



## Toys that kick-start the imagination!

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Over the years I've accumulated quite the collection of toys, for use both in my practice as a speech pathologist, and with my own children. While toy trends have come and gone, I've come to realize that there are a few "tried, tested and true" toys that are staples for any toy box, especially when it comes to encouraging pretend play. These toys seem to have three characteristics in common. They:

- are **open-ended** – there is more than one way to play with the toy
- **promote interaction** – they encourage collaboration and conversation
- can be **used for simple or elaborate pretending** – these toys can stimulate your child's imagination from toddlerhood into the early school-aged years

### Before choosing a toy for your child...

The toy suggestions below are only a guide. The best guide is your child and his interests. He may be fascinated by something that is not on the list below, such as dinosaurs. If this is the case, then your toy box might include different items than those listed below. Always follow your child's lead.

### Toys that encourage pretend play

For each toy below, there are recommendations for children who are just beginning to pretend ("new pretenders") as well as children who already engage in some pretending ("experienced pretenders"). To determine your child's stage of pretend play development, refer to the guidelines in our article "The Land of Make Believe".

- **Your child's favourite stuffed animal or doll.** Teddy bears aren't just for cuddling and sleeping! Sometimes children's first pretending is seen with their favourite stuffed animal or doll. New pretenders might enjoy feeding their teddy bear or doll with a toy spoon or

putting a blanket over it so it can go to sleep. Experienced pretenders can have tea parties with several stuffed animals or dolls, or create a veterinarian's office or hospital by placing stuffed animals or dolls in old shoe boxes which do double duty as beds!

- **Puppets.** Puppets can be used in the same way as stuffed animals or dolls. But they have an additional feature that really stimulates pretending – their moving mouths and arms help them come to life. This makes them look more realistic and encourages new pretenders to feed them, talk to them, or comb their hair. More experienced pretenders enjoy putting on puppet shows using multiple puppets, or even puppets they've made themselves out of old socks. A cardboard box makes a great puppet theatre. Puppet shows encourage great collaboration and peer play in older children.
- **Blocks and Lego.** Blocks are not just for building towers! Children new to pretending might build something simple and familiar like a house or a garage for their favourite car. More experienced pretenders might pretend individual blocks are beds for the hospital or pieces of garbage for the garbage truck. Or they might enjoy creating elaborate scenes out of blocks, such as various buildings for a block "city". Some Lego sets are designed to build something specific, such as a spaceship or a castle. But try to "think outside of the Lego box"! There is no limit to what you and your child can create together.
- **Toy food and dishes.** Sometimes parents of boys are surprised when I suggest toy food and dishes as a pretend idea for their son, wondering "aren't those for girls?" But as a mother of two boys I can tell you that *ALL* children love to pretend about food! Children interact with food constantly – they eat, watch their caregivers prepare meals, and visit the grocery store. This makes food a great theme for new pretenders as it is so familiar. Often a child's first pretending involves food, such as feeding a stuffed animal or feeding mommy with a toy cup. More experienced pretenders can play restaurant, have a tea party, pretend to shop for toy food, have a birthday party, play pizza shop...the possibilities are endless!
- **Vehicles.** This time, it's the parents of girls who ask "aren't those for boys?" But all children enjoy playing with vehicles. Just like food, vehicles are something common in children's experience, which makes it a good early pretend theme. Pushing a toy car back and forth doesn't necessarily mean a child is pretending. But once they put an action figure inside and "drive" the car to the mechanic for a tune-up, the imagination is really working! A shoe box with doors cut out at the ends makes a great pretend car wash. Small dolls can take a bus ride to the zoo. Keep things simple for new pretenders by demonstrating one simple action with the vehicle, like pretending to fix it with a toy tool, or pretending to race two cars (one for you and one for your child).
- **Playdough** – Most children enjoy the sensory experience of squishing, rolling, and manipulating playdough. This can be a way to hook new pretenders into using their imagination. New pretenders can make something simple and familiar, like a car or an apple. You don't need the fancy playdough sets that come with accessories so you can style your pet's hair or make teeth for the dentist to clean (although these may give more experienced pretenders some neat ideas!). Again, try to "think outside of the playdough box"! You can incorporate some of the toys listed above to expand the pretending with

playdough. For example, make playdough food to serve on the toy dishes, then feed it to a puppet. Or make playdough roads or tunnels for toy vehicles to drive on. If you don't have any playdough – try making some with this recipe.

- **Costumes and props for role play.** This doesn't mean you should run to the toy store to buy expensive costumes. You can collect items from around your house for children to dress up in and pretend to be someone (also called "role play"). Items can include old purses, ties, hats, aprons, shirts, or jewellery. And look for props to accompany such dress up play, such as an old cell phone, shopping bag, briefcase, etc. New pretenders can pretend to be something familiar, like dressing up as mommy or daddy by holding a purse or wearing a tie. Experienced pretenders can dress up and act out a scene, such as mommy going shopping (with her shopping bag) or daddy going to work (with his briefcase).

## Beware of:

- **Bells and whistles.** Sometimes too many buttons or electronic parts can mean that the child's focus shifts to button-pressing instead of using his or her imagination
- **Close-ended toys.** Some toys have a specific end product (like a Lego set that creates a specific vehicle) or only one way to use the toy (like a remote controlled car). These types of toys can encourage certain skills (such as fine motor ability) but they can be restrictive when it comes to using the imagination.

Remember, if you follow your child's lead, it will be obvious what toys you should include in your toy box. For tips on encouraging your child's pretend play skills, read our article "The Land of Make Believe".

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

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