

# A parent's guide to... choosing toys

for children under three years

By Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and author

Toys. They are everywhere. Gone are the days when they were only sold in toy shops. Now they are a few shelves away from the food in the supermarket and the aspirin in the chemist. They are not cheap, either. So, what is worth buying and, more importantly, what will genuinely help your child to learn?

In this guide, we look at choosing toys for children under three, and in the next, we will consider older children.

Our starting point with babies and toddlers is safety. In these first three years, toys have to be strong and well designed. If you have a child under two years, it is highly likely that an object will end up in your child's mouth. This is known as 'mouthing' and is a perfectly normal way for babies and young toddlers to explore. It does mean, however, that toys and anything else that you give your child must be large enough to prevent choking.

While babies love mouthing, toddlers, on the other hand, have a tendency to poke and prod things. This means that their toys must be pretty robust

and moving parts have to be put together in a way that avoids damaging their fingers.

With safety in mind, the best advice is always to look for toys that bear the CE logo and to follow the manufacturer's advice. Keep in mind, too, that if you have an older child, their toys might represent a choking hazard to the younger one, so if they are playing together, you need to supervise them.

## BABY DAYS

While there are thousands of toys on the market, the best toy for a baby has and always will be an interested parent. As a parent, you can make eye contact, squeak, smile and bounce your baby up and down, while also being warm and cuddly! It is, therefore, worth seeing toys in your baby's life as additional extras – useful because they give you both something to focus on.

Remember, too, when you are out shopping, that anything you buy, you are likely to have to play with too. This can put a different spin on the squeaky giraffe or the musical toy with an irritating tune.

## TODDLER TIME

While babies rely on adults for most of their play, toddlers are starting to venture out alone. This is not to say that your child does not need you – on the contrary, quite often your child will only play in this way if you are in sight and may well want you to take a frequent interest. I always think about toddlers as 'do-ers'. Toys that work well allow the toddler to be busy. The classic brick trolley, for example, keeps the toddler busy as they push it around and keep loading and unloading it.

## Rotating and swapping toys

Children do like variety when it comes to toys. This does not mean that you need to go and buy lots, but it is useful to find ways of rotating them so that they are not out all the time. Bringing out 'new' toys can be useful if you need to get something done or you have run out of energy and need a bit of a break.

If you have friends with similar-aged children, think about swapping some toys on a regular basis. It is also worth checking to see if there is a toy library in your area where you can borrow toys. (Visit [www.natl.org.uk](http://www.natl.org.uk) to find out more.)

## Using household objects

While I have focused on buying toys, remember that many everyday items will also fascinate babies and toddlers. These have the advantage of being readily to hand and can be put away, rather than cluttering up your lounge!

For babies, look out



## A PARENT'S STORY

'Ever since Kyle was born, I have noticed how his play keeps on changing. At first, he loved watching rattles and staring up at his cot mobile. Things really changed when he could grab objects and he loved anything that he particularly enjoyed. By the time he was sitting up, his favourite game was knocking down stacking beakers and dropping things over the side of the highchair.

'It was at this time that I realised just how many things from the kitchen would keep him amused. When I was cooking, I would often hand him a wooden spoon or plastic bowl and they somehow kept him happy. Once he began crawling, he was into

everything and that is when I began to really find toys useful as a way of distracting him.

'I've found buying toys a bit hit and miss. I thought at first that more expensive toys would be better, but now I don't think it makes much difference. Some toys seem to grab his attention and keep him busy for several minutes, but others he scarcely notices.

'He is 18 months old now and very active. I find the best way to keep him entertained is not to have all the toys out at once. I put some away and then bring them out. I also find that he goes through phases. At the moment, he has one car that loves playing with because it makes a beeping sound. His favourite game is to roll it down a cardboard tube.'

for items that can be safely 'mouthed' such as wooden spoons, clean sponges, tea towels and even the odd lemon. With toddlers try putting out saucepans, spoons, clothes pegs and provided that you will be on hand, both to supervise and to clear up, half a bucket of water!

## Toys for Babies

I am a minimalist when it comes to toys for babies, but these would be my essentials:  
✓ Stacking beakers

✓ rattles ✓ musical mobile ✓ ball ✓ cot activity centre ✓ bath toys ✓ you!

## Toys for Toddlers

To avoid your home turning into a toy shop, adopt a 'less is more' approach and aim to have a selection of toys that do different things.

To push and move: Pushchair, brick trolley and small wheeled toys like cars

To ride: Sit-and-ride tricycle with no pedals, scooters

To throw and kick: Soft balls of different sizes

To fiddle with: Toy telephone, shape sorter, jigsaw puzzles, Jack-in-the-box

To explore: Paddling pool, play sand, paint and large markers, bath toys.