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Learning Care Group Offers Tips for Educational Toys this Holiday Season

Consider giving toys that inspire learning all year long

NOVI, Mich., Dec. 2, 2009 – Every holiday season, family's frantically shop for the "it" toy of the year and soon after may see the gift discarded for more intriguing items or the next big thing. This year, Learning Care Group encourages families to give children the gift of learning and to consider educational toys that will benefit kids for years to come.

According to educational specialists at Learning Care Group – a leader in early education and child care – the best toys actively engage children in many areas of development and can be used in a variety of ways, depending on the child's interest, ability and imagination.

Children are amazingly resourceful and creative. They will transform cardboard boxes into space ships, stones into animals and cardboard tubes into telephones. Children don't need the most expensive toys and equipment for optimal learning, but there are guiding principles and helpful processes to use in evaluating and selecting the most appropriate toys and materials for young children.

The right toys can help a child develop physically, phonetically, socially and emotionally, as well as cognitively.

Physical Development

Appropriate toys and materials encourage children to build muscle control, strength, body awareness, balance and dexterity.

Language Development

Providing children with age-appropriate toys gives them unique and interesting topics to talk about. Books and recordings help children appreciate words, literature and music, and pretend play objects encourage children to talk with each other.

Social – Emotional Development

Children learn to cooperate, negotiate, take turns and obey rules through play. Creative art, movement and drama materials foster creativity, are an emotional outlet and provide another view of life. When children put on dress-up clothes, they learn to express themselves and to be comfortable in different roles, which in turn lead to self-expression and socialization opportunities.

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Cognitive Development

Toys and materials that promote active learning motivate children to pursue their own ideas and interests enthusiastically. Many toys, for example, encourage children's interest in concepts like same/different, patterned/planned, classifying and sorting. Construction items help children learn about science and number concepts, and hardwood unit blocks help children learn about geometry, gravity, shapes, and balance. Children practice problem solving as they figure out how things work, and when children create with paint, they learn to mix colors and to use their own unique ideas; which help them in exploring and discovering consequences.

It is important to select items that are appropriate for the child's age and development. Following are suggestions based on the age of the child.

Infant (Birth-18 months)

Provide babies with opportunities to learn about size, shape, sound, texture, cause and effect, and repetition.

- Soft, squeezable toys that help the baby practice grasping and reaching
- Push-pull toys that strengthen muscles
- Simple press-together bricks, blocks or pop beads to develop eye-hand coordination
- Brightly colored, lightweight toys with texture that encourage the baby to touch and explore

Toddlers (18-35 months)

Toddlers are very active and physical. They enjoy playing make-believe and imitating the adult world they see. They are not yet ready to actively play with each other, but they may choose to play beside each other. The following selections promote these skills and more.

- Play sets with people, animals and cars help to expand language skills
- Children's music that allows toddlers to experiment with different sounds, rhythms and patterns to increase their body awareness
- Children's books with simple, colorful plots and pictures can expose children to different speech patterns and new vocabulary
- Dolls help toddlers make sense of their world and imitate adult behavior.

Preschoolers (3-5 years)

Preschoolers are masters of make believe. They are interested in each other and the world around them, and they enjoy showing off their new number and alphabet skills. Below are suggested products for supporting and encouraging a preschooler's developing skills.

- Puppets that encourage children to explore the difference between fantasy and real-life and expand language skills through storytelling
- Sand and water toys, such as boats, funnels, pails and scoops allow children to explore size, weight, measurement and other science and math concepts
- Simple games that help preschoolers understand and follow rules and learn to cooperate with other children
- Active equipment such as jump ropes, balls, hula-hoops and riding vehicles that lead to increased body awareness, the development of fine and gross motor skills, balance and self-esteem.

School-Age (6-12 years)

School-agers are influenced by their peers and have a strong gender identity. Older school-age children know how to cooperate and negotiate using advanced social skills. Mastery of academic skills enables them to pursue intellectual and creative experiences.

- Complex puzzles that encourage experimentation with cause and effect, strategic thinking and problem-solving
- Craft materials such as clay, washable markers, beads, collage materials, paint, washable inkpads and stamps, and scissors that help support creative expression and aesthetic awareness.
- Fitness and fun materials such as balls, beanbags and jump ropes that help children gain self-confidence, exercise, release tension and have fun with others, while also developing fine and gross motor skills
- Non-fiction and fiction books at different reading levels reinforce reading skills and provide information about other people and cultures.

Give the gift of learning this holiday season. For more ideas and suggestions, visit your local Childtime, La Petite Academy, Montessori Unlimited, The Children's Courtyard or Tutor Time school today.

About Learning Care Group:

Headquartered in Novi, Mich., Learning Care Group, Inc. provides high quality, early education programs to children between the ages of six weeks and 12 years under its umbrella of brands: The Children's Courtyard, Childtime Learning Centers, La Petite Academy, Montessori Unlimited and Tutor Time Child Care / Learning Centers. Between these five brands, Learning Care Group has approximately 1,100 schools (corporate and franchise) with a system-wide capacity to serve close to 167,000 children in the U.S. and internationally.

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