

TEXAS Parenting News

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

WINTER 2004

What makes a toy educational?

When parents buy toys, they sometimes think that it's better to buy those that are "educational." They may look for toys specifically advertised or packaged for their learning value.

Actually, almost anything that a child can learn from safely is educational. This includes many ordinary items around the house like oatmeal boxes and wooden spoons. Educational toys don't have to be expensive, and many are free.

Babies and preschool children learn through their senses—their eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and hands. They need experiences with materials that use all their senses—including ordinary experiences such as grocery shopping and doing laundry.

Simple toys are often more educational than complicated toys because they stimulate imagination and creativity. The more things a child can do with a toy, the more educational a toy is likely to be.

Here are some suggestions, taken from the National Association for the Education of Young Children:



Caution for babies

Use the cardboard tube from a roll of toilet paper or paper towel to judge whether a toy poses a choking hazard. If the toy passes through the tube, it's too small.

- Hands-on toys, like puzzles and toy cars. These materials build eye-hand coordination. They encourage children to think about how things work and how to solve problems.
- Books and recordings. These materials help children learn language. They build knowledge and foster appreciation for literature and music.
- Art materials like crayons, paper, clay, and paint. These materials foster creativity and build skills that lead to reading, writing, and seeing beauty.
- Pretend-play objects such as dolls, puppets, and dress-up clothes. These materials give children a chance to try new behaviors, build social skills, express emotions, and use their imaginations.
- Construction items like blocks. They teach science concepts like gravity and balance and math concepts like geometric shapes and numbers.
- Active play items like balls, wagons, and tricycles. These materials help children build muscles and confidence to meet physical challenges.

Talk to your child's caregiver or teacher. Which materials are your child's favorites? Which materials could help your child develop needed skills?

Talk with your children about the toys they want. Do they want something because "everyone at school has one"? Did they see it advertised on TV?

Remember, children don't need lots of toys. They need materials that are safe and that engage their interest. They need toys that are fun.

Dad: You're important

If you're like many fathers today, you're taking an active role in raising your children. Caring for children, even babies, is no longer just "women's work."

With more women working outside the home, men are also helping out with housework and other home responsibilities.

Taking care of children every day allows you to form strong bonds with your children. These close ties will continue to be important when children reach their teens and are tempted to try risky behaviors.

What you can do with your baby:

- Hold and rock her.
- Talk and sing to her.
- Help feed her. If Mom is breastfeeding, she can pump some of her milk into a bottle for you to use.
- Change the baby's diaper.
- Bathe and dress her.
- Show her how to play with simple toys like rattles and blocks.

What you can do with your toddler:

- Help him learn to walk.
- Show him how to use the toilet.
- Take him outdoors for a ride in a stroller or wagon.
- Read him a story and tuck him in bed.
- Comfort him when he's upset.

What you can do with your preschooler:

- Teach her how to catch and throw a ball.
- Sing and dance with her to music on the radio.
- Take time to just listen, without advising or criticizing.
- Read stories to her and talk about what she liked best and least.
- Go to parent-teacher conferences, to show that you value school.

Most important: Give each child some special attention every day, doing nothing else, just talking and listening to that child. This tells your children that they are important to you.

Encourage your daughter in sports

Physical activity is just as important for girls as for boys. Helping girls learn active games and sports can give them skills for lifelong recreation and health.

How can you help your daughter?

- Show her how much you enjoy physical activity yourself. (Mom and Dad, this means you.) Ride a bike, swim, or hike.
- Introduce her to a variety of games and sports. Talk about the different sports on TV. Make physical activity a part of family gatherings and vacations.
- Buy or check out library books about women athletes like Serena Williams and Mia Hamm. Read about women's sports in the newspaper and magazines.
- Take her to women's sports events in your neighborhood, such as soccer and basketball.
- Photograph your daughter being active. Frame the photo and display it.
- Help her learn fundamental skills of running, jumping, swimming, throwing, and catching. Avoid comments like "You throw like a girl."
- Avoid comments about her size and body shape. Love and accept her just as she is. The goal is not a slender figure or competition but rather fun and health.
- Talk with your daughter's teachers about the daily physical activities they plan for children. Ask how you and other parents can help.
- Pay attention to your daughter's interests. When she's 8 or 9, she may wish to join a school or neighborhood sports team. Buy her good equipment, not her brother's hand-me-downs. Go to her games. Consider volunteering. Stress the value of teamwork.
- Remember that your daughter may be better suited to individual versus team events. She may prefer tennis, track, swimming, or gymnastics. Encourage her personal skill building, not ribbons or trophies.

Should you get a pet?

Thinking about surprising your child with a pet? Or are your children already asking for a puppy like Amy's?

Before rushing out to the pet store, or letting your child keep that turtle you found in the road, consider these questions:

- How old are your children? Infants and children younger than 5 years old are more likely than most people to get diseases from animals. Why? Because young children often touch surfaces that may be contaminated with animal waste, and they like to put their hands in their mouths.
- What kind of pet do you have in mind? The Centers for Disease Control recommends that infants and children younger than 5 avoid contact with the following: snakes, turtles, lizards, frogs and other amphibians (toads, newts, salamanders), and baby chicks and ducklings. These animals often carry the salmonella bacterium.
- Where will the pet live? Furry and feathered animals inside the home can aggravate asthma and allergies. Outdoor pets need a fenced yard and shelter from harsh weather.
- What does the pet need? All animals need a safe and clean place to live, space for movement, and food and water. Cats often need a litter box, and dogs will need to be housebroken or let outside



regularly. Some animals need more. Fish, for example, may need air circulation and filtration systems in their aquarium.

- Who will take care of the pet? Children may insist that they will feed the pet and clean its cage regularly. They may think it will be fun to bathe a dog. However, after the novelty wears off, caregiving can become a dreaded chore.
- Who will take care of the pet when you're out of town? Some animals like gerbils and hamsters can be left alone over a two-day weekend, but no animal should be left longer than that. If a neighbor or friend cannot care for the pet, you may have to board the pet in a kennel.
- What will you do if the pet gets sick or injured? Pets, like humans, get sick and can have accidents. Dogs and cats require rabies shots and medicine to prevent illness and infestation by fleas, ticks, and heartworms. Dogs and cats require neutering and regular checkups.
- What are the problems with this pet? Some animals bite when handled. Rabbits have powerful back legs for jumping. When handled improperly, a rabbit can kick so hard that it can break its back. Ferrets, which are related to polecats and skunks, are strictly regulated in some cities.
- How much will the pet cost? Consider purchase price, neutering, housing, food, medicine, veterinary care, kennel, and carrying case.

If you get a pet

Learn as much as possible in advance about the particular pet you want. Discuss responsibilities with your children. Help them understand that the pet is a living creature and totally dependent on your family for its care.

Plan who will do which chores. Make a chart to help everyone remember. Discuss what will happen if chores are forgotten or ignored.

Make it a strict rule that everyone will wash hands thoroughly before and after handling pets or anything in their habitats.

Pets can provide companionship, fun, and learning for children. Choosing a pet and planning its care require thought and careful decision making.

Discover your family health history

Have you ever noticed that both your Uncle Jack and Uncle Pat had heart attacks in their mid-50's? Ever wonder why Grandma Evelyn lived to age 90?

Your family's health history may give you clues to the future health of you and your children. Many of your physical traits, such as eye and hair color, are inherited. So are risks for certain health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers.

By learning your family's health history, you can learn about health risks you face and how to reduce them. For example, people at high risk for heart disease may be able to lower their risk by not smoking, exercising often, and improving their diet.

How to start

Talk to your relatives. Start with your parents and grandparents if they are living. Ask about uncles and aunts. Make sure the information is as accurate as possible.

Holidays and family gatherings can be good times to collect this information. If family members cannot remember specifics, you can call the state health department for birth and death information.

Get the facts

For each relative, write down as many of these items as possible:

- Age or date of birth
- For those who have died, age and cause of death
- Disease or chronic health condition, such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney disease, and asthma
- Mental illness, including alcoholism, suicide, and depression
- Birth defects such as spina bifida, cleft lip, and heart defects
- Learning problems or mental retardation
- Vision or hearing loss at a young age

Note the ages at which the conditions or diseases occurred. Did Uncle Jack have his heart attack at age 51 or 78? Did Cousin Ida develop diabetes in childhood or as an adult? If unknown, write your best guess.

Keep immunization records

When your children enter child care and public school, you will be asked about their immunizations. State law requires that children be up-to-date in their vaccinations, or they will be turned away.

Ask your family doctor or clinic for a schedule of required immunizations. This will help you remember when to take your children for their shots in plenty of time before school starts.

Place doctor receipts for each child in an envelope or notebook after every visit. Store the envelopes in a safe and handy place so that you can find them easily when needed.

For family members with known medical problems, note whether they smoked, were overweight, and had poor diet and exercise habits. Find out where your mother's and father's family came from originally (for example, Scotland, Germany, Africa, Mexico). Some inherited health problems occur more often in specific ethnic groups.

Store the information in a loose-leaf binder. Update it regularly. Share the information with your family doctor. Ask about ways to reduce risk for diseases common in your family.

Texas Parenting News is published by the Texas Workforce Commission for free distribution. ©2004, TWC.

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