

Toy shop

Smart toys for little girls and boys

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SPECIAL WRITER

Today's toy makers turn out technologically advanced playthings to help kids keep up with modern demands. But what children really want are toys that let them be children. Some of the best toys are sturdy ones that promote open-ended play, inspire creativity, last past Jan. 1, and offer a little education. Here's a sampling of smart holiday gifts.

Santa's youngest

Babies learn during play, so toys that let them explore on their own make marvelous gifts. Even the tiniest tots will enjoy Playskool's Kick Start Gym. Baby starts the fun by kicking to activate music, sounds and motions made by textured butterfly, bird and flower toys. Less-active babies can join in the festivities with an extended play option. As baby grows, so does the gym, which converts to a play center for toddlers.

Lamaze Teaching Taxi is cuddly cloth, with buttons, clicking tires, zippers and crinkly bumper. Brio, known for indestructible wooden train sets, offers many bright playthings for babies and toddlers. Circus Ball Play is a colorful dome with spinning balls and three levels of drops and jingles. Brio's Sightsee Camper is a pink, motorized van with figures, dog and trailer for push fun.

The Fisher-Price Little People Motorized Big Top Train is a circus of laughs, with music, launching daredevil, jump-through ring, trampoline and moving high wire - my toddler's favorite toy. Its Happy Crane Construction lets toddlers drop boulders and manipulate a construction vehicle. Water Magic Kitchen uses real water, with no batteries, to make bubbling, sizzling sounds. Tots will love seeing a flower "grow" and a faucet "run." Also great from Fisher-Price, Grow-To-Pro Baseball, Sizzle 'n' Glow Grill, the active top-notch RC Off-Road Adventure and big-ticket, cool Power Wheels Harley Davidson.

Toddlers love bath play. Ambi's Fishing Boat comes with mini poles and fish. Bath Bouncing Bears hook together and float, whistle and promote lots of hand-eye activities, as do Ambi's Rub-a-Dub-Dub bears in a tub full of holes, (for water to flow through), a whistle and lots of put-in, take-out action. And Lego's Primo bath set includes rattling, squirting water toys and a net for storage.

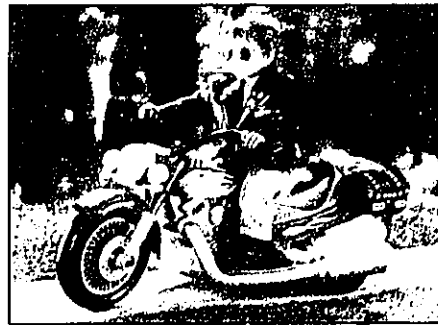
Preschool fun

The toy market aimed at preschoolers is enormous. Brio's Richard Scarry's Busytown train set incorporates favorite characters into a fun-filled choo-choo extravaganza. Learning

Curve makes wooden train sets in the Thomas the Tank Engine theme. Their "working" sawmill with dumping depot is especially cool. And T.C. Timber, another premium manufacturer of wooden toys and games, offers a Spiral Twister Train full of twists and turns. Looking for tenacious wooden puzzles? Learning Curve's many games for the preschool market are fantastic.

Brio's many other preschool toys are also worthy, with a new motorized, magnetic racing truck set, a sure bet for boys. Young builders keep busy with Brio's sturdy Fire and Rescue Set, so 3- to 6-year-olds can construct a working fire station with truck, figures and pumps. Lego's Duplos are always hot for this age group, and their Pool's Hundred Acre Wood set invites familiar friends to play.

Girls with doll houses welcome Fisher-Price's Loving Family acces-



Easy Rider Jr.: Little kids will get a kick out of a Harley-Davidson scaled down to toddler size, \$700, at Motor City Harley-Davidson, Farmington Hills.

sories - bedroom, dining and bath sets with real sounds, lights and movements. The Loving Family Dollhouse is updated, with new action features. And Kinder-Garden Babies, from Toy Biz, are packaged in soft carriers that smell flowery or fruity, like accompanying baby dolls. Adorable Muffy VanderBears are now packaged affordably and meant

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