

# idealist's guide to

# TOYS

**HIP,  
WHOLESUME  
AND  
LEAD-FREE  
FINDS**

Design for kids is smarter, more developmentally appropriate and better looking than ever. Today's parents have done their homework on toys, and they want functional, open-ended playthings that reflect intelligent design principles and a modern aesthetic. In many ways, shopping the toy aisle is a study in innovation, as long as you know where and how to look.

BY AMY NANCE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GENE POLLUX & COURTESY OF THE RETAILERS

Resources: Baby Boutiki, 3205 Manatee Ave. W., Bradenton, 941-748-3800; Baldwin Toys available at Baldwintoy.com; Bilibo available at ModernNursery.com; bloombaby Coco Natural Stylewood Baby Lounge available at ModernNursery.com, 877-663-2224; Bloomin' Bellies, 3604 S. Osprey Ave., Sarasota, 941-316-1500; Chalk-a-Dots, Modern Clider, Flensed Mobiles available at Modernseed.com; Cubes available at fatbraintoy.com; DucDuc Alex Crib available at ModernTots.com, 877-289-0453; Funtoysia, 8311 Lockwood Ridge Rd., Sarasota, 941-355-9797; Holistic Moms Toy Store available at www.holisticmoms.org; Kidz, Etc., 4043 Clark Rd., Sarasota, 941-923-4001; Melimade, www.melimade.com; Nurseryworks' Duet bunk bed available at Nurseryworks.com; Obli Organics, 877-674-6959, www.obliorganics.com; Sarasota Waldorf School, 1900 Meadowood St., Sarasota, 941-927-3711; Spaceframe Builders Kit available at ModernTots.com; Toy Lab, 1529 Main St., Sarasota, 941-363-0064; Villa Sibi Dollhouse available at sparkability.com. Painting: "Sound Luminescence" by Andrea Dasha Reich, courtesy of State of the Arts Gallery.



### The New Toy Vanguard

A recent article in *Mothering* magazine derides “junk toys,” a neologism the author applies to plastic or electronic items crowding the shelves at the big chains. These toys often represent commercially-licensed characters from television shows. Some might make an inspired addition to your kid’s cache of personalities, but most of these friendly faces aren’t so play-friendly. A popular toy like Hasbro’s Transformers Movie Ultimate Bumblebee, for instance, quickly exhausts its possibilities as a plaything—it’s always the Bumblebee, an exciting and potent action figure, for sure, but not believable as a rung in a make-believe ladder. The Bumblebee isn’t open-ended, the kind of toy that invites your child to use his imagination over and over again in countless playtime scenarios (good, at-home open-ended toys include shoe boxes and Tupperware). The Swiss-made Bilibo—a rocking, colorful Polyethelene shell with two eye-sized holes in it—is an example of an innovative and open-ended toy. There is as much intentionality in its design as there is ingenuity: it makes a fabulous hat, a trusty sand scoop at the beach, a good space pod for little Martian people and whatever else your kid dreams up. OFFT’s Spaceframe Builders Kit’s large felt pieces are made from recycled soda bottles and lock together to build structures big enough for a child to crawl into. Similarly, the brightly colored, interlocking Dado Cubes have won just about every kid-design award out there, and mostly because they can be anything.

Don’t think you’ll have to get these toys online only, though savvy shops like Fat Brain Toys and Oompa (the company’s motto: “No batteries. No blinking lights. No cartoon-themed toys. Period.”) do make it easy. Local independents have been bringing smart toys to the area for a while. “I can give you a product that will appeal to the imagination and the visual sense and it will be educational,” says Robin Henchel, co-owner of toy shop Funtoyasia. Henchel stresses the importance of open-ended as well as developmentally-appropriate toys, citing a passion for “putting the right piece in the right person’s hand.” She points out a seesaw-like contraption that, when stepped on, flings a ball into the air and promotes tracking and catching skills. “We showcase wonderful products that provide teaching opportunities. These are tools a child needs, for socialization, for nurturing and for education,” she says. Funtoyasia’s inventory includes puppets—“Great for kids who are afraid to talk about things; the puppet can speak on their behalf”—high concept games and the endearingly old fashioned Kathe Kruse dolls. The staff at local favorite Toy Lab are also eager to help kids connect with the right toy. The shelves are delightfully crammed with a veritable who’s-who of well made toys and old favorites.

Many parents didn’t need the recalls to convince them to buy organic for their families. “Customers gravitate toward the organic or natural products over the alternatives,” notes Jen Topjun, owner of mom and baby boutique Bloomin’ Bellies, adding that she was conscientious in researching products to carry in her new store, especially when it came to ensuring

## top 10 idealist approved toys

**1.** PLASMACAR, FUNTOYSIA  
“A lot of kids don’t have arm strength, but this will work the upper body,” says Henchel of this ride-on car that uses no gears or pedals.

**2.** HABA TOYS, TOY LAB  
These German-made wood and fabric toys are genius: simple, whimsical and exceptionally well-made. Try any of the block sets.

**3.** PLAYMOBIL, Funtoyasia  
These long-cherished little figures and play communities will never go out of style.

**4.** PAPER AUTOMATA and TATEBANKO, MODERN TOTS.COM, Kids on the cutting edge might want to pick up one of these kit projects that dates from the 15th and 17th centuries and lets them build machines and dioramas from paper.

**5.** RICH FROG, TOY LAB  
The soft, squeezable frogs, ducks and rabbits from this Burlington company will have your tot building an indoor menagerie in no time.

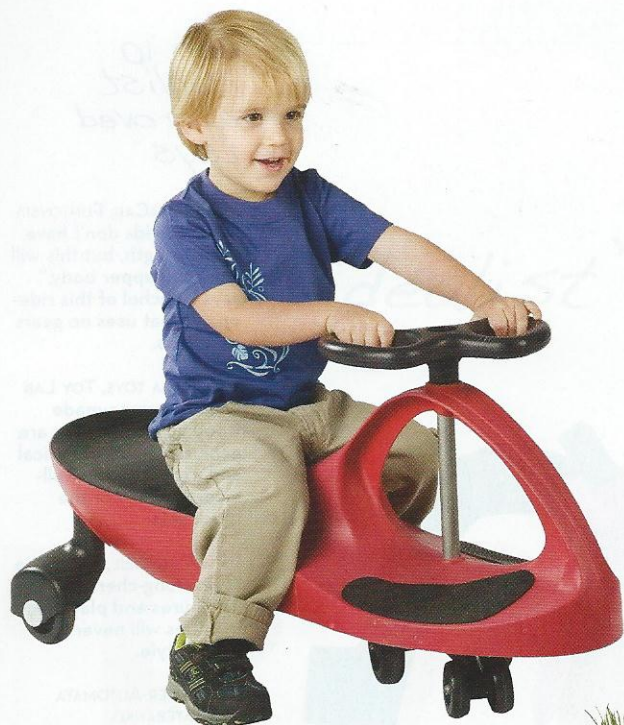
**6.** COROLLE, TOY LAB  
The perfect first doll—vanilla scented, with a delicately painted face and tailored to your child’s size.

**7.** INMODERN’S ECOTOT ART TIME EASEL, MODERN NURSERY.COM  
This artfully-designed easel uses three pieces of SmartWood, is completely non-toxic and breaks down in minutes.

**8.** NYOKKI PET PLANTS, MODERN NURSERY.COM  
For green thumbs and enviro-tots, these Japanese ceramic egg planters with faces and legs make growing fun.

**9.** TOY WOODEN ROCKING DORY, CRAFTSBURYKIDS.COM  
It’s a boat and a rocking toy all in one. Looking for fair trade toys? Craftsby Kids has a toy-box full of them.

**10.** CITO CRANE, MODERN TOTS.COM  
This indestructible crane is as good-looking as it is rugged, made of birch and with clean lines.



Previous page: Haba Little Elf, \$20; Toy Lab. Top to bottom: Obli Organics Signature Surfer Swirl t-shirt, \$18; Obli Organics. PlaSmart PlasmaCar, \$70; Funtoysia. Modeled by Jacob Hazelhoff. Nyokki Pet Plants Chickee, \$8.50; ModernNursery. Rich Frog Sleepy Lamb, \$14; Toy Lab. Tatebanko Hokusai's "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" paper diorama, \$10; ModernTots. Right: Guidecraft Cito Crane, \$85; ModernTots, Playmobil Triceratops set, \$42; Funtoysia



that her vendors conducted independent tests on their outsourced items. Topjun, mom to four year old Nathan and baby Bonnie, sells gorgeous Cariboo bassinets and Svan high chairs, both of which are all natural wood and environmentally friendly. Topjun stocks Earth Mama Angel Baby skincare products ("they smell dreamy, like an orange creamsicle") and the USDA certified organic Mother Love line. She has Egg organic clothes and organic onesies, and the shop holds prenatal yoga and infant massage classes every week.

Last year's Atomic Holiday Bazaar (AHB) and E-Fest both featured children's vendors devoted to responsible practices like sustainability and fair trade (the children's line Melimade, a booth at AHB, was created by a vegan mom from Tampa and offers such delights as the organic wool carrot teether). Obli Organics, an "ecolectual" line of clothing for babies and toddlers, was started locally by two sisters, and Bradenton's Baby Boutiki sells dolls by fair trade company BlaBla.

"Sarasota is a very green city," observes Leslie Button, co-leader for the local chapter of Holistic Moms Network, a community of moms who share an interest in holistic living. "Our group has expressed concerns about lead recalls. Some of us had toys to get rid of and were looking for wooden, woolen, felt toys that are non toxic," says Button, who made a Christmas wishlist for her son at Magic Cabin, an online retailer of open-ended, old fashioned toys. Button's son attends Sarasota Waldorf School, where experiential, imaginative learning is emphasized "in creative, tranquil, low-tech settings, with absolutely no pressure or competition," according to an article in Wondertime magazine. "We have many more wooden toys and cars than most people do," says Button, whose home doesn't have a television. "With Waldorf, there's an interest in texture. The blocks in the classrooms foster the imagination and later help kids learn about physics. There are no painted princesses or noise makers—it's an approach that's not about commercialism," she says.

Brands like Kate Quinn Organics, Baby Soy, Sckoon and Under the Nile are no longer niche lines; with their use of low-impact, fair trade practices and organic materials, they are rapidly becoming the standard.

True, parents want safe, constructive toys, but they want them to look good, too. "I can tell the collectors from the non collectors right away," says Steve Baldwin of Nebraska's Baldwin Toys, which appeared at last year's American Craft Council's Sarasota show. Baldwin makes mantelpiece trains that go for \$6,000, "show-pieces, signed and dated and serviced for life." His toys are painstakingly hand crafted and no two are alike.

Today, high design is going universal, and everyone from Target to Ikea has made intelligent form available to the masses (case in point: Target sells the high-end Offi Tiki Stool, while Ikea's superbly designed, \$50 Gulliver made *Cookie* magazine's list of top high chairs). One look at the DucDuc Alex Crib or Nurseryworks' Duet bunk bed will have you swooning for an adult-sized version; the Jennifer DeLonge Modern Glider and bloombaby Coco Natural Stylewood Baby Loungers more than elevate kid's room seating. Now, babies can marvel at Flensted's fluttering, abstract animal mobiles and when they get older, scrawl on modish Chalk-a-Dots that affix to their walls. Dollhouses are more design-forward than the homes they live in, with the Villa Sibi (which looks straight out of Sarasota-school architecture) inspiring a whole new generation of homebody kids. Stokke's crib, available at Kidz, Etc., reflects in its well integrated, oval-shaped design just how far we've come in thinking about how our kid's lives should be shaped by their things. ☐