



by Karen Stephens

# Mind-Powered Play: Engaging Alternatives to Battery-Operated Toys

Oh, yes, I know children fancy they can't live without television's hyper-advertised battery-operated toys. From commercial to commercial, they drool over fantastic feats the toys perform.

But while those performing toys appear spectacular on television, in real life they often leave children disillusioned. Soon the flashing lights and whistling bells — that easily break — go by the wayside within days.

Toys best for children allow plenty of growing room for creativity, resourcefulness, and originality. Those play materials aren't complete without the child's input, influence, and decision-making. The best mind-powered toys require kids' imaginations to enter into play or the toys won't do a thing.

Because they are usually open-ended and responsive to children's wishes, mind-powered toys set the stage for more play options. And they can be used differently as children develop; thus they grow *with* children. It's kinder to the family pocketbook when the same toy can be used over several years rather than just several weeks. It also combats the boredom factor by expanding with children's intellect.

Basic wooden building blocks, and other types of construction toys, are still the best buy for the money. During play, they trigger children to action, inviting active "hands on" application and manipulation rather than passive observation. They help develop basic concepts such as size, number, shape, color, matching, comparing, balancing, etc. When toy vehicles, animals, or train tracks are added, block building takes a child wherever he or she wants to go.

During block play with peers, language and communication skills are utilized, too. In cooperative play, kids experience and identify emotions, and learn to effectively express ideas. They gradually master the ability (and patience) to share, cooperate, negotiate, lead, and follow. Those "team player" skills will be put to good use throughout life.

As alternatives to battery-powered toys, listed below are simpler, and often much cheaper, mind-powered play items. At every touch they stimulate children's brain cells and learning pathways. They motivate children to discover knowledge that can be acquired, processed, applied, and then re-applied to their hearts' content.

When selecting any toy, remember to offer only those safe for your child's age, experience and abilities.

## **Dramatic play kits**

A dramatic play kit is a collection of pretend-play props centered on a theme. Whether purchased or homemade, they can be stored in a box, small suitcase, or plastic storage tub. The kits entice children to make up and act out stories, like playing "house" or "going to the restaurant."

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Children's favorite kits often start with their parents. Are you a construction worker, doctor, veterinarian, farmer, or store salesperson? Your kids will love pretending to be one, too!

When making kits, provide just enough props to trigger a play theme, not to completely dictate it. Multiple props encourage cooperative peer play.

Below are two examples of dramatic play kits children enjoy. Your own imagination can come up with others customized to your child's interests.

- *Veterinarian kit*: Stuffed animals, gauze, bandages, tape, towel for an "operating table," toy stethoscope, box or milk crate for patient bed, notepad for prescriptions, play money and cash register.
- *Magician*: Top hat, white gloves, deck of cards, scarves, cane, adult's old black suit jacket with sleeves cut to child arm length.

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### **Manipulatives: Table Toys Galore**

*Manipulative and construction toys*, for floor or table top play, are very flexible and responsive to children's ideas. They can be connected together to make endless creations either by stacking, snapping, interlocking, stringing.

They give small finger muscles and eye-hand coordination good challenges. Even nature items, such as rocks, sticks, leaves, and seeds can be used as manipulatives. Commercial manipulatives go by trade names such as Legos®, Bristle Blocks®, Lincoln Logs®.

### **Sensory Play Materials**

*Play dough* or other types of molding and modeling clay is easiest for kids to use inside. The texture and color of dough materials is calming, while also triggering imaginative play. Play becomes more complex and engaging if children use tools with dough, such as cookie cutters, wooden tongue depressors for carving, or small rolling pins.

*Sand play* can be enjoyed indoors or on a balcony or patio using a small rubber tub with a plastic liner underneath to protect floors. When possible, an outdoor sandbox offers more options. When a hose or buckets are offered with water, children can make hand or footprints, shape casts, or "pretend" mud pies. Building landscapes of mountains, valleys, castles, and water moats stretch mind-power, too. Large sculptures can be created with sand and water — even whales or dinosaurs.

*Water play* is another sensory material that tantalizes children. Whether used indoors in an actual water table or tub, or used outdoors, water play takes creative turns if you provide play tools such as sponges and buckets. Also provide plastic, unbreakable items such as: measuring cups, funnels, clean bottles, sponges, sailboats, or miniature sea creatures.

### **Art Materials**

Art experiences let children formulate and reveal thoughts, ideas, and impressions both in two and three dimensions. For instance, there's tempera painting on paper, but also building sculptures with cardboard boxes. Below are a few suggestions for art materials and color tools.

*Color*: Washable, water-based tempera paint, finger-paint, watercolors, markers, crayons, chalk, colored pencils.

*Paper Mediums:* Newspaper, construction paper, old wrapping paper, paper grocery bags, fingerpaint paper, paper plates, paper towels, cardboard boxes, shoe boxes.

*Color Application Tools:* Brushes of all sizes, cotton balls or Q-tips®, plastic eye droppers, sponge prints, cookie cutters, feathers, water spray bottle, sponge rollers, fingers (as in fingerpaints).

### **Nature Play Opportunities**

Wherever you can find a safe location, children love the freedom to explore natural spaces. Mind-powered play shifts into high gear, whether building forts, making pathways, chasing butterflies, observing an ant hill, tracing leaf patterns, making flower crowns, tracking animal prints, or looking for worms or “buried treasure.” It develops not only children’s brains, but their connections to Earth.

I hope your kids have fun during mind-powered play. And don’t forget, whether in your child’s early childhood program or at home, you can play, too! One of the perks of parenting is the chance to re-experience the joys of childhood — without looking silly!

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.