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Child development

Simple toys vs. electronics

Child psychologists say children enjoy simple things, such as blocks, and learn by building or creating with them. This isn't because children are simple — it's because they have so much imagination.

"Simple materials are very important, basic learning tools," according to Dr. Melvin Lewis, professor of pediatrics and psychology at Yale University Child Study Center. "These are literally building blocks for children's mental development and thinking."

Yale studies show children use blocks, with a variety of textures, colors and shapes, for more than improving physical dexterity. While handling such simple items, children begin to conceptualize space, weight, volume, mass and time.

"This is a way young children begin to form concrete thoughts," Lewis said. "Creating and building are very important in a child's development and help him or her learn to think."

PERHAPS surprising to parents is research showing that children enjoy this kind of creative activity not because it's easy, but because it's difficult. Standardized tests used in the developmental assessment of children show a child likes such activities because there is a sense of achievement involved in completing them.

"The exercise of imagination involved in creating a finished product or completing a task is itself pleasurable," said Lewis. "Improvising with different materials also is a wonderful experience for children. But what I have found to be the most pleasurable for children is the process of mastering involved in their efforts and the pride children take in the results of their efforts."

An Evansville, Ind., based manufacturer of wooden gift and collectible products has found this to be true. And Arbor Hill House President Angie Sinclair said using handmade wooden letters and accessory figures also allows children to create keepsakes or gifts ad develop their imagination.

"I once watched a small boy making a desk plaque for his teacher," Sinclair said. "As he carefully glued the wooden letters to the base of the plaque and decided whether to attach the rainbow or the kite as an accessory, he and his imagination were hard at work learning about the world."

DESIGNING an item in a free-form way using imagination, a child can make it be whatever he wants it to be. It is important that the child be allowed to create and build at his own level. Studies show if forced to go in any one direction, the pleasure of the activity is decreased. The element of pleasure increases when the item created is given to someone as a gift.

"Children love giving gifts to others," Lewis said. "The pleasure evoked by someone who appreciates and vocally praises a child's gift gives the little craftsman an immense sense of pride, accomplishment and love."

This kind of positive growing experi-

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