

The True Cost of Toys

You can get your kids Great Toys and make their Christmas wonderful without spending a ton of money... as long as you know how to get the most out of your toy budget, if you only remember one thing about toy buying:



The most affordable toy is the one your child plays with the longest.

First, your child is going to play, and most likely, they are going to play with toys. If they don't have toys, then they'll make toys out of whatever they can get their hands on - sticks, rocks, your favorite heirloom vase from your great-great-grandmother.

How much your child plays is dependent on his or her schedule. But rest assured that children will fill all the white space in their lives with play.



The second thing to remember is that you want toys for your children to use during play so that they *don't* pick up grandma's vase and start a football game in the living room.

So, kids will play, and they need toys. To save money on toys, you need to find toys that have long play value, toys that your kids will play with for hours on end. The longer they play with a toy, the fewer toys you have to buy to fill those hours of play, and therefore, the less you will have to spend.

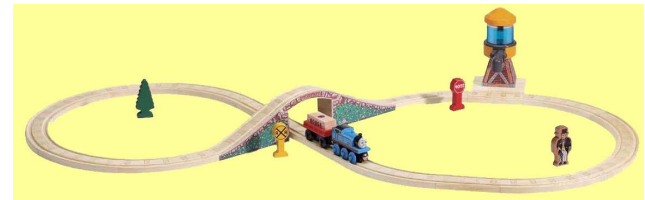
Calculating the True Cost

So the way to save money becomes very simple. Find how much a toy costs *per hour of play*. We call that the **True Cost** of a toy. As a formula it is:

Cost of Toy ÷ Hours Played With = Cost per Hour of Play (**True Cost**)

Take, for example, the Thomas the Tank Wooden Railway Figure Eight Set.

The set sells for \$40. A typical child will play



with this toy for at least forty or more hours before becoming bored with it. Doing the math we get a True Cost of $\$40 \div 40 \text{ hours} = \$1/\text{hour}$ of play.

But what if the toy turns out to be not quite so interesting? A classic example is Tickle Me Elmo. Most kids thought it was fun to squeeze five or six times before becoming bored. Average playtime? Thirty minutes. Do the math and $\$25 \div 0.5 \text{ hours} = \$50/\text{hour}$ of play.



Tickle Me Elmo's up front cost may be \$15 less than the train set, but you can see that Tickle Me Elmo won't occupy your child for very long, so you'll be back at the store to find new toys for the other thirty nine hours and thirty minutes of play that the

wooden train set would have occupied, but Elmo didn't. In reality Tickle Me Elmo costs fifty times as much as the wooden train!

Long-Lasting Play Value

The only problem is that the boxes don't tell you how long your child will play with each toy. How can you estimate how long a child will play with a toy?

There are three criteria that make a toy a winner and give it long-lasting play value:

- **Interactive**
- **Open-Ended**
- **Creative**

Interactive

Interactive means that the toy engages the child. The child has to be an *active* participant in the play. The child has to do something more than just turn it on and watch it go. The wooden train is just colorful lumber until someone lays out the track, someone picks up the train, someone pushes it around, someone decides when, where and why it goes the way it goes.



Interactive means that the child is involved in every aspect of the play. *Playing* the game is much more fun than *watching* the game. The same is true with toys. Kids don't want to watch their toys; they want to use them. Tickle Me Elmo's only interaction is to squeeze his belly and then watch. That's as interactive as a light switch (and not nearly as fun.)

The more a child does to make the toy work, the more the child will play with that toy. A classic example of interaction is the doll. We have dolls that walk, talk, cry, eat, wet, and more. But surprisingly enough, it is the

doll that does nothing but lay there that becomes the little girl's favorite. Why? Because she has to give the doll life through her own actions. And that giving of life, that creating of the doll's every moves - her personality, her talk, her actions - is what creates the bond between girl and doll.

Open-Ended

Open-Ended means there are endless ways to play. Wooden Blocks are the ultimate in open-ended toys. You can stack them, throw them, build with them, lay them out in designs, even decorate them. You can use your blocks with other toys like Hot Wheels (garages & tracks), Barbie's (houses & furniture), little green army men (forts, fox-holes, and trenches). The list of ways to play goes on and on.



The more ways a child can play with a toy, the more often that toy will be included in play. The more often it is included, the longer the child uses it, and therefore, the lower the cost per hour of use.

Creative

Creative means that a child has to use his or her imagination. Just like the example of the doll, the more a little girl must do for the doll, the more she must use her imagination. The more



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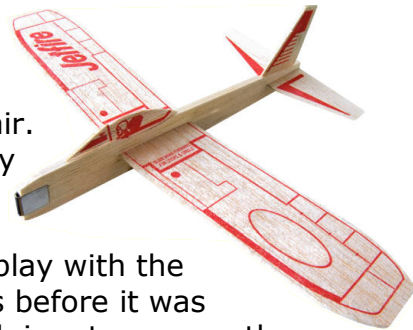
she uses her imagination, the more she “owns” that toy because it came from her own mind. The same holds true with any toy. Once a child engages his or her imagination, they take ownership for having created the way in which the toy was played. They then feel more attached to the toy and are more apt to continue playing with it.

Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative are the three keys to long-lasting play value, more hours of play, and lower True Costs. If you can look for these concepts in the toys you buy your children, you will save lots and lots of money in the long run.

Quality

Quality does count. Here’s another classic example.

Every boy has owned a cheap balsa airplane at one time or another. Now they’re made out of Styrofoam, but the concept remains the same. Slide the wing through the slot in the body and start tossing it into the air. At \$2 apiece, these are pretty cheap toys... until you look at the True Cost. Since most children were lucky to play with the plane for a mere ten minutes before it was stepped on and broken, stuck in a tree or on the roof, or taken away by a parent because of throwing it in the house, the True Cost for this toy measures like this: $\$2 \div \text{one/sixth hour} = \$12/\text{hour of play}$.



The quicker and easier that a toy might break, the fewer hours your child will use it, and the higher the True Cost will be. For that reason, be wary of knock-

offs or cheaply made versions of toys. Quality built toys will always be cheaper in the long run.

Look *not* at the price tag, but at the **cost per hour of play** and you will save money on toys.

Observation

You know how to evaluate toys using the criteria of **Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative**. But now you’re in the store seeing the thousands of Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative toys that we sell. How do you choose that one toy that will most interest your child?

Having them watch hours of TV to see the toy ads won’t work. Television is the Holy Land for toy companies to advertise their latest versions of Tickle Me Elmo and other non-interactive toys with really high true costs.



In fact, you’re better off keeping the kids away from the TV. The creative teams behind those toy ads can make *anything* look fun and exciting for thirty seconds.

The BEST way to know what toys to get your children is for YOU to watch THEM. Observe your children in play. Watch how they interact with other kids, how they interact with the toys and what type of play interests them.

Some children are very active and always play a specific role in whatever they have imagined. They don’t just move the characters around; they become one of the

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characters. Toys like dress-up clothes, kitchens & tea sets, workbenches, sporting goods, and dolls are good for these kids. The girl at the tea party, the boy who becomes a fireman, and the children playing kickball all are *Participants* in the play.

Other children like to be the *Director*. They don't play a specific role as in the previous example, but they control all the actions of the characters in their play. Toys such as themed playsets from Playmobil and Imaginext, dollhouses, action figures, and wooden trains make great toys for these kids. The child isn't one of the characters, like she would be at a tea party, but is still fully involved directing what the characters do.



Building and construction toys such as Lego, K'Nex, Erector, Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs are also great Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative toys. Finding the right construction toy is easier when you observe your children in play. Are they quiet, able to stay focused for long stretches of time? Do they get frustrated easily? Can they follow multiple directions? Are they more likely to color within the lines or follow their own path?

Some construction toys like Erector Sets require more careful planning, following of directions, and overall time to build the models. The same holds true for some of the more advanced Lego & K'Nex sets. Other building toys like SuperMag and Duplo are easier and quicker to assemble the finished product. The key is to know your child's



skill level and being able to match the right building toy with their ability. If it's too easy, they get bored quickly. If it's too challenging, they get frustrated and walk away. Following age guidelines and knowing your child's abilities helps you pick the right level.

The same can be said about arts & crafts projects. Does your child need a framework to work within, or can they create from a blank canvas? Are they better suited for Coloring Books or Sketch Pads?



Thin pencils or thick markers? Finger paints or fine point brushes? Create this specific item or Create whatever comes to mind? The more you understand your child, the better your choices will be for arts & crafts projects.

Observe your child's play habits and you'll be more likely to find the right toy that they will play with for hours and hours and hours.

Expandability

All of the toys listed above are *Expandable* toys. Expandable means that there are add-ons to the original toy – rooms of furniture for the dollhouse, small K'Nex sets to go with the bigger K'Nex set, vehicles to go with the action figures, track to go with the wooden trains, buggies for dolls, and on and on.

Expandability in a toy is one of the greatest assets for

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parents on a tight budget for three reasons.

1. You don't have to invest a lot of money up front to gauge a child's interest.

Even if you have done your homework above and observed your child in play, there is still a chance they might not take to whatever toy you choose. By starting with a small set, you can test the waters to see if the child has any interest, before investing in lots of product. You can even start small with a variety of different expandable toys to see what your child likes best.

2. The add-ons make for great gifts from family & friends.

If you know the toy will be a hit, having other family members buy add-ons means your child can get the "big splash" of a toy without breaking your budget. Although you know that you only bought the "starter set", all your child knows is that he got, "a whole lot of Lego!" Plus, you make shopping easy for grandma & grandpa.



3. Add-ons make the original toy (and original investment) new again.

The best thing about expandable toys is that it doesn't take much to make the whole toy new again. If your child already has a dollhouse, adding a new room of furniture makes the *whole* dollhouse new again, and renews her interest in playing with it. The same holds true for the wooden trains. Add a new building or a few new pieces of track and the *whole* train set becomes a

brand new toy. New Playmobil brings the old Playmobil back out of the toy box.

Here's a mathematical example. You have thirty dollars to spend on a "big" item. You could spend that on a stand-alone toy that is not expandable, or on an expandable toy. With the non-expandable toy, the following year, you will need to spend another \$30 to replace that item with another "big" item. But if you went with an expandable toy, just a \$15 add-on in year two will actually give you \$45 in "new" toys for your child.

You math wizards have already figured out that you can spend 25% less but get 50% more in play value. That is real savings! That is Expandability!



And imagine how fast the savings add up when you account for the \$30 that grandma & grandpa spent on add-ons that first year. Now your \$15 investment the second year makes \$75 worth of toys "new" again!

Observe your children in play and look for expandable toys - money savings tips guaranteed to work!

Time & Money

The third area to save is that most expensive commodity in parent's lives - Time.

As a parent, you are constantly aware of time. You have schedules to follow to get your kids to school, to sports, to music lessons, to doctor's appointments, to bed. You have to allow time for eating, homework,

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practice, playtime, and naps. You have your own agendas to follow including work, laundry, housekeeping, grocery shopping, gift shopping, and meal preparation. And none of that includes your own white space, your own playtime.

Yes, time is the most valuable, and thus most expensive, commodity in parents' lives.

But how can toys save time?

Some of the answers are obvious. Toys keep kids occupied so that you have time to do what you need to do around the house.

Of course, that is only true if you have the right toys that hold your kids' interests. If you have given your kids toys that *are* Interactive, Open-Ended and Creative (Great Toys), they will play longer with those toys and give you more time for your projects.

Then again, the opposite is true. If you buy cheap toys that break easily, or buy toys that don't hold your child's interest, not only will your child be bugging you more (taking up more of your time), but you'll also have to spend *more time* shopping for new toys to replace the toys that didn't last.



So, being more diligent in your research and selection of toys will save you time spent entertaining your children and time spent shopping *again* for more

toys.

In a more subtle way, buying the right toys also saves your children time. Great Toys do something wonderful to children. These toys make kids think. That's right; Great Toys get kids to use their brains. Toys are the great teachers of youth.

When children think and use their imagination, they become smarter. You know the old adage how "practice makes perfect." When kids think, they are "practicing" using their brains. Studies show that children who are read to at early ages and children who are encouraged to read a lot on their own perform better in school. They accomplish more in less time.



The same holds true for toys that require children to think and use their brain. Kids who play with Great Toys use their brains, become smarter, and are able to accomplish more in less time. In other words, they save time.

So, the right toys *can and do* save time. And Time definitely does equal money.

Saving Money on Toys is easy if you...

- **Know the True Cost**
- **Observe Your Children**
- **Buy Expandable Toys**
- **Buy Quality**

Happy Shopping!