

TOYLAND

By Rebecca Tree

I'll get right to the point. Shopping for children at this time of year comes with its own mixed bag of feelings sometimes ranging from excitement to just plain guilt. I'm not certain, but I believe that many advertisers and manufacturers spend their summer vacations dreaming up ways to move us from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other. It's time to shut it all out, identify and own our personal holiday reality, and then live it. So here are my thoughts;

First: pay attention to the recent toy recalls. You can get this information on line. Most major warehouses have had holiday merchandise stocked well before the whole recall fiasco began. I would like to think that they have resolved this however, as grown-ups, we are the ones who undoubtedly have to take the responsibility when it comes to our own kids.

Remember: Manufacturers spend a bundle to find out how to compete for your business. Since deregulation in the 1980's manufacturers have developed many sophisticated advertising strategies aimed at every age group but especially our children and teens who are the most vulnerable. Talk to your children about how commercials are made to make us want certain things.

Say No! If your hunch is that this is not a wise purchase for your budget, sanity or your child then don't do it. If your child is asking for something that you know is not appropriate than be honest. This can be done *gently* in simple terms, such as, "This is not an appropriate choice so please do not expect it. Let's talk about some other choices." Ensuring your child that there WILL be gifts is a good way to end the conversation. Do not feel guilty that you cannot buy everything they want. Wants are not the same as needs and learning about limits is extremely important as they grow older.

Many toys are based on certain children's programs and encourage certain kinds of play. Ask yourself if this is how you want your child to play? If you are not big into the recent swash buckling craze then logically do not buy a sword and expect your child to do something different with it. I'll never forget watching a mother presenting her son with such a toy. She turned to resume her conversation with her friend while her son removed the sword from the packaging. Next thing you know...wham...he knocks her in the head with it. Now we have an angry mother and a really confused kid.

Ask yourself some of these questions as well; "Is this age appropriate? Does it fit our family values or am I caving in? Does this support what I want my child to think about, learn about? How will my child play with this? Is that OK with me? Am I considering buying this because of my own personal fears regarding my child's academic success or failure?" You get the picture. Also, 'age appropriate' is a pretty broad term. There are huge developmental differences between a 3 year old and a 5 year old for instance and even an 8 year old. Consider toys as an investment. Toys that can be added to and expanded on over the years fall into this category.

The simpler the toy the more creativity, imagination and brain power is required. Someone once said that a toy should be 90% child and 10% toy. The child should lead the play, not the other

way around. Toys that are overly scripted from TV programs, etc. do very little to expand a child's imagination. There is a difference between capturing one's attention and capturing one's imagination. Once a toy's limitation is discovered the toy is quickly abandoned and boredom usually sets in. I love the book "Crispin: The Pig Who Had It All" by Ted Dewan. In the end Crispin discovers that the best gift of all is having good friends and perhaps a large appliance box. Toys may be battery operated, childhood is not. Be prudent and wise when buying electronic and other 'clever' toys.

There is no rule anywhere that says that a toy be purchased brand new. However, in light of recent recalls you may need to be cautious. In our family, cousins hand down toys to one another. Some of the best gifts that I have assembled and given are prop boxes, theme boxes of dress ups and props that the child uses for creative play. Some themes are; medical person, office worker, baker, fire fighter, etc. With a little imagination and some thrift store know how you can assemble these and add to them over time as well. For instance the office worker box can have an old computer key board, paper and pens, junk mail, old telephone, etc. And don't forget the dress up part! A fire fighter needs an old vacuum hose and a plastic fire hat to start with.

Another idea is an art/writing box. Unlined paper, crayons, water color paints, scissors (if age appropriate), hole-punchers, tape, scrap paper, etc. You do not have to add all of these items at one time. Have enough items in a safe place that can be rotated on a regular basis.

I recently found some well made wooden vehicles at the Farmers Market. Holiday Markets are in full swing and offer many unusual and often overlooked choices. Limiting our purchasing choices to a few high quality items for our children will keep them from becoming over stimulated and over whelmed.

For a more in depth list of age appropriate toys by age go to the website for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, naeyc.org. Click on the link titled Choosing the Right Toys for Young Children. For a list of toys that have been recalled go to www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/prerel/category/toy.html. Happy Shopping.