

TRUCE* Toy Action Guide

Dear Child Care Providers and Parents:

TRUCE members are worried about the many ways that the play of today's children is being undermined, especially by the toys that are heavily marketed to them through the media.

Play is essential to children's healthy development and learning. Children use play to actively construct knowledge and acquire life skills. The content of their play comes from their experiences. Changes in today's childhood are undermining play. The pervasive influence of the media means more of children's experience takes place in front of a screen instead of engaged in creative play.

Toys are the tools to use in play. They influence how children play. Toys of value enhance children's natural ability to engage in imaginative, meaningful play by allowing room for children to bring their own ideas and solve their own problems. Many toys on the market today are highly structured and linked to TV and videos. They channel children into imitative play, robbing them of play that uses imagination, problem solving, and creativity.

Parents are constantly faced with decisions about what toys to buy and what toys to avoid. There is pressure on parents and children (from peers, advertisements, and link-ups between products and the media) to buy every new toy from TV or movies rather than to make thoughtful decisions about which toys promote the healthiest play. This guide is intended to help adults choose toys that support children's play, learning, and social growth.

In 1984, the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children's television. This made it legal to sell toys through TV programs. Since deregulation, most best-selling toys have been linked to TV shows and other media, many of which promote violence, sexiness, and buying more. Deregulation has made choosing toys and promoting play harder for adults.

We believe that adults have a vital role in promoting positive play. We offer the following to help parents promote their children's creative and constructive play through understanding the importance of play and the role of toys in play; making informed choices about healthy toys for their children and toys to avoid; and working with other adults at home, school, and in the community to promote positive play and toys.

We thank you for working with us on this effort.

Teachers for Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) Steering Committee

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CHOOSING TOYS OF VALUE

Toys have enhanced play value when they:

- Can be used in many ways
- Allow children to determine the play
- Appeal to children at more than one age or level of development
- Are not linked to video games, TV, or movies
- Can be used with other toys for new and more complex play
- Will stand the test of time and continue to be part of play as children develop new interests and skills
- Promote respectful, non-stereotyped, non-violent interactions among children
- Help children develop skills important for further learning and a sense of mastery

Choose toys that promote (some toys fit into more than one category):

DRAMATIC PLAY. Helps children work out their own ideas about their experiences. Provides a powerful way of learning new skills and a sense of mastery.

Examples: Blocks, toy vehicles, dress-up clothes, small animals, dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, props to re-create real life (post office, restaurant, store), materials for creating small worlds like doll houses, castles.

MANIPULATIVE PLAY WITH SMALL PLAY OBJECTS. Develops small muscle control and eye-hand coordination. Teaches about relationships between objects, essential for understanding math and science.

Examples: Construction sets and toys with interlocking pieces (Legos, Lincoln Logs), puzzles, pegboards, miniature models, parquet blocks.

CREATIVE ARTS. Encourages self-expression and using symbols, a vital skill for problem solving and literacy.

Examples: Poster and finger paints, assortment of blank paper of all sizes and colors, crayons and markers, scissors, glue, recycled materials, stamps, clay, weaving kits.

PHYSICAL PLAY. Promotes healthy body awareness and coordination and helps let off steam. Opportunities for social interaction.

Examples: Bikes, scooters and other wheel toys, balls, bats, jump ropes, space trolleys, pogo sticks, giant chalk, swing sets, climbing structures, play tunnels.

GAME PLAYING. Teaches about taking turns, planning strategy, sequencing, rules, and cooperation.

Examples: Board games like checkers and chess, card games, jacks.

READING BOOKS. Provides exciting content to use in play and an essential foundation for literacy. Children enjoy telling, acting out, and drawing their own stories.

Examples: Books with meaningful stories and characters and good values.

USE OF RECYCLED MATERIALS. Helps children come up with their own ideas, creativity, and problem solving. Can be used on their own or with other toys. Readily available, often without cost. Can counteract lessons about the throw-away society.

Examples: Large empty cartons for creating spaces like houses, trains, nests, spaceships; empty squirt (soap) bottles and plastic containers for water play; wallpaper sample books for art.

PLAY WITH NATURAL MATERIALS. Using sand, water, mud, rocks, shells, and leaves cultivate a love of nature and the environment at minimal cost.

Examples: Extend play with buckets and shovels, bubble blowers, watering cans, plastic tubing, cardboard boxes for collecting and sorting, magnifying glasses, flashlights, butterfly nets, balance scales.

TOYS TO AVOID

Toys have limited play value when they:

- Can only be used in one way
- Encourage everyone to play the same way as determined by the toy designer
- Appeal primarily to a single age or level of development
- Will probably sit on a shelf after the first “fun” half hour
- Will channel children into imitating scripts they see on TV or movie screens
- Do special high tech actions for the child instead of encouraging the child’s exploration and mastery
- Lure children into watching the TV program or other media that is linked to the toy
- Promote violence and stereotypes or can lead to disrespectful and aggressive behavior

Try to avoid toys that (some toys fit into more than one category):

MAKE ELECTRONIC TECHNOLOGY THE FOCUS OF PLAY. Many are billed as educational, but most control and limit play, leading to “smart” toys, not “smart” children.

Examples: Dolls, stuffed animals, phones and books that talk when a button is pushed.

HOOK INFANTS AND TODDLERS ON TV, COMPUTERS, AND OTHER MEDIA. Young children need to interact directly with people and materials and experience their direct effect on the immediate environment.

Examples: Talking play computers that say the alphabet, colors, or numbers.

LURE YOUNG GIRLS INTO PRETENDING TO BE TEENAGERS. Promotes stereotyped and sexualized behaviors, focuses on appearance and bodies, equates self-worth with beauty and appearance.

Examples: Dolls based on real teenage stars and pop music; pretend make-up, tattoos, body piercing, jewelry.

EMPHASIZE VIOLENT, GROTESQUE, AND SEXUAL IMAGES. Contributes to an unhealthy focus on antisocial play that undermines the lessons caring adults teach.

Examples: Action figures linked to male and female professional wrestlers, science fiction, or horror TV programs or movies.

ARE LINKED TO COMMERCIAL PRODUCTS AND ADVERTISEMENTS. Turns play into ads for products and ensures an early and easy market for brand-named products.

Examples: Toys with the logos of fast food restaurants, chain stores, and junk food products.

TAKE THE CREATIVE PLAY OUT OF CLASSIC TOYS. Dictates what and how to play and undermines creativity and learning.

Examples: Balls made to look like bombs, play dough with molds to make items in only one way, construction toys with directions to build in only one way.

ARE LINKED TO TV PROGRAMS, MOVIES, AND VIDEO GAMES RATED FOR TEENS OR ADULTS. Exposes children to inappropriate content not designed for them.

Examples: Action figures, dolls, and other products linked to PG-13 or R-rated movies or TV-14 programs.

ENCOURAGE GAMBLING. “Toys” where manufacturers arbitrarily make some cards more valuable than others. Focus is on always buying more and requires understanding probability (which young children can’t do) to make informed buying decisions.

Examples: Trading cards from sports, Pokémon, and professional wrestling.

LINK PLAY TO CANDY AND UNHEALTHY FOODS. Encourages poor nutrition and conditions children to expect a treat as part of play. Examples: Miniature boxes of sugar-coated cereals and other snack foods, toys linked to fast food restaurants, necklaces full of candy, motorized lollipops, plastic animals with candy body parts.

WHAT ADULTS CAN DO

Parents and Children

- Provide interesting activities, materials, and field trips to encourage positive interests and hobbies.
- Talk to children about toys that hurt or scare; discuss your own values.
- Support and shop at toy stores that consciously don't sell toys of violence or toys that undermine healthy play.
- Take an active stand about highly structured, media-linked toys and toys that promote antisocial behavior (e.g., write a letter to a toy company or store).
- Plan toy purchases together and limit impulse buying and overstimulating trips to toy stores.
- Provide uninterrupted daily playtime and organize play materials so they are easily accessible.
- Work together to make thoughtful decisions about the role of media in the home.

Parents and Other Parents

- Support each others' efforts to reduce children's exposure to TV shows and movies that are used to market toys, especially violent toys.
- Share resources for activities, good toys and books, ideas for birthday gifts, events and outings with other families.
- Share strategies and ideas for alternatives to TV, especially at difficult times of day.

Parents and Teachers

- Provide information for parents on the importance of play and how toys and media affect it.
- Help parents find effective ways to promote healthy play and limit their children's involvement with media.
- Work together to develop school policies that promote healthy play (e.g., ample recess time).
- Start a home lending book and tape program to provide positive leisure-time play options.

Parents and Community

- Create coalitions among existing community groups who support healthy play environments for children.
- Organize efforts to voice concerns about harmful toys being marketed or advertised to children in your community (e.g., complain at stores, write letters to newspapers).
- Plan a "violent toy trade-in," "good toy and book" fair or swap. Involve older children in your efforts.

Resources

— BOOKS —

Bronson, M. (1995). *The right stuff for children birth to 8: Selecting play materials to support development*. Washington, DC: NAEYC (www.naeyc.org).

Carlsson-Paige, N., & Levin, D. E. (1990). *Who's calling the shots? How to respond effectively to children's fascination with war play and war toys*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society (www.newsociety.com).

Levin, D. E. (1998). *Remote control childhood? Combating the hazards of media culture*. Washington, DC: NAEYC (www.naeyc.org).

Ready at five partnership: Moving young children's play away from TV violence and bringing parents into the picture. Available through Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org).

Walsh, D. (1995). *Selling out America's children*. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press. Available through the National Institute on Media and the Family (www.mediaandthefamily.org).

— ORGANIZATIONS —

Center for a New American Dream
6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 900
Takoma Park, MD 20912
www.newdream.org
(Publishes booklet: "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture.")

Commercial Alert
1611 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 3A
Washington, DC 20029
(202) 296-2787
www.essential.org/alert
(Helps parents defend against harmful marketing and commercialism.)

Lion & Lamb Project
 4300 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 104
 Bethesda, MD 20814
 (301) 654-3091
 www.lionlamb.org
 (Promotes healthy play and non-violent toys. Publishes Parent Action Kit and Violent Toy Trade-in Manual.)

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 (Prepares this toy guide. National group working to raise awareness about the negative effects of violent, stereotyped

toys and media; limit the harmful influence of unhealthy children's entertainment; identify toys and activities that promote healthy play and non-violent behavior; reduce sales of toys of violence and marketing practices that harm children; and support parents' and teachers' efforts to deal with these issues.)

SHOE BOX GIFTS for Hours of Creative Play

Usually, giving children gifts means buying manufactured toys at a store. Here's an alternative gift idea that you can easily make. Shoe box gifts are collections of small, familiar items organized around a play theme and presented in an appealing way. They provide hours of creative and satisfying play. They also help children learn that expensive, fancy-packaged toys aren't the only good play materials or gifts. The process of putting together such an easy, yet imaginative and age-appropriate gift for a special child in your life can be very satisfying for you, too.

Guidelines for Making Shoe Box Gifts

Decorate an empty box and lid (gift wrap, stickers, etc.). Choose a theme and put a simple word and picture label of the theme on the box. Most items below are found at hardware, stationery and art/crafts stores, pharmacies, and supermarkets. Use small containers, zip-lock bags, or build dividers with small pieces of cardboard to make compartments for the various items in the box. Young children like organization — being able to find and return everything to its place. Most suggestions are appropriate and safe for children's independent use. A few objects may require adult supervision or aid (e.g., food coloring).

Shoe Box Theme Ideas (Use one of these theme ideas or create your own)

RESCUE/FIRST AID

- flashlight
- bandaids
- ace bandage
- sling
- eye patch
- gauze
- stethoscope
- surgical mask

OFFICE

- stapler (4 or 5 years and up)
- hole puncher
- tape
- post-it notes or message pad
- small clipboard
- receipt book
- sticky-back blank labels
- key ring with old keys
- pens/pencils/markers
- ink pad and stamp

RESTAURANT

- take-out menus
- desk bell
- plastic utensils
- plastic dishes
- cloth napkins
- pretend food
- order books
- pens/pencils

PLAY DOUGH

- buy a can of play dough or make your own
- garlic press
- plastic knife
- popsicle sticks
- wooden dowel
- plastic lids
- small tray/plate
- buttons/beads
- plastic animals

PLAY DOUGH RECIPE

2 c. flour
 1 c. salt
 1 T. cream of tartar
 2 c. water with food coloring
 1 T. vegetable oil

Put everything in pot. Cook at medium heat. Mix until looks like mashed potatoes. Knead when cool to touch. Store in plastic container or zip-lock bag in refrigerator.