

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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BEST BRAIN-BUILDING TOYS ARE THOSE THAT FOSTER INTERACTION BETWEEN PARENT, CHILD

DALLAS – Dec. 5, 2002 – Many parents are searching for intellectually stimulating toys for their children this holiday season. But a child psychologist at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas says that the best toy is one that fosters parent-child interaction.

“The best learning and play experiences take place when the toy, no matter what price, is more interactive, and more importantly, the parent takes time to interact with the child while he plays,” said Dr. Peter Stavinocha, assistant professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern.

“Stimulating your child is a parent’s job, not a toy’s job.”

Parents should remember that toys – no matter how much they cost or how much they amuse children with buttons, sounds or flashing lights – can’t substitute for parent-child playtime interaction, said Stavinocha, a child neuropsychologist. He added that there’s no conclusive proof that one kind of toy is better than another.

“The toys touted as intellectually stimulating are not necessarily going to make your child smarter than any other toy,” Stavinocha said. “The toy’s impact on development depends on how it is used, the interaction it promotes, the language that is used to discuss the toy, and the level of pretend play that it promotes.”

When it comes to selecting a “brain-building” holiday gift for your child, though, newer toys with electronic gadgets and sound-making features are not necessarily better than tried-and-true toys. A child can develop important life skills such as ethics, values and work habits even from the simplest toys as long as a parent plays a key role during playtime.

Traditional toys for children – like building blocks, crayons and puzzles – actually work as well as the more sophisticated “brain builders.” And, Stavinocha said, these simple toys may help a child develop life-long skills.

“Playing with crayons, drawing and painting unleash the creativity in a child and encourage old-fashioned imagination and exploration,” he said. “If a child simply hits the reset button on an electronic game, it can prevent the child from learning to tolerate frustration.”

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Playing with building blocks, for instance, can be frustrating. As a child stacks the blocks, the tower may wobble and fall. Re-building the tower, Stavinocha said, teaches a child problem-solving, how to deal with failure, and the persistence to work through it.

But even these toys won't help children develop if they're left to play alone. The main factor in the healthy development of neurological, social and motor skills remains parental participation during playtime, Stavinocha said.

For toddlers, Stavinocha recommends toys that develop senses and hand-to-eye coordination and that encourage exploration. Cause-and-effect toys, including ones that have buttons that make sounds when pushed, are excellent for toddlers as are larger toys like wagons and tricycles.

For children 2 to 5, consider swing sets, big balls to kick, playhouses and tape recorders. Stavinocha underscores the importance of books to help build brainpower. As children hear words spoken when an adult reads to them, it enhances their language development. It also stimulates their imagination as they visualize what is being read.

"I think that parents should pay attention to the intellectually stimulating qualities of a toy," Stavinocha said. "But at the same time they don't need to bend over backwards and drain their savings account to buy these types of toys."

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