

# TAMING YOUR TOY MONSTER

A back-to-basics approach to gift giving

By Debbie Dalton

'Tis the season for kids' annual chorus of "I want, I want I want" and parents trying to find a balance between making their little darlings' wishes come true and maintaining their sanity and budget.

If your kid's eyes are glazed over from hours of video games and you've started rooting for the monsters in the Mario Brothers game, you're probably ready to try a back-to-the-basics approach to gift giving for your children.

"Toys and games should invite children to use their imaginations and develop their thinking and coordination skills. The more gadgets a toy has, the less it will capture your child's imagination," says Danielle Aymen Gottfried, owner and administrator of Caravaca Academy, a private school. "Toys should be simple, sturdy, long-lasting and educational. We need to get back to basics."

For example, building blocks have been around for years because they're a valuable tool for developing motor skills, problem solving techniques and creativity.

"Just because your child is of a new generation, doesn't mean the toys he plays with have to be new," Gottfried says. "Avoid fads and so-called hot items and look for toys which have long-lasting value for your child."

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When selecting products remember, the simpler, the better. "Children love to use their imaginations and it is important to encourage this," says Gottfried. "Too many of today's toys do not involve the child in any way. Just turn it on and it plays by itself, which won't hold a child's attention long. The play possibilities for a more basic doll or push-toy are limited only by your child's imagination."

Look for what really interests your child — not just what television commercials convince them they want. Children are

fascinated by household and kitchen items. A sandbox with basic items such as sieves and strainers opens up a world of imagination for a child and develops coordination skills.

Encourage your child to develop a hobby or special interest. Instead of giving pre-packaged hobby kits, create your own. That way you can add or delete items that specifically appeal to your child.

Creative types of children appreciate art kits which build on their current experience. Stay away from kits that are too constrictive — follow the directions and the result will look just like the picture on the box. Instead, let your children test the boundaries of their imagination. Art kits could include paint, crayons, paper, chalk and a small chalkboard, clay, felt, yarn, looms, popsicle sticks, blunt scissors and glue.

A photography kit could include an easy-to-use camera, film and a scrapbook. The child can use the scrapbook and photos as a diary by writing an account of what was happening under each picture and naming the people in the picture. Instead of allowing your child to take endless pictures, encourage them to use the finished photos in some form.

Once you decide to give your children toys and games which will best serve their play interests, how do you handle the constant demands for "hot" items they simply must have? Gottfried says decide the limits you want to set — either the types of toys or total numbers and then stand your ground. "Don't give into your child's anger or frustration. A child who gets every toy she asks for will not learn about limits and face some harsh realities when inevitably faced with them."

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Let everyone in your family who might give gifts to your children know about the limits you've set and why you've set them and encourage them to support you. Finally, consider the effects of peer pressure on children. Much of what they want to wear or play with is based on what their friends tell them they should like.