

The Natural Toy Guide

4 Tips That Help You Choose Safe and Timeless Toys For Your Little Loved Ones

**Presented by
Natural Moms Talk Radio**



Over the years as a parent you're going to spend a lot of money on toys – perhaps thousands of dollars.

So it would be smart to think about toy purchases as an investment.

You want them to last for more than one child, and not to be discarded quickly. And instead of filling up landfills with plastic junk, you may want toys to be more like heirlooms that can be passed on after your kids have enjoyed them.

This report has been prepared to share some tips to help us figure out whether a toy is truly valuable. Another concern is about the safety of toys. With so much alarm in the news with recent massive toy recalls, parents are rightly concerned about toys their children play with.

To this end, this report has been put together with snippets of an interview with toy expert and mom, Nancy Politis of Heirloom Wooden Toys. She shares the 4 things parents should look for when making decisions about toy purchases for their kids. At the end I'll also include recommendations for safe, healthy toy options.

I hope this report is helpful and informative. Feel free to pass it along!



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Tip number one: Consider the play value of the toy.

According to Nancy, an important question to ask is: *“Is the toy an open ended toy?”*

Open ended, imaginative toys are very important for kids. They capture your child's attention cognitively, allow them to try various combinations, different themes, different ways of playing with the same toy.

With open ended toys, the outcome is not always the same, and the outcome is not already chosen for them. Kids are able to use their imagination to act out or build or play with a variety of themes.



That's very important for children nowadays, because so many toys require nothing other than that the child just sit in front of it and the toys does everything for them. It will start itself, tell the child how it should be played with, and then they're just sitting there not participating much in their play.

That's unfortunate because play is a learning opportunity for children. Open ended toys are the ones that your kids will come back to again and again and again. Kids get bored easily with toys that play by themselves – have your kids ever entertained themselves with just a cardboard box? Mine sure do.

The toy that many of us are most familiar with in this category of open ended toys are wooden blocks. The possibilities are endless with them.

They've been around for decades, and when your child is an adult they'll still be popular when your Grandkids are toddling around because they're a classic.

My Mom bought my oldest his first set of wooden blocks from an antique shop and they looked as if they were from the 1940's era.

A 6 month old baby can play with blocks, practicing picking things up holding in their hand, passing it from one hand to the other, then when they're a little older they can stack one on top of the other and knock it down. They can keep playing with those when they're 8 or 9, building more elaborate structures. Even much older kids enjoy building with blocks. Goodness – I'm an adult and I like playing with blocks! ☺



Nancy says that building with blocks is actually introducing math skills. Without knowing it, kids are learning concepts around symmetry and building and ratios.

Tip number two: Consider the durability of the toy.

Questions to ask: Is the toy well made, how long will it last, are the toys going to be treasured and passed on through the generations?

Our generation – the “Gen X and Y” parents are understandably more concerned about this issue.



We're thinking of the next generation, we're thinking of our landfills, especially with all the plastic toys that we have filling them up and going nowhere for hundreds of years. What happens? The resources required to produce the plastic in the first place are enormous. Then if a part breaks, the whole toy gets tossed out. And what happens when we toss all the plastic toys out that seem to multiply at night in our homes while we sleep? We eventually say we can't take the clutter any more! There's too many! Sadly, they often just get tossed into the trash.

One solution that we love is to buy wooden toys, wood being a renewable resource, a natural product.

According to Nancy: *“Wood is live. The kids are playing with it and it feels better. And with a lot of our toys, if a piece breaks, you can generally fix it. If a part breaks, a lot of the manufacturers will be more than happy to fix the toy or provide a replacement part.”*

I think this sends an important message to our children, because they see the hypocrisy in us if we go to a fast food restaurant and get a little plastic toy with the meal. They play with it for 5 minutes and then it turns into “bottom of the van fodder”. It's trash, and you get tired of it and throw it out. This is sending such a bad message to our kids.

And to boot, wooden toys are much more aesthetically pleasing and cleaner than plastic toys.

You may recall the whole “plastic versus wooden cutting boards” debate that went back and forth. In the end one study showed that wood was much safer. This particular study was funded by a company who made plastic cutting boards! They smothered the two boards with bacteria, left them overnight, and what they found the next morning was that the bacterial count on the plastic board had multiplied, yet on the wooden one, the bacteria died.

We worry about what babies and young children will put in their mouth, how clean and how safe it is. With wooden toys you can at least be comforted by the fact that they will not carry as much bacteria and germs.

Another plus with wooden toys is that if the child chews on them and ingests them, they won't be eating plastic. Wooden toys are painted but the dyes are non toxic and safe for a child to chew on, especially if you buy from a company like Heirloom Wooden Toys.

Tip number three: What is the growth value of the toy?

Nancy suggests that parents look for toys that can be added on to, instead of those that will only be played with once, providing a quick thrill that lasts a couple weeks.



She encourages parents to look for toys that are classic enough to grow with them. For example, the wooden train sets.

“The trains for my son have been a huge hit, and even at 7 he still plays with them. Even as they age, year to year, it becomes more complex and it's different. When he was 4 or 5, he wondered: how can I make them go as high as I can? So he would take the wooden blocks and stack them really high and make a ramp, and send the cars down.”

There are so many possibilities with open ended toys and they'll grow with your child as they go through their different play cycles, and then if you're going to have more than one child, the wooden and classic toys will last through more than one child.”

These kinds of toys capture their attention and you can keep adding to it and not be inundated with more toys than your child can play with or that you can fit in your home comfortably! This becomes overwhelming to the child and they turn off and don't want to play with any of it. In addition, gift giving becomes easier. If your children have a train table and train set, you can ask Grandparents and friends to give your child a new addition to the set. Instead of getting an overmarketed, loud, flashy, it-needs-20-batteries-to-operate plastic toy, you can encourage friends and relatives to add to the existing set.

Nancy adds: *“If you pay for one nice toy, you can teach them how to value things around them, and they won't think of things as disposable as some people treat their things. They can start at an early age to treat their toys and things and surroundings with more respect and take care of them.”*

Tip number four: What is the learning value of the toy?

These days, a lot of toys focus on being “educational”, which studies have shown to be of dubious value. With classic toys, it's not a pushy type of learning. But they're learning as their attention is captured and they're playing.

They're learning the ABCs, colors, shapes, and patterns... a lot of these classic toys do that. They also help develop gross and fine motor skills.

Nancy continues: *“One example are the wire bead mazes. It doesn't seem like a learning toy and it's not forced, but as kids play they're learning fine motor skills, counting, and those types of things. And as they interact with the toys, it helps to increase their self esteem by allowing them to interact with their environment.”*

More great examples are wooden ring sorters. First a young baby will learn to take off the rings, then a few months later they'll be able to put them on, then they learn that the rings are different sizes, and that the bigger one goes on first. The other manipulative toys like puzzles are good, and there are a lot of neat chunky wooden puzzles nowadays that very young children can play with.

So we want our children to learn as they're playing but instead of being too focused on wanting them to learn specific things, we need to let our kids be kids, let them play and interact with their environment. And a lot of the classic toys allow them to have fun and integrate learning of fine motor skills.

One of the major concerns is for toys to be safe.

Make sure that the toys that you give your children are well made, that they don't pose a hazard. This might mean spending a little more money up front for a higher quality toy. Plastic toys may contain PVC (polyvinyl chloride), which has been linked with cancer and other health issues.

Another issue with plastic toys are phthalates. According to Wikipedia.org, phthalates are:

"... a group of chemical compounds that are mainly used as substances added to plastics to increase their flexibility. They are chiefly used to turn polyvinyl chloride from a hard plastic into a flexible plastic.

Phthalates are controversial because high doses of many phthalates have shown hormonal activity in rodent studies. Studies on rodents involving large amounts of phthalates have shown damage to the liver, the kidneys, the lungs, and the developing testes".

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phthalates>

While the topic is being argued from both sides, some scientists believe that excessive levels of phthalates may cause cancer and reproductive problems. Minimizing the amount of exposure is easy with simple lifestyle choices, so why wouldn't we take precautions as caring parents?



Choosing cloth and wooden toys is a safer option. Especially when buying toys for babies or toddlers, it's a good idea if the cotton is organic. It's no news to you that babies and toddlers put everything in their mouths!

Some tips for choosing cloth toys: Avoid toys made with petrochemical derived fabrics (synthetics). Organic cotton, wool and hemp are good bets.

If you're a crafty type you can sew your own so you know exactly what's inside them (some conventional cloth toys are stuffed with polyurethane filling) and what fabric they're made from.

Spend your money with companies that use responsible manufacturing processes that show respect for the environment. Even wooden toys can be made from particleboard held together with glues that are toxic, or finished with sealants that contained petrochemicals and pesticides.

Still, wooden toys are generally a better choice, especially if you do a little homework first. Your best bet is probably to buy natural finish wooden toys that are sealed with beeswax or other food grade oils.

And Finally ... Remember - Less is More

Nancy offers a last bit of advice: *"There's a lot of value to having fewer pieces around the house. It decreases noise pollution."*



There's another reason to give natural toys the thumbs up – they're not battery operated and often quieter!

Recommended Resources:

[Heirloom Wooden Toys](#) – thanks Nancy for providing this valuable information. Nancy offers free shipping on orders over \$99.

[Build Your Own Toy Train Table Ebook](#) – Are you the crafty type? Save hundreds and build a train table for your kids in just 3 hours with the instructions in this eco-friendly ebook.

[Green Nest](#) – Organic cotton baby toys and more stuff for the natural baby

[Craftsbury Kids](#) - Gorgeous selection of unique cloth and other natural toys, including Fair Trade items.

[Amazon](#) - Amazon.com has a large selection of sustainable, non-toxic wooden and cloth toys.

I hope you enjoyed this toy guide. Please share it with someone you care about. 😊

Carrie Lauth
Mom of 4 and Host of [Natural Moms Talk Radio](#)