

# Choose gifts that foster learning



By Sharon Hartin Iorio

Children are central to the holiday season. At no other time of the year is there more focus on the youngest in our society, and few things in life bring more joy than seeing little faces light up when a special gift is opened.

Because young children learn and grow every moment of the day, the gifts you give can make all the difference to the positive development of the youngsters in your life.

Can't resist the most popular toy of the year, the one you think will bring the biggest smile? Giving that special gift is what the season is all about. Yet child's play is more than fun and games. When a toddler is stacking blocks, he is developing hand-eye coordination. When the blocks fall, that's an opportunity to learn persistence and patience.

Pushing a play grocery cart, toy truck or doll's stroller helps a 2-year-old learn balance and opens to her the world of imagination.

Early brain development and learning begin far sooner than most of us realize. Academic researchers now calculate that the greatest period of

development for a child's mind occurs before the age of 3.

It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of early childhood education. Almost every childhood activity is a step toward learning and developing.

Reading and speaking to infants imprint the babies' mental processes with the fundamentals of human communication. By 6 months, little ones learn to understand what they see with the help of books with pictures of familiar toys such as balls.

Continuing to read to children during their first year stimulates what educational researchers call "language acquisition"-learning to repeat sounds, speaking words and adding words to the child's vocabulary. Later on, children learn to say the words that go with the pictures in their first books.

Celebrating the holidays is great fun for children and adults alike. Children's happiness makes all things seem possible during the holidays. And a broad range of opportunities should be

possible for every child. The gifts you give will shape a child's learning environment, and you'll be creating opportunities for the children in your life to reach their fullest potential.

So shop carefully during the holidays. An over-abundance of toys and books, both electronic and traditional, can be found in almost any retail outlet. Inexpensive or handmade gifts can provide an equally rich foundation for children's future learning success.

Moreover, as we celebrate with gifts that delight and foster learning, keep in mind that the gifts of encouragement, positive example and active participation in the life of a child have no dollar value and are the most enduring gifts of all.

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