

Imagination

No, It Doesn't Walk, Talk or Light-Up

By Donna Smith

Surrounded by eleven other preschoolers, you watch as your daughter rips the clown-covered wrapping paper off another present. Smiling, she holds up her new battery-operated, remote control, multifunctional toy that plays music, converts to a robot, sings and can fold into a carry case for her other toys. You sigh, and wonder how many days she'll actually play with this thing before she either breaks it or throws it in her toy box and forgets about it.

Buying gifts for preschool-age children can be tough. Many parents instantly head for the electronic section of the store, where everything makes a noise and lights up. Parents often forget that simple, basic toys are the ones being played with the most. There are some toys that have stood the test of time and have been around for ages. Kids love them. They don't light up, sing, dance, play music and go through batteries at light speed; they entertain by making the child use his imagination. Your preschooler will not be entertained by the toy, but will be entertained with the toy.

So walk -- or click! -- past that noisy aisle at the toy store and get a gift that will be appreciated and have lasting appeal. Here are a few toys that will do just that.

Art Supplies

Preschoolers are at that age where they love to create and make things. Simple activity books and crayons are perfect for this age. Find educational activity books that teach letters, numbers and shapes, or fun ones with farm animals, trucks and cartoon characters. As for the crayons, those short, fat ones seem to fit better in a preschooler's little hand than the regular sized crayons. They also love to use markers, but make sure they are washable! To protect their clothing, get them over-sized white T-shirts and let them decorate with fabric paint. If it's a gift, have your child decorate with the name of the birthday boy or girl.

Building and Stacking Blocks

Preschoolers love to work with their hands. Building blocks, stacking blocks and Legos will encourage creative play. Many blocks help teach basic shapes and colors, as well as help them with their motor skills and make them use their imagination. (Balancing blocks takes a steady hand!) Legos encourage children to be creative and inventive. The possibilities are endless on what a child can make out of these little, brightly-colored blocks.

Books

Preschoolers are at the wonderful age where they are learning about themselves and the world around them. What could be a better gift than a book? Picture books and board books will delight and entertain over and over again. Bathtub books, homemade books and even non-fiction books are great for preschoolers. Find a book to match a child's interest. Books also encourage a parent and child to spend some quality time together. Parents should be prepared to read this book over and over again! Another idea is a magazine subscription. There are several magazines aimed at the preschool age group that the child will be excited to receive every month. Turtle and Humpty Dumpty are two great magazines for preschool-age children.

Balls

What child doesn't love a ball? Balls encourage interaction and cooperation with others, and are also lots of fun! Kids love those big colorful bouncy balls, or how about a football or soccer ball? Preschoolers are just beginning to form their interests, so give them a variety of different balls and see which one they enjoy the most. Will you have a football player? A soccer player? Or maybe just an entertained preschooler playing catch in the back yard? Encourage your child to make up new games to play.

Musical Instruments

Parents often forget about buying kids a musical instrument. Who wouldn't want an active preschooler banging on a set of drums in the living room? OK, so how about a harmonica or a tambourine? Get a tape recorder and tape them playing their music. Kids will love listening to the sounds they make. "Real" musical instruments can be expensive, so opt for the cheaper, plastic kind for now. If your kids do develop an interest, wait until they are older and able to take care of an expensive instrument.

Toys don't have to talk, walk, beep, light up, blow up or require batteries to be fun. The toys above have sustained through many,