

Parents
BEST TOYS
— 2021 —

50 Toys They will Love

Give the gift that makes their holiday! Curated by experts, tested by kids, and rated by parents, these came out on top to win our annual seal of approval.

by **JESSICA HARTSHORN, REBECCA RAKOWITZ, and JENNA WIRTH**
photographs by **PETER ARDITO**



1. Pirate Booty

Treasures Await! Adventure Ship sails (rolls, really) on the floor and comes with a rowboat, a captain, a first mate, and requisite treasure chest. “I hear my kids seeking gold, attempting a rescue, or just having characters fish off the boat,” a mom told us. (P.S. The anchor makes cranking sounds.) Ages 3 to 8, \$60; lakeshorelearning.com

PLAYSETS THAT THRILL

\$25 or less



2. Taking the Cake

A pretend Bake-Off begins with the **Play-Doh Kitchen Creations Rising Cake Oven Playset**—toy oven, mixing bowl, and five cans of the squishy clay included. “My son loves making the timer ding,” a parent said. “And I got into using the cake-decorating tools with him.” Ages 3+, \$20; amazon.com



3. Dino Might

A mash-up of choo-choos and dinos, **iPlay, iLearn Dinosaur Train Adventure Set** hits all the right preschool notes. Said one mom: “My kid likes manipulating the levers and knobs. It’s suited to his motor skills and the doing-the-same-thing-over-and-over thing that 3-year-olds love.” Ages 3+, \$35; amazon.com

PROP STYLING BY ASHLEY TOTH.



A BALL RUN FOR EVERY AGE

4. Dominoes Down

The eye-catching **Haba Kullerbu Ball Track Kringel Domino Set** has wooden tracks and brightly colored balls that set off rainbow dominoes. But beyond looking great, it improves kids' engineering, building, and hand-eye coordination skills. "It's one of those magical toys that encourages cooperation without competition," observed a mom of sibling testers. "As my 6-year-old son put it: There are no winners here! Just fun." Ages 2+, \$70; habausa.com



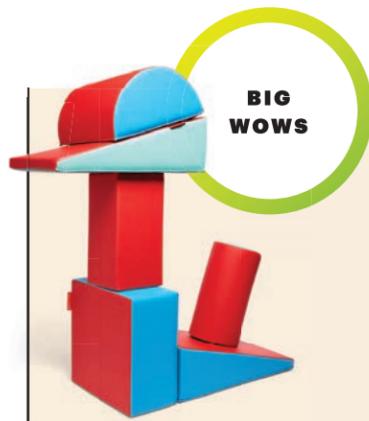
5. Big Buildup

This 145-piece, battery-operated **VTech Marble Rush Ultimate Set** has a spinning Ferris wheel, a light-up cone drop, and ball launchers that impress, plus ten large marbles. "Both of my kids giggle ecstatically as the run grows taller," said a parent whose sons kept returning to it to try new things. Ages 4+, \$48; walmart.com



6. Next-Level Marble Track

Whether they follow the designs in the **Ravensburger GraviTrax PRO Vertical Starter Set** manual or go rogue, engineers-in-training can build intricate paths for traditional marbles with this. One dad loved that it demonstrates physics and said, "My girls don't want to stop until they figure out how to get a marble through." Ages 8+, \$80; target.com



BIG WOWS

7. Tumble Time

This six-piece set of oversized shapes brings gym class home. One mom of a toddler said the **Radio Flyer Tumble Town Foam Climbing Blocks** give her son pure joy—and that she even borrows them to rest. Ages 9 months to 3 years, \$180; radioflyer.com



8. Raid This Fridge

"My son is obsessed with every item inside," gushed a mom of the 16-inch **Ryan's World Chef Ryan's Fridge Surprise**. It offers up fake food (tiny eggs!) and things to squish (a slime cupcake) for a total of 15 gifts to unwrap. Then there's the fridge itself, with a real dry-erase board. Ages 3+, \$50; walmart.com



9. Dig This

Minecraft goes 3-D and IRL with this 542-piece **LEGO Minecraft: The First Adventure** set. Kids know the cat, sheep, and skeleton and build familiar features such as a waterfall elevator. "It's a 9-year-old's epic dream," raved a mom. Ages 8+, \$70; lego.com

10. Back to the Batcave

A nearly 3-foot-tall imposing Batman figure opens up to a ten-room lair for a small version of the superhero. The **Batman Bat-Tech Transforming Batcave Playset** has "so cool" details like an elevator, an escape hatch, and a jail for supervillains. Ages 4+, \$100; target.com



11. Four-Story Fun

Dazzling for any fan of the brand, the **L.O.L. Surprise! OMG House of Surprises** measures 4 feet tall by 4 feet wide, with ten rooms, a light-up fireplace, transforming furniture, and (yes) a spiral slide. Dolls aren't included, but as a dad of three testers pointed out, "My kids already have a ton, and now they have a place to play with them." Ages 4+, \$230; target.com



12. Horse Play

Perfect for two kids to play with together, the **Schleich Big Horse Show With Dressing Tent** has pairs of figurines, horses, and stations to bring the sport to life. "Small details like the scoring cards, makeup station, and hose occupied my girls for hours," a mom reported. Ages 5+, \$100; schleich-s.com



14. Hello, Dolly!

Splurge on the **American Girl Kira Bailey Doll, Book & Accessories** bundle to get a plush koala, a well-written book about Kira caring for the Australian environment, and more. "This brand is always top quality," a parent enthused. Ages 8+, \$170; americangirl.com

13. First Class

One preschool tester was the "hit of the neighborhood" as he drove the **Kid Trax USPS Mail Delivery Truck** on the sidewalk. It comes with a pretend mailbox and envelopes, has working headlights and a horn, and offers an auxiliary input for playing favorite tunes through a portable music player. Kids go forward or in reverse with a foot pedal, like in a real car, but (don't fear) there's a max speed of 2.5 mph. Ages 3 to 5, \$269; kidtraxtoys.com



CUTEST CHARACTERS

\$25 or less



15

16

When in doubt: Everyone wants a Squishmallow.



17



18



19

\$25 or less



20

15. Fairy Nice

Ten wrapped surprises are nestled inside each **Zuru Rainbocorn Fairycorn Surprise** egg, which has a set of wearable fairy wings on the back. The main attraction is the glittery friend (shown). Ages 3+, \$25; [target.com](#)

16. Duet Partner

Fisher-Price Linkimals Cool Beats Penguin introduces letters, opposites, numbers, and more through catchy songs and flipper-flapping dance moves. One dad swore it was helping his son talk, explaining, "He's focused on lipreading" when he sings along "like 100 times a day." (Yep, that's a favorite toddler toy.) Ages 9 months+, \$30; [target.com](#)

17. Buddy and Book

The softest of loveys, **Slumberland's Yak Kin** gets kudos for the accompanying affirmation card and board book that follows a yak overcoming a perfectionist streak. Kids are encouraged to repeat, "I know I am enough." Ages 3 to 8, \$45; [slumberland.com](#)

18. Just Squish It

The Beanie Babies of our time, **Squishmallows** usually form a squad in a kid's bedroom. New ones keep coming out, and old ones keep selling out: Our testers got their hands on Violet, a 12-inch octopus. Holiday editions include a snowman, an elf, and a peppermint candy with a face. Ages birth+, \$30; [claires.com](#)

19. Go In for a Hug

My Fuzzy Friends are wearable, animatronic kittens and koalas with extra-long arms for nuzzling. They react with some 50 sounds when kids do things like rub their nose or serve them their snack. "I know I am enough." Ages 3 to 8, "My son checks on 'Koaly' throughout the day to see if he's hungry or tired," a mom noted. Ages 4+, \$25; [amazon.com](#)

20. Switch It Up

Kids can change **Mixaroo** endlessly by reassembling its dozen features. (Go ahead, put the nose on top of the head!) One parent enjoyed watching her two kids get creative. "They can't stop laughing." Ages 2 to 5, \$30; [educationalinsights.com](#)

SHOWTIME



21. Lead Guitar

Get psyched for a concert with this play instrument that looks like the real thing. The **Little Tikes My Real Jam Electric Guitar** has four modes: Play With the Band, Free Play, Solo Jam, and Play Any Song With Bluetooth, for connecting songs from a phone or tablet. The box becomes a guitar case! Ages 2+, \$40; [target.com](#)



22. Hocus Pocus

Kids play sorcerer with **Magic Mixies Magic Cauldron**, combining potion ingredients (think bath bombs) to create real mist and make a creature appear (via a trap door). Kids can then invent new potions, buy refills of the misting balls, perfect their wand skills, and master their tricks. Ages 5 to 8, \$70; [walmart.com](#)



\$25 or less

23. Work the Room

Disney Toy Story Talent Show takes the planning out of performing. Pick a card, complete a low-risk act like rolling the game's ball with your nose, and collect a ticket (and applause!). One family raved that it's the first family game, for two to six players, that their 6-year-old enjoys. Ages 6+, \$20; [amazon.com](#)

DOLLS AND DOLLHOUSES



24. Open Top

Unlike most playhouses, the wooden **Haba Little Friends Dollhouse Town Villa** has a modern, airy design that makes it easy for small hands to access it from all sides. (If you want resident figures from the brand, you can buy them separately.) Cutouts at the top function as handles for moving the house around, and assembly is a breeze. Ages 3+, \$100; [amazon.com](#)



25. First Home

A diverse trio of besties hangs out at the **Fisher-Price Little People Friends Together Play House**. Kids can activate lights, songs, and sounds, including the always hilarious flushing toilet. One tester's tot puts the figures to bed while turning on the lullabies (imitating real-life efforts to get him to sleep?). Ages 1 to 5, \$40; [walmart.com](#)



26. Modern Mermaids

The posable friends of **Mermaid High** have a secret—they're really mermaids who can slip off their tail to reveal human legs (with cool shoes). "The hair is beautiful and fun to comb. Accessories, like a clamshell laptop, are a cute touch," reported a mom of a 6-year-old. Ages 4+, \$27 each; [amazon.com](#)

FUN READING & MATH HELPERS

\$25 or less



27. Letter Board

It may remind you of a tablet, but the wood-encased **LeapFrog Touch & Learn Nature ABC Board** goes deep with ABCs, 1-2-3s, weather phrases, nature sounds, and activities around animals and conservation. One mom said, "My toddler is just learning the alphabet, so having the letters in order, instead of like a keyboard, is perfect." Ages 18 months+, \$25; [target.com](#)

\$25 or less



28. Fine-Motor Friend

Pieces of **Spike the Fine Motor Hedgehog Puzzle Playmate** make a satisfying click as your tot fits them in place. Once kids grasp matching shapes, they can learn to order the quills from one to five. Ages 18 months to 4 years, \$16; [learningresources.com](#)

\$25 or less



29. Math Practice

With bright, familiar faces from the hit cartoon on Netflix, the **Numberblocks MathLink Cubes** entertain while helping kids hone number sense. (Look how short one is compared with ten!) "It puts the show's lessons into three-dimensional concepts," one parent said. Ages 3+, \$25, [hand2mind.com](#)

BUILDING SETS



\$25 or less

30. Light-Up Blocks

Bricks for the **Laser Pegs Multi-Models 4-in-1 Mini Construction Set** glow, and the 91 tiny pieces turn into a truck, an excavator, a grader, or a forklift. Build, take apart, make another one! Ages 8+, \$13; laserpegs.com



\$25 or less

31. That Arctic Life

Add **Magformers Cube House Penguin Set** to your preschooler's collection of magnetic builders, or make it a great first set. It's got 20 stick-together pieces plus a trike, a table, and a character who wears either a penguin or bear hood. Ages 3+, \$25; magformers.com



\$25 or less

32. Vet Techs

Kids like our 10-year-old tester may be so excited to "treat" the unicorn and flying pig at the **Luki Lab Pinxies Vet Care Center**, they won't notice they use problem-solving skills to put the 110 pieces together. Ages 6+, \$20; amazon.com

ARTSY KITS



\$25 or less

33. Piece It Together

Throwback! **Colorforms 70th Anniversary Edition** engages kids and encourages storytelling with 500 modern design pieces that stick like magic to the board, then peel off to make way for new scenes. One mom appreciated how "it gives kids a chance to make striking art projects with no mess." Ages 3+, \$25; amazon.com



34. Graphic Designs

Like the original, the **Spirograph Animator** lets kids create endless amazing designs. But now they can watch them appear to dance via a device that spins the spirals under light so they look as if they're moving. One dad joined in. "I made a bunch of them because apparently I'm 9 years old again," he said. Ages 8+, \$27; walmart.com



\$25 or less

35. Brighter Thinking

The battery-powered **Crayola Light-Up Activity Board** illuminates with lights so kids can learn color mixing and matching with the included clings. Use the washable markers with the drawing sheets to add scenes or more shapes. Supplies store in the back for easy travel. Ages 3+, \$24; crayola.com



\$25 or less

36. Make Them Yours

The 2021 edition of this popular color-the-creature series, the **Crayola Scribble Scrubbie Ocean Pets Lagoon Playset** provides washable markers for customizing the shark, octopus, whale, and clown fish. Kids can use the lagoon shower to clean the figures and start fresh anytime. "My twins love drawing on the animals, and it doesn't require a lot of water to erase them," noted a mom. Ages 3+, \$20; crayola.com



37. At the Drawing Board

Entice little ones to get creative at the wooden **Melissa & Doug PAW Patrol Tabletop Art Center** with a paper roll, a chalkboard, and a magnetic dry-erase board. Yes, Chase and the gang are there as magnets to hold activity sheets on the easel. Cups store the chalk and dry-erase marker. "My son loves this thing," said a dad. "He uses it daily to draw." Ages 3+, \$54; melissaanddoug.com

GAMES ALWAYS WIN



\$25 or less

38. Word Game Egg-citement

Cluckle is a fast-moving, word-making game for two to six players that's reminiscent of Boggle. Start by squeezing the chicken to pop the die out as though it has just laid an egg. Then flip the tiles, form a word, and grab the chicken to end your turn. "It keeps my kids' interest while honing word skills," a parent observed. Ages 7+, \$10; target.com



\$25 or less

39. Dinner Is Served

A riff on the card game **Slapjack**, **Hangry** has players racing to fill their table setting. In each round, three to six players simultaneously show a food card and look for a match. The person who claims matching cards first can keep them. Surprise cards like the Buffet add drama by changing the number of cards players hold. "Good for everyone to play together, including grandparents, unless you're all vegetarian," joked a tester. Ages 6+, \$18; walgreens.com



\$25 or less

40. Toppling Tower

Kids can monkey around with this suspenseful game by themselves or play with up to four people. It ends, Jenga-style, when someone accidentally knocks all seven figures off the ledges of the **Super Mario Blow Up! Shaky Tower**. "My daughter loves the anticipation," a dad said. Ages 4+, \$25; kohls.com



\$25 or less

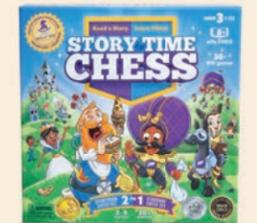
41. Cooperative Play

Jumanji Deluxe takes two to four players on a jungle trek. To stay alive, you must work together to solve riddles, survive danger, and complete challenges. Press the dome to hear drums beating. "The kids' faces during this game are awesome," said a parent. "There's also some theatrical screaming." After all, if any one player loses all life tokens, everyone loses! Ages 8+, \$50; amazon.com



42. Noodles of Fun

Teaching dexterity, counting, pattern recognition, and friendly competitiveness, **Noodle Knockout! Fine Motor Game** has a side benefit of letting kids practice with chopsticks. Play alone or with up to four players. "My daughter enjoys pretending to eat her completed bowl of ramen," a parent reported. Ages 4 to 8, \$20; learningresources.com



43. Opening Gambit

We were skeptical, but testing proved that **Story Time Chess** can teach the basics to preschoolers, using cute characters and mini games. "It's a way to bring chess to young kids," a parent said. "They must have put a lot of thought into deconstructing and translating the game." Another remarked, "The stories are silly from an adult perspective, but they taught my 4-year-old chess." Ages 3+, \$50; storytimechess.com

VEHICLES THAT GO VROOM



44. Start Green

America's star mouse takes the wheel of the **Green Toys Mickey Mouse Recycling Truck**, made from 100 percent recycled plastic. The box it comes in has cut-out cardboard pieces to sort in the truck's chutes. One dad said it inspired him to reuse household cardboard for his son to play with along with the truck. Ages 6 months+, \$30; amazon.com



45. Give Chase

Kids can launch the top dog aboard his motorcycle right out of the **PAW Patrol: The Movie Chase Transforming City Cruiser**. It can send three discs flying through the air too. "Great for role play," noted one mom of a preschooler. Ages 3+, \$42; walmart.com



46. Make Tracks

The **Hot Wheels Track Builder Unlimited Rapid Launch Builder Box** has been in one tester family's playroom for weeks as the kids continue to go back for more. The 28-piece set, with a four-car high-speed launcher and loop components, connects to other tracks from the brand, but it's also a great starter kit. "Every time I walk past, my kids are yelling, 'Watch this!'" a mom said. Ages 6+, \$50; walmart.com



STEAM STARS



47. Wing It

Testers (and editors) couldn't get enough of the **Crayola STEAM Paper Butterflies Science Kit**, which uses drops of dye to colorfully demonstrate how the creature's capillaries move liquid along. Kids create a dozen one-of-a-kind butterflies to display or use in pretend play. Ages 7+, \$20; crayola.com



48. Code Clues

Kids program a dragon or a unicorn to move using the **Coding Critters MagiCoders** wand and spell book. In essence, kids string together a code that tells the character what to do. Observed a mom, "Given how important coding has become, I'm glad this exposes it to my son in a playful way." Ages 4 to 8, \$55; learningresources.com



\$25 or less



\$25 or less

49. Blast Off

Testers said **The Young Scientists Club Space Adventure Pack** was out of this world. More than a dozen galactic activities are tucked into the backpack, teaching about moon phases and constellations. Sibling testers worked together to make a clay solar system. "They had fun mixing the clay's colors and making the planets," their mom said. "And they learned the order of the planets and their relative sizes." Ages 6+, \$25; amazon.com

50. Eco Action

The **Science4you: Green Science Kit** earns the "fun indoor activity" stamp of approval for rainy or snowy days. It includes more than 15 cool projects such as building a solar oven and growing a plant from seed. "I love that this reinforces education on renewable energies, which my kids learn in science class," exclaimed a parent with three school-age kids. Ages 6+, \$25; playmonster.com

WHAT MAKES A "BEST" TOY

Play experts helped us evaluate more than 500 new toys before we tested more than 300 of them with 45 families. The criteria:

- SCREEN-FREE**
Nothing requires a download.
- KID-POWERED**
We chose toys that encourage kids to interact, invent a story line, or play with others.
- BRAIN-BUILDING**
Susan Michal, director of early childhood education at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, and Karen Elinich, director of research and evaluation of the Please Touch Museum, in Philadelphia, pointed us to toys that fire imagination. Jere Krueger, associate vice president of retail services at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, checked that these new toys improve on what's already in the market.
- ON-TREND**
Laurie Schacht, chief toy officer of *The Toy Insider*, forecast what's likely to top this year's wish lists.

Our families, with 83 kids among them ranging from babies to teens, rated the semifinalists. We asked parents to report on:

- LEARNING BENEFITS**
Every winner makes a kid think or gets them pretend playing.
- PLAYING TIME**
We love when kids keep returning to a toy.
- GROWN-UP APPROVAL**
Our toys require reasonable assembly, have volume control, and otherwise do not drive parents bonkers. But generally, the old cliché holds true: When kids are happy, parents are happy.