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**When buying holiday toys, is simpler better?**

K-State child development expert talks about usefulness of toys for young children

MANHATTAN, Kan. – As the number of weeks to Christmas slowly creeps into the single digits, many parents are already getting a pretty good idea of this year’s hottest toys.

A new version of Baby Yoda that eats snacks and features more than 40 sounds and motions. The Nintendo Switch. Or how about a Space Jam ‘Lebron James’ Shoot and Dunk Playset?

Children may be asking for the flashiest and brightest – and by association, often the most expensive – toys this year, but K-State Research and Extension child development specialist Bradford Wiles says those may not always be the best choice for their long-term growth.

“The thing about toys is they are a means for learning,” Wiles said. “As young children, we need to manipulate things and figure out how things work, which are all concepts that many of us take for granted. We need to feel the friction and pliability of toys, be able to bend and even break or lose toys to learn what (disappointment) feels like.

“The idea is that children use toys to further their cognitive development, to understand more about their world through these things that are accessible enough for them to manipulate.”

The hottest toys of the season might help accomplish those developmental goals, Wiles said, but simpler, less expensive options are also good choices.

“One thing I like about the very simple toys is that they encourage imaginative play, whereas when you have the toys with the imaginary components already built in – sirens, jet noises, car noises – what you find is that children aren’t making those noises on their own. They are letting the toy do it,” Wiles said.

“Part of learning and developing our minds is attempting to make these noises, attempting to understand how to mimic noises and learning how our vocal chords work and our mouths work. There comes a point when we start to deprive children of experiences that we know are beneficial because we are over-compensating for that with the gifts we are giving.”

**This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at www.ksre.k-state.edu/news/stories/2021/10/parenting-holiday-toys-and-child-development.html**
To illustrate his point, Wiles pointed to a simple kitchen toy set, which allows the child to imitate what the adults are doing in the family kitchen. “It’s a way for children to do some observational learning and apply it using a model of something that exists in the real world,” he said.

Regardless of the toy given, Wiles said “there is no substitute for human, facial interaction.”

“If you want toys to help your child meet their potential, play with them,” he said. “Talk about what you’re doing with them; engage with them. Toys, like books, are a means to engagement. For children, you could give them a mouse pad. As long as you’re playing with them with the mouse pad, it’s great.”

Wiles recently shared tips for buying toys as gifts on Sound Living, a weekly radio program from K-State Research and Extension. More information on child development also is available online from K-State Research and Extension.

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Sidebar
Should I let my child win?

Parents may have the tendency to back off on winning when they’re playing games with their children, but is that good for the child’s development?

K-State Research and Extension child development specialist Bradford Wiles encourages adults to be “judicious” in the effort they put toward winning.

“I’m not saying you let them win every time, but you don’t want to crush interest by demonstrating your skill as an adult over the child,” he said. “I’d like to think that’s elementary, but I know in practice that doesn’t always happen.”

“There’s pushback toward the participation trophy and children winning every time, but that doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t win 90 percent of the time when they’re kids. They need to understand mastery and a sense that they can do things, and that’s much more valuable than the ability to lose well at a young age.”

Parents could instead focus on adding progressively bigger challenges as the child grows older.

“What you’re talking about is what (researchers) call the zone of proximal development,” Wiles said. “It’s this area where children can learn really well with just a little help from adults. You want the goal to be just a little out of reach from their current ability so that with a little help they can get to that goal. What happens is they understand the pathway to get to that goal and they can replicate that.”

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Sound Living (radio program), www ksre k-state edu/news radio-network/sound-living.html
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