



Play

Finding Value in

2009 NAGC Toy List

By Maureen Reed

The year 2009 has been an economically trying time for many families, and families of the gifted are no exception. Budget-conscious parents are constantly evaluating their options in an effort to make wise purchases. Value is always an utmost consideration, even—or perhaps, especially—when it comes to their children’s toys.

The value of play itself to a child’s healthy development has been well-documented and researched. Dr. Peter Gray, a research professor of developmental and evolutionary psychology at Boston University, observes, “Play is nature’s way of assuring that young mammals, including young humans, will practice and become good at the skills they need to develop in order to survive and thrive in their environments.” Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play and author of *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, notes, “Play is hardwired into our brains—it is the mechanism by which we become resilient, smart, and adaptable people.” Through play a child develops the majority of his or her soft skills such as problem solving, creativity, imagination, and social skills. Play also develops children’s hard skills such as physical coordination, language, and constructive abilities. The value of play to childhood development is undeniable.

Parents want a bang for their buck when looking for toys, including a variety of benefits beyond merely occupying a child. A good toy is one that will enable a child to explore, create, learn, and discover, all the while challenging and encouraging a child with new, fun, and exciting opportunities. In other words, a good toy to purchase will have value beyond the sticker price.

For 2009, NAGC looked at a diverse array of products to find the ones with the most value to offer. In choosing these products, we considered the educational value and developmental purpose of each one. We also sought the opinions of gifted children and their parents and teachers. The following products are offered for your consideration.

When looking for the value of a potential toy purchase, consider the many ways play—and toys—promote the entire spectrum of development and learning.

Motor/Physical play—Through motor/physical play, children develop both fine and gross motor skills; control their own bodies; recognize play's relationship to the world around them; and integrate their muscle, nerve, and brain functions into a cohesive and coordinated whole.

Language play—From the first sounds an infant purposely babbles to the puns and rhymes of school-aged children and even adults, people learn language through playing with sounds, words, and sentence structures.

Exploratory play—From day one, human beings explore the world around them. Their curiosity and drive to learn about their environment forms the basis for their intelligence. Exploratory play is nature's classroom.

Constructive play—Human beings are tool users and structure builders. In constructive play, we learn to manipulate objects in our environment and create improvements that benefit our lives.

Social play—Through social play we learn to relate to other people with self-control and mutual benefit. We learn cooperation, reciprocity, sharing, values, and cultural roles. Through formal and informal games, we learn about the importance of social contracts and following rules. We learn our place within a social structure and the value our contribution adds.

Pretend and Imaginative play—Through pretend and imaginative play, children experiment and practice with what they already know and then go beyond it to the abstraction of ideas, concepts, and possibilities. This includes how to be flexible, creative, and predictive in our thinking—all very important to the development of intelligence.

Perfect Sense

The creator of this game understands the lure of the hidden secrets contained in a riddle. Each of the five riddles found on the card is a clue to the same word and relates to one of your five senses. Riddles offer differing degrees of difficulty and can challenge and delight players of many ages. The manufacturer recommends this game for ages 12 and up, but our 9-year old tester said, "If you know the meanings of the words, and if you think about it, you can recognize the clues. I liked the game!"



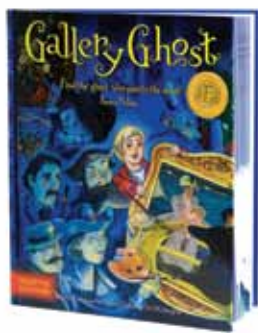
Manufacturer: Patch Products
 Web Site: <http://www.patchproducts.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 12 and up; Number of players: 3–6
 MSRP: \$25.00

Six

This elegantly simple abstract strategy game was a hands-down favorite among our avid game-playing testers! Consisting of beautifully crafted red and black hexagon-shaped pieces, Six tickles the strategic mind and soothes the aesthetic eye. The goal of this game is to be the first to form a pyramid, a straight line, or a circle with six of your pieces. Our testers declared this game "both easier and harder than chess" because the concept is simple to learn yet a player must watch both offense and defense carefully to prevent a surprise defeat. A great abstract strategy game in the tradition of Go!, this game is great fun for kids who enjoy strategy and visual-spatial patterns.

Manufacturer: FoxMind
 Web Site: <http://www.foxmind.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 7 and up;
 Number of players: 2–4
 MSRP: \$24.95



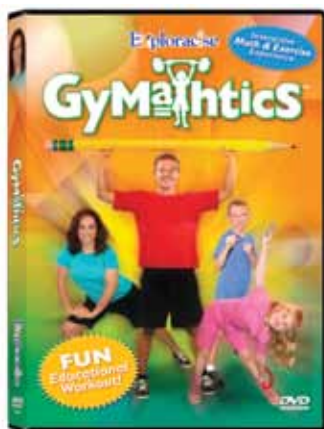


Gallery Ghost

Published in association with the National Gallery of Art, this unique puzzle book has its pages split in half horizontally. On the bottom are original paintings as they are shown in museums. On the top are those same paintings, but with subtle changes made by the artists at night. For instance, a hat from Winslow Homer's "Breez-

ing Up" may mysteriously show up in Mary Cassatt's "The Boating Party." The images were eagerly studied by our testers for long periods of time in an effort to "spot the difference." In the process, they learned about the artists and their masterpieces, and many testers made independent observations about the differing styles and subject matter. This beautiful hard-cover book is a very natural tool for engaging children in great paintings and comes with a magnifying glass and score card to help you keep track of the changes you find. This book has already won an award from the Independent Publisher and is *Creative Child Magazine's* Book of the Year.

Manufacturer: Birdcage Press
 Web Site: <http://www.birdcagepress.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 7 and up
 MSRP: \$17.95



Gymathics

A brilliant idea to combine math and exercise, this revolutionary DVD teaches math and healthy lifestyle concepts while performing a complete exercise routine. The exercise program is great for kids of all ages, while the math facts are targeted at traditional second- through fifth-grade levels. After viewing this DVD, our testers continued playing this new "game" on their own, finding fun and creative ways

to stretch and move their bodies into triangles, planes, intersecting lines, and a variety of other mathematical concepts. Besides getting the kids moving, this DVD's value as an inspirational tool for young math lovers is invaluable.

Manufacturer: Exploromania
 Web Site: <http://www.exploromania.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 6 and up
 MSRP: \$24.99

X-Ball

Roger von Oech, author, inventor, and public speaker on the topic of creative thinking, designed this "toy" as a way to teach the process of creativity to an adult audience. The benefits of creativity are obviously not confined to adults, however, and the X-Ball offers an excellent opportunity to enrich the creativity of kids, as well. The ball's 30 magnetic X-shaped pieces come as a skeletal icosidodecahedron (Leonardo da Vinci's favorite shape), but users will quickly take the ball apart, using the Xs to invent their own shapes and designs. The X-ball comes with a 96-page creativity guidebook full of ideas and exercises for other fun shapes and creative applications. Our testers enjoyed talking through many of the challenges in the guidebook, quickly asking for additional applications as each was completed.



Manufacturer: Creative Whack Company
 Web Site: <http://www.creativewhack.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 8 and up
 MSRP: \$29.95

Brain Food

Brain Food is inert, non-toxic, nonallergenic putty. Wonderfully mushy, this mass of moldable goo is just waiting for creative hands to stretch, shape, sculpt, and twist it. None of our testers was able to resist immediately touching and poking the colorful substance.

Several created very clever sculptures that held their shape quite well. Some colors are glow-in-the-dark, and one type is even magnetic—eliciting an excited "super-cool!" response from our testers.



Manufacturer: Fat Brain Toys
 Web Site: <http://www.fatbraintoy.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 3 and up
 MSRP: \$15.00

The Chain Game

The Chain Game is a quick-thinking linking game in which you must think of a new phrase using one word from the previous phrase. For example, if the card says "catfish" you can say "house cat." The next person might say "house of cards" and the next might say "card shark." Keep the chain going and you keep your links. If the horn blows, the time is up, and you lose a link. The next player reads a new card and the fun continues. The Chain Game is a fun party game for friends and family and is a fabulous example of linguistic play. Words and phrases are the crucial game pieces and your quick responses are the key to winning! This game brought all our testers together in large groups more than any other product tested. Lots of laughter and friendly rivalry created the social cohesiveness that is the other benefit of this fun party game.

Manufacturer: Out of the Box Publishing
 Web Site: <http://www.otb-games.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 12 and up;
 Number of players: 3-10
 MSRP: \$24.99



Sequels and New Twists

Creator 2

A gifted child's natural curiosity is all that's necessary to begin this exciting journey in two, three, or even higher dimensions. Zometool's Creator 2 kit of color- and shape-coded parts takes a child's constructive play into the realm of hyperspace, molecular structures, and nature's perfect symmetry. With online modeling guides and special downloadable software, this kit can inspire and teach higher concepts in math and science through fun, exploratory play. Our testers were instantly enthralled and immersed themselves in model designs with all the intense focus a gifted child can generate. Talk of wormholes, surface tension, and DNA nucleotides wafted through the air as the kids were truly unleashed to create with their hands objects they had previously played with only in their minds.

Manufacturer: Zometool
 Web Site: <http://www.zometool.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 6 and up
 MSRP: \$79.00



Crazy Machines 2

This sequel to the very popular computer game of wacky contraptions and awesome gadgets was well received by all testers. They greeted it with eager anticipation and weren't disappointed. 3-D wrecking balls, lightning rods, lasers, pulleys, springs, and gears kept the fans of the first CD interested and created new fans in those who hadn't seen it before. Our testers with deviously inventive minds were especially enthralled by this game and spent hours perfecting their "inventions."

Manufacturer: Viva Media
 Web Site: <http://www.viva-media.com>
 Rated E for Everyone by ESRB
 MSRP: \$19.99

Gears! Gears! Gears! School Set

The youngest testers gravitated toward this toy, recognizing it instantly as something a bit different. After working with the pieces, they excitedly asked their parents to observe what they were building again and again. The school set, an addition to the award-winning Gears! Gears! Gears! basic pieces, lets kids create their own school and playground with real moving gears. Color-coded building instructions are included or children can discover on their own. The set isn't recommended for children under 4 because of small pieces.

Manufacturer: Learning Resources
 Web Site: <http://www.learningresources.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 4-8
 MSRP: \$34.99



Quadrado

Our budding young strategic geniuses especially enjoyed challenging the older testers in this simple yet sophisticated strategy game. Quadrado is the familiar abstract strategy game in which getting four identical items in a row is the way to win—only with an added dimension and, ok, throw in a twist as well! You must create a row of four beads, in any direction, level, row, column, or plane before your opponent does. Each move consists of placing a bead and then an optional twist of the rotational middle. The multitude of possible moves wasn't daunting for the younger players, and oftentimes they won, which generated a lot of eager excitement along with requests for more turns. Quadrado is one of those unique games that is enjoyable for all ages and is an ideal game for any family or other multiaged gathering.



Manufacturer: MindTwisterUSA
 Web Site: <http://www.mindtwisterusa.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 6 and up;
 Number of players: 2
 MSRP: \$29.95

Morph-O-Scopes

Earlier versions of Morph-O-Scopes have won numerous awards, including one from *Parenting for High Potential*. The newest set, called Sports of all Sorts, continues to stretch and twist the drawer's perceptions as she puzzles out the image she is seeing. This product is the familiar coloring book, dot-to-dot puzzles, and mazes—with a twist—literally! Our younger testers in particular giggled at the distortions and delighted in trying to decipher the morphed images without the mirror. Their delight doubled as they investigated the effect of the mirror on the images. Each set includes two mirrors to make it easy to color with a friend.



Manufacturer: Ooz & Oz
 Web Site: <http://www.oozandoz.com>
 Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 5-14
 MSRP: \$19.99

Classic Games Redone

NAGC normally recommends brand-new products, but the past year has been such a special year for classic board games—two in particular—that we had to give them an honorable mention.

2009 saw both the 50th anniversary of the classic board game **Diplomacy** and the 25th anniversary of another classic board game, **Axis & Allies**. Renowned for their in-depth strategy and intense level of intellectual engagement, both events were celebrated by the publisher with updated art, game pieces, and even additional new rules. Over the years, these two games have delighted and challenged innumerable teens and adults who love international intrigue and decisions that affect the fate of nations. Whether negotiating, planning, or marshalling resources, these classic board games have proven to be a reliable source of fun and enticing mental exercise for deep thinkers.

Many history teachers have used these games in their classrooms, and families have spent hours around the table replaying history. Their appeal has not diminished over the years (as evidenced by one teenage boy's excited comment, "New rules? Let me see that!" and the snatching of the game with a speed unrivaled by anything other than his parents' car keys), proving that value can be found in quality that stands the test of time.

Manufacturer: Avalon Hill
Web Site: <http://www.wizards.com>

Diplomacy:
Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 12 and up;
Number of players: 2-7
MSRP: \$29.99

Axis & Allies, Anniversary Edition:
Manufacturer's Recommended Ages: 12 and up;
Number of players: 2-6
MSRP: \$24.99

You can find more information on the 2009 recommended toys and games as well as links to where they can be purchased on the NAGC online Resource Directory at www.nagc.org/resourcedirectory.aspx.



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