



Making the Most of your Toys

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Parents often ask me to recommend specific toys. While this question seems like it should have a straightforward answer, I often find myself reluctant to respond. I don't want parents spending money on something that won't engage their child, or that will be so all consuming that the child won't be able to focus on their parents while playing with it.

I advise parents to pick toys that have versatility – that do not have one set way of being played with. Whenever I suggest a toy, I like to help the parent think of a few different activities they could do with the toy.

Something I often suggest are animal figurines – ones that are big enough to not be a choking hazard. However, if the child is under three, the parents should make sure not to leave their child alone with them – safety is essential. I like animal figurines because they are portable, washable, and you can often find them at discount stores, which makes them affordable to boot. Animal figurines can stimulate pretend play and so much more. Here are some of the suggestions I've given to parents:

1. Give a reason to communicate, and wait.

With children who tend to have an “own agenda” style of communication, I'll suggest parents use the figurines to give their child a reason to communicate by putting them in unexpected places around the house. Parents tend to get a kick out of this, too. I worked with one mom who managed to spark an interaction with her son by putting an elephant in his cereal bowl. When the child realized that instead of cereal, he had an elephant, he was excited to bring it to his mother's attention. The more unexpected the spot, the better this tends to work for eliciting communication!

2. Guess what I have

For children who are working on expanding their language and are communicating in sentences, I'll suggest to parents to put the animals into a cloth bag, and then let their child pick one while the parent looks away. Then the parent has to ask for details about the animal until he can guess which animal the child has chosen (examples of some things parents can ask: tell me if it's big or small, what does it like to eat, where does it live – the questions should vary depending on the age and abilities of the child). After the parent guesses the name of the animal, it is his or her turn to pick an animal. In this case, it's likely

easier for the child if the parent gives the child hints (it's a big animal, it makes the sound "roar", it lives in the jungle) and see if the child can guess which animal it is.

3. Hide and Seek

Hide and seek can work for children with a wide variety of language abilities – whether they are speaking in sentences, single words, or even if they use gestures but have stronger language comprehension skills. Have the parent leave the room, and let the child hide an animal. Rather than simply looking for the toy, the parent has to respond to clues from her child ("Look under the carpet!", or if the child can direct the parent with a point or eye contact) to find the missing animal. When it's the parent's turn to hide an animal, the child has to listen carefully and follow his parent's directions to be successful. My only word of caution is that sometimes children can be a little too good at hiding – one father told me that a missing lion reappeared after about a month and a half of searching around their living room.

4. Imitation

For children at the very early stages of communication development, and who do not interact much, I suggest parents purchase two sets of matching animals. The parent puts a few of the animals out, in pairs, and does exactly what the child is doing with her animal, to see if that sparks the child's interest and attention. Once the child notices her parent and starts to take turns back and forth performing the action, the parent can add a new action or word to the activity (for example, drop the animals, kiss the animals, pick up a different set of animals), and then wait and see if the child imitates the parent's new action.

When advising parents on which toys to use, it's important to let them know how they can get the most mileage out of their purchase. To see more of my favourite toys, and how I use them, please check out "[Take a look at what's on our toy shelf!](#)" and let me know about some of your most useful toys by [joining the conversation](#) in the forum.