

# Better Homes and Gardens®

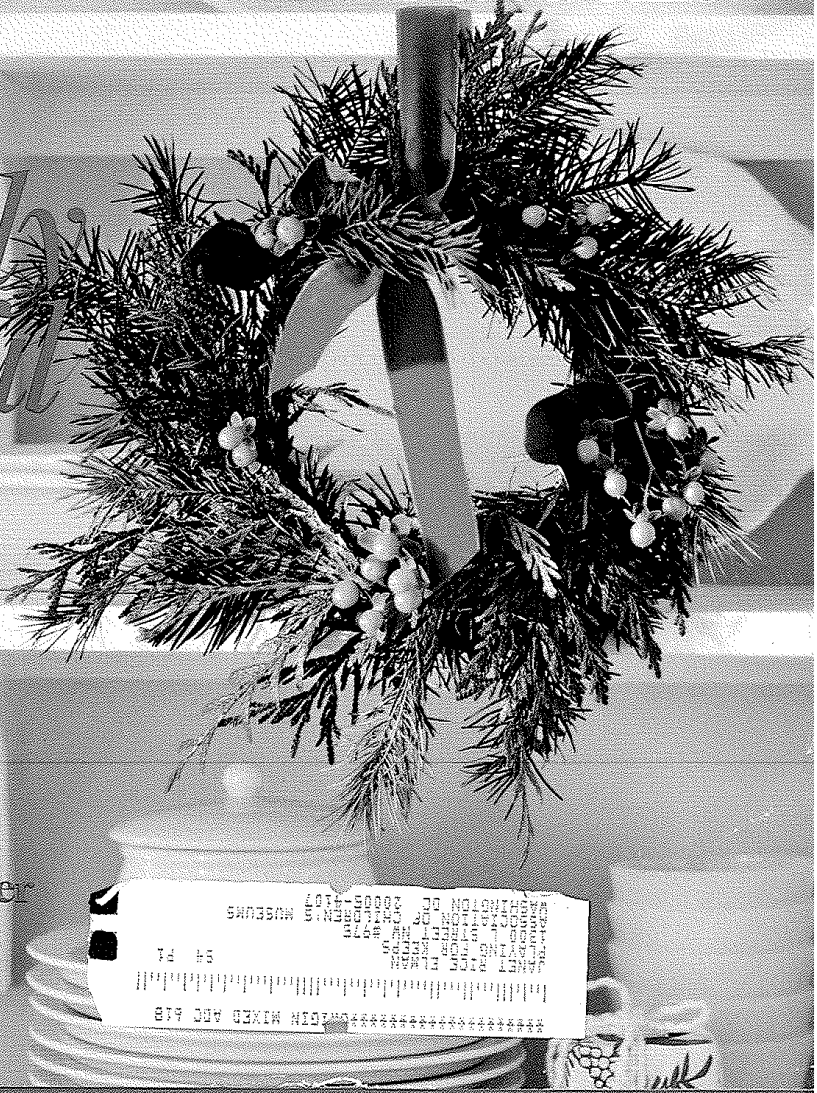
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*Simply  
Joyful*

Easy Ideas for  
the Holidays

A Memorable  
Christmas Dinner

Stylish Gifts  
Under \$50



## Just Imagine

Kids may be dazzled by the lights and sounds of the holiday's hottest items, but it's the simple toys that spark youthful creativity the most.

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Every holiday season you see them, first in TV and Web ads, then on the wish lists of children everywhere. The action figures tied to a cartoon or recent movie.

The hot video game of the moment. The latest computer chip-controlled "smart" toy.

"Kids are dazzled by them, but the dazzle wears off," says Stephanie Oppenheim, who tells the story of a little girl who recently got an interactive doll, the kind that responds to voice commands and talks back to its owner. "She took it to another girl's house for a play date. On the way home, her mom realized that she'd left the doll behind. But when she offered to go back and get it, the little girl passed. 'That doll talks too much,' she told her mom."

The girl's reaction isn't all that unusual, says Oppenheim, cofounder of the Oppenheim Toy Portfolio ([toyportfolio.com](http://toyportfolio.com)), an independent consumer organization devoted to evaluating toys and children's media. "There are a lot



# family matters

## GIFT GUIDANCE



of bossy toys out there that try to direct you a little too much," she says.

While many of these products can teach valuable skills and lessons, they need to be balanced by toys and games that stimulate more open-ended activities, says Janet Rice Elman, executive director of the Association of Children's Museums in Washington. Elman also is spokeswoman for *Playing for Keeps* ([playingforkeeps.org](http://playingforkeeps.org)), an ACM initiative that promotes the need for more free play time for children. "Parents, teachers, and toymakers have all been moving in a

direction toward highly structured play," says Elman. "But we also need to make room for unstructured time, and for toys—like building blocks and modeling clay—that can be played with in a lot of different ways."

The need for this kind of creative play is crucial. In developmental studies of schoolchildren over the past 20 years, researchers at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, found that kids who got more time for this kind of play were able to use their creativity in other areas of their lives as they grew up. In particular, research showed a strong link between creative play and the development of effective problem-solving and coping skills, which will serve children well for the rest of their lives.

This season, try these strategies—and fill some of the space under the tree with gifts that encourage kids to use their minds and bodies.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE

"In general, the more basic a toy is, the better kids will like it and the longer they're likely to play with it, since those are the kinds of toys that offer more opportunities for kids to use their imaginations," says Kourtney Eidam, an editor who coordinates the annual toy guide published by *Better Homes and Gardens'* sister magazine, *Parents*. Highly structured toys with a long list of features or capabilities built around a very specific story are less

likely to capture a child's interest for very long. Open-ended toys—art supplies, costumes, and puppet theaters—are all smart choices for fueling imaginations.

### GET CRAFTY

Whether it's a paper airplane kit, modeling clay, a jewelry set that lets kids make beaded necklaces and bracelets, or a simple blank journal to write in, craft kits and creative toys make for powerful—and fun—gifts.

### EMBRACE THE CLASSICS

Don't forget the pure fun and joy of perennial favorites, like a traditional board game. Most kids (even the most sophisticated preteens and teens) will join in on a few rounds of a favorite game. "In our family it's Boggle, or some of the classic board games, such as Risk," says Oppenheim. "It really doesn't matter what you play—what matters is doing it together."

### LOOK FOR ACTIVE TOYS

With childhood obesity reaching epidemic proportions, it's never been more important to encourage kids to get off the couch. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends 60 minutes of physical activity per day. Encourage kids to get that exercise by giving them scooters, bikes, sports equipment, or even a foam football they can chuck around the basement. 🐾

### TOY TIPS

Every year, **Oppenheim Toy Portfolio** publishes its "Best Toy" awards for products in age categories from infants to later school years. See the latest results at [toyportfolio.com/platinumawards](http://toyportfolio.com/platinumawards). Portfolio cofounder Stephanie Oppenheim also blogs regularly about toys and related news at her Web site, [toyportfolio.wordpress.com](http://toyportfolio.wordpress.com). **Parents magazine's Web sites**, [parents.com](http://parents.com) and [goodyblog.com](http://goodyblog.com), are both packed with the latest information about toys and games for the whole family. Be sure to check out the magazine's December issue, featuring a video game guide.

For more toy-shopping strategies and tips for children's entertainment, go to [truceteachers.org](http://truceteachers.org), the Web site for the nonprofit group **Teachers Resisting**

### Unhealthy Children's Entertainment.

TRUCE also publishes an annual Toy Action Guide.

Finally, if your gift list includes children's books, look up past and present recipients of the esteemed John Newbery Medal, awarded every year to the best in American literature for children. Learn more at the Newbery Medal site, [ala8.ala.org/alsc/newbery.html](http://ala8.ala.org/alsc/newbery.html).