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## *The Open-Ended Toy*

Why do all babies prefer the boxes, paper and ribbons over the expensive, flashy toys at their first birthday party?
Why do all toddlers love to play in the kitchen drawer where you keep the leftovers storage containers?
How long have building blocks of some kind been a staple in households where young children play?
Why is a bucket of water and cups so exciting to a young child?
These are examples of **open-ended toys**.

Open-ended toys can be described with the following characteristics.
- Limitless- can be played with in multiple ways
- Encourage creativity
- Simple (no batteries required)
- Often inexpensive (although investing in a good set of wooden blocks can be pricey but worth it!)
- Engaging
- Encourage child-directed play
- Foster imagination
- Not age specific - are enjoyed by children of a wide age range
- Encourage collaboration (playing together)
- There's a lot to talk about, because the toy doesn't talk for you
- Timeless – the "oldie but goodie" toys that remind you of your own childhood
- Teach independent thinking and problem solving

Here are some of my favorite open-ended toys:

Blocks: wooden, foam, large, small, Duplo, Lego…

Containers: boxes, bowls, cups, baskets, purses, pillowcases, bags, nesting boxes/cups

Kitchen items: cups, plates, utensils, bowls, baking items, potato masher, spatulas, measuring cups/spoons, play food

Dress-up items: costumes, scarves, capes, hats, glasses, necklaces, masks, aprons, belts, blankets

Craft supplies: play dough, rolling pins, cookie cutters, crayons, markers, finger paints, paint brushes and washable paints, scissors, tape, glue, stickers, old magazines, catalogs and greeting cards, construction paper, LOTS of blank paper

Sand/Water: great for the few weeks out of the year it's nice enough to play outside and not get eaten alive by mosquitoes! A water/sand table is nice but not a necessity. The under your bed storage boxes (big, but not deep) work great for outdoor water play.  Add cups, bowls, paint brushes, watering cans, sponges, scrub brushes, shovels to increase the fun exponentially.

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Another important characteristic of open-ended toys is they <u>encourage parent participation</u> (unlike computer games). When you sit down and play blocks with your child you can decide together what you are going to build- A road? A hospital for sick animals? A train track? An apartment building? A fence for your horses? The tallest tower EVER? As you build with your child, he is developing visual-spatial skills, problem solving skills, imagination, collaboration, patience, and vocabulary AND he thinks he's just having a great time playing with you!

An open-ended toy is <u>Limitless</u>.
101 ways to play with a BOX
 A BOX can be: a cage for a stuffed animal, a place to hide treasures, a bowl for mixing pretend cookies, a stage, a step, a seat, a hat, a train car, a garbage can, a bathtub, a pool, a drum, a phone, a truck, a building block, a house, an oven, a shoe, a bed, a sandbox, a sled, a fort, a washing machine, an ice skate, a dog house, a spaceship, a soccer goal, a table…

I also want to include a few more toys that encourage creative play and language learning. They are also multi-purpose and can be enjoyed by children of all ages:

- Dolls and baby care items (boys love these too!)
- Dollhouse people and furniture
- Farm play sets
- Balls
- Musical instruments
- Tool sets
- Puzzles
- Puppets
- Games (there are so many great games available – and a lot of duds too!  I'll write another article about that…)
- And last but certainly not least BOOKS, BOOKS, and more BOOKS!

Happy Playing!

*Sarah*

"Play is the highest form of research."    Albert Einstein

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Sarah Thomas is a master's level speech language pathologist with over 15 years experience working with young children to help them meet their fullest potential.  She loves to play games, sing songs, do crafts and act silly! Sarah provides individual speech language evaluations and therapy. Feel free to contact her about scheduling.

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