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BABY

Best Toys for Babies

Toys are tools for learning, so choose playthings that inspire exploration and build skills

IN AN AGE WHEN IMAGES, MUSIC, AND GAMES APPEAR WITH THE touch of an electronic screen, the best baby toys remain simple ones that stimulate curiosity and motor skills, says Claire Lerner, LCSW, a child development and parenting specialist in Washington, D.C.

“They become interested and curious about the world, which is the foundation of learning,” says Lerner, who works with Zero to Three, a nonprofit organization focused on early child development. Here are some of Lerner’s top toy picks.

Crib mobile

A colorful mobile captivates babies with visual contrast, motion, and sound. Watch how your baby reacts. Some thrive on sensory stimulation, while others become easily overwhelmed. Remove mobiles at 5 months or when your baby can push up on hands and knees.

Books

Talking to your baby aids brain development, so it’s never too early to begin reading aloud. Start with books that your baby can touch, hold, and even put in his mouth.

Nesting cups

First, your baby may knock cups together, making sounds. Eventually, he will learn that one fits inside another or that they can be stacked.

Pop-up toys

Baby bangs on the big plastic button and suddenly a smiling bear pops up! With toys like this, surprise leads to an understanding of cause and effect.

Connecting blocks

Some children naturally want to take things apart or put them together. You may be the one connecting the blocks for your baby, but for older children, blocks become a tool for creative play.

Musical instruments

Younger babies may just wave around a plastic maraca or toy drumstick. Even that grasping helps them build motor skills. By about 6 to 8 months, they have enough motor control to bang on a small drum or a pint-size xylophone.

Shape sorter

Engage your baby in dropping shapes into a container and spilling them out. You can demonstrate spatial concepts by guiding the shapes into proper-shaped holes, although babies won’t master that until about 15 to 18 months.

ASK YOUR DOCTOR

Q What toys are safe for my baby to put in his mouth?

Pay attention to warning symbols on toy packaging. Safety guides are available from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Q How should I clean my baby’s toys?

Use a spray disinfectant and rinse thoroughly before your baby plays with them again.

Q What toys are most appropriate for my baby’s motor skills?

The answer depends on your baby’s age. Remember that infants don’t all progress at the same rate.

Q What everyday objects are safe for my baby to play with?

Infants may enjoy banging on pots or plastic containers with a spoon.