

Our Annual

TOY TEST

by Carol Anne Pagliotti

These Playthings Prevail in Deptford Mall Workout

Of the 442 toys from more than 80 manufacturers that **MetroKids** received for our Toy Test this year, 90 were chosen for a live test at the Deptford Mall. There, 50 Chief Toy Testers and their parents put the playthings through their paces. We asked the parents to rate toys on appeal, educational value, functionality and durability. The children were asked, "Would you like to receive this toy?" Of the toys tested, 37 received high marks.



Around-the-Block Wagon, \$89.95 Parent's Magazine

This sturdy wooden wagon is just the right height for baby to walk behind. It comes with 40 colorful blocks as well as spinning and sliding beads for baby to play with when she is not up walking, holding onto the easy-to-grasp handle.

Baby Play Zone Crawl & Slide Arcade, \$44.99

Fisher Price

Sturdy, bright and interactive, this play set for babies and toddlers encourages crawling, sitting up and sliding down. The substantial set features ball play activities, lights, sounds and, when baby is ready, a slide.



Bath Organizer, \$12.99

Soft Giggles

This attractive, purple nylon lion organizer features a child-safe mirror and holds foam bath toys, which float and stick to tub wall when wet.



Developlay Activity Center, \$39.99

Tiny Love

This interactive toy with noises, lights and music can be used on cribs, playpens, portacribs or the floor.

Double-sided, it features 20 baby-activated activities such as a reflecting ball, baby-safe mirror and a spinning clover, as well as real musical instrument sounds — piano, violin and trumpet.



Around Town Activity Center, \$24.99 Playskool

Toddlers will enjoy this busy town filled with motion. The activity zone includes a train, elevator, control tower and pet shop. The umbrella twirls, the hat spins and the puppy does a dance. The town also comes with a car and a helicopter. The car's headlights spin and the helicopter's blades twirl.



John Deere Animal Sounds Hayride, \$19.99 ERTL

This toy tractor with hay wagon includes four removable farm animals. A happy little farmer plays "Old McDonald" when pushed down. Sounds are triggered when setting the removable pig, cow, horse or sheep back in the hay wagon.

Learn Through Music, \$34.99 Fisher Price

Rhythm, rhyme and repetition, plus a touch screen, give wee ones an interactive experience learning basic concepts such as color. You can purchase software packages for \$9.99 with additional characters such as Barney, Dora or Sesame Street.

Magical Friends Singing Dora, \$29.99

Fisher Price

Interactive Dora doll sings "The Happy Song." Each of her interactive friends (the star, baby bird, frog and butterfly from the show) performs a different action.



My Musical Farm, \$19.99 Mega Bloks

This musical farm building set teaches five children's melodies and three farm animal sounds. Help your favorite farm animals play on the musical seesaw, slide in the farm silo or build a market scene with the 15 decorated blocks.

Educational toys by Leap Frog, Vtech and Learning Resources were big hits with the parents while Sing-Along Care Bears from Play Along and the Snowboard Game from Mattel were hits with the younger set.

Following are toys our testers and parents liked. From our **MetroKids** family to yours, we wish you a happy, healthy and safe holiday season and New Year.



Lamaze Infant Development System

Lamaze Infant Development System offers a line of toys for babies that provides new takes on proven favorites. The **Stacking Rings (\$19.95)** and the **Shape Sorter (\$21.95)** are classic toys made from soft shapes covered in colorful, printed fabrics. They are ideal for little hands to hold onto or little mouths to suck on. Some of the pieces are even aromatic. The **Lamaze 2-in-1 Gym, \$30**, collapses flat and can be carried by its shoulder strap. With it, you'll have a safe, familiar spot to put your baby down on when you are away from home.

My First 1-2-3 Puppets Book, \$35 Folkmanis

This brightly colored, soft book features detachable puppets, a counting theme and different colors and textures.

Rhyme Time and Surprise Book, \$12.99 Vtech

Bright and durable, this interactive book features six nursery rhymes and songs. A light-up smiling face giggles as the pages turn.

Together Tunes, \$59.99 Neurosmith

Soft but sturdy musical interactive cube plays music and is full of fun surprises.

Building Toys

We received an abundance of building toys this year, including the basic Lego set, fantasy worlds full of dragons and creatures, and a 5-foot, 5-inch motorized roller coaster by K'Nex.



Dizzy Fun Land, \$36.95

Learning Resources

This toy rates a wow without so much as opening the package. Part of the Gears, Gears, Gears line, it is an amusement park with moving rides, connected with gears and run by a power motor once your child assembles it.

Dragon Krystal Wars, \$79.99 each

Mega Bloks

Each of three fantasy-themed building sets we tested — Man-O-War Ship, Marauder's Cliff and Draigar Castle — is substantial and elaborate, full of dragons, fairies and other creatures. A child can have great fun playing with these sets after enjoying the challenge of putting them together.

Rippin' Rocket, \$79.99

K'Nex

Standing more than 5 feet high when completed, this substantial building set comes with one roller coaster car and features a motorized turbo boost to add to the excitement.

Slammer Stadium, \$39.99

Lego

This hockey stadium with stickers can turn your child's creations into favorite NHL Hockey players. The players use spring-loaded technology to hit the puck. Former Flyer Brian Propp and his son Jackson enjoyed playing with this set at the Deptford Mall Toy Test. ❖



Care Bears Sing-Along Friends

Laugh-A-Lot Bear, \$19.99

Play Along
The Care Bears are back in fashion and these sing three different songs: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," "The Wheels on the Bus" and "If You're Happy And You Know It." If you have more than one Sing-Along Bear, they can sing together, trading off choruses.



John Deere Power Pull, \$229

Peg-Pérego

Rideable two-speed tractor with trailer goes forward and in reverse. It rides on grass or cement and on the floor of the Deptford Mall, where it was so popular we couldn't keep kids away from it. It has a gearshift for speeds of two or four mph, automatic brakes and foot pedal activation.

Play-Doh Creativity Table, \$29.99

Hasbro

This all-in-one arts and crafts center with markers, crayons, Play-Doh and paper provides a space for creative play. It features Play-Doh favorites: the Fun Factory, Extruder and Fuzzy Pumper, and includes four crayons, four markers, 12 sheets of paper and eight cans of Play-Doh.

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Power Touch Learning System, \$49.99

Fisher Price

This interactive toy allows children to learn by touching words and pictures with their fingers. They can hear the story read aloud and learn words, phonics and spelling. The system also comes with two starter books — A Sesame Street storybook and a bonus School Skills book. The activities advance from preschool through 2nd grade.

Radio Control Mighty Dump Truck, \$49.99

Tonka

Little kids will love "driving" this radio-controlled construction vehicle in all directions and dumping its load (we hope not mom's potting soil in the living room) with the push of a button. An auto shut-off feature saves battery power.

Thomas and Friends Wooden Railway Tidmouth Station Travel Set, \$80

Learning Curve

This complete travel set comes with its own suitcase. While it might be too heavy for young children to carry, it is a nice-sized set that can be transported to grandma and grandpa's or to the sitter's house. The 24-piece set includes Thomas, bus stop, 20 track pieces and travel bag.

Imaginative Play

We received several toys designed to foster creativity and imagination. Children can pretend to be a police officer, a knight of the round table, a doctor or mommy.

Fold and Roll Kitchen, \$19.99, ages 2 & up

Playskool

Preschoolers can shake and bake anywhere they go with this rolling suitcase, which opens to a full kitchen, complete with a refrigerator with kid art on it. Fill the sink with warm water and scrub the plates — stains disappear. When the dishes dry, the stains reappear. The play set comes with plenty of accessories and features a kitchen sink, refrigerator with icemaker and storage area, oven, two glowing burners and a storage compartment.

Adventure Castle, \$79.99,

ages 3 & up

Mega Bloks

The set comes with colorful flags and gilded blocks for your child to imagine he is Sir Daniel, a knight in King Arthur's Court traveling through the forest on a magical journey with Merlin. Modular, expandable giant-sized blocks lock together to create play areas that can be personalized for each child. Each Mega Play set includes a booklet with ideas for creative play.

Jr. Police Officer suit, \$57.95,

ages 3-12

Aeromax

From the Get Real Gear line, this realistic police officer costume is made of quality, durable materials. It comes complete with a cap, badge, shirt, pants, belt, radio, baton, hand cuffs, police whistle and ID wallet. It is available in children's sizes 2/3, 4/6, 8/10 and 12/14.

Pretend and Play Doctor Set, \$24.99,

ages 3 & up

Learning Resources

This fun kit allows kids to play doctor with realistic sounds and brightly-colored instruments such as a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff & reflex hammer. It is also available as a tool set.

Teaching Cash Register, \$44.95,

ages 3 & up

Learning Resources

This adorable, realistic-looking cash register features four interactive learning games. It also identifies & counts coins. ❖





Alphabet Classroom, \$29.99, Vtech

From the Ready, Set, School series, this substantial, bright and interactive toy features eight interactive activities and seven game modes that teach letters, phonics, colors, spellings and time-telling with 27 three-dimensional figures. Press a letter to see which of the 26 students pop up. The bright LCD screen brings the classroom and classmates to life.



Batmobile Vehicle, \$26.99, Mattel

This 20-inch vehicle was a big hit with the Toy Testers. Inspired by the DC Comics series, the styling is contemporary while maintaining the classic Batmobile look. Cool features include tandem seating, which allows Batman and Robin to cruise side-by-side. Robin's seat actually ejects from the Batmobile into a stand-alone motorcycle with wings.

Go Go My Walkin' Pup, \$49.99, Tiger Electronics

This life-like dog barks, whimpers, wags its tail and comes when it's called. With the lifelike movements and dog sound effects such as barking and panting, it's just like having a real dog, minus nightly walks.

Learning Screen Karaoke, \$29.99, Leap Frog

Cool learning toy teaches ABCs, 123s and phonics through sing-a-longs.

Magna Phonics, \$49.99, Neurosmith

Interactive game teaches children how to sound out words. With a magical letter wand, children direct 26 magnetic letter tiles. By sliding any series of tiles to the Learning Board, children can explore which combinations of letters make which sounds, build and sound out new words and play fun spelling games.

Magna Wheels Fire Stomper, \$30, Matchbox

This forest-fire-fighting play set allows children to imagine they are racing to the rescue. The Fire Stomper has six huge tires, which allow the vehicle to roll over tough terrain on its way to any emergency. The versatile fire truck can convert into more than 50 fire-fighting vehicles. Magnetic connections work easily. It also includes a two-foot ladder and moveable light bar that has real lights and sounds.



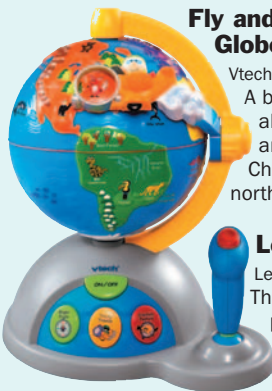
Ello Creation System — Fairytopia People, Places and Things Set, \$19.99, Mattel

This beautiful 176-piece building/craft kit allows girls to create a fantasy world or a tissue box, flower clock, mobile, fairy cart or something out of their own imagination such as a fairy-copter. This unique set combines building with crafts and storytelling.



Fly and Discover Globe, \$24.99, Vtech

A bright, fun & interactive globe with a pilot character spins and gives info about animals, continents, rivers and mountains. It teaches places, names and animals with sound effects, a magnifying glass and oversized buttons. Children direct the play with a built-in joystick that navigates the rotating globe north, south, east or west.



Leap Pad Plus Writing Learning System, \$59.99, Leap Frog

This learning toy comes with two interactive books and an interactive magic pencil that sounds out letters and words, reads stories and writes. This unit works with the entire LeapPad Library of more than 50 books. Easy-to-clip pen allows children to practice making letters and numbers.

Polly Pocket Designer Mall Stylin' Clay, \$24.99, Mattel

This bright, multi-piece set contains 40 fashions & accessories along with clay and glitter. It's definitely for a more detail-oriented girl. The mall has four stores — boutique, shoe store, salon and food court — plus a working escalator. Clay and molds make it easy to create additional accessories for Polly. The set comes with one doll.

Stuntsters — Hot Rocker, \$19.99, Tyco R/C

Stuntsters were the hit of Toy Test. There were even a few **MetroKids** staffers seen ogling these smaller, less expensive, but no less fun radio-controlled cars. They take approximately three minutes to charge and run for five minutes per charge. The tiny cars perform awesome stunts, from rolls to jumps to 360 degree cyclone steering.

Switch 'Em Up SpongeBob, \$12.99, Jakks Pacific

SpongeBob does Mr. Potato Head. This set comes with two sets of eyes, two mouths, two arms, hat and spatula. You can even add his pet snail, Gary.

Dolls

American Girl Dolls

These substantial dolls and accessories are any girl's dream gift.

- **Hallie, \$48.** Unlike most "perfect child" dolls, the 16-inch Hattie looks like a real little girl. Part of the younger Hopsotch Hill School line, she comes with the storybook *Hallie's Horrible Handwriting*.
- **Kailey's Complete Collection, \$145.**

Ten-year-old Kailey is the newest addition to the American Girl line. This 18-inch surfer girl comes with crocheted sandals, a beaded necklace, bracelet and anklet. Her beach bag holds seashells, a starfish and a Frisbee.



Haddy, \$26, Saddy and Gladdy

This plush doll has a unique twist: She turns from sad to happy when turned upside down. The doll comes with a clever book and is meant to help children think positively and express their feelings.

Language Littles, \$39.99 each, Language Littles

- **Anna** — speaks Russian.
- **Emma** — speaks German.
- **Other models** — speak Chinese, French, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese and Spanish.

These 16-inch plush dolls have three pressure points to teach another language. Move the right hand and the doll speaks greetings. Move the left hand and it speaks vocabulary terms including counting, days of the week, colors and/or favorites. The right knee says "I love you" in the doll's language. Each doll comes with a translation booklet.



Little Mommy, \$12.99, Mattel

This small, lightweight doll is easy to hold for young pretend play. It's a soft, cuddly doll with activity keys, a bottle & chip art book.

Dressable Madeline, and Dressable Nicole, \$10 each, Learning Curve

These 16-inch, dressable rag dolls are simple dolls with friendly faces. Accessories include:

- **Bon Voyage, Ski Adventure & Bathrobe Outfits, \$6.50 each.**
- **Dreamtime Bed, \$10**, a plush, beautiful, softly colored bed with matching pillows and a chenille bedspread.
- **Comfy Cozy Chair, \$7.50** is a 15-inch, oversized plaid print chair and throw pillow.

Poseable Madeline, \$7.50, Learning Curve

The doll stands eight inches tall and wears her school uniform with a blue overcoat and yellow hat. Accessories and play sets include:

- **Riding Outfit, \$5**, with riding jacket, jodhpurs, hat, boots and first place ribbon.
- **Madeline's Horse Clarabelle, \$15.** Clarabelle makes whinny and clip clop sounds. The plush horse comes with bridle, saddle, blanket and brush.
- **Horse and Pony Stable, \$20.** The set includes a pony named Violette, and a stable, working weathervane, feeding trough, bag of oats, pitchfork, shovel, comb and first place ribbon.

Rock-a-Bye Chou Chou, \$39.99, Zapf Creations

This life-like doll looks realistic. It laughs, cries and babbles. Its softness makes it feel realistic too.

Topsy Turvy Dolls, \$25, North

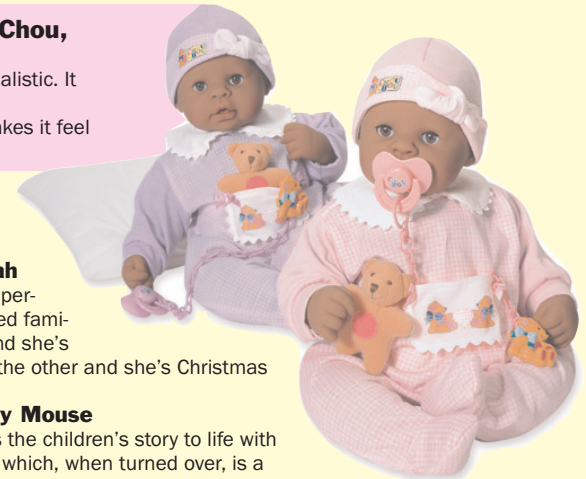
American Bear Co.

• Christmas/Chanukah

This multicultural doll is perfect for religiously blended families. Turn her one way and she's Chanukah girl. Turn her the other and she's Christmas girl.

• City Mouse/Country Mouse

This adorable doll brings the children's story to life with a pretty pink city mouse which, when turned over, is a more down-to-earth country mouse in floral print.



Unbelievably Soft Baby, \$9.99, Goldberger Doll Mfg. Co., Inc.

Filled with air and powder-scented, this doll has African-American and Caucasian versions. Both are beautiful, soft, realistic dolls. ❖

Puppets

Puppets have been getting more sophisticated and creative during the past few years. This year, Folkmanis offers a **Funny Little Bunny, \$24**, hand puppet that comes tucked into a watering can, making it the perfect companion for a reading of *Peter Rabbit* or other bunny stories. Also from Folkmanis, the **Border Collie Puppet, \$36**, is so lifelike, you will want to feed it.

With the **Prehistoric Park Finger Puppet Set, \$25**, Manhattan Toy provides a Flintstones-like play set, complete with camper vehicle, jungle print rug, and campfire with roasting hotdogs and marshmallows. Made out of soft colorful fabric, the finger puppets and their pet mastodon allow kids to imagine their own prehistoric camping scenarios. ❖



Disney Princess Handheld Karaoke Microphone, \$49.99, Memcorp
Sing along with your kids to the greatest Disney movie songs. A microphone connects to your TV with an Audio/Video cable. Choose from a list of 20 songs to sing with the background music while the words of the song appear on the screen. The unit has a cartridge slot on the side that will allow you to plug in other songs as they become available. The microphone also will alter your voice to male or female to match the original singer, or you can let the unit rate your singing after each tune.

Extreme Snowboard, \$19.99, Mattel

Another big hit at Toy Test, this motorized snowboard track lets kids live out the fantasy of snowboarding all year. The object of the game is to launch the snowboarder onto the mountain to score points. Moving the three-foot mountain landing creates new challenges.



G.I. Joe Cobra Moccasin Boat with Cobra Moray, \$7.99, Hasbro

This 27-piece building play set allows children to imagine they are taking to the water in a speedboat they've just built or riding a snowmobile through white-thatched mountains.



MicroMachines Super Stunt City, \$29.99, Hasbro

The large tanker opens to reveal a city of micromachines. The micromachines do daring stunts, and this city where kids control the stunts serves as the toy's own storage.



Artificial Intelligence Series Tablet-Notebook, \$99.99, Vtech

This realistic-looking, laptop-like talking toy with four activity cartridges, desktop software & PC connection cable also features a touch screen. The detachable digital screen and game pen provide more than 75 activities in subjects such as English, math and history. It includes a word processor, music composer and mixer, stereo speakers, art program and four additional activity cartridges.

Chatitude, \$19.99, Milton Bradley

The truly evil equivalent of Peter Brady's tape recorder, with which the Brady Bunch tyke taped private conversations, this game for girls features 200 cards with 800 questions. One girl answers a question (recorded for posterity) and then passes the gadget to the other girls to guess what they think you think.

Desert Forces Train Set, \$105, Bachman Industries

This plug-and-play set from a Philadelphia company is remarkably easy to put together, with no special tools or fasteners. Honoring military rail transport, the desert-camouflaged train includes locomotive, caboose and missile, refrigerated medical supply and track-powered floodlight cars that run on a 47 x 38-inch oval.

Lights Out, \$14.99, Tiger Games

Judging by how quickly children at the Deptford Mall learned to play it, this game is easy. With more than 1,000 different lights puzzles, players are challenged to press the correct sequence of buttons to turn the lights out.

Lizzie McGuire Flash Talk Games, \$19.99, Milton Bradley

Fast-paced, this party game for girls asks participants to talk about girly stuff such as cute boys and TV shows. Players shout out answers and hope they haven't repeated any of the answers already given. Majority rules, so beware — if your friends think your answer is bogus, they can challenge you.



MGears Motorized Building Set, \$36.95, Learning Resources

Kids can create robots, vehicles and machines of their own devise with this 350-piece building set. The set comes with a forward/backward motor control and instructions to build ten models and 18 types of building pieces.

SuperMag Magnetic Genius, \$42.92, PlastWood

This very cool magnetic building set consists of nickel-plated steel balls and two sizes of plastic-coated magnetic, polarized rods. The strength and versatility of magnets allows for countless possible constructions, including models, buildings and spinning tops.

Vertigo, Tyco R/C, \$64.99

Colorful and cool-looking, this radio-controlled, spinning stunt vehicle with lights will spin on two wheels. It seems surprisingly durable, though it can be hard to keep moving it straight.



Future Careers

Careers, \$9.99, Parker Brothers

The classic board game has been repackaged to appeal to today's generation. As with the original, players plan a formula for success consisting of fame, fortune and happiness points. In the game, a player can get a college degree (increase salary \$20,000), get appointed to the Supreme Court (6 fame points), get caught for smuggling parrots (lose half your cash) or experience the bear market (cut salary in half).

GeoSafari Xcavations Museum Quality Fossil - Saber-Toothed Cats, \$19.95, Educational Insights

This science kit simulates an archaeological dig with hard plaster "fossilized bones" of two saber-toothed cat skeletons. Your budding paleontologist will enjoy the opportunity to experience the excitement of the discovery. Use a real pick and chisel to chip and scrape away at the plaster block to reveal the buried cats.

Real Brick, Real Stone — Empire State Building, \$29.95, Educational Insights

Go ahead touch 'em. They're real miniature bricks and the set uses mortar to cement them together to create a replica of the Empire State Building with this 664-piece set. The mortar dissolves in water, so junior can also create his own architectural masterpiece. Refill mortar kits can be purchased for \$6.95.

Art House, \$195, Storyboard Toys

This play set is both an art toy and a play place. Children can design and install the decorations and the house is large enough to be home to popular action figures, dolls and dollhouse furniture. The panels hinge open to accept new designs for continuous play. It comes with two décor kits: Fire House and Country Cottage. Additional sets such as Traditional Japanese Home, Viking Longhouse and North American Horse Barn, are available. ❖



Twister Moves, \$19.99, Milton Bradley

What's old is new again. The classic game Twister is updated to teach tweens how to dance. It is like the arcade video game in which kids dance to blinking arrows and lights. And there's no more worry about co-ed play as it is no longer a climb-all-over-your-friend exercise. It comes with three 30- by 30-inch mats, three Twister Moves CDs and an Aaron and Nick Carter CD. ♦

Carol Anne Pagliotti is Resources Editor of **MetroKids**.