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Give it up:

Educational gifts for the holidays and beyond

Educational Gifts

By Kris Collingridge

All play is educational for kids. Play develops children's imaginations and social skills and helps them understand how the world works long before the word "science" becomes part of their vocabulary. And as any parent has learned, even a stick or a cardboard box will do as a toy -- no special equipment required.

Still, there's no denying that when it comes to specific cognitive skills, some toys are better teaching tools than others. Number sense, language arts, logic, chemistry, natural history...there's a whole world of toys out there designed to develop a child's knowledge in a certain area while masquerading as nothing but fun.

For our third annual educational gift guide, we asked local toy stores to tell us what they're excited about this year. They picked older favorites and exciting new toys on the market. Some of their picks are specifically academic, but boring? Dry? Dull? Nah. Kids will seek out these toys long after the holiday gift wrap has been put in the recycling bin.

Another option to consider as an educational gift is to buy a special child in your life a membership to a local museum (listed online at www.parentmap.com/giftguide). Memberships are waste-free, can be enjoyed year-round, and area residents have a rich variety of venues to choose from.

All of the picks mentioned can be found at the stores that suggested them (store name listed in parentheses; see sidebar for addresses and phone numbers), but we've also included manufacturer's information so you can inquire about them elsewhere.

Infants/Preschoolers

Eric Carle Polar Bear Touch & Stack Blocks [Small World Toys, 18 months and up, \$24.99]. This set of 10 colorful nesting blocks introduces young children to numbers, colors and the simple verbs that can be used to describe different animals from Carle's Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear? book, while stimulating kids' tactile senses. Carle toys are especially apt this year, as the child-friendly "The Art of Eric Carle" is on view at the Tacoma Art Museum through Jan. 21, 2007. (Teaching Toys and Books)

Mixed-up Chameleon Maze Board [Small World Toys, ages 3 and up, \$24.99]. This Carle-based wooden maze teaches color matching by challenging kids to manipulate colored metal balls, using a magnetic wand, into the correct spot on the chameleon's multi-colored body. (Teaching Toys and Books)

ElectroWiz Science Kits [Norman & Globus, ages 4-6, \$19.99] Most science kits tend to be aimed at older children. These three highly recommended kits -- on magnetism, electricity and chemistry -- are written with younger children in mind. Each kit comes with activities, materials and supplies, and includes a book with clear graphics that make it accessible to even pre-readers. (Science, Art and More)

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Elementary ages/Tweens

Cogno. [DoubleStar, LLC, ages 7-adult, \$29.99] This award-winning board game was developed by a group of scientists, many of them from NASA, who were concerned at the lack of science literacy shown by elementary school kids. The space-based game boasts a cast of appealing alien characters, but the science kids learn as they play is the real thing. Players answer trivia questions as they travel from planet to planet, and can consult the "Book of Y" for an explanation of the science behind each correct answer. (Teaching Toys)

Blokus Trigon. [Educational Insights, ages 5 and up, \$33] A hexagonal board adds extra challenge to newest twist on the popular Blokus strategy game. Kids see how geometrical shapes fit together and learn to think ahead to block fellow players' moves. The rules are simple enough for kindergarteners yet play can become increasingly complex as kids master strategic thinking. (White Horse Toys)

Do Art kits. [Creativity for Kids, ages 9 and up, \$15] Creativity for Kids, part of art supply giant Faber-Castell USA, offers several art kits that feature instructions and supplies of very good quality, including artist's canvas, wooden articulated models and textured papers. Kids learn art skills in a format that's more open-ended than some arts and crafts kits, which allows them to exercise real creativity as they work. The series includes "Faces and Features," "Drawing Power," "Say it with Flowers" and "Have You Scene It?" (Teaching Toys)

ElementO. [Lewis Educational Games, ages 10 and up, \$34.95] Kids learn about the periodic table of the elements in this Monopoly-like game, in which elements are traded instead of properties, using Neutrons and Proton Certificates instead of cash. ElementO cards demonstrate how the elements fit into daily life. (Science, Art and More)

Physics Solar Workshop. [Thames & Kosmos, ages 8 and up, \$59.99] One of the newest additions to Thames & Kosmos' popular line of science kits focuses on solar energy. The kit comes with a solar panel that can be used to make models -- built by kids -- run using solar energy. A 64-page booklet comes with the kit to enhance kids' understanding of the physics of solar cells, and the way that solar energy can be used to run motors. (Teaching Toys)

Microcontroller. [Thames & Kosmos, ages 12 and up, \$149.99] Another addition to the line, released this year, allows kids to put together basic computer circuits and control lights, buzzers and displays. Kids can also learn to write programs to control the devices they build. The kit includes a detailed, 100-page experiment guide. (Science, Art and More)

Our picks

WonderLetters. [WonderChess, LLC, ages 6 and up, \$24.99. Buy online or find retailers at www.wonderchess.com] Kids practice their literacy skills in this crossword game developed by a local company. "WonderLetters," a unique and small-child-friendly feature of the game, are pieces that can be filled with small prizes for the player who captures them.

Around the World. [Around the World, LLC, ages 8 and up, \$26.99. Available at www.aroundtheworldgames.com] With colorful, bold graphics, "Around the World" introduces kids to global geography, people, cultures and languages. As they travel around the game board, players must answer questions in each of those categories to fill up their Global Scorecard and win the game.

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Yo! I Know -- Brain Building Quizzes. [World Almanac Books, ages 7-14, \$9.99]
The first in an upcoming series of quiz books for kids -- offered by the folks who publish the top-selling "The World Almanac for Kids" -- teases kids' brains with questions about history, sports, weather, space, language and a host of other topics. The slender, spiral-bound book is a good size for travel, and its interactive format and graphics-rich layout is designed to appeal to elementary-age kids.

Up on Denali: Alaska's Wild Mountain. [Sasquatch Books, ages 6-10, \$16.95]
Layered, richly detailed illustrations of flora and fauna illuminate a study of Alaska's largest mountain, Denali, by Alaskan author/illustrator duo Shelley Gill and Shannon Cartwright. The book is suitable for kids in a broad age range, as part of the text can be read as a story for younger kids, while older kids can delve into more complex information. Younger children will also enjoy naming the dozens of animals depicted on almost every page, or looking for the raven that appears -- in one form or another -- throughout the book.

Give the gift of membership

Science/Animals

- **Burke Museum of Natural History.** A natural for budding fossil hunters and dino bone enthusiasts. 206-616-6057, www.washington.edu/burkemuseum
- **Odyssey Maritime Discovery Center.** Find out all about our region's connection to maritime industries via displays, exhibits and hands-on activities. 206-374-4000, www.ody.org
- **Pacific Science Center.** Permanent and special science exhibits, plus planetarium, IMAX films and tots' play area. 206-443-2924, www.pacsci.org
- **Seattle Aquarium.** View tropical and Pacific Northwest fish and marine mammals, birds and invertebrates. 206-386-4300, www.seattleaquarium.org
- **Woodland Park Zoo.** The zoo's latest addition, Zoomazium, is an indoor playspace with a natural history component. 206-615-1024, www.zoo.org

Children's museums

- **Children's Museum Seattle.** Activities include a recently updated area for tots, a play restaurant and theater, plus artist-led arts and crafts and special exhibitions. 206-441-1768, www.thechildrensmuseum.org
- **Imagine Children's Museum,** Everett. 425-258-1006, www.imaginecm.org
- **Tacoma Children's Museum.** 253-627-6031, www.childrensmuseumoftacoma.org
- **KidsQuest Children's Museum,** Bellevue. 425-637-8100, www.kidsquestmuseum.org
- **Hands On Children's Museum,** Olympia. 360-956-0818, www.hocm.org

Our gift gurus

- **Teaching Toys and Books**
2624 N. Proctor St., Tacoma
253-759-9853
- **Science Art and More**

6417 Roosevelt Way N.E., Seattle

206- 524-3795

www.scienceartandmore.com

- **White Horse Toys**

Gilman Village

317 N.W. Gilman Blvd., Ste. 13, Issaquah

425-391-1498

www.whitehorsetoys.com

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