Eco-Friendly Toys: Tips for Keeping Kids and the Planet Safe

As parents, we always have our kids' safety in mind. We rarely hand something over to our children without thinking of how it could potentially harm them. *Will he be able to pull parts off that car, put them in his mouth, and choke? What happens if she eats that* Playdough*?*

While we do take the time to analyze various aspects of a toy, we probably don't put *enough* thought into it. Does the toy have hidden chemicals and toxins? Did its production harm the environment?

Let's look at several factors parents should take into consideration before hitting the toy store.

1. Repurpose First

Before buying anything new, take a good look at what you have at home. Has your son been begging for a drum set? Maybe the pots and pans would be a satisfactory alternative. Is your daughter determined to have that hot pink playhouse? A refrigerator box with a custom paint job might do the trick.

Here are some great ideas. Otherwise, google phrases like "toys from trash."

2. Broaden the Age Range

See if you can adapt toys to fit different age ranges. The longer you can use a toy, the longer it will stay out of the landfill.

For example, all you need to do to make “old kid” toys more age appropriate for a younger crowd is bend the rules a little. For example:

- Move the foul line closer when playing cornhole and tossers so little arms can play, too.
- Don’t worry about forming words with the Scrabble tiles; use them with preschoolers who want to learn their letters.
- Use the Twister game board to help kids sort toys by color.
- Rather than use a big, heavy soccer ball, let younger kids play with a balloon (by the way, this makes it a great inside game for rainy days).

3. Phase Out Dangerous Things

Sort through your kids’ toy box. Take a look at what is already in there. You probably have several things that are no longer safe—toys with broken or missing parts.

You might also have toys that are unsafe because of the products used for their construction.

Rather than throw these toys out and contribute to landfill waste, repurpose them. There are lots of creative ways to make use of discarded toys (you can find examples here and here).

4. Buy Natural When Possible

The best toy construction materials are all-natural. Look for toys made out of sustainably logged, solid wood. Toys sans finish are best; otherwise, look for options with a non-toxic finish (vegetable, water-based, or beeswax).

Avoid any toys made of pressed woods (plywood or particle board). These woods often have toxic chemicals in the glue.

Other natural materials that make great toys include felt, wool, silk, hemp, organic cotton, and bamboo.

5. Buy High Quality Items

You might have to spend a little more, but high quality toys are worth the investment. These toys are preferable for several reasons:

- Quality toys are less likely to break, meaning sharp or dangerous parts won't be an issue.
- The better the toy, the longer it will last. Several children—sometimes multiple generations—can play with a single quality toy.
- It is much easier to sell used toys if they are quality. Other parents won't be interested in purchasing (repurposing) your second-hand toys if they aren't in great shape. That means they could potentially end up in the landfill.
- Higher quality toys are more likely to be made with safe products—sans unwanted chemicals.

6. Buy Local

Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by buying local. The shorter the distance the item needs to travel between manufacturer and consumer the better.

If there aren't eco-friendly toy makers in your area, see if you can convince someone to give it a try. Ask a local carpenter to make wooden blocks. Ask someone crafty to make eco-friendly dolls and stuffed animals.

7. Be Smart about Imports

If you do buy an imported toy, make smart decisions. Not all countries abide by the same regulations when it comes to

making consumer products. Therefore, the country of origin can greatly influence the chemicals included in the toy.

Buy safer toys from Japan, Canada, or European countries.

8. Encourage Creativity

Open-ended toys (ones that can be used in a variety of different settings) inspire the most creativity. Not only is this good for your child's cognitive development, it also means a single toy can have more uses—meaning fewer toys will need to be purchased.

Great examples of open-ended toys include

- A sand box (or sand and water table for inside play)
- Art supplies
- Wooden blocks
- Dress up clothes

9. Avoid High Risk Toys

While many toys pose a low-level threat, other toys are extremely dangerous because of the chemicals they contain.

Cheap plastic jewelry and cosmetics specifically designed for kids are especially dangerous. These often have lead and known carcinogens. Avoid these at all costs!

While it is impossible to avoid plastic altogether, you can make smart decisions about which plastics make it into the shopping cart. A good way to tell if a plastic product is safe is to check the recycling label on the bottom. If it is safe (free of the most dangerous chemicals), the item will have a number 1, 2, 4, or 5 inside the arrow logo.

10. Get Recall Notifications

Subscribe to recall notifications and find out as soon as possible if a toy you purchased is labeled unsafe. The email alerts from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission would be the best resource for toys.

You can also sign up for recalls from the Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Authority (for safety information related to tires, child restraints, vehicles, and school buses).

11. Don’t Buy Anything!

In the end, your child probably doesn’t really need a new toy. Simplify your child’s toy box. Your youngster’s creativity, your wallet, and the environment will thank you!

What are your favorite eco-friendly toys?

Editor’s Note

We don’t really buy toys for our two year old son. Most of the time when people have given us toys for him, he was not interested. He likes to play with what we use. For instance, we prepare virtually all of our own food, so he loves to mimic us and pretend to cook. We give him pots and pans to play with. Add a few spatulas and a some water and he’s set for at least 30 minutes. Big cardboard boxes are always awesome, we cut them out and make forts. I am convinced that letting him play in this way helps boost his creativity, and it certainly saves us a lot of money!

Sources:

- *Natural Toy Care Instructions*, by Bannor Toys
- *Bringing up baby with safe and green toys*, by CNN

- *Cornhole for Kids*, by Custom Corntoss
- *10 ways to reuse board games*, by Mother Nature Network
- *Go Green With Eco Friendly Toys*, by Health Guidance