

# NAPPA '96

NATIONAL PARENTING PUBLICATIONS AWARDS

## Best Kids' Toys

by Mimi A. Slawoff and Vivien Santana Hughes

*Happy is he that is happy in his children.*

—Thomas Fuller

**S**oon you will be setting out to buy presents for your child. But truthfully, who will derive the greatest pleasure from the gifts?

After all, you get to envision the delight on your youngster's face before she even opens the surprise. You carry this thought with you, replaying it as you shop, discovering that it is truly much better to give than to receive.

Like many parents, you may also carry some self-doubt as you ponder the various shades of perfection found in a toy or a book, or any other of the materials that make up your child's developing life.

The National Parenting Publications Awards were created to help you decide what to buy for you sons and daughters this holiday season. Our judges looked and listened and played. Here are some of the most wondrous things they found to make moments magical for your child—and the child in you!

**T**o children, play is work. From playing, kids develop motor and social skills, learn how the world works and, most importantly, let their imaginations soar.

**Our job as parents is to provide the stimulus for all this growth: great toys. Our job as NAPPA toy judges was to narrow down this ever-more-competitive field.**

**After deciphering many instructions, putting together a preponderance of plastic parts and, of course, playing with a multitude of playthings, here are the 12 entries we've picked as top tools of the kid trade.**



### Preschool

**Duplo WaterPark** (LEGO Systems; \$39.99; 800/453-4652; ages 2 to 6). Move over Sea World. This 47-piece set lets little squirts create a variety of marine scenes on a large, multi-level, Duplo-compatible plastic base. Besides the basic high-quality blocks Lego is famous for, the set includes pairs of whales, polar bears and penguins, a dolphin, people, trees, a boat and such up-to-the-minute accessories as a toy video camera.

**Kids' Schoolhouse** (Today's Kids; \$70 to \$85; 800/258-8697; ages 1 1/2 to 6). A blue ribbon goes to this versatile school with its reversible desktop that can be used as a drawing and writing table or Lego-compatible building table surface. It comes with 48 bristle-back numbers and letters, a removable board/bristle

### Infant

**Fold 'N Go Activity Easel** (Summer Infant Products; \$39.99; 800/926-8627; ages 6 months to 3 years). Made of lightweight foam covered in removable, machine-washable fabric, this attractive

easel is loaded with baby-friendly fun. One side features a dozen Velcro-backed figures including flowers, butterflies, vehicles, and people (which store away in handy mesh pockets) ready for your child to arrange into numerous scenes. Turn the easel around for built-in activities and textures like a crinkly sail on a sailboat, a Velcro-backed bee that attaches to printed flowers, a circus book, an assortment of beads strung on a colorful kite tail, a spinner with sea life pictures and, for a personal touch, a "family album" awaiting baby's favorite photo.



**Little Smart Tutor Scooter** (VTECH; \$49.99; 800/521-2010; ages 1 to 3). This cool toy motorcycle gives tots a jump-start on learning. Easy to maneuver, the scooter is loads of fun by itself, but it also comes with a removable electronic game board (set between the handlebars) that quizzes toddlers on colors, shapes, numbers and animals. A ringing telephone, honking horn, revving engine and a few melodies are among the entertaining audibles.

**Scribble Center** (The Step2 Company; \$20 to \$25; 800/347-8372; ages 1 1/2 and older). A little kid with a crayon is a dangerous thing—unless you give him an appealing place to focus his creativity. This sleek, double-duty drawing board comes fully assembled (score one for that feature alone) and easily folds flat for storage. Designed to toddler-scale, the self-standing chalkboard has a large molded-in tray and a clip to hold paper for crayon, marker and painting fun, and comes with chalk and an eraser.

board, clicking clock, pull-out tray and storage area.

**Cook 'N Play Kitchen Center** (Playskool/Hasbro; \$69.99; 800/PLAYSKL [752-9755]; ages 2 and older). Fully equipped with appliances—even microwave with timer bell—this kitchen's most outstanding feature is that it easily folds into a compact unit for storage. Other selling points: a fold-down breakfast bar, built-in high chair, sink, cooking accessories and telephone.



## Early Elementary



**Step One Plus** (Team Concepts; \$59.99; 800/486-0898; ages 4 to 7). With the advanced state of computer games these days, do we really need these kidsized “laptops”? Yes—because they’re portable, easy to use and children love them! This electronic, sleekly designed talking unit features animated graphics and 26 activities, including letter, word, math and time-telling games—all in three skill levels for one or two players.

**Radio Flyer All-Terrain Wagon** (Radio Flyer; \$129.95 to \$159.95; 800/621-7613; ages 1 1/2 and older). While their parents go off-road in their SUVs, kids can hit the trail—or the sidewalk, for that matter—in this sturdy, hardwood wagon with removable red-stake sides. The most winning feature: inflatable pneumatic tires that are strong enough to handle rough ground or sand, but also offer an exceptionally smooth ride on pavement. The makers of the original little red wagon didn’t let us down.

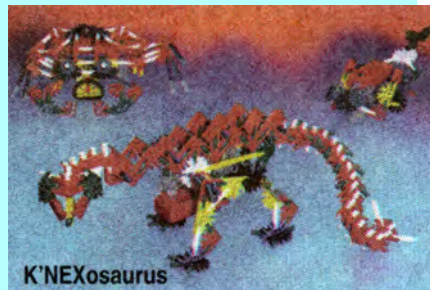
**Toobers & Zots Oobles Kit Kaboodle** (HandsOnToys; \$50 to \$70; 800/500-4699; ages 3 and older). Yes, the name is a mouthful, but this 175-piece, brightly colored foam construction toy is worth the effort. First, some vocabulary: Toobers are 2-inch to 4-foot-long tubes, the larger of which bend like pipe cleaners into the configuration of your choice; Zots are an assortment of flat shapes with holes to string your Toobers through. Then there are the big, spongy three-dimensional squares and circles you stick the aforementioned into; that’s your Oobles. Enough with the lesson—go get creative!

## Elementary

**Childshop Bug House** (Graphic Arts Systems; \$13; 800/447-2349; ages 5 and older). A top-quality homemade wooden toy created in less than one hour? It’s possible with this kit that contains natural wood pieces drilled, cut and waiting for assembly. A great project for any child. Even a 5 year old can enjoy building a wooden toy with her own hands and the help of an adult’s (and the beauty is you don’t have to be a construction engineer). Bug facts and recommended reading about our insect friends are listed. Other sets include a letter-holder, sports car, helicopter and logging truck—all of which were winners in our book.

**Stack: The Strategy Dice Game** (Strunk Games; \$18; 800/669-3315; ages 6 and older). There are few kids’ games that appeal equally to adults (ever played Chutes & Ladders all day?). That’s why Stack is a winner. Each player gets 12 dice that he stacks by matching the numbers with his opponents’—kind of a vertical dominoes. There is strategy and luck involved as players vie to win the stack and the points that go with it, practicing simple arithmetic along the way. Portable, easy to play, fun—what more can you ask?

**K’NEXosaurus** (K’NEX Industries; \$24.99; 800/822-5639; ages 8 and older). We gave K’NEX a Gold NAPPA award in 1993 when the original plastic building systems came out. Now they’ve added another award-winning twist with a motorized version that really moves. With this 283-piece set, kids can make a lizardlike dinosaur, clambering crab or “RoboMouse” stomp to life by just snapping the battery-operated motor into place. Our favorite feature of these color-coded construction sets: Once your creation is put together, it stays that way—until you’re ready for a new model.



*Mimi A. Slawoff reviews toys as the new products editor for L.A. Parent. Vivien Santana Hughes is an editor and staff writer for the magazine. Both have studied child development. Combined they have five children and, after four years on the judging panel, have assembled more toys than Santa.*



# NAPPA 1997

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and Mimi A. Slawoff

## Best Kids' Toys

When I became an adult I put away childish things," reads part of an oft-quoted Bible verse.

Pity.

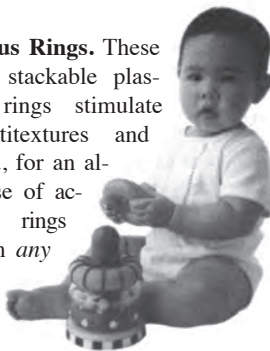
Play stimulates our children to think: By solving puzzles, building cities, creating art, touching, feeling and just plain pretending, our little ones can soar. And by playing our way through the hundreds of 1997 toy entries, we can say with confidence that our kids' minds have plenty of exciting learning tools from which to choose. (The creative exercise didn't hurt the *judges'* gray matter either!)

This year's collection of NAPPA award-winning playthings is sure to inspire the young inhabitants of your household. It may even inspire *you* to take up your childish ways again.

Or you can just pretend.

### Infant

**The Sassy Circus Rings.** These four well-crafted, stackable plastic and rubber rings stimulate with color, multitextures and rattling beads. And, for an always positive sense of accomplishment, the rings fit on the dowel in *any* order. *Sassy Inc.*; \$8.99; (800) 323-6336; ages 6 months and older.



**Soft Rock 'n Bounce Zebra.** Your baby won't be able to resist this rocking zebra, with its soft fabric-covered body and interesting textures and sounds. The mane rattles, the tail jingles, the ears crinkle and the nose squeaks. Safety features include Today's Kids' patented Rubber Bounce Suspension for safe rocking and a removable support bar that securely holds infants. The zebra cloth body removes for washing. *Today's Kids*; \$60 to \$80, (800) 489-0454; ages 9 months to 2 1/2 years.

**Toddler Wobbler.** This sturdy, BRIO-quality wooden

walker provides much-needed stability to wobbly toddlers. And it does double duty: Even when your child can run with ease, the Toddler Wobbler makes a handy toy tote. *BRIO Corporation*; \$70; (888) 274-6869; ages 6 months and older.

### Preschool

**Microsoft ActiMates Early Learning System.**

Through sensors in his eyes, feet and hands, the plush 16-inch interactive Barney (yes, *Barney*) actually responds to a child's touch. Squeeze his foot or hand and he'll sing and talk—he has a 2,000-word vocabulary! This high-tech toy also interacts with a specially encoded *Barney and Friends* videotape, as well as software, enabling him to comment on what's happening on screen, ask questions and reinforce key themes. They're even encoding the TV show just for this system. *Microsoft, plush Barney* \$99, *TV and PC pack* \$64.95 each, *PC software titles* \$34.95, *videotapes* \$14.95; (800) 426-9400, ages 2 to 5.

**Kids' Pirate Ship Toy Box.** This treasure of a toy box stows playthings (5.5 cubic feet of space) and is a toy in itself. A spinning ship's wheel and a gang plank that opens and closes invite swashbucklers into hours of imaginative play. Other features include a secret compartment, removable treasure chest and separate storage space for small pieces. *Today's Kids*; \$60 to \$80; (800) 489-0454; ages 2 to 4.



**Smokey II Steam Engine with Coal Tender.** A ride-on toy so sturdy an *adult* can comfortably take it for a spin (trust us), this wooden train with detachable coal tender comes in a finely sanded finish that can be stained, painted or left *au naturel*. Truly an heirloom to last generations. *Real Toys USA*; \$115; (800) 853-3636; ages 2 and older.

### Early Elementary

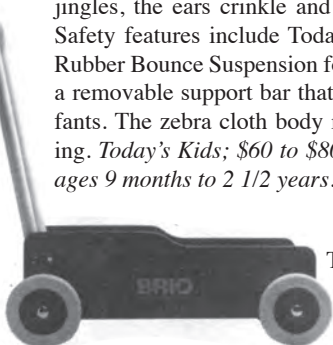
**Little Smart Discovery Land.** Kids can set off on a trek and discover the world of numbers, letters, colors, shapes and more with this portable electronic game. There are five different activities that a child can play alone or with friends, and the pull-out gameboard, equipped with four playing pieces, develops skills in logic and deduction by encouraging players to follow clues. *VTECH*; \$39.99; (800) 521-2010; ages 3 to 7.

**Corolle Mini-Suitcase Gift Set.**

Remember, as a child, that special toy you just fell in love with? This is one of those. A perfectly formed 8-inch baby doll with two additional outfits, all set in a miniature padded wicker suitcase. *C'est magnifique!* *Corolle*; \$50; (800) 628-3655; ages 3 and older.



**Rainforest Finger Puppet Playset.** Point out the facts about a rain forest with these well-made, colorful fingerpuppets, which include a spider monkey, scarlet macaw, giant day gecko and poison dart frog. Hands down, this sturdy set of four finely detailed puppets is sure to encourage creative play. Folkmanis' other outstanding finger puppets include a sea-life play set, mice in a box and robins in a nest. *Folkmanis, Inc.*; \$21.95; (800) 654-8922; ages 3 and older.



## Elementary

**Electro Wizard: Inventions.** Build a radio, clicking motor, telegraph and a flashing generator from this science set. Three-D color graphics make even the instructions inviting, as well as easy to follow, while teaching *why* each project works. *Norman & Globus Inc.*; \$19.95; (888) 377-3669; *ages 8 and older.*

**Robotix Robo-Dog.** Your kid can control this pet's every move—with a wireless remote, that is. Robo-Dog is a complex, motorized 175-piece building set that, in addition to making a roving canine companion, can be transformed into robo-anything your child imagines. Based on the principles of robotics engineering, all Robotix sets are interchangeable. *Learning Curve*; \$119.99; (800) 704-8697, - *ages 9 and older.*

**Astronomical Refractor Telescope.** Your little Harriet the Spy can see what the neighbors are up to . . . better yet, have her zoom in on the moon and other far away objects with this well-constructed and easy-to-use telescope. Your child will get the picture with the 8 mm to 24 mm zoom eyepiece, 2x finderscope, rack-and-pinion focus and panhead adjusting tripod. Now, watch where she points that thing. *Tasco*; \$101; (954) 2523600; *ages 8 and older.*

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