Gift Guide to Open-Ended Toys: The Gifts that Keep on Giving

Every parent is familiar with the feeling of drowning in a sea of toys. No matter how much we try to control the purchases of overzealous grandparents or purge the forgotten play things, the pile seems to grow. Some days, it's like an army of plastic is waging a battle against my sanity. While cheap, PVC is an enemy to the environment, I've realized that MY biggest household enemy is even more specific: "one and done" toys. These are the toys that *don't* teach, inspire or grow with our kids.

A quick example is the Hatchimal that my daughter got for her birthday last year. This toy offered only one purpose – to pretend to care for a creepy, googly-eyed, animal-ish, thing. Once she was done exploring that purpose, there wasn't anything interesting or new to do with the toy. You might have a "one and done" toy in your house if it talks, sings songs, is full of brightly-colored plastic with movie or character themes, and ends up lost in the basket of random mixed junk. While your kid may refuse to throw it away, it will rarely get extended playtime. The bottomline is that a "one and done" toy is meant to entertain your kids rather than your kids entertaining themselves through one of the many forms of creative play.

On the flip side, there are open-ended toys. Open-ended toys do not have one prescribed outcome. Legos are the gold standard of open-ended toys, especially when we let go of the desire to preserve them in a final creation state. What once was a fire truck can transform into a monster truck or an alien spaceship. They require cognitive work and lead to deeper play. Open-ended toys do not need to be complex or have lots of parts. Sticks, boxes, tupperware, and blankets are all must have, open-ended items in the toy inventory.

At the Junkyard, we believe that children learn best through open-ended, playful experiences, where they have control over the process and the outcome. Play, and in particular creative play, is a key component of building a child's resilience, while fostering the ability to focus and act intentionally even when the outcome is unknown. When kids play with open-ended toys, they develop problem-solving skills, communication skills, cognitive ability, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, self regulation, creativity and more. To better support my sanity, open-ended toys are also easier to organize. Blocks store with blocks. Legos store with legos. Playdoh tools store with playdoh tools. My family can be mindful about what we want to play with at any particular time, which better focuses our play until it's time to clean-up.

And now, if you want to foster creative development, cut back on passive screen time, and better organize your toy bins, here is the Hopper's list of open-ended favorites:

Hape Domino Run: (ideal for ages 5-10): Chain reactions are an endlessly fun way to explore cause and effect. This set, designed to transfer energy in exciting ways, challenges kids to build and problem-solve, while celebrating both the failures and successes.

Keva planks (ideal for ages 5-99): These simple uniform blocks are the perfect component for designing beautiful feats of engineering. They are lightweight and they stack well. We can't break the kiva blocks out and not jump into the action with our kids.

3d doodle pen: (ideal for ages 8 and up): 3D pens are a simple way to explore 3D printing technology at your fingertips. The filament binds to create almost anything imaginable. Not all 3D pens are created equally, and skimping on a cheaper model generally just leads to more frustration.

Makedo kits: (ideal for ages 5 -10): Everyone knows that one of the best toys for imaginative play is a cardboard box. If you've spent any time with your kids modifying cardboard with scissors and packaging tape into things like cars, helmets, swords... then makedo is sure to come in handy. And for the seasoned cardboard maker, pair it with a cardboard cutting tool. You'll wonder how you ever lived without one.

Gravity trax: (ideal for ages 8-12): Marble runs are timeless. This sleek set allows you to build with interchangeable pieces that feel more sophisticated and complex than the toddler versions. With 100 pieces, the starter set has more than enough variation to engage the budding engineer.

Real Woodworking tools like a low volt drill or ratchet set (ideal for ages 8 and up): It is empowering to be entrusted with real tools. Not only does it give you the freedom to embark on your own projects, but the ability to do it well. Hammers and nails are hard to use. A low-volt drill is a much better way to construct a project that is built to last. Ratchet sets are also a great "just-in-case" tool to have on hand for bike, snowboard, and skateboard enthusiasts. The ability to take care of and fixing your own things is a skill we all need.

Turing Tumble (ideal for ages 8 and up): We admittedly haven't played with this one, but we have heard nothing but great things from educators and software engineers.

Kids learn about coding by building an analogue “computer” that is powered by marbles. It's essentially an exploration of “and/or” or “if/then” logic gates.

Littlebits Base Inventor kit (ideal for ages 10 and up): Little bits has a bit of a learning curve, but once you get the hang of it, the possibilities are endless. There is a wealth of open source projects and ideas online. With a range of Bits that move, light up, and make noise, kids gain STEAM skills by learning how technology is built.

Beginner Starter Kit for BBC Micro:bit (ideal for ages 14 and up): We have found that micro:bit is a wonderful tool for programing your own creations. The “drag-and-drop” style of software commands make coding simple and accessible. The device features 25 LED lights and two programmable buttons that you can use to program motors, LEDs, and more.

Singer start sewing machine (ideal for ages 12 and up): As a hobbyist seamstress, I have learned quite well that cheap sewing machines only cause more problems. For beginners, choose a simple, but high quality machine. A used sewing machine can be an option, but I would also pay to get it tuned so that the timing is correct before gifting it to a beginner.

Crazy forts kit (ideal for ages 6-12): If you little engineers are constantly stretching your blankets across the couches, a fort making kit is a great way to expand their resources. Fort clips also come in handy.

Magnatiles (ideal for ages 2 - 8): These are some of the most well loved pieces of plastic in my house, second only to legos. They are houses, train tracks, cars, castles, towers, and more. They make for beautiful exploration in geometry. In the past 6 years, not a single tile has cracked (and they’ve been stepped, smashed, and thrown by a toddler godzilla countless times).

Artist easel (ideal for ages 2-8) : A sturdy easel is a helpful way to allow your little one to explore their artistry while hopefully containing it to one location. Paint will get on the ground and maybe even on the wall, but much less than it would have otherwise.

Goldieblox Maker Tool Kit (ideal for ages 8 and up): Your little maker will never ever be without the right tool again! Whether they’re hacking or crafting, this comprehensive and stylish set will be an asset for all their future projects.

Dinosaur Fossil Legos (ideal for 14 and up): Finally, if your older child (or yourself) still can’t get enough of the legos, check out the new dinosaur fossil set. For maximum

open-ended exploration, follow the instructions and then see if you can create a new species of dinosaur...perhaps a Three-horned Pteranosaurus.