

# AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

## CLINICAL REPORT

Guidance for the Clinician in Rendering Pediatric Care

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### Selecting Appropriate Toys for Young Children: The Pediatrician's Role

**ABSTRACT.** Play is essential for learning in children. Toys are the tools of play. Which play materials are provided and how they are used are equally important. Adults caring for children can be reminded that toys facilitate but do not substitute for the most important aspect of nurture—warm, loving, dependable relationships. Toys should be safe, affordable, and developmentally appropriate. Children do not need expensive toys. Toys should be appealing to engage the child over a period of time. Information and resources are provided in this report so pediatricians can give parents advice about selecting toys.

Children learn from the time they are born, and parents/guardians are primarily responsible for providing quality experiences from which their children learn. Parents often ask their pediatrician for advice about appropriate toys, books, and computer or video games, because they know that these tools may be important in their child's development. Pediatricians can use questions about toys as opportunities to discuss the importance of a child's environment at home and in child care. A young child's growth and development can be supported and enhanced through play. Toys bring parents or caregivers and children together in play. Early brain development is enhanced through these relationships.<sup>1</sup> These discussions are also an opportunity for the pediatrician to help parents understand the role of play in all areas of development, including cognitive, language, social, physical, and emotional development.

Toys can provide a bridge for a child's interactions with parents or other caregivers.<sup>1</sup> Although toys should never be used as a substitute for loving, unconditional attention from parents and other caregivers, toys can enhance these interactions. When adults participate in the play of children, learning is enhanced.<sup>1</sup> Parents are able to observe the skills their child currently has and also help expand those skills. For example, if an 18-month-old who is starting to enter the world of pretend play is building a tower with blocks, a parent can introduce the idea that the

blocks can also become a garage for the cars or a house for the stuffed animals. A child's self-esteem and level of mastery are also enhanced when adults participate in play.<sup>1</sup> Toys can facilitate the development of relationships as parent and child share in the mutual joy and delight of new discoveries.<sup>1</sup>

When pediatricians advise parents, it is important to stress that toys serve a supportive role in enhancing a child's development. Play materials should match the developmental and individual needs of each child. Some children may need toys that have been adapted to accommodate a motor, visual, or other disability.<sup>2</sup> All children benefit from toys that promote safe physical activity.

Some toys pose emotional or social risks. Graphic depictions of violence presented in an interactive way, such as in some computer or video games, can lead to acts of violence by the child.<sup>3,4</sup> Although video games are rated, even those deemed for "everyone" may contain significant violence.<sup>5</sup> Toy weapons or other toys that promote violence should be discouraged. Parents also should consider whether a toy promotes negative racial, ethnic, cultural, or gender stereotypes. The toys parents provide (or do not provide) send children a message about what is valued.

Some toy marketing includes claims that specific toys will facilitate specific developmental milestones. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that any toy is necessary or sufficient for optimal learning. These advertisements can promote misinformation, inappropriate expectations, and unnecessary expenditures. Even worse is the unfounded guilt parents experience when they cannot afford or choose not to make such purchases.

Government regulations, improved safety standards for the manufacture and use of toys, and product testing have made most toys safe when used appropriately for recommended ages and stages of development. Just because a product is on the market, though, does not mean it is safe. In determining toy safety, the characteristics of the toy should be considered as well as how the toy might be used or abused and the amount of supervision or help needed for safe play. It is important for pediatricians to be familiar with current recommendations about

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toy safety and guidelines on the safe cleaning and maintenance of toys.<sup>6-10</sup>

Pediatricians can use the information provided in this report to guide them in selecting and maintaining the toys in their office and make this information available to parents (see resource list). Although there appears to be no increased rate of acute illness for children who have just visited a pediatrician's office,<sup>11</sup> toys in the office should be routinely cleaned. Toys that are available in a pediatric office and how they are maintained will serve as a model for parents.

#### ADVICE FOR PEDIATRIC OFFICES

1. Office toys should be safe for all ages.
  - Do not provide small toys or toys with easily dislodged parts that fit in an infant's or toddler's mouth.<sup>2,5-8</sup>
  - Do not provide toys with loose string, rope, ribbons, or cord.<sup>2,6-9</sup>
  - Do not provide toys with sharp edges.<sup>2,6-9</sup>
  - Do not provide toys that make loud or shrill noises.<sup>2,6-9</sup>
  - Provide only toys made of nontoxic materials.<sup>2,6-9</sup>
  - Always store toys safely, and avoid toy chests with lids.<sup>2,6-9</sup>
  - Choose toys that are easily and routinely cleaned. When possible, each time a toy has been in contact with saliva or other body fluids, it should be sanitized (2 minutes of contact with a 10% bleach solution [1 tablespoon of household bleach per quart of water], made fresh daily, or use of an Environmental Protection Agency-registered sanitizing solution according to manufacturer's instructions), then rinsed and air dried.<sup>10</sup>
2. Office toys should be engaging and encourage creativity.<sup>2,6</sup>
3. Offices should include at least as many developmentally appropriate books and magazines as toys.
4. Posters from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Consumer Product Safety Commission concerning toys and safety recalls should be prominently displayed in the office.
5. For a list of appropriate and safe toys, see the Goodson and Bronson resource *Which Toy for Which Child*, available by order or online.<sup>9</sup>

#### ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

1. Keep in mind that the most educational toy is one that fosters the interaction of an adult with a child in supportive, unconditional play. Toys are never substitutes for the attention of devoted caregivers.<sup>1</sup>
2. Provide children with safe, affordable toys that are developmentally appropriate. Include toys that help promote learning and growth in all areas of development. Avoid toys that discourage children from using their imaginations. Social/emotional and cognitive skills are developed and enhanced as children use play to work out real-life problems.<sup>2,6-9</sup>

3. Make a thoughtful selection of toys and remember that a good toy does not have to be trendy or expensive.<sup>2,6</sup>
4. Use books and magazines to play and read together.
5. Be skeptical of educational or developmental claims made by advertisers, especially product claims of intellectual enhancement.
6. Seek the pediatrician's advice in distinguishing between safe and unsafe toys (see resource list).<sup>2,6-9</sup>
7. Remember that some toys promote violence or negative social, racial, or gender stereotypes. These toys are not recommended for children.<sup>3</sup>
8. Limit video game and computer game use. Total screen time, including television and computer use, should be less than 1 to 2 hours per day.<sup>4</sup> Children younger than 5 years should play with computer or video games only if they are developmentally appropriate, and they should be accompanied by the parent or caregiver.<sup>1</sup>
9. For a list of appropriate and safe toys, see the Goodson and Bronson resource *Which Toy for Which Child*, available by order or online.<sup>9</sup>

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