10 (Non-Tech) Holiday Gift Ideas to Promote Kids' Language, Learning

November 29, 2016 By Diane Paul and Adena Dacy

The holiday shopping season is upon us and wish lists from children of all ages likely include tablets, MP3 players, headphones and other technology gifts. But audiologists and speech-language pathologists should take advantage of this time to help clients, family and friends find a technology balance and spread awareness about high-quality off-line activities, too. *Of course, children who use low- and high-tech augmentative and alternative communication devices (AAC) should continue to use them at all times—and in an interactive way.*

The holidays provide an ideal opportunity to get back to the basics in childhood play and use them to foster communication and social interaction. Enjoy these ideas for low(er)-tech holiday gifts to do just that.

1. **Traditional toys**, according to numerous studies, remain superior to electronic toys for children's language development. For example, when toys talk, parents talk less—and subsequently, kids vocalize less. Blocks, dolls, musical instruments, cars/trains, shape-sorters and other low-tech toys get kids—and parents!—talking, singing, playing and interacting. These all help build foundational communication skills.
2. **Books** always make excellent presents, and sharing the joy of reading is a lifelong gift. For infants and toddlers, books with textures inviting touch are ideal, as are colorful board and picture books. For kids just learning how to read, give books appropriate to their skill level to facilitate emerging literacy. For older children, find engaging chapter books and book series. Family members can take turns reading chapters aloud. This may be the start of a family book club.
3. **Board, card and conversation-based question games** can be enjoyed together as a family and get everyone talking and laughing. There are games for all age ranges. And what better time of year than winter to begin family game nights for building conversation, connections—and fun!
4. **Costumes and other dress-up accessories** allow kids to use their imaginations and foster creativity. Children's language skills expand as they make up dialogues, tell stories and take turns.

5. **Building toys, blocks and crafts** yield fun indoor activities to occupy kids on cold days. They also help hone fine motor skills for all ages. For young children, motor skills are closely linked to language development.
6. **Outdoor toys** such as balls, sleds, jump ropes and yard games encourage running, jumping, sports and other active play. Physical activity and movement prime children for learning.
7. **Puzzles**—ranging from basic options for young children to complex types the whole family can attempt as a team—spur conversation while building analytical, problem-solving and other skills.
8. **Cooking supplies** work as fun gifts for children of almost any age. Involving young kids in making and trying new foods offers a wealth of opportunity for conversation and language-building, including likes/dislikes, tastes, textures, and more. For older kids, cooking together sets the scene for family bonding. Following recipes also helps improve reading and comprehension skills, planning, organization, sequencing, and following directions.
9. **Crayons, colored pencils, coloring books** and other writing supplies are not only child-approved, but also help children build literacy skills.
10. **Tickets to child-friendly shows**, sporting events or other performances allow parents and kids to enjoy special activities together. These outings promote family interaction, conversation and bonding. In addition, memberships to local zoos, museums or aquariums make great gifts for entire families to enjoy.

Technology gifts likely will remain on many gift lists, but use holiday gift-giving to encourage parents to mix it up when shopping. When they do buy those tech items for their kids, remind parents to lay out some ground rules for using the devices, make a family media plan, and strive to use technology interactively with kids when possible.