

Materials that Promote Creativity

According to leading play researchers, “basic is best” when it comes to toys and materials. Each year, the TIMPANI toy study examines how young children engage with toys. Researchers work to identify toys that “best engage children in intellectual, creative, and social interactions in preschool classrooms.” Each year, researchers identify toys that score highly with young children. As you review the toys listed below, think about how the concepts might apply to infant, toddler, and school-age children.

The highest scoring toys over the past several years have been:

2018: Bottle Clix (now sold as Magz Clix by Magz®)

2017: Animal Kingdom Mega Pack Playset

2016: Plus-Plus

2015: Wooden Cash Register

2014: Paint and Easel; Hot Wheels Cars

2013: Magna-Tiles; My First Railroad

What do these toys have in common? They are open-ended and allow for imaginative play. The toys can either (a) become anything the children want them to become or (b) allow the child to create interesting worlds or scenes. Using these themes, look for the following materials in classrooms and programs across the age span:

- **Dress-up clothes and materials.** Children should have access to age-appropriate, safe materials for dress-up. These might be adult clothes or child-sized clothes. Children should be able to use the materials to take on different imaginative roles (parent, firefighter, doctor, puppy, etc.)
- **Figurines, toy trains, toy cars, railroad tracks.** Children should have the chance to build an imaginary world with mini-figurines, cars, and other items. This allows children to take on different roles and collaborate with others.
- **Arts and crafts materials.** Children should have access to art materials like crayons, markers, paint, and clay every day. This allows children to express themselves in different ways.
- **Blocks and other building materials.** Unit blocks, interlocking blocks (e.g., Legos or Duplos), and other safe building materials can help children build imagination and spatial awareness.
- **Puzzles.** Although puzzles have a defined product, they help children learn problem-solving skills and mental flexibility. Puzzles help the children look at objects in different and creative ways.
- **Balls and active toys.** Simple toys like balls, hoops, and jump ropes can become props in imaginative play. They also help children explore how the world around them works and cause and effect.
- **Dolls and puppets.** In their early years, nearly all children show an interest in dolls and caring for other babies. They can explore family roles and responsibilities.
- **Recycled or found materials.** Creativity can be sparked when objects are used for new or interesting purposes. See what children can do with PVC pipe, laundry-detergent lids and cardboard boxes.