



Before you walk into a toy store...

We are constantly being inundated with advertisements telling us our child need this toy or that toy, and that our children need a new toy for every age or milestone they reach. The truth is there are many, many things we can add to the toy collection that are great for children of all ages, from toddlers to school age, and these items aren't gender-specific either!

It is true that as children grow, their needs and urges change. But there is one thing that stays the same, regardless of the age - children enjoy self-directed, self-initiated play, where they can engage with the objects of their choice in a way they find interesting. And while some toy manufacturers would have you buy a new toy for every moment in the life of your child, the truth is that the toys that stand the test of time and were fun when children looked at them or banged them together to see what sound they made, are also fun later on to stack, build, and construct with. Children may even give their toys names and have them walk and talk, because their imagination and creativity know no boundaries. As Susan Linn, from Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood says: "The best toy is 10% toy and 90% child."

'In a market of numbing electronic glitz, the fact remains that simple, open-ended toys are still best. A toy should encourage the child to manipulate, interact, or figure something out. When there is only one "right way" to play, or if toys try to "teach" routine academic skills, opportunities for experimentation, and new discovery are limited. Common household objects such as tools, cooking utensils, and gadgets, provide great possibilities for creative problem-solving and imaginative play. Nesting and stacking toys or objects, containers for dumping and pouring, art materials, and stringing and sorting different sizes of beads and buttons, for

example, all require active handling by the child and teach about relationships: top, middle, bottom; small, big, bigger, biggest. Wooden unit

blocks are all-time winners.' (Jane Healey, "Your Child's Growing Mind")

Have you noticed the key words that a number of child psychologists and play experts seem to be stuck on these days when it comes to talking about 'toys'? **Open-ended** and **simple**. So, in practice, what does that mean?

Open-ended toys are those, which don't have a set of instructions to go with them, and all they require is your child's imagination. Pretty simple? We think so, but when you look around toy stores, it seems the exact opposite is true . . . toys that play music, sing, dance, jump, blink, have something jump out of them when you push a button, are just one of the many examples of toys that are NOT open-ended. And as far as our kids engaging with them, well, how many times can you keep pushing a button before you decide you want something more fun to do?

Children's imaginations know no boundaries - they don't need buttons to push, but they do need toys that are safe to explore in any way they want. *The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves. (Carl Jung)*



Our children need us to allow them to develop that creative instinct. It is not with 'educational' toys, or toys that come with a complex set of instructions that creative minds can thrive - **creativity is not built by pushing buttons.**

It is very important that the toys be safe for our kids to do whatever they want with them - otherwise you might end up with broken toys, or toys that are no fun to play with, if you constantly have to monitor the play and the way the toys are handled. Unfortunately toy stores are not divided into 'educational' and the 'open-ended' sections. In fact, creative and simple toys are usually not found in these stores at all. So, here some examples and ideas:

Pieces of cotton cloth or other (safe) fabric, blankets etc.

A simple blanket becomes a sleeping buddy, hide-and-seek cover, a tent, grass to plant trees on, add a few cars and it becomes a parking lot . . .



Cups, bowls, baskets, empty containers etc.

Oh, wow! There are a thousand things that can be done with these magical objects.

- For babies they are things to touch, feel, taste, bang.
- As children get older they are used as containers for anything that fits.
- You can pour water in and out of them.
- You can wear one on your head like a hat.
- You can 'cook' with them.
- You can hide things under them.
- You can build with them.
- You can use them in the bath or in the sand.
- They turn into parking garages for cars, a barn for the horse or a bed for a doll.

Is there anything you can't do with them, really?

Cardboard boxes or any container big enough to climb into

- You can crawl in and out of it.
- You can drive around with it or even fly.
- You can sit inside and drive cars along the edge.
- You can hide and relax in it.
- You can cuddle up with a book and a stuffed toy.
- You can turn it into a space ship, a school bus, a doctor's office, etc.
- If they've got holes (like laundry baskets) you can count those, put your fingers through and explore what else fits through - or doesn't.

The list is endless!



Sticks, stones, chestnuts, acorns, leaves, and whatever else you found on that walk

These are excellent items for collecting, lining up, putting in and taking out, rolling, cooking with, sorting.

- Sticks can be used outside to build with.
- A grouping of them inserted into the sand or snow makes a fort or a house for a toy man to hide in.
- Sticks laid out on the ground can be used to make shapes, spell words, create paths for walking or skipping along, or to jump across.
- Stones, chestnuts, acorns, leaves etc. . . . can be used in a toy kitchen, as art supplies; used to sort, to count, to pattern with.

Balls

Children of all ages, boys or girls love balls! They are great for both outdoor and indoor play. The best thing about balls is that they encourage physical activity!

Blocks

Blocks are for building...

- and lining,
- and sorting,
- and collecting.
- For sitting on,
- for walking on,
- and jumping off.
- For learning about math and spatial relationships;
- For finding out about balance on things other than your own body;
- For learning about constructing and deconstructing;
- For exploring gravity.

The learning that takes place by playing with blocks is endless!

And then there is the stuff you just have . . . and never considered as toys . . .

- Pots and pans
- Lids - all kinds and sizes
- Wooden spoons, spatulas etc.
- Coasters, placemats
- Flowerpots
- Egg cartons, tissue boxes
- Toilet paper/kitchen paper rolls
- Wooden bracelets you no longer wear
- An old shirt, scarf, or hat
- Handbags, purses, wallets you no longer use
- Carpet
- Blankets or sheets
- Pillows
- Cleaning and tidying equipment (brooms, dustpans)

They are all objects you have around, and which are perfect for fulfilling all the developmental urges that occur during play.

The beauty of these seemingly simple play objects, is that they are, in fact, magical to children - they can be whatever they want them to be, and they can fill a number of developmental needs.

Their apparent simplicity promotes free play - free in the sense intended by Dr Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber, that is, self-initiated, self-regulated, self-led **play**. This is because with these open-ended objects the child does not need your help, explanation or guidance - if they invite you to join, that's wonderful, but they do not have to rely on anyone to

show them how to play, or make sure that nothing gets broken. And knowing that you can discover things that amaze you and others, is not only a cornerstone of creativity, but is also very empowering.

Before you walk into a toy store - stop and think how much marvelous play material you have around the house. Children don't get bored with toys so easily - they might need some more time to come up with new ways of using them, but if the toy allows for many different ways of exploration, toddlers will grab this opportunity, and new ways of playing come up as they grow older.

Taken in part from: www.mamasinthemaking.com



Craft Ideas

Paper Plate Pizza

You likely already have all the materials you need for this activity. It can also be adjusted to all levels. You can use the cutting of the pieces as a cutting exercise and add in glue bottles if you want to use this as a gluing exercise as well. Decorate your wall with all of the pizzas and this theme would go great with any food-themed units that you might be working on!

Materials: Paper plates, Red paint, Paint brushes, Scissors, Pencils, Colored construction paper for your toppings (Red, Brown, Black, Yellow, Green), Glue (optional)



1. Fold your construction paper (each piece) into eighths (in half, in half again, and in half again!)
2. Draw your topping according to your color construction paper: Red - pepperoni, Brown - mushrooms, Black - olives, Yellow - cheese (for the cheese just cut strips), Green - green peppers. Be creative and choose toppings you like!
3. Using the scissors cut out each topping (or have the children do it if it's age-appropriate).
4. Place some red paint on the paper plate and using a paint brush, spread it all around (it can be used to act as glue, so you can be generous here!). If you would rather that the kids use bottled glue, you can let the paint dry and then they can add the pieces individually by applying glue to each piece.
5. Once your plate is covered with the "sauce" go ahead and put your toppings on! Press down so secure the toppings to the "sauce" since this is going to act as your glue.

Source: shesaved.com

Paper Plate Christmas Tree

This Christmas craft is easy to make!

Materials: Paper plate (1 per tree), Clear tape, Green paint, white glue, Multicolored pom poms (instead of pom poms, you can use stickers, beads, gems, buttons, or sequins)

1. Find the centre of the paper plate and cut out a $\frac{1}{4}$ wedge of the plate.
2. You can paint the plate green while it is still flat or you can roll the plate into a cone shape, secure with tape on the inside, and paint it when it is a cone. For younger children, have them paint the plate while flat.
3. After the paint dries, glue on your decorations!



Source: creativefamilyfun.net

Cotton Ball Painting

Painting can be a tricky endeavor with toddlers. The little ones likely want to paint, but may have a hard time grasping a brush. Try cotton ball painting for a new kind of paint project. The clothespins reduce the mess and are easy for little hands to hold.

Materials: cotton balls, clothespins, different colours of paints, tray/palette to hold paint, white paper.

1. Pour a small amount of different colours of paint onto a tray or palette.
2. For each colour, use a clothespin to grab a cotton ball. This is the paint brush!
3. You can easily replace the cotton balls with fresh ones if they become too saturated to use.



Source: sheknows.com

Tin Foil Hearts

This makes a great Valentine's Day craft!

Materials: cardboard, aluminum foil, Sharpie permanent markers, scissors

1. Cut a heart shape out of a piece of cardboard. Any spare box or a cereal box will do.
2. Cut off a sheet of your aluminum foil a little bigger than the size of your heart. Fold the aluminum foil around your cardboard heart, covering it completely.
3. Use the Sharpie permanent markers to decorate and finish your tin foil heart Valentine's Day craft. This is truly a creative process for kids, letting them draw and create any design of their choice.



Source: iheartcraftythings.com

Activities

Snow Kitchen

This wintery play set up is simple to put together and uses items you may already have in your home. Take any kitchen equipment from indoors—it can be play tools or from the real kitchen—and make an outdoor snow kitchen! When you are finished using it outside, everything can be brought back indoors and washed, or you can leave it be until the spring. It's an added

bonus to see what happens to snow left in the containers when the weather turns warmer!
One note: bring the breakable items inside to prevent cracking in the freezing weather (i.e. hard plastics like ice cube trays).

You don't have to have a tea trolley for this set up—any surface will do! An old table or upturned plastic box would work just as well.

The children will have hours of fun filling various vessels with snow, and cooking inventive meals for you! Icicles can be added as a special ingredient.

If you have any shaped molds or tins, these are great for making beautiful snow desserts!

Source: sunhatsandwellieboots.com



Painted Snowman

Build a classic snowman with the children and bring out their inner Jackson Pollock with snow "paint"! Just dilute drops of food coloring in a spray or squeeze bottle filled with water and give your snow person some pizzazz.

Materials: spray or squeeze bottles, food colouring, water, accessories for the snowman (hat, scarf, buttons, etc.).

Source: howdoesshe.com



Valentine's Day Heart Hunt

Kids love to hunt for things. Hunts are easy to set up, can be played indoors or outdoors - and best of all they keep the kids moving and laughing!

Materials: Craft foam (because it's sturdy), scissors, paper lunch bags.

1. Cut out a whole bunch of hearts from the craft foam. You could also do paper, just know that it will tear more easily. Plus, if you're setting the activity up outside, the craft foam is waterproof.
2. You can also decorate the bags (draw hearts on them!).
3. Then hide those hearts! Decide which rooms/areas you want to cover with the hunt, and start hiding. You can hide them in fairly obvious places, at or below eye-level.
4. For indoor hunts, stick hearts to windows, on chair arms, and next to table legs. Outdoors, put hearts on steps, on top of rocks, and on low-hanging branches.
5. Playing is easy. Hand out the bags, and explain that they are going on a heart hunt, and finding all the hearts they can in their bags.
6. Because the craft foam is fairly sturdy, you can play this game again and again.



Other Ways To Play

- **Play with multiple ages:** Assign a color of hearts to each age group, and hide the hearts for the little ones in more obvious places. For multiple children the same age, give them each a color.
- **Let the child set up the hunt:** They can hide hearts either for you or for other kids.
- **For toddlers:** Placed the hearts in plain sight, sometimes in a pattern or a line.
- **Sorting:** Once they've found the hearts, sort them by size or color.

Adapted from: simpleplayideas.co

Songs and Fingerplays

Boot Prints

Up and down the yard we go
Making boot prints in the snow
Big steps, little steps
Around and around
Oh what fun with snow on the ground!
Black boots, white boots
Red boots bright
Isn't it strange our boot prints are white?



Winter Sun

Recite the poem below and let the children fill in the blanks.
Winter sun, don't you run,
Stay with me and have some fun.
Shine on the _____, shine on me,
Shine on the _____, shine on the tree.
Shine on the _____, shine so fair,
Shine on the _____, shine everywhere!

Tidy Up Song

Sung to Twinkle, Twinkle little star

Twinkle, Twinkle little star,
time to clean up where you are.
Put the toys back in their place.
Keep a smile upon your face.
Twinkle, Twinkle little star,
time to clean up where you are.

I Like Hearts

Sung to Twinkle, Twinkle little star

Red hearts, white hearts,
Pink hearts, too.
I like purple hearts.
How about you?
Green hearts, yellow hearts,
Blue hearts, too.

I like rainbow hearts.
How about you _____? (Fill in a child's name)



Tasty Treats

Slow Cooker Chicken Rice Soup

Slow Cooker Chicken and Rice Soup is an easy chicken soup recipe. All of the raw ingredients go in the slow cooker and a delicious soup awaits for dinner!

Ingredients

3 chicken breasts, trimmed of fat and cut in half
1 cup brown rice
1 small onion, chopped
3 carrots, chopped
3 celery stalks, chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced
3 tsp salt
pepper to taste
2 tsp parsley
1 tsp thyme
1/2 tsp rosemary
1/2 tsp sage
1 bay leaf
2 tbsp butter, optional
9 cups chicken broth



1. Place all ingredients in order in a slow cooker, except rice.
2. Cook on low for 4 hours. The rice absorbs the liquid and gets white and puffy. If you prefer the brown rice to maintain a more firm shape and texture, add it after 2 hours of cooking.
3. Thirty minutes before serving, remove the chicken from slow cooker and shred or cut into cubes.
4. Return chicken to the slow cooker, cook for thirty more minutes, and serve.

Slow Cooker Chicken and Rice Soup Recipe Tips:

- Use fresh seasonings, as mentioned above. Feel free to add more or less depending on your taste.
- The rice does absorb the liquid of the soup and become soft, almost like a pasta. If you prefer the rice to be firm and don't want to babysit it in the slow cooker, stir 2-3 cups cooked rice (brown, white, or wild) into the soup just before serving.
- If you are watching fat content, you can totally skip the butter. The butter gives a little more richness to the broth, but it is not necessary. The soup will taste just as good without it.

- This soup thickens when it cools. The flavors really come out after it sits for a day or two, but it will be a thicker soup than when you eat it straight from the Slow Cooker. If you prefer a thinner soup, just add some water to it when re-heating to give it the consistency you desire.

Source: favfamilyrecipes.com

One-Pan Baked Ziti

This recipe takes 30 minutes to prepare-- perfect for a weeknight!

Ingredients

- 1/2 lb ground Italian sausage
- 15 oz can diced tomatoes
- 8 oz can tomato sauce
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 5-6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 tablespoon dried basil (or 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves but add it at the end)
- 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
- 3 cups water
- 12 ounces ziti or similar pasta
- 1/2 cup half and half (or heavy cream)
- 1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- ground black pepper
- 1 cup mozzarella cheese, shredded

1. Preheat oven to 500 degrees F.
2. Add olive oil to a deep, 12-inch or larger oven-safe skillet over medium heat. Add sausage cook until browned, about 3-5 minutes.
3. Add the garlic and crushed red pepper flakes to the pan and cook for 1-2 minutes.
4. Add the diced tomatoes, tomato sauce, dried basil and oregano. Stir well. Reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 5-10 minutes.
5. Add the water and dry pasta. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat to a low boil and cook,



stirring occasionally, for 10-15 minutes or until noodles are tender.

6. Stir in the half and half, and parmesan cheese and season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle mozzarella evenly on top.
7. Transfer the skillet to the oven and bake until the cheese has melted and browned, about 5 minutes. Enjoy!

Source: tastesbetterfromscratch.com

Apple Oat No-Bake Bites

These bites can be made free from the top 8 food allergens (dairy, wheat, egg, soy, peanut, tree nuts, fish, crustaceans) when the substitutions are used.

Ingredients

- 200g cooked apple or apple puree
- 1/2 c peanut butter or "sunbutter" or tahini
- 1/2 c raisins
- 3 c rolled oats or gluten-free rolled oats



1. In a food processor, blitz the apple, peanut butter, and raisins.
2. Add the rolled oats and using the pulse function on the food processor; pulse until combined.
3. Take tablespoon-fulls and roll into balls. If you find the mixture a bit sticky, dampen your hands
4. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.
5. Serve!
6. These balls can keep in the refrigerator for up to 4 days, or frozen.

Source: mykidslickthebowl.co

Cold Weather: A Reminder for Parents

Oh, the weather outside is frightful..... at least, it can be some days during an Ottawa winter! Please be mindful of the temperatures when dressing your child in the mornings. Outdoor play is a part of your child's day, regardless of the weather! Packing extra outdoor gear (hat, mittens, socks) helps for when the first set gets wet!