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Toys: What They Can Teach – More Than You Might Imagine

Toys! All kids, all ages, like toys. A constant question for parents and caregivers is “do I buy the toys *I* want them to have, or the toys *they* want to have?” Perhaps there is a way to compromise. Certainly toys can do much more than just entertain, so some thought about what toys teach may be helpful when you shop.

The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis’ director of early childhood education, Cathy Southerland has spent her career “playing” with preschoolers. “Be very purposeful and intentional when you buy toys and materials for children” says Southerland. If you are going to buy your child a toy drum for example, buy one that resembles a “real” drum. Toys can and should teach children about the world around them. They should inspire creativity. A drum (if you can stand it) presents great learning possibilities. According to Southerland, it is important to talk with your child about their toys and ask questions such as “what do you see, or hear, or feel when you play with this?” She also recommends that when you play with your children, be sure to let them lead the way. Where will their imaginations take you? Just sit back and enjoy the fun.

When playtime is over, there are many more life lessons children can learn from their toys. You can help them learn to respect and appreciate their belongings. Explain how important it is to keep an orderly home environment. Create a logical space for your children to keep their toys. A toy box might be easy, but is it inviting? Do children see what is available? Are toys treated with respect in a toy box? Perhaps, says Southerland, you might do what she does in The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis’ Preschool - create cubbies or bins where toys can be logically grouped together. Take a picture of the toys, laminate the pictures and then place them on or above the bin so your child knows where building blocks or baby dolls belong.

Yes, this may be easier said than done, but teaching good habits early, is sure to save some battles later! Just ask any parent of a teen who has a messy room.

Families with children (infants through five years old) are encouraged to learn together through interactive play based upon the latest brain research at The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis’ *Playscape*. The permanent exhibit opens August 31, 2013.

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