

THE

BEST

REPORT

EXPLORING THE WORLD

OF QUALITY

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Champagne In Excelsis

Within the jealously guarded world of the champagne-maker, the epitome of his art is found in the rare declaration called *cuvée spéciale*p.23

Colored Stones

Think gemstones and what comes to mind? Diamonds? Rubies? Emeralds and sapphires, perhaps? If you want the best value in beauty, look a little further. An unusual stone of top quality often carries a price tag that's comparable to, or less than, a well-known stone of only mediocre quality.p.29

READERS CHOICE

A selection of exceptional products discovered in our worldwide research and made available for purchase as a special service to our readers.p. 13

SCHOOLS FOR TENNIS

Can the average dedicated player make intelligent choices among tennis resorts and camps and come home satisfied, even delighted? Certainly. The BEST Report herewith presents a cosmopolitan, carefully assembled list of the finest of the two species.p.26

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THE ART OF SHOOTING

Perhaps no other piece of sporting equipment is as elegant as a high-quality shotgun. Top-of-the-line scatterguns are meticulously made by craftsmen who possess a deft precision equal to that of a master surgeon.

Today, there are many types of shotguns on the market: break-action single shots, pumps, autoloaders or bolt-actions. But for the past century, the pre-eminent shotguns have been double-barrels . . .p.20

TOP TOYS

A worldwide tour of classic, creative, challenging and comforting playthings, plus a list of specialties and toy stores.p. 9

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TOP TOYS

A worldwide tour of classic, creative, challenging and comforting playthings.

by Betsy Storm

A leading toy inventor once said that toys are a child's theater. In play, a child tries out new roles, frolics in Fantasyland and learns about the world by literally trying on many hats. **The mere mention of a few classic toys illustrates this:** a doll teaches a child to nurture others; a hobbyhorse whisks a youngster off to faraway lands; a Teddy Bear supplies constant comfort; and a puzzle encourages its challenger to solve problems.

A toy is what a child believes it is, and it covers the spectrum from improvised to purchased in the world's finest toy emporiums. Educational experts, manufacturers and leading retailers interviewed by **The BEST Report** advise toy buyers to consider these criteria above all: 1) safety, 2) durability, 3) versatility, 4) lasting play value, 5) overall design, 6) use of primary colors.

Most of all, a good toy involves a child and encourages him to act upon it.

With over 150,000 toys on the market, matching the right toy to the right child isn't a simple task. First principle of selection: Each child needs a variety of toys. Some should encourage fantasy and dramatic play (tea sets and puppets) and some should have a more realistic bent (magnetic boards with numbers and letters). If the proper balance is struck and all the playthings provided are of good quality, a child's play will be fun and well rounded.

A caveat: Don't buy every toy marked educational. Toys have always had educational value, but the label "educational toy" has become increasingly common in recent years. Child development specialists believe mental and sensory progression begins at birth, so many parents look for toys that will give their children a head start. That makes sense, as long as a toy shopper buys critically. Some toys billed as educational aren't much more than sophisticated gimmicks or short-lived pastimes that may teach but can't pass the ultimate toy test—they just aren't fun!

Following is a **BEST Report** sampler of toys which, when integrated, will provide the repertoire of fantasy and challenge a child needs as he or she grows to adulthood. We start with one of the basic toys—blocks.

Blocks

Among the best learning toys is one that isn't cleverly promoted or packaged as such—a fine set of unit building blocks. Learning is progressive and ongoing, and unit blocks illustrate this. They invite the creation of all kinds of environments. By playing with blocks over time, children grasp an understanding of numbers, shapes, design and fractions. Based on a modular concept, all sizes are proportioned to a standard unit.

Blocks are one of the best toy values because, depending on the individual child, they may be used for as long as eight years.

A quality set is made of hard maple or birch, since these woods are heavy enough to sustain the tall structures children like to build. When comparing sets, look for a well-balanced mix of shapes. All edges should be sanded. Natural wood is preferred, since colors alone can guide children and limit building patterns.

Childcraft's blocks are among the best available. Prices vary from \$28 to \$80, depending on the number and variety of pieces. The company's catalog, featuring an interesting array of playthings, is available from: *Childcraft, 20 Kilmer Rd., Edison, NJ 08818. (800) 631-5652.* Other superior blocks are made by: *Tucker Toys, P.O. Box 429, North Adams, MA 01247;* and *Habermass Corp., P.O. Box 42, Skaneateles, NY 13152.*

As young builders become more adept, they'll like more intricate construction sets such as those from Lego Systems Inc., available in most toy stores. These interlocking plastic pieces come in various kits with people, boats and other extras.

Homemade Toys

Homemade toys and household objects are an important part of childhood diversions. Water and sand play, dressing up in cast-off clothes and hiding out in tree

houses are among grown-ups' favorite childhood memories. A toy manufacturer has commented he could make a fortune if he could just figure out a way to package a cardboard box.

Workjobs for Parents, by Mary Baratta-Lorton is a book brimming with ideas for "activity-centered learning in the home." It's difficult to locate in many bookstores, but can be ordered direct from: Addison-Wesley Inc., Jacob Wiley, Reading, MA 01867. Enclose \$7.20 plus the appropriate amount of tax.

Huggables

Is there any more revered and remembered childhood symbol than the Teddy Bear?

Many adults cling to their Teddies, honoring them with lifelong family status. Teddy is a father figure, a

confidante, a creature looked to for comfort when the rest of the world seems not to care in the least.

Teddy has a colorful history. Clifford Berryman, a cartoonist for the *Washington Star*, seems to have started it all in 1902 when he sketched a picture of Teddy Roosevelt refusing to shoot a small bear on a hunting trip in Mississippi. Soon after, two toy companies introduced Teddy Bears, and to this day, there remains a question about who actually invented the little creature. The leading contenders are Morris Mitchom, later the founder of the Ideal Toy Corp. of America, and Margarete Steiff of the famed stuffed animal firm. Some 80 years later, it's a moot point. What matters is that **Teddy is the classic among classics in the toy corner.**

Along with Teddy, Pooh Bear is

loved throughout the world. The story goes that the plump, honey-colored bear created by writer A.A.

Milne was a favorite of the wits and intellectuals who congregated at the Algonquin Hotel's Round Table in Manhattan during the 1930s.

Stuffed animals—cat, frog, panda, polar bear, almost any creature from the animal kingdom—serve the same purpose as a Teddy, and every child can use more than one special friend. Look for one that's soft, squeezable and durable. The Toy Manufacturers of America (TMA) requires its members to adhere to stiff safety codes, but be wary of eyes and noses that could come loose and check for sharp wires.

Outdoor Toys

Outdoor playthings include ride-on vehicles, climbing equipment and swing sets, among other items. Most youngsters are ready for a ride-on at about 18 months. All these transporters—from spring rocking horses to low-wheeled vehicles, should be bought with the size and ability of the child in mind. Measure and, if possible, take the child with you to the store. Look for a ride-on made of solid materials and check for sharp edges that could cause injuries. **Among the best available are toys by: Child Guidance; Little Tikes; Fisher-Price; Playskool; Milton-Bradley and Brio.**

Ride-ons are the best means of self-transportation for toddlers; most children don't have the coordination necessary for a tricycle until the age of three.

Indoor and outdoor gym sets are an enduring gift that can be passed from child to child and family to family. Good ones are expensive, but they're an investment. One company that's highly recommended is **Swing Design Inc.** All sets are crafted from Southern yellow pine and are pressure-treated. A 10-year guarantee is given against decay.

The company's best-seller, "The Champion," includes a small gym with ladder sections, climbing net, knotted rope and two platforms. Prices vary from \$440 to \$565, based

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Where to Shop

One of the world's most celebrated toy stores is **FAO Schwarz**. In its 33 stores throughout America Schwarz tantalizes with playthings from more than 20 countries. A visit to the main emporium at 745 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan is like being transported to toy heaven. A visitor may wander into a puppet show, watch toy trains complete their daily rounds and purchase as inexpensive an item as a \$1 yo-yo or as extravagant as a \$12,000 doll castle.

Head buyer Ian McDermott leads the ongoing search for superior toys. The pinnacle of the 1982 Christmas catalog exemplifies his quest: A Laredo jeep that travels at 7 mph and features twin electric motors, FM radio and real bumpers. Junior motorists can drive the \$2,195 vehicle for three hours, then stop overnight for recharging.

When Neiman-Marcus decided to dazzle customers with its impressive array of unusual merchandise, it didn't forget the younger set. Store buyers scout London, Nuremberg, Wembley, New York, Dallas and other locales to coordinate an exquisite toy collection, and the store's personalized service is a help in making selections.

Some examples of special children's toys currently offered by

Neiman-Marcus, include: a pedal-operated sulky cart and horse (\$750); a complete art box with crayons, paints, pastels, palette and easel (\$45); a complete croquet set for children (\$48); a three-foot tall hand-painted Pinocchio with jointed arms (\$300); a Ducky Rocker, a plush acrylic rocking mallard duck attached to a metal frame (\$750), and of course, the store's version of a traditional stuffed animal: Super Teddy, a three-foot tall bear made of mohair (\$750).

Some other U.S. shops worth investigating are:

- Toy Gallery stores in Chicago
- The Carousel Shop, Edmond, OK
- The Hobby Horse, St. Joseph, MI
- TLC Toys, Whitefish Bay, WI
- The Toy Safari, Atlanta, GA
- Wayne Toytown and House of Happy Things in Philadelphia.
- Thinker Toys, Carmel, CA
- The Kids' Connection, West Lebanon, NH.

Outside of the United States, Schwarz's McDermott recommends **Hamley's in London (200 Regent St.)** **Le Naim Bleu (408 Rue St. Honore)** in Paris and the toy departments of most any Japanese department stores. In Germany, the **Obletter** chain is owned by Franz Carl Weber, parent company of FAO Schwarz; its Swiss counterpart is Weber.

All-American Sports Equipment

Be it by foot, basket or base, balls are the crucial element in America's three favorite sporting pastimes. Not any ball will do. So **The BEST Report** canvassed the pros, coaches and sports administrators to find out what equipment is best. Here are the results of our survey.

Football

The finest prolate spheroid made is the one under the pile-up at every National Football League contest. Wilson's "Official NFL Game Ball" bears Commissioner Pete Rozelle's signature and a \$40 price tag.

Don't buy it for any son not old enough to vote. The NFL ball swells just enough at the grip (where the stripes normally are) to provide better handling for man-size pro hands. In lesser hands, the ball feels like a watermelon.

Wilson's answer for younger players—**The Duke**. This full grain leather alternative lists for about a dozen dollars less than the NFL ball. All that's different are the grade of lacing and the thinner ends. The slimmer Duke perfectly fits the average young adult hand and takes flight like an arrow. An optic orange Duke gives one more chance to catch a touchdown as mid-winter day turns to night and the game goes on.

For still smaller footballers, Wilson markets Duke junior, Youth (ages 12-14) and Junior (9-11) models. The ages can only be approximate since children vary so much in growth. Don't buy a larger ball expecting a boy to grow into it. The months or years of frustration trying to throw spirals with too big a ball can turn a potential quarterback into a lineman.

Basketball

Basketballs come in three basic materials: leather, synthetic leather (more accurately "synthetic non-

leather") and rubber. First, let's dismiss the least. Rubber endures. It's also cheap, about \$10. But rubber is the choice only if the ball is more likely to be used for kickball than basketball! **No self-respecting hoopster of any age will play with a "ball that bounces like rubber."**

At the opposite extreme, try leather—but only indoors. Asphalt or cement will chew up an \$80 NBA ball in hours. Full grain leather is designed to give a ball a true bounce and consistent feel on polished wood floors indoors. This season the NBA chooses the **Wilson B1215**, in orange color rather than brown. The NCAA Finals uses the **Spalding TF100**, a model not available to consumers. Balls are generally provided for recreational and league play indoors, so buying a leather ball doesn't make sense for the pre-college age player.

What makes sense is buying the all-purpose indoor/outdoor ball covered in Clarino, a Japanese manufactured polyvinylchloride. The **MacGregor X-6000** surpasses the competition because its synthetic covering feels and plays amazingly like leather.

The MacGregor IX-6000 (\$35) wins on two points: it dribbles and

rebounds with a consistently true, soft bounce; it also feels most like the leather ball a youngster will use in league competition and so makes the transition easier from pick-up to league play.

Spalding aggressively markets a synthetic Larry Bird signature model for about \$20. It's a "personal ball"—the owner gets used to it and loves it; others pick it up for the first time and find it rubbery. Missed shots tend to bound unnaturally high and long off the rim.

Grammarians aside, there are degrees of roundness when it comes to basketballs. Try spinning a prospective purchase on your finger (or ask the store clerk to do it). A round ball will spin like a top. An out-of-balance ball will wobble and fall off the finger quickly.

One more tip about basketball: always buy the standard 30-inch ball, not the 28-inch junior size. Similarly, avoid the eight-foot baskets. Basketball relies on hand-eye-space coordination evolved over years of play, so play should start as early as possible with regulation equipment.

Baseball

You can't play the game without one, but otherwise the baseball isn't crucial.

The correct bat and glove can make or break the Little League or pro; the ball won't. Rawlings sells the cowhide ball used in the National and American leagues for \$7.50. MacGregor's comparable "97" model goes for \$6. Wilson opts for a horsehide cover for greater durability, but only cowhide balls meet pro specifications. Balls stamped "Little League" cost about \$4 and stand up to any battering a 12-year-old can give them.

When ball meets bat, the ball actually compresses or wraps around the bat and springs off. How far the ball goes into the field depends on only two factors: bat weight and speed of swing.

Worth, Easton and Hillerich & Bradsby make the bats kids swing most. Tradition, firmly rooted in

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Sports Gifts

Where can you buy a deck of Cowboys playing cards? Or a Lakers mug. Or a Phillies cap? Each pro sport licenses products which can legally sport the names and colors of all the teams. A Pittsburgh family transplanted to Los Angeles can still order a Steelers pennant, scarf, hat, bicycle, jeans, pajamas and much more. The items claim no more than souvenir-product quality. But as a stocking-stuffer or unusual gift, they're perfect for the sports crazy son or daughter.

Here are the numbers to call for a catalogue or ordering information: NFL (212) 838-0660; NBA—(212) 826-7000; Pro Baseball—(212) 484-6060. Ask for the "licensed products" office.

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on how many swings (from one to four) accompany the set. A slide (\$85) and attachable clubhouse (\$230) can enlarge the play area. More than 600 retailers nationwide carry Swing Design's line. For a catalog: *Swing Design, Inc., 6 Tripp St., Framingham, MA 01701*. Upon request, they'll send a list of dealers in your area.

A playdome based on Buckminster Fuller's engineering concept is another apparatus that can be used by several children simultaneously. Throw a sheet over it and it transforms into a tent or playhouse. The height is 51", base diameter 96". The playdome is available from Childcraft, among other companies, and retails for about \$100.

Inexpensive Toys

This is a plentiful and diverse category. Paint sets, crayons, washable markers, modeling clay, finger puppets, stickers, yo-yos and much, much more is affordable to everyone. For children who enjoy crafts the newest thing is safety scissors with stainless steel blades and plastic safety covers. They are rust-proof and dishwasher-safe. At \$1.95, these are a small but thoughtful gift. Another inexpensive indoor favorite is the portable hopscotch mat. Available at many toy stores, it sells for about \$5 and is perfect for a rainy day.

"Let's Pretend" Toys

The beauty of these is their range—a play cash register, jetport or finger puppets are all fun fantasy-world items. There's no limit here, and the category is too large to detail. The selection of a let's pretend toy offers a good opportunity to match a toy to a child's present interest or hobby. A kitchen set is fun for the child who wants to prepare meals for a family of dolls, while a play farm with animals and tractors captures the interest of a budding animal lover.

Dolls

A doll to love is one of the most basic toys. Crib-age children require soft, washable dolls sturdy

enough to withstand rough handling. Toddlers and older children also like dolls that can be stuck in a pocket. No matter what the material, select one that's bright and interesting in appearance. There are endless brand names available, but a few to look for are: Fisher-Price, Horsman, Gabriel, and Knickerbocker. Select clothes with Velcro tape closures, so a small child can dress a doll without the frustration of buttons and snaps.

On the luxury level, Madame Alexander dolls are among the most exquisite. The 87-year-old Madame Alexander still oversees design of the

International Specialties

Germany shines in many categories, but is probably best-known for its Steiff stuffed animals. These young-set status symbols are praised for their styling, fillings, craftsmanship and lifelike qualities—the animal fur looks and feels like the real thing. Prices start at about \$25 and the teenagerie is found at better toy and department stores. For a catalog send \$1 to: *Steiff, 1107 Broadway, New York, NY 10010*.

From Sweden look for the name Brio, makers of wooden pre-school toys from doll cradles to stacking toys. These beechwood and birch playthings are hand painted with several layers of non-toxic, high gloss paint in primary colors. Pull toys are in the \$10-\$25 range, and the least expensive railway set is about \$21. For a free catalog: *Brio Scandinavia Corp., 6531 N. Sidney Pl., Milwaukee, WI*.

England is known for Britain's (brand name) model figures of toy soldiers and farm animals. The beautiful Victory puzzles, still handmade with jig and saw, are also English. They sell for \$5-\$100 depending on coloration and degree of difficulty.

Italy, a major toy producer, joins France in turning out some of the world's most beautiful dolls. A typical Italian Sebino doll is about \$55, and the average price of France's Corolle is about \$85. They are available from FAO Schwarz.

Japan excels in magic tricks. The Tenyo line's creations cost as much as \$15 per trick.

company line, which includes dolls for all ages. International, historical and storyland dolls are among the line of 100-plus dolls. Brocade, velvet and Chantilly Lace are among the fabrics used for costumes. Ranging from about \$22 to \$150, these dolls often sell out quickly, but look for them at better toy and department stores. For a catalog send \$3 to: *Doll Royale, 330 S. Pickett St., Alexandria, VA 22304*.

Fashion Dolls

As girls grow out of the baby and pocket-doll stage, many graduate to more grown-up variations on the theme, the best-known of whom is Barbie. After 30 years and much controversy over her value, Barbie continues to thrive and be continually updated. Depending on their condition and version, original Barbies are valued at anywhere from \$40 to \$800. Undoubtedly, Barbie is a classic. The main criticism she receives is summed up by a 30-year observer of the toy scene: "If a little girl grows up thinking she has to be beautiful and have a terrific figure, what does that say about our society?"

Selection Savvy

One of the most important guidelines is, select a toy that's age-appropriate. Probably the most common mistake made is to choose a toy that's too advanced for a child. The reason: everyone likes to believe his grandson, niece or whoever, is brighter than most other kids that age. A toy that's too grown-up will only be a source of frustration and find its way—at least for a while—to a closet shelf. Keep in mind the child's skill level. At the other end of the scale, pick a plaything that's sufficiently interesting and will not bore a child.

Finally, all the experts advise toy consumers not to be swayed by the power of television toy advertising. Parents shouldn't be talked into purchasing a toy just because kids say they want it. Go to the toystore and check out the toy on its own merits. If it isn't satisfactory, explain your reason for rejecting it. B