
- scrounge materials
- 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.

BEYOND SHOE BOXES

Recycle large boxes that can be painted/decorated for dramatic play. Create a car, spaceship, animal, creature, house, or cave. Extend the play possibilities by adding blocks, flashlight, tablecloth, and/or pillows.

Materials:

- appliance box
- paint, tape, markers
- wallpaper books to decorate and glue
- utility knife (for adults to cut holes)
- carpet samples

Resources

ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Childhood •www.allianceforchildhood.net
• Promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development and play.

American Specialty Toy Retailing Association •www.astratoy.org
• Look here for toy stores and toy manufacturers that carry many of TRUCE's recommended toys.

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood
Judge Baker Children's Center •www.commercialexploitation.org
• Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children.

Center for a New American Dream •www.newdream.org
• Helps families consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice.

Commercial Alert •www.commercialalert.org
• Promotes policies and practices that stop harmful marketing to children, including "The Parents' Bill of Rights."

Commonsense Media •www.commonsensemedia.org
• Rates media based on developmental criteria, including role models, commercialism, violence, and stereotypes.

Media Education Foundation •www.mediaed.org
• Provides educational videos on media literacy.

Playing for Keeps •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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