



By Karen Stephens

## Mind-Powered Toys: Batteries Not Required

Oh, yes, I know, children think they can't live without television's hyper-advertised battery-operated toys. Skipping from commercial to commercial, they drool over fantastic feats the toys perform. (Advertisers don't earn big bucks for nothing! They know how to whet kids' appetites for consumer goods.) But if you want to build children's creativity and learning power, the *watch-me!* toys don't do the trick. Toys that really engage children, and keep them occupied for hours, are the ones that aren't complete without the kid.

Play toys that require children's active participation develop both thinking and social skills. They are toys that trigger children to action, making the kids, not batteries, do the work — or as kids call it, the play.

Battery-operated *performance* toys also reduce children's chances for peer play. They may look impressive on the outside, but most battery-operated toys simply set the stage for passive, even isolated learning. The key to better brain development (and fun!) is plentiful opportunity for engaged, back and forth play, not detached observation of a toy doing tricks.

With interactive play items, kids develop decision-making skills as well as abstract and symbolic thought. Problem solving skills are fine tuned, too. When playing with peers, language and communication skills are utilized. As children enjoy active play with peers, they begin to master patience and the ability to share. Emerging friendship skills, such as cooperation, taking turns, and negotiation are honed. Through mind-powered play, children also learn to contribute play ideas and build on their peers' ideas, both valuable *team player* skills.

As alternatives to the battery-operated toys, I've listed homemade, *pretend* play kits that set the stage for active, creative play. One or two are sure to catch your child's fancy. The kits, a collection of props around a theme, will entice children to make up and act out stories, like when you played *house* or *farm*.

You may think of other pretend play kits your child will enjoy. I'll give you a hint — start with your own job and hobbies. Are you a construction worker, doctor, florist, or artist? Your kids will love pretending to be one, too! When gathering items for kits, provide just enough props to trigger a play theme. You don't want to completely dictate the play. You provide the basics, and then leave room for kids to provide imaginative details. When developing kits, keep in mind your children's ages, experiences, developmental abilities, and appropriate safety precautions. The younger the child, the more supervision required. Multiple props encourage cooperative play between siblings, cousins, or friends.

And take a lesson from advertisers — packaging motivates! If packaged with a little flare, the kids won't even know it's homemade. Store kits in labeled, see-through plastic storage tubs or sturdy, decorated boxes. Contact paper, markers, and stickers dress up containers to catch children's eyes. (And from a parent's perspective, containers encourage organization and clean up!)

Your kids will have fun with the kits. And don't forget, you can play, too! One of the perks of parenting is the chance to re-experience the joys of childhood — without looking silly!

- **Veterinarian kit:** Stuffed animals, kids' round-tipped scissors, gauze, bandages, tape, towel for an *operating table*, toy stethoscope, box or milk crate for patient bed, notepad and pencil for prescriptions, play money, and cash register.

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- **Rock Singer kit:** Microphones (glue a small sponge ball on top of empty toilet paper tube), sunglasses, flamboyant hats, scarves or capes, instruments such as margarine tub shakers (dry beans inside make the sound), oatmeal box and wooden spoons for drumming, lidless shoebox strung with rubber bands for strumming.
- **Dancer's kit:** Provide dancing materials, such as scarves, crepe paper streamers, tinsel tree garland, tutus, lace scraps, old slips with elastic waist (can-can slips made from netting are great!), Hawaiian leis, capes, feather boas, or feather dusters.
- **Fire Fighter kit:** Fire fighter hat, rain slicker, galoshes, cut off garden hose, plastic safety goggles, empty plastic 2 liter pop bottles equipped with elastic arm straps to resemble air tanks.
- **Hair dresser:** Mannequin head, wigs, brushes and combs, mirror to play in front of, unbreakable hand-held mirror, small spray bottles, bows, barrettes, headbands, scarves, foam curlers, old blow dryer with cord cut off at base, old curling iron with the cord cut off at base.
- **Backpacker kit:** Backpack, map, flashlight (without batteries), compass, pretend first aid kit, dried fruit, tin pan, old field guide, and binoculars (tape two empty toilet paper tubes together.)
- **Picnic kit:** Picnic basket filled with paper plates, cups, spoons, plastic food, tablecloth, napkins, plastic thermos, plastic flowers, straw sun hats, sunglasses, empty bottle of sunscreen.
- **Beach party:** Beach towels, beach balls, hula hoops, sunglasses, sand toys, empty bottle of sunscreen, sunglasses.
- **Waiters/waitress kit:** Menus (glue magazine pictures of prepared food items onto cardboard), apron, paper hat, pad and pencil for orders, plastic food, food trays, plastic plates, cups, utensils, play money, cash register. (Want more realism? Make plastic *charge cards*, and include a microphone so kids can *announce* reservations.)
- **Construction worker:** Child-size hard hat, pretend tools and tool box, boots, tool belt, large cardboard boxes for construction, walkie-talkie, old blue prints.
- **Florist kit:** Rose boxes, ribbon, bows, tape, child's round-tipped scissors, artificial flowers, plastic vases, old cards, pencils, flower catalog, delivery person hat, play money, and cash register.
- **Business Executive kit:** Old brief case, appointment calendar, notebook, pencils, calculator, business cards, junk mail, business equipment magazine, computer keyboard, large dry erase easel with markers, sports coat with shortened sleeves, vest, a chunk of cardboard to resemble a cellular phone.)
- **Postal Carrier kit:** Bag, junk mail, cancelled stamps, hat, and plastic spray bottle (to fend off dogs.)
- **Airline Attendant:** Flight magazines, small plastic trays and cups, microphone, uniform-type jacket, airline posters.
- **Grocery Store:** Play cash register, pretend money, and clean empty food boxes or plastic containers on shelves, wagon or stroller to use as shopping cart.
- **Magician:** Top hat, white gloves, deck of cards, scarves, cane, adult's old black suit jacket with sleeves cut to child-length.
- **Secretary:** Old computer keyboard, play telephone, junk mail, stamp pad, notepads, and pencils.
- **Woodworker kit:** Safety goggles, wood scraps (soft pine is best), nails with large heads, child-sized saw, level, tool belt, carpenter apron. (Only for ages four years and up. Always supervise woodworking play closely!)
- **House Painter kit:** Plastic buckets for pretend paint, paint brushes, paint stirrers, paint roller and tray, paint chip samples, paint manufacturer brochures, painter's apron, painter's cap.
- **Santa Claus:** Santa hat, beard (white fur material from fabric store with string tie), pillowcase to hold toys, red overcoat, boots, stack of "Letters to Santa," world map, flashlight (without batteries).
- **Fairy Godmother:** Wig, hat, full length play dress, dress-up shoes, homemade magic wand, confetti bits for fairy dust. (And, needless to say, a vacuum to clean up the *fairy dust*.)

**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*.

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