

# GIVING GIFTS for CHILDREN

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How do we as parents manage gift giving to our children? In this Acorn segment we are sharing some thoughts about this topic to give some insights into the art of simplicity; the value of experiences, memories and traditions; the differences between open-ended and close-ended toys and games; sustainability and AI.

## **Simplicity**

This powerful concept is a hard one to realize in our material world, but important to at least think about. There are early childhood parents and educators who believe that 4 gifts is enough for each child:

Something they want

Something they need

Something to wear

Something to read

It is also tempting to give our young children things that might best be left for another year. Do young children need a planetarium, train set and magna tiles all in one year?

## **Experiences/memories/traditions**

These are important gifts we can give to our children during the holidays. Giving children our time and attention during the hectic holiday season is meaningful and lasting. Traditions like lighting the candles of the Menorrah, Advent, Kwanza and Divali provide important family moments of continuity and faith. Decorating the house, baking, singing, playing and reading together as a family, and repeating these holiday rituals through the years provide expectations, memories, connections and a sense of security. Time, attention and togetherness are, in the end, the best gifts of all.

## **Open-ended and close-ended toys**

The kinds of toys we gift matters. The following article gives some insights to help understand the value and purposes of different toys/

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Mar 16, 2023

### **Open-Ended vs. Close-Ended Toys: What's the Difference?**

When it comes to choosing toys for children, there are two main types of toys to consider: open-ended and close-ended. While both types of toys can be fun and engaging for kids, there are some important differences to keep in mind. Let's find out the differences and benefits between open-ended and close-ended toys.

#### **Open-Ended Toys**

Open-ended toys are often simple and do not have a specific end goal or outcome. Examples of open-ended toys include blocks, play dough, art supplies, and dress-up clothes.

The benefits of open-ended toys are numerous. First and foremost, they encourage creativity and imagination. Children can use open-ended toys to create whatever they can imagine, without being limited by a specific goal or outcome. Open-ended toys also foster problem-solving skills and encourage children to think outside the box.

Another benefit of open-ended toys is that they can be used by children of different ages and developmental stages.

#### **List of Open-ended toys:**

**Blocks:** Blocks come in many shapes and sizes, and children can use them to build anything they can imagine.

**Play Silks:** Play silks are colorful pieces of fabric that children can use in a variety of ways, such as for dress-up, to create forts, or as part of imaginative play scenarios.

**Play Dough:** Play dough can be shaped and molded into anything a child can imagine, providing endless opportunities for creativity and imagination.

**Loose Parts:** Loose parts are a collection of materials, such as sticks, stones, shells, and fabric scraps, that children can use to create anything they can imagine.

**Art Supplies:** Art supplies, such as paints, markers, and clay, provide children with the tools they need to create anything they can imagine.

**Dress-Up Clothes:** Dress-up clothes, such as hats, scarves, and costumes, provide children with the opportunity to imagine and act out different roles and scenarios.

**Outdoor Play Equipment:** Outdoor play equipment, such as swings, slides, and climbing structures, provide children with opportunities for physical play and exploration.

**Nature Items:** Nature items, such as pine cones, leaves, and rocks, can be used in a variety of ways to support imaginative play and exploration.

### Close-Ended Toys

Close-ended toys, on the other hand, have a specific goal or outcome. They are often designed to be played with in a specific way, and once that goal is achieved, there may not be much more to do with the toy. Examples of close-ended toys include puzzles, board games, and toy sets with a specific purpose, such as a play kitchen or doctor's kit.

While close-ended toys may not have the same level of flexibility as open-ended toys, they do have some benefits of their own. For one, they can be great for developing specific skills. For example, a puzzle can help develop problem-solving skills and hand-eye coordination. A board game can help children learn to take turns and follow rules.

Close-ended toys can also be a great way to encourage social interaction. Board games and other group activities can be a fun way for children to spend time together and learn important social skills such as cooperation, communication, and sportsmanship.

### List of Close-ended toys:

**Puzzles:** Puzzles are a classic example of a close-ended toy. Children must fit the puzzle pieces together to complete a specific picture or design.

**Memory Games:** Memory games require children to match pairs of cards or tiles that are face down.

**Board Games:** Board games have a specific set of rules and gameplay instructions that children must follow to achieve a specific goal, such as winning the game.

**Action Figures and Dolls:** Action figures and dolls can be considered close-ended toys, as they often come with specific accessories and features that children can use to create specific play scenarios.

**Arts and Crafts Kits:** Many arts and crafts kits, such as paint-by-numbers or bead sets, provide children with specific instructions and materials to create a specific project or design.

**Musical Toys:** Musical toys, such as electronic keyboards or toy drums, often have specific buttons or keys that children can press to create specific sounds or music.

**Train Sets:** Train sets provide children with a specific set of tracks and train cars that they can use to create a specific layout or design.

**Electronic Learning Toys:** Many electronic learning toys, such as tablets or educational gaming systems, have specific games and activities that children must complete to learn specific concepts or skills.

In Summary...

In the end, both open-ended and close-ended toys can be great for children, depending on their individual needs and preferences. Open-ended toys can foster creativity and imagination, while close-ended toys can help develop specific skills and encourage social interaction. It's important to have a mix of both types of toys in a child's toy collection, to provide a well-rounded play experience.

### **Sustainable toys**

The following article goes beyond how we use delivery, boxes and gift wrap to include the materials with which toys are made, the updated components included in toys to underscore sustainable living, and toys that last for generations.

Washington Post, November 13, 2023

Opinion

The most sustainable toys are the ones that are fun for decades by Alyssa Rosenberg, Columnist *Rosenberg writes about mass culture, parenting and gender for The Washington Post's Opinions section. Before coming to The Post in 2014, Alyssa was the culture editor at ThinkProgress, the television columnist at Women and Hollywood, a columnist for the XX Factor at Slate and a correspondent for The Atlantic.com.*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/13/solutions-discarded-holiday-toys/>

As the holidays approach, my kids' toys evoke a Christmas carol, and not in a good way. I count: 12 Brio train cars, 11 plastic veggies, tens of Magna-Tiles, 900 picture books, eight tiny teacups, seven bathtub boat toys, six packs of markers, five sidewalk chinks, four tasteful block sets, three cans of slime, two blowup swords and a mountain of plush stuffies.

Like so many parents, I dream of professional organizing help and dread the annual tidal wave of junk. But I found a better, more holistic approach — in the last place I expected it.

It was on the crazed convention floor at the Toy Fair in New York City this fall that I caught sight of something not just shiny and new but genuinely covetable: a vision of play and sustainability that offers an alternative to the waste of toy consumption.

I learned that we can restore sanity to our playrooms and set our kids up for a greener world by thinking about the life cycles of their toys — from production to play to pass-along — and by harnessing the expectations that the toys foster in children.

Toymakers and distributors are keenly aware of market research suggesting parents value sustainability. A poll commissioned by the Toy Association, which stages the Toy Fair, suggests 45 percent of parents under 40 prioritize environmental impact when making purchasing decisions. Almost every company representative I spoke to in New York brought up what their toys were made of without prompting.

Some offerings are a testament to the miracle of modern materials science and supply-chain management. Gund, maker of plush toys, is spinning melted

plastic bottles into teddy bear fur and baby-duck down. Thailand-based PlanToys harvests rubber trees that can no longer be tapped for latex and turns the wood into cheerful peg people and witty play food, including a shuckable oyster.

Parents and toy store owners are pushing back against junk and over-purchasing in other ways. Popular “surprise” collectibles come wrapped in what Lizzy Newsome, owner of Las Vegas-based Kappa Toys, calls “an explosion of trash” to prolong the unwrapping process and heighten anticipation. And when kids get two of the same toy, the duplicate often heads for the landfill. Newsome’s solution is a trade-in desk: Kids visiting her shop can swap their extras to complete their collections.

Toys that enable crafty children to make sturdy, beautiful things for themselves and others mean the house won’t get cluttered with useless projects, and they teach kids to value lasting objects. Take the metal and wooden looms for children from Friendly Loom, based in Harrisville, N.H., a town that has preserved its key historic buildings and has a textile industry dating to 1794. With many-hued cotton loops and wool yarn, kids can make pot holders that actually protect a parent’s hand from heat, or a scarf that will last for many winters.

Even modest crafting toys can have long-term benefits. After a child has fashioned a cheery animal from a Klutz craft kit, they’ll know how to make their own pompoms. A toddler might love pulling the tape on the bird tape measure from Handy Famm; an older child can use the built-in level and angle-finder to learn woodworking or maintenance skills.

Parents looking to shrink the environmental footprint of the playroom should also consider what happens to a toy when a child loses interest. The high-density polyurethane that’s used to manufacture Green Toys vehicles, tea sets and beach toys can be recycled by some municipal waste departments. The company is also trying to design aluminum toy cars that could be repurposed with the same ease as a Diet Coke can.

And families who are ready to part with high-quality toys can now connect with parents who want to buy used playthings via secondhand marketplace Toycycle. It cleans and tunes up toys so parents can feel sure they’ll work and last. The recycling company TerraCycle has partnered with companies

including Hasbro and Spin Master to keep Mr. Potato Head and the PAW Patrol crew out of landfills.

Of course, the most sustainable toys are those so robust they can be passed down to delight another pair of little hands. My 5-year-old and 2-year-old zip around our house in my girlhood Community Playthings wooden lion ride-on and explore our neighborhood in my 1988 Little Tikes Cozy Coupe. At the Toy Fair, drawing striking geometric designs with a reissued die-cast Spirograph brought back memories of playing with my father's boyhood version — still in excellent working condition. I can't wait until my daughter gets her hands, and extensive marker collection, on it.

Meanwhile, the stories playthings tell are important, too. Just as feminists of the 1970s pushed for boys to be given dolls to normalize male caregiving, toys can normalize a new energy economy. Companies such as Hape and Playmobil are building mini houses and farms with tiny decorative solar panels in their roofs. Were they to add wind turbines, might a generation of kids grow up seeing these as simply part of the landscape, rather than as intrusions that must be opposed at all costs? And so, as the nights of Hanukkah and the days of Christmas approach, let's think about all the months and years to follow as we search for gifts for our kids that tread lightly on the world, and that just might inspire them to keep it beautiful, too.

## **AI**

Are AI toys developmentally appropriate for young children?

Washington Post, November 15, 2023 Opinion

I made an AI pal at the Toy Fair, but I don't want to invite him home

by Alyssa Rosenberg, Columnist|

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/15/pbs-snorble-miko-ai-toys/>

I met Snorble in a basement corner of New York City's Javits Center during the Toy Fair this September. We played a game, naming shapes. He made me giggle with his bear impression.

Snorble is not a person. Nor even a "he." Snorble is a robot pal for young kids. He's the size of a small owl, looks like a cheerful ghost on the hunt for a friendly house to haunt, and he's powered by artificial intelligence. He'll likely be in stores next year.

Need something to talk about? Text us for thought-provoking opinions that can break any awkward silence.

As such, Snorble is a reminder that questions such as whether high school students will use ChatGPT to cheat are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to kids and AI. Parents who will soon have to decide whether to welcome robot companions for toddlers into their homes should consider a few key issues before clicking "Add to cart."

The first: What is this for? In an age of overconsumption, that's worth asking of any toy. It is an especially good question given the potential for total absorption that robot companions offer and the nature of a child's developing brain.

As psychology and neuroscience researchers Tamar Kushnir and Teresa Margaret Flanagan noted in a recent literature review, younger children are more likely than older ones to believe that robots have agency. They are all on the cutting edge of a social experiment.

Many of the AI-powered toys for young kids shown at the Toy Fair are intended as parent-approved playmates — chipper little friends with infinite patience, a passion for educational games and no inclination for mess or mischief.

Miko, another robot companion, can tell jokes, start dance parties or let kids use the screen that doubles as its face to stream content from outside providers, including Disney and Cosmic Kids Yoga. Snorble might chuckle along with a kid who is reading a funny book, check in with a crying child, or play dress-up as a panda or unicorn thanks to RFID chips in his costumes. Snorble can also be programmed to assist with a customizable bedtime



routine, cheerleading a kid up the steps and into pajamas, before teeing up a prayer or reflection.

This multifunctionality is a reminder of how many areas of kids' lives AI could soon touch. For example, Snorble co-creator Mike Rizkalla envisions the robot encouraging kids, via a connected toothbrush, to really get in there and clean those molars: potentially reducing dental bills in exchange for some light surveillance. Or Dog-E, a robot puppy who enjoys having its ears scratched and getting a plastic biscuit, might offer an eerie simulation of pet ownership. Others, meanwhile, are developing AI tools intended to help kids learn by engaging them in conversation.

PBS Kids has funding from the National Science Foundation to work with researchers at the University of Michigan and the University of California at Irvine on interactives that could debut in 2025. Characters such as Elinor, the animated bunny star of "Elinor Wonders Why," could someday ask children questions about what's happening on-screen. The idea is that kids who talk about what they're reading or watching retain more and understand concepts at a deeper level.

If it's clear that AI has plenty to offer kids and families, the gnarlier question is how to make those experiences safe. One rule is to start small. Both Miko and Snorble use algorithms that run on processors inside the toys, rather than on the cloud. These products avoid uploading children's voices and questions to a database and avoid hacks that could give outsiders access to kids. Snorble and Miko can't trawl the internet and train themselves on unfiltered content. That limit means they won't start babbling about extreme politics or encourage kids to hijack cars, because the AI tools themselves won't know about those ideas.

Similarly, the PBS tools function like sophisticated search engines, crawling limited data. When a character asks, for example, "Do you think that snake will move faster or slower once it's shed its skin?" the broadcaster's AI will decode children's answers and choose from a menu of prerecorded responses.

Putting more mutable AI into products intended for children is dicier. At the Toy Fair, I stopped by the booth for ScienceWiz, a company that promised interactive e-books powered by ChatGPT. I asked Electra, the virtual assistant in the books, about her favorite birds and prehistoric eras. She praised "the

majestic peacock” for “its vibrant colors and stunning tail feathers” and singled out the Mesozoic as “particularly interesting.”

Electra’s creator, Penny Norman, was surprised: “Yesterday, she wouldn’t say she had a favorite.”

What if Electra got creative in other ways and started to preach bogus scientific theories, say? Norman pointed to a potential upside to that risk: It is an opening, she suggests, to train children to be skeptical and look for a second source. But that sort of media literacy lesson is probably beyond very young users.

Hence the importance of setting limits on the responses of AIs for kids. “I remember a three-week span where all we did was talk about Snorble being abused by children,” Rizkalla recalls. The team ultimately decided that Snorble simply wouldn’t respond to being cursed at or tossed against the wall to avoid rewarding kids with negative attention for bad behavior.

When I asked Miko Mini “Where do babies come from?” it replied that for “a human thing” such as this, I should seek the counsel of a grown-up. The aim of the programming, Miko co-founder Sneha Vaswani said, is that Miko “will never try to drive an opinion” or undermine what a parent might want to tell a child about a fraught concept such as “war” or “murder.”

At their most admirable, these AI tools are programmed to behave the way parents aspire to act. What father who has just been bit by a 2-year-old wouldn’t admire Snorble’s equanimity in the face of provocation? Wouldn’t all parents love to have the patience for infinite educational games, and a way to bring down the curtain on screen time without sparking a tantrum?

But no toy is a substitute for human company and adult wisdom. Miko can’t answer those big life questions, and Snorble, adorable as he might seem, can’t enfold kids in a loving embrace at the end of a long day.

Like a lot of parents, my husband and I have already welcomed some AI into our home. A mischievous expression creeps across my 5-year-old’s face as she tells Alexa to replace the jazz coming from her father’s speakers with “I Am a Gummy Bear.” The Roomba that scuttles around our floor like a drunken hermit crab has been named Arthur Crazy pants.

But Snorble? I'm not quite ready to let him in. For now, I'm content to chat with him on my metaphorical front steps and to see who he — and my kids — grows up to be.