

BIRTH TO THREE: For creative play, Tinkertoys trump technology

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Giving gifts is a holiday tradition in most households, but choosing toys for young children can be challenging.

While shopping for the right toy, you may find yourself inundated with confusing messages mixed in among the mountains of advertisements, catalogs and newspaper inserts you receive during the holiday season.

They will likely be focused on selling the newest gadget or gizmo — the cool new trendy toy that will maintain your child’s rapt attention for hours on end with flashy images and electronic effects. But going simple can actually make your life easier and have great developmental benefits for your child.

The Center for Early Childhood Education at Eastern Connecticut State University recently released the results of its 2011 TIMPANI (Toy to Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination) study. Each year they name a “best toy” based on three categories: thinking and learning; cooperation and social interaction; and self-expression and imagination.

The winner may be surprising: the Tinkertoy Construction Set, first released nearly 100 years ago. Unlike many toys, Tinkertoy sets come with no screen, nothing to plug in and will not be subject to downloadable updates.

What is it that places this classic set of sticks and spools above more modern, technology-based products?

“This year’s findings confirm what we’ve been finding over the years with the TIMPANI study: those basic, open-ended toys tend to be more beneficial to children’s play and learning than some of the more elaborate and commercial toys that are on the market,” said Professor Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, the study’s principal researcher.

This article does not endorse any specific product. Other open-ended toys with similar qualities include blocks, Legos or Duplos, trains and cars, Playdough, animal and character figures, and many other manipulatives that give children the opportunity to make choices, be creative and explore. Gift givers sometimes save lots of money with these kinds of presents.

An argument could be made for the benefits of some electronic or educational toys that include interactive elements and instant feedback. But keep in mind that anything with a

screen takes away from joint attention, either between parent and child or between the child and another child.

Children develop social skills in the context of relationships. Communication exchanges and moments of interaction enhance and reinforce learned concepts. This occurs during peer-to-peer interactions and during interactions between children and adults. And parents are their children's primary teachers.

According to research, parents have an average of 220,000 interaction opportunities with a child each year, while a child in a 2.5-hour, four-days-per-week preschool or kindergarten program has 9,900 interaction opportunities with teachers over the same year.

This staggering difference serves to underscore the importance of the choices you make regarding toys, materials and activities.

If your goal is to have your child be entertained, that's easy. There are many media opportunities and electronic products that can occupy a child for extended periods of time.

If your goal is to have a cooperative child who interacts with you, it will require your active participation by having interactive exchanges with your child.

But the benefits are huge — you and your child develop and strengthen your relationship as you increase your ability to communicate with each other. In other words, your child learns how to speak to you, and how to listen to you.

Those of you who have teenagers know how important cooperation and communication can be, and these skills are developed during a child's early years. Interactive exchanges are a short-term objective that meets the long-term goal of a healthy parent-child relationship.

For you as a parent, play is your passport to building a supportive, nurturing relationship with your child. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers learn through activity and interaction. They also learn through their important work, which is play.

Through play, you can provide your child with the support needed to learn and grow, to learn how to learn, and to get needs met in safe, appropriate ways.

In addition to choosing a developmentally rich toy for your child, perhaps the greatest gift you can give is your time and attention. This is an opportunity to meet your child's developmental needs and provide your child with unconditional, positive attention. And you may enjoy building a Tinkertoy helicopter with your child.

Gerry Morgan is a behavior specialist with Early Childhood CARES, an agency that provides early intervention and early childhood special education services to Lane County children ages birth to 5. If you have concerns about your child's development, call 541-346-2578 or 800-925-8694 to schedule a free screening in English or Spanish. The opinions expressed in this column are those of the writer. Birth To Three is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening families through parent support and education. For more information about Birth To Three, visit www.birthto3.org or call 541-484-5316.