

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment



TRUCE

10th
Anniversary

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Toy Action Guide

Play is essential to children's healthy development and learning. Children use play to actively construct knowledge, meet social/emotional needs, and acquire life skills. The content of their play comes from their own experiences. Changes in today's childhood are undermining play. Because of the pervasive influence of the electronic media — such as TV, movies, videos, DVDs, computers — children spend more time sitting in front of a screen and less time playing creatively with each other.

Toys, the tools of children's play, influence that play. Toys of value enhance children's natural ability to engage in imaginative, meaningful play by allowing them to try out their own ideas and solve their own problems. Many of today's toys are highly structured and often linked to popular media images and programs. These toys channel children into imitative play, robbing them of opportunities to use their own imaginations, creativity, and problem solving skills.

Parents are constantly faced with decisions about what toys to buy and what toys to avoid. High-powered marketing and the influence of popular culture interfere with thoughtful decision-making at the toy store.



This guide is intended to help adults promote children's creative and constructive play by making informed choices about toys, and by working with others at home, school, and in the community to promote positive play and toys.

Violent events such as the war in Iraq and the post-war conflict, acts of terrorism, crime, and natural disasters affect everyone. Children receive different information about these events. Some children are included in discussions, some overhear adults' or other children's talk, some hear or see it on the news. Many young children may be confused or frightened and try to work out their feelings and understanding in play. Adults can observe and guide the play by responding to what children say with simple, accurate information and keeping the play within safe physical and emotional boundaries. (See guidelines, p. 2)

For more information contact TRUCE: www.truceteachers.org
PO Box 441261, West Somerville, MA 02144 • e-mail: truceteachers@aol.com

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What Parents & Other Adults Can Do

Since the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children's television in 1984, it has been legal to sell toys through TV programs. As a result, most best selling toys have been linked to children's TV shows and other electronic media, many of which promote violence, sexiness, and buying more and more. Deregulation has made choosing toys and creating a healthy play environment harder for adults. Dealing with this challenge provides an opportunity to build communication and share values with children in a meaningful way. It also offers adults a chance to work together with schools and the community to create healthy play options for children.

parents & children

- Provide interesting activities, materials, trips to encourage positive interests, hobbies.
- Define your values about violent toys and share them with your children.
- Shop at toy stores that consciously don't sell toys of violence or toys that undermine healthy play.
- Take action — write a letter to a toy company or store.
- Plan toy purchases together and limit impulse buying and overstimulating trips to toy stores.
- Provide uninterrupted daily playtime and organize play materials so they are easily accessible.
- Work together to make thoughtful decisions about the role of media in the home.

parents & other parents

- Support each others' efforts to reduce children's exposure to TV shows and movies that are used to market toys, especially violent toys.
- Support each others' efforts to avoid buying toys of violence or items with logos related to movies, TV shows, restaurants, etc.
- Share resources for activities, good toys and books, ideas for birthday gifts, events, and outings with other families.
- Share strategies and ideas for alternatives to TV, especially at difficult times of day.

parents & teachers

- Discuss the importance of play and how toys and media affect it.
- Suggest ways to promote healthy play and limit children's involvement with TV, movies, videos, DVDs, computers.
- Work together to develop school policies that promote healthy play (e.g., ample free play).
- Start a home lending book and toy library to provide positive leisure-time play options.

parents & community

- Create coalitions among existing community groups which support healthy play environments for children. Plan a community forum on this issue.
- Organize efforts to voice concerns about harmful toys being marketed or advertised to children in your community (e.g., complain at stores, write letters to newspapers).
- Plan a violent toy trade-in, good toy and book fair or swap. Involve older children in your efforts.

Helping Children Use Their Play to Safely Work Out Scary Events

When young children see scary things in their own lives or in the media (news or entertainment), it's normal for them to bring what interests, confuses, or frightens them into their play to try to work out their ideas and feelings. Here are guidelines to help you respond effectively when such play occurs.

- Watch children as they play, to learn more about what they know, are struggling to understand, and may be worried about.
- If the play gets scary or dangerous, gently intervene and redirect it. For example, ask how people might help each other, or provide toys, such as rescue vehicles and medical equipment. [See Rescue Kit, p.7]
- Try to follow the children's lead in the roles that you take rather than taking over the play. Help them come up with ways for extending the play.
- After the play, talk with children about what they played. Reassure them about their safety. Clear up confusions. Answer questions simply.



Choosing Toys of Value

All toys listed are suitable for girls and boys. While our age guidelines represent the youngest age for safety and appropriateness, children can use many of these toys throughout their early years.


Toys have enhanced play value when they . . .

- Can be used in many ways.
- Allow children to determine the play.
- Appeal to children at more than one age or level of development.
- Are not linked to video games, TV, or movies.
- Can be used with other toys for new and more complex play.
- Will stand the test of time and continue to be part of play as children develop new interests and skills.
- Promote respectful, non-stereotyped, non-violent interactions among children.
- Help children develop skills important for further learning and a sense of mastery.

Remember the Classics!

- table blocks
- ocean, farm, and rainforest animals and insects
- cars, trucks, boats, planes, and trains
- natural materials (shells, leaves, acorns)
- open-ended construction sets
- flashlights
- dolls with accurate features
- clay
- basic art supplies
- dress-up clothes and housewares
- bean bags
- balls
- playing cards
- puzzles
- medical kits

Choose toys that promote . . .

 **Dramatic play.** Helps children work out their own ideas about their experiences. Provides a powerful way of learning new skills and a sense of mastery. Examples: blocks, toy vehicles, dress-up clothes (vests, hats, fabric squares), small stuffed and plastic animals, dolls, puppets, props to recreate real life (post office, restaurant, store), materials for creating small worlds (doll houses, castles).

• Vehicles (Melissa and Doug)

Latches Fire Truck

Ages 3 & up

\$40

Sturdy wooden fire truck features brass locks and latches. Opening the latched doors and magnetic windows reveals engine compartments, storage space, and detailed graphics of the inside of the fire truck.

Stacking Emergency Vehicle Set and Stacking Construction Set

Ages 2 & up

\$20

Wooden vehicles with interchangeable parts can be rebuilt repeatedly. Key features include interlocking pieces, strong pegs, and sturdy rolling wheels.

• Play Structures and Kids' Cottages (Bazoongi Kids)

Ages 3 & up

\$30-\$40


Bright, colorful playhouses and tents that can be used both indoors and outdoors. Some structures come with tunnel attachment. Made of a light, durable material and easy to assemble.

• BOX-Carz (BOX-Carz)

Ages 3 & up

\$7

Lightweight corrugated car-shaped boxes come in three styles: fire-rescue vehicle, police car, and race car. To use, children step in, pick up, and "drive." Boxes feature handholds, cut out from each side.

 **Manipulative play with small play objects.** Develops small muscle control and eye-hand coordination. Teaches about relationships between objects, essential for understanding math and science. Examples: construction sets and toys with interlocking pieces (Legos, Lincoln Logs), puzzles, pegboards, miniature models, parquetry blocks.

• Zoobs (Infinitytoy)

Ages 4 1/2 & up

\$5 & up

A unique construction set with jointed pieces that move. Five different pieces snap together in twenty different ways.

• Play Activity Packs (Lauri)

Ages 4-7

\$15

Different themes—Fire/Rescue, Dinosaurs, Animals, Shapes. Use for imaginative play as well as to encourage the development of lacing, stringing, sorting, and organizational skills.


• Twistix (Small World Kids)

Ages 3 & up

\$15

Twist and connect the plastic rods with elastic to create fun shapes. There are twelve geometric building pieces.


Choose toys that promote . . .

 **Creative arts.** Encourages self-expression and the use of symbols, a vital skill for problem solving and literacy. Develops fine motor skills. Examples: poster and finger paints, assortment of blank paper of all sizes and colors, crayons and markers, scissors, glue, recycled materials, stamps, clay, weaving kits.

• **Make Your Own Jigsaw Puzzle (Melissa and Doug)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$5**
Put any 5x7 photo or piece of artwork on the adhesive sheet, cut out and adhere to the 12 wooden pieces. Young children may need help with cutting.

• **Various Musical Instruments (1st Note)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$1.25 - \$22**
Finger cymbals, kazoos, bells and other percussion and wind instruments made of metal and wood. Wooden rainbow play-by-color xylophone comes with color-coded music sheets and mallet.


• **Magnetic Table Top Easel (ALEX)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$40**
Collapsible double-sided easel has a magnetic/dry erase side and a chalkboard side; both can hold paper for painting and drawing. Tray holds paint cups and other art materials (paint not included).

 **Physical play.** Promotes healthy body awareness and coordination and helps let off steam. Opportunities for social interaction. Examples: bikes, scooters and other wheel toys, balls, bats, jump ropes, space trolleys, pogo sticks, giant chalk, swing sets, climbing structures, play tunnels.

• **Bean Bag Toss (Melissa and Doug)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$40**
Toss the themed beanbags into the mouths of the three animal characters, each with its own unique pop-up target. Made of solid wood and stands up on its own.

• **Mini Golf Set (ALEX)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$20**
Fun circus-themed miniature golf set made of soft foam material. Includes 4 balls, 2 golf clubs, and 6 holes and can be used indoors or outdoors.

• **Backyard Challenge Picnic Pack (Spalding)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$30**
Set equipped with sporting equipment to play six exciting games: Tug of War, Kickball, Flying Disc, Baseball, Spoon Race, and Relay Race. Comes with its own travel bag.

 **Game playing.** Teaches about taking turns, planning strategy, sequencing, rules, and cooperation. Examples: board games like checkers and chess, card games, jacks.

• **Color Dominoes (eeBoo)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$13**
Dominoes made of thick laminated 1" x 3" card stock, with colorful simple drawings of familiar items. This version of an old favorite game promotes cooperative play and visual matching skills.

• **Teddy Mix & Match (Ravensburger)** **Ages 2 1/2- 5** **\$12**
Twelve different pairs of teddy-bear-shaped cards are easy for young hands to manipulate in a memory or matching game. Encourages language learning through discussion of similarities and differences.

• **Blokus (Educational Insights)** **Ages 5 & up** **\$30**
Players use strategy to cover the game board with their brightly colored tiles. Families can work together to cover the board in the least amount of turns. Tiles are also great for open-ended play, such as stacking, sorting, design-making, etc.

• **Bambino Dino (Family Pastimes)** **Ages 5-9** **\$15**
Baby Dinosaur is caught in the rising water of a flash flood and the players work as a team to save little Dino. To find information about other games that foster the spirit of cooperation for ages 3-adult: www.familypastimes.com

A WORD ABOUT COOPERATIVE PLAY

Children learn many messages through play. When children's play is filled with competition, they learn that playmates are opponents and winning means that everyone else loses. When we support cooperation, children learn to live together better—respecting each other's ideas, finding solutions to problems, and working together toward a common goal. Example: Musical Chairs—When the music stops, take away a chair, not a child. By the end, everyone is laughing and holding onto each other as they share the remaining chairs.

Support independent specialty toy stores that have made a commitment to high quality non-violent toys.



Toys and Toy Trends to Avoid

We have chosen toys which dramatically illustrate some harmful toy trends. Many toys could fit into more than one category.

Toys have limited play value when they . . .

- Can only be used in one way.
- Encourage everyone to play the same way as determined by the toy designer.
- Appeal primarily to a single age or level of development.
- Will probably sit on a shelf after the first “fun” half hour.
- Will channel children into imitating scripts they see on TV or movie screens.
- Do special high-tech actions for the child instead of encouraging the child’s exploration and mastery.
- Lure children into watching the TV program or other media linked to the toy.
- Promote violence and stereotypes, which can lead to disrespectful and aggressive behavior.

Try to avoid toys that . . .

Make violent themes the focus of the play. Often linked to TV programs, movies, and video games, these toys make violence seem entertaining and fun. Guide children into anti-social play that undermines the positive lessons which caring adults try to teach.

• **Beyblade Hidden Spirits Dranzer V (Hasbro)** **Age 8 & up*** **\$10**
 Part of a line of TV-linked tops for children to “build, customize and battle.” Launchers sold separately, tricking parents into another purchase. Turns play with tops into a fighting game. *Toys R Us recommends this toy for ages 5 & up

• **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles S.W.A.T. Battle Pack (Playmates)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$50**
 The Turtles are back and more violent than ever! This set includes: SWAT battle shell, SWAT figures, and weapons arsenal. Box advertises for TV show, linking play to TV scripts and using toys to market TV.

Are linked to movies, TV shows, and video games rated for older audiences (e.g., PG-13 and R-rated movies). Expose children to content that can be confusing and scary. Leads them to think media for older audiences is meant for them.

• **Lord of the Rings Playset—Orc Soldiers and Battering Ram (Toy Biz)** **Ages 5 & up** **\$15**
 Very scary action figures with monster features, menacing expressions, and overly-muscled bodies. Playset recreates scary battle scene, emphasizing destruction and threatening safety.


• **Terminator 3—Rise of the Machines Figure: Arnold (McFarlane Toys)** **Ages 12 & up** **\$12**
 Action figure with blood-covered face. Example of a line of highly realistic *Terminator 3* action figures, some recommended for children as young as 5, which are linked to the R-rated movie.

Link non-nutritious food to play. Play connected to high-sugar/high-fat foods can lead to poor nutrition, childhood obesity, and can create brand loyalty from an early age.


• **McDonald’s Deluxe Mealtime Server Set with Apron & Headphones (Creative Designs)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$20**
 Glamorizes McDonald’s, constantly reminds children of the McDonald’s brand, and makes unhealthy food a part of children’s play.

• **Play Doh Cookie Makin’ Station (Hasbro)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$10**
 Familiarizes children with specific cookie brands, such as Oreo and Chips Ahoy, inserts the idea of junk food into children’s play and lives. Turns an open-ended play material into a single-purpose product.

Try to avoid toys that . . .

 **Encourage gender stereotypes and premature sexuality.** Dictate that certain toys and interests are only for boys or only for girls. Emphasize highly sexualized appearance/behavior that is confusing to children. Make bodies the focus of play and equate self-worth with appearance (often extreme thinness).

- **PlayDoh My Little Pony—Pinkie Pie Pretty Parlor (Hasbro)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$10**
Media-linked play dough set. Presents play dough as only for girls, and turns an open-ended play material into a single-purpose product (to be used solely for extruding the pony's mane).
- **Lil Bratz—Night Time Funk Gift Set (MGA Entertainment)** **Ages 4 & up** **\$20**
4-doll set outfitted in spiked heels, heavy make-up, and very skimpy, tightly-fitting clothes. Promotes club-hopping scenario that is inappropriate for young children.
- **Padmé Amidala—Star Wars Action Figures (Hasbro)** **Ages 8 & up** **\$17**
Action figure with huge breasts, nipples suggested through a torn shirt, and anatomically revealing tight pants.

 **Use electronics in toys for babies.** Infants and toddlers learn best by interacting with people and objects and by seeing how they can affect their environment. These electronic ("smart") toys control and limit play, teach babies to expect toys to entertain, keep them from creating their own "smart" actions and ideas, and exploit parents' desire to be good parents.

- **Leap Frog Learning Drum (Leap Frog)** **Ages 6 mos. & up** **\$20**
Claims to teach "numbers 1-10, letters, cause and effect," an inappropriate goal for infants.
- **Toby the Totbot (Fisher Price)** **Ages 1 & up** **\$20**
Robot with bells and whistles is misleadingly presented as a friend for your baby.

 **Make shopping the focus of the play.** Condition children to equate spending money and shopping with fulfillment and fun.

- **My Scene Shopping Spree – Barbie (Mattel)** **Ages 6 & up** **\$14**
Sporting a tube top, studded dog collar, and Levi's jeans, this doll comes with a cell phone, money, credit card and shopping bag. Promotes materialism, brand loyalty, and emphasis on sexuality.
- **Sunset Mall (Imaginarium)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$70**
Child-sized, 2-story structure with café, chic boutique, soda shop, and hair salon. Box promises that "kids will have hours of fun visiting the mall."

 **Use flashy props to turn children's books into toys.**

These "toy" books undermine the acquisition of reading skills by diverting children's attention from the story line and language. They can make traditional books seem boring when they don't resemble toys and make children expect their books to use gimmicks to entertain.

- **Barbie Beautiful Makeup Book (Readers Digest Children's Books)** **No age rating** **\$13**
Printed on cardboard, a format meant for baby books, this book comes with four shades of lipstick and rouge with applicator. Pictures and text show girls how to put make-up on Barbie and themselves.
- **Spiderman 2 (Meredith Books/Columbia Pictures)** **Ages 3 & up** **\$16**
Book linked to *Spiderman 2* movie has attached 16-button panel to make harsh sound effects which accompany the story.

A Letter About Fighting Toys: for Children & Adults to Talk About Together

Some kids really love toy guns and toys with weapons on them. They have fun pretending to fight with them. A lot of teachers worry about fight with them. They think that if kids play with weapon toys. They think that if kids play with these toys and pretend to fight and kill, it will teach kids that it's okay to hurt people and that fighting and hurting is fun. Kids often say, "We're only pretending. We're just 'playing.'"

Some teachers say kids in their classes pretend to be characters on TV. Kids act out kicking and fighting. Then kids often really do hurt each other. It gets scary. It isn't pretend, teachers say.

Many teachers are worried. They are angry that TV shows and ads make violent toys look cool so kids want to buy them. They say companies shouldn't be allowed to sell violent toys to kids on TV.

Teachers hope this letter will help families talk together about the toys they buy and make thoughtful choices.

- What do you think about what the teachers say?
- What do you think teachers, parents, and children should do about fighting toys?
- What can grown-ups do to help children be safe and learn not to fight?
- What ideas do you have about how children can play without fighting toys?

From Many Teachers All Over the Country

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Shoe Box Gifts for hours of creative play

Usually, giving gifts to children means buying manufactured toys at a store. Here is an alternative gift idea that you can easily put together. Shoe box gifts are collections of small, familiar items that are organized around a play theme and presented in an appealing way. They also show that expensive toys in fancy packages aren't necessarily the best. The process of putting together such an easy, yet imaginative and age-appropriate gift for a special child in your life can be very satisfying for you, too.

Making Shoe Box Gifts

- Decorate an empty shoe or appropriate-sized box and lid (gift wrap, stickers, etc.).
- Choose a theme and put a clear label on the box which includes both a simple word and picture of the theme.
- Most of the items we suggest are found at hardware stores, pharmacies, stationery stores, art/crafts stores, supermarkets.
- Use small containers, ziplock sandwich bags, or build dividers with small pieces of cardboard to make compartments for the various items in the shoe box. Young children appreciate organization—being able to return everything to its place.
- Most of these suggestions are appropriate and safe for children to use independently; however, objects in some kits may require adult supervision and/or aid (e.g., food coloring).

Shoe Box Gift Theme Ideas: Use these or create your own

OUTDOOR IDEAS

- jump rope
- small ball
- bean bags
- frisbee
- sidewalk chalk(hopscotch)
- bucket with wide brushes (use water to paint rocks, fence, siding, etc. and watch evaporation)

RESCUE/FIRST AID

- flashlight
- bandaids
- ace bandage
- sling
- eye patch
- gauze
- stethoscope
- fabric strips/ bandages
- surgical mask

SHOE BOX GARDEN

- plastic-lined shoebox
- potting soil
- seed packets
- small watering can
- popsicle sticks
- garden tools
- gardening gloves

COOKING

- small mixing bowl
- measuring cups/spoons
- rolling pin
- small whisk
- wood spoon
- spatula
- empty plastic spice bottles
- cookie cutters
- recipes
- apron

WATER / BATH

- plastic funnel
- plastic tubing
- plastic eye dropper
- turkey baster
- spray bottle
- squirt bottle
- plastic sea animals
- plastic nesting / measuring cups
- bubble bath packet

PLAYDOUGH

- buy a can of playdough or make your own
- garlic press
- plastic knife
- popsicle sticks
- wooden dowel
- plastic lids
- small tray/plate
- buttons/beads
- plastic animals

PLAYDOUGH RECIPE

- 1 cup flour
- 1 Tbsp. oil
- 1 cup water
- 1/2 cup salt
- 2 tsp. cream of tartar
- food coloring
- Mix ingredients in saucepan.
- Cook over low heat stirring constantly until playdough pulls away from sides of pan.
- Scoop playdough onto wax paper, knead until smooth.
- Store in airtight container.

NATURE EXPLORER

- nature guides with pictures of birds, trees, woodland animals
- small sketch book and colored pencils
- binoculars
- plastic magnifying glass
- play camera
- vest or small backpack with pockets
- small ziplock bags
- bag of bird seed



Resources

BOOKS & PUBLICATIONS

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VIDEOS

Media Education Foundation

26 Center St., Northampton, MA 01060

800-659-6882; www.mediaed.org

- "Game Over: Gender, Race, & Violence in Video Games."
Addresses how video games exploit gender, race, and violence.
- "Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood, and Corporate Power."
Looks at Disney's role in shaping childhood and the ideas Disney movies and related products teach about race, gender, and ethnic groups.

ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Childhood

PO Box 444, College Park, MD 20741

301-779-1033; www.allianceforchildhood.net

- Promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development and play.

American Specialty Toy Retailing Association.

116 W. Illinois St, Ste 5E, Chicago, IL 60610

312-222-0984; www.astratoy.org

- Look here to find toy stores and toy manufacturers that produce and sell many of the Toys of Value on TRUCE's list.

Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood (Formerly: Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children).

Judge Baker Children's Center, 53 Parker Hill Ave., Boston, MA

617-278-4105; www.commercialexploitation.org

- Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children.

Center for a New American Dream

6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 900, Takoma Park, MD 20912

1-877-68-DREAM; www.newdream.org

- Helps families consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice.

Commercial Alert

4110 SE Hawthorne Blvd. #123, Portland, OR

503-235-8012; www.commercialalert.org

- Promotes policies and practices that stop harmful marketing to children, including "The Parents' Bill of Rights."

Playing for Keeps

116 West Illinois, Suite 5E, Chicago, IL 60610

877-755-5347; www.playingforkeeps.org

- Dedicated to improving outcomes and quality of life for all children by promoting healthy and constructive play.

TRUCE is a national group of educators deeply concerned about the impact of children's entertainment and toys on the play and behavior of children in our classrooms.

TRUCE's goals are:

- To raise public awareness about the negative effects of violent and stereotyped toys and media on children, families, schools, and society.
- To work to limit the harmful influence of unhealthy children's entertainment.
- To provide children with toys and activities that promote healthy play and non-violent behavior at home and school.
- To create a broad-based effort to eliminate marketing to children and to reduce the sale of toys of violence.
- To support parents' and teachers' efforts to deal with the issues regarding media.

For more information about what you can do and to make a contribution to cover our printing and disseminating costs, write: **TRUCE**, PO Box 441261, Somerville, MA 02144
www.truceteachers.org or e-mail: truceteachers@aol.com.

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