

# All Toys Are Not Created Equal

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As new parents we are inundated with pressure to buy this season's most popular toy, whether it is a new Disney princess doll, a talking Elmo, or the latest chatting cell phone. It can be overwhelming, as we try to do our best to zero in on the toys that provide fun and deep learning, toys that grow with a child over time. How many of us have found, after spending a hundred dollars on a toy, that the box is much more interesting to our kids? Over my life as a mom, teacher, and school director, I've learned a lot about toys and kids. You would be amazed at how simple great toy solutions can be.



My three boys were presented with lots and lots of toys over the years. But the one that had greatest lasting appeal was [unit blocks](#). I vividly recall their arrival to our home when my middle son, my little architect, turned four. While these blocks can be costly, and involve setting aside space for shelving, they are well worth a parent's efforts. Children will spend hours making zoos, firehouses, skyscrapers, roads, etc. It was so peaceful to watch my boys happily constructing, repairing collapses, sharing materials, talking aloud, and getting into the flow of creative problem solving, basking in imaginary worlds. Blocks were the perfect toy at home and school, worth every penny over the next five years as my sons made increasingly complex structures and eventually transferred knowledge to more detailed work with [LEGOs](#).

As a teacher and director, I broadened my sense of what made a good toy, drawing upon what I learned watching my own sons. The best toys are open ended and provide limitless opportunities for imaginative play. Children control the scenario from start to finish. A chatting cell phone? Well, if the phone talks at the child, they aren't encouraged to do anything but listen.

There's a whole world of toys that invite flights of fantasy, that catapult children's ideas, and act as a canvas for children's creative productions. These toys may not be widely discussed on the playground, you may never see them advertised on TV or read about them in the press. But they will provide your child with hours of productive, expressive play which will satisfy the child's soul and amaze the adults in their lives.

In addition to unit blocks, toys that fall into this category include:

**Manipulatives:** Includes small table top materials that can be worked with a child's hands and invite creative play. [Magnatiles](#), [Bristle Blocks](#), [LEGOs](#), [Crystal Climbers](#), [Tinker Toys](#), and [Kapla Blocks](#) are just a few examples. Check out Learning Materials Workshop [HERE](#) for a colorful assortment of unusual pieces.

**People, Animals, and Vehicles:** When children build with blocks or other manipulatives their play goes deeper when they have real objects to include in their structures. The [LEGO Community Minifigure](#) set is a great example of this type of toy, though pieces are small. [Schleich](#) is a fantastic resource for farm and wild animals, as well as knights. These toys are widely available on the market.

**Sand and Water Play:** Sensory play offers serene, hands-on experiences that promote imaginative scenarios alone and with friends. We're at the beach, we're on a treasure hunt, we're serving tea—all of these possibilities come to life when children are provided sensory opportunities. Children need funnels, tubes, cups, containers, pails, shovels, etc. to encourage manipulation and movement. Additionally, natural objects such as rocks, shells and even hermit crabs enrich this type of play. You can find many of these simple materials at [Community Playthings](#) or [Amazon.com](#).

Of course, no matter how great and engaging any toy is, parents and teachers need to set the stage and make sure they've created the right environment to help release the child's creativity. As long-time school director and parent educator [Jean Schreiber](#) points out: "Successful block play does not just happen. Adults must set up a safe, welcoming, and organized block area that allows all children to explore freely."

If you choose to provide blocks at home, along with a variety of supporting materials, you open up a world of opportunity for your child and their friends. You don't need lots of toys in your home, but you do need the right ones to encourage problem solving and creative play. Don't forget; take lots of pictures so you can remember these precious days!

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