Homemade Toys

FEW YEARS BEFORE Neil Armstrong took his historic steps on the moon, my buddy Eric and I journeyed there on a reconnaissance mission. Our craft? A giant cardboard box, equipped with a steering wheel, door, and windows from which to survey the space-scape whizzing by. The lift-off was from the sunny green expanse of my suburban backyard. Eric and I, then 7, hurtled through space and touched down again—all in time for a lunch of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. The childhood memory is enduring, perhaps because the event entailed so much creativity, so much time busily making and doing before we deemed the spaceship fit for “flight.”

“The art of making a toy adds a dimension that no toy maker can add,” says Steve Bennett, Cambridge, Massachusetts-based co-author of 365 TV-Free Activities You Can Do With Your Child. It draws upon creativity and offers a sense of mastery. While the economic benefits are obvious, “homemade toys are also a great way to get your kid involved in his entertainment,” he says. Children instinctively realize that everyday household items hold myriad play possibilities. What parent hasn’t given their child a gift only to discover that her little one had more fun playing with the box than the toy? Be alert to the many opportunities for making toys and you’ll keep your child entertained, says Bennett. And don’t wait until she is proficient at gluing, cutting, or scribbling to begin inventing.

Here is a sampling of great playthings to make for—or together with—your child, beginning at the earliest ages.

READY, SET, CREATE
Birth to 1 Year

Infants crave the sensory stimulation of sights, sounds, and touch, and delight in their evolving ability to grasp and manipulate objects, explains Karen Shanor, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Washington, DC.

For a newborn, you can create a mobile from an empty cardboard paper-towel tube, string, and pictures—either cut-out shapes, checkerboards made of black and white construction paper, or magazine pictures glued onto shapes cut from index cards—suggests Bennett. Simply cut several holes on each side of the tube, insert strings through them, and tie a large knot in each string to prevent it from slipping out. Then glue or tie the pictures onto the strings. To hang the mobile, loop a string through its length, tie the ends together, and fasten it securely from the ceiling with a hanging-plant hook. Make sure there’s no chance of the mobile or its parts falling into the crib, and remove the mobile (homemade or otherwise) when your baby can pull herself to stand (usually by about 5 months).

One caveat: Keep safety foremost in mind. Never use materials small enough for an infant or toddler to choke on, such as marbles,

Talk about recycling! Just string together empty grocery cartons for a great choo-choo train.
coins, or buttons. Be careful of sharp edges, such as those on empty metal cans, and soft, porous materials (wood, paper, cork) that may dissolve or splinter in a baby's mouth.

As your baby approaches his first birthday, encourage his increasing ability to grasp, shake, and stack objects by devising homemade stacking cups with clean, empty yogurt containers. Older babies are fascinated with the way things work, so make a shape sorter (far right) by using everyday objects, such as a spice box or table tennis ball, to trace shapes onto the top of a shoe box. Then cut those shapes from the box top and give your child the objects to fit into the holes. Your 10-month-old will delight in trying to figure out which object fits through which hole.

As your baby gets older

It's no puzzle to figure out why children love fitting together the pieces of their own interlocking creations, and adept at handling crayons, glue, and scissors, he can participate in the creative process—for example, he can help you decorate a shape sorter with colorful construction paper, felt, or paint. But be flexible in your expectations. “See what develops,” says Bennett. “Who cares if you set out to make a school bus and it turns out to be a tyrannosaurus rex?”

PURPOSEFUL PLAY
1 to 3 Years

At this age, kids are expanding their sense of the world and examining shapes, colors, and configurations, says Dr. Shanor, so it's an ideal time to play with boxes in every size. Building blocks can be created from milk cartons, cereal boxes, or shoe boxes that are stuffed with newspaper and taped shut. As your tot becomes more skillful, he can decorate them with stickers, colorful paper, or nontoxic paint. And there may be nothing more fun for kids than taking cartons, cutting off one side of them, stringing them together, and making a “choo-choo,” says Nancy Balaban, Ed.D., director of the Infant and Parent Development Program at the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in Manhattan. Toddlers love to fill their trains with “cargo”—books, dolls, blocks—and chug-choo-choo around the room (see page 55), notes Dr. Balaban.

To encourage your child's evolving verbal skills, create a naming game. Put several objects (try a ball, a block, a spoon, a feather) in a laundry bag and ask her to pull out the object you name.

BUDDING IMAGinations
3 to 6 Years

At this age, kids relish playing adult roles, such as shopkeeper, mailman, or doctor, says Cosby Steele Rogers, Ph.D., an associate professor of child development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg. Provide real-life props, like cereal boxes stuffed with newspaper and taped shut for grocery shopping; junk mail for post office; bandage boxes and empty plastic medicine bottles for house calls.

Or nourish your child's imagination by creating a sock puppet. Just take a sock, draw a face on the end where the toes usually are—or glue on facial features cut from felt (far left)—put it on your or your child's hand, and you've got a sock puppet.

Homemade beanbags are also a great way to test growing skills. Fill a plastic sandwich bag with dried beans and use a twist-tie to close it securely. Place the bag in an old sock and tie the end. Then try a variety of toss games—into boxes, pots, or circles drawn onto large sheets of paper.

“I'LL DO IT MYSELF”
6 to 9 Years

The increasing dexterity and independence of school-age kids enables them to take more initiative in creating homemade toys, says Dr. Shanor. Kids this age enjoy sorting and organizing, so making a collection box—covered with gummed shelf paper, and divided into cardboard partitions—can help launch a hobby, such as sticker, stamp, or coin collecting, notes Dr. Rogers. (Continued on page 139)
Creating a picture book cultivates a kid's literary abilities and can chronicle a recent vacation or family gathering. Give your child some photos or postcards from a trip, and, with construction paper, a stapler, and clear adhesive paper, help him make a book. Younger children can dictate the story, while older ones will take pride in penning the "memoirs" themselves.

Puzzles take on an extra challenge when kids make them from scratch. Have your child draw, paint, or glue a picture on white cardboard (the kind that comes as backing for men's shirts), then have her cut it into 10 to 12 interlocking pieces (see page 56).

**JUNIOR DETECTIVE**

*9 to 12 Years*

At this age, youngsters are exploring how things work, explains Dr. Shanor. Making a weather vane fuels natural kid curiosity. Just have your child punch a hole through the bottom of an empty yogurt container and push a pencil through the hole with the eraser side up. Silt both ends of a straw and insert a piece of cardboard cut into a triangular shape in either end to form an arrow. Glue the pieces together to secure them. Then, put a pin through the middle of the straw and insert it into the eraser (this is a parent's job). Anchor the lid of the container to a piece of wood or heavy cardboard with glue, and rejoin the top and container. Use a compass to mark the directions with the letters N, S, E, and W on the wood or cardboard.

Kids love animation and can create their own "flip card movies," using index cards or a small, spiral-bound notebook. Have your child draw a series of 30 pictures or so in which a figure moves ever so slightly in each one. (This could even be a stick figure doing jumping jacks or hitting a baseball.) Once the drawings are completed, he can flip through them rapidly and see the movie's action unfold.

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