



MY FAVOURITE THINGS



Your 2014 go-to guide for the hottest toys and games for the little ones from birth to Grade R. By creative parenting expert and toy trend analyst, Nikki Bush



THE BABY YEARS (AGE 0-1)



The first year of life is such a miracle as your baby uncurls from the foetal position to greet the world and start his great adventure of multisensory exploration. In just 12 months, watch with wonder as your baby learns how to push up on his arms to raise his head and look around, roll over, sit, crawl, stand, and even take his first tentative steps. Getting the balance right between stimulating your baby and helping him to feel safe and secure, is the challenge. A good routine that includes regular times to sleep, eat and play, as well as lots of gentle, regular interaction with you, is essential to having a contented baby.



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1 Little Tikes Bop the Top, R150, Babies R Us and large retailers

If you want to grab a baby's attention while he's sitting, why not stack the cups on top of the turtle? Press down on the top cup to watch the turtle shake them all off! This is a fun, hand-eye co-ordination game full of surprises!



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2 Tomy Tap 'n Toddler Elephant, R269.99, large retailers

Tap on the elephant's head and watch him spin off. This is a good way to get your baby on the move by crawling. Fascination is an important part of holding a baby's very short attention span for a few more minutes here and there. Little ones only have about a minute-and-a-half's concentration for every year of their life, and by the age of six, they need to be able to concentrate in class for 20 minutes at a time. You can help them get there through play.

3 O-Ball Anyway Stacker, R109, Baby City and large retailers

These colourful, soft, stackable pieces fit together in any order. They're perfect for little hands to grasp and the uniquely shaped pieces let baby stack without requiring a post or base. They will spend more time knocking them down, but when you build the tower for them, remember that they're watching you and learning how. Talk while you build, naming the colours as you go. We talk our children clever.



4 B.Toys A-Maize Rain Rush, R300, independent toy stores

Fascinate your baby with this extra-large wooden rain stick and use it to encourage crawling by rolling it along the floor when your baby's sitting. The sound of the wooden balls dropping through the holes and rolling around is quite different to the higher pitched sounds that baby toys usually make.

5 Tiny Love Woodlands Pram Arch, R349, available at Baby City or large retailers

I love convenience and multi-purpose items, because they provide added value. The Tiny Love Woodlands Pram Arch can be used as an arch above baby or straightened across the pram. It comes with a universal clip, making it suitable for any pram, and has three sensory clip-on toys. Simply roll it up when not in use.

6 Viga Pull-a-long Caterpillar, R179, independent stores

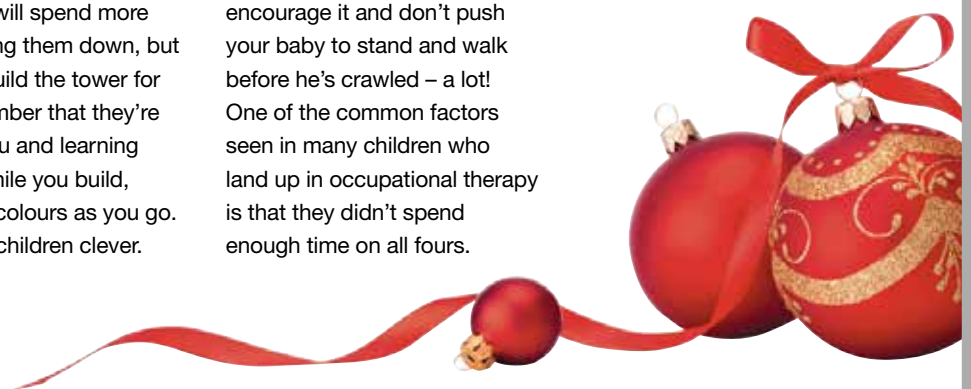
This colourful pull-a-long caterpillar is lovely for the toddling child. Or you can pull it along in front of a crawling baby. The more a baby crawls, the more he's integrating both sides of his brain. Make sure you encourage it and don't push your baby to stand and walk before he's crawled – a lot! One of the common factors seen in many children who land up in occupational therapy is that they didn't spend enough time on all fours.

7 Tiny Love Developlace, R899.99, available at Baby City or large retailers

The Tiny Love Developlace is a real win, because it has features that will extend its use into the early toddler years, and serves as an activity gym, tummy time mat and crawling tunnel, as well as an activity wall for toddlers, with toys that adjust to baby's development (includes no less than 11 activities!) Its beautiful and colourful nature theme with bold smiling animals will engage your baby in developmentally appropriate gross motor activities and, when sitting, he will love the posting hole and peek-a-boo.

8 Bright Starts Having a Ball 3 – 1 Step & Ride on Lion, R599, Baby City

This sturdy walker will not only support your child's walking efforts, but his movement will activate the balls to spin around the lion's mane, turning this into an action-reaction toy as well. Children are encouraged to learn and explore their world when they discover that they can make things happen. Master of the Universe, here I come!



**TODDLERS
1-2 YEARS**

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ow your baby is on the move and is spending more time sitting and standing. Rather than placing your toddler in front of a screen, you need to encourage movement and exploration – it's how they learn best. Don't expect your child to be able to concentrate for more than a minute or two on any activity if he's playing alone; however, if you get involved, you'll be able to keep him focussed for 10 minutes or more. Talk to your child when you're playing – it's how children acquire vocabulary even though they're not yet able to speak back in words. These games, e.g. 'put it in and take it out', 'drop it and mommy will pick it up', 'peek-a-boo' and knocking down constructions you've built, are favourites at this stage.



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1 Leap Frog Sing & Play Farm, R350, Toyzone and large retailers

This take-along barnyard is great when you're on the move, as there's nothing that can get lost, which is always a bonus! Your child can push buttons, turn keys, flip a light switch on and off, play peek-a-boo, learn his ABCs as well as animal sounds and more. There are five interactive play areas and 13 adorable animal friends to discover. It's a perfect early problem-solving game for little fingers and big minds.

2 Little Tikes Discover Sounds® Shape, Sort & Scatter, R320, Baby City and large retailers

This is a shape sorter with sounds and three modes of play to grow with your child. Post the shapes into the matching holes, learn about colour, and race against the clock before the shapes drop out and scatter. Shape sorters are essential for developing pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-maths skills that come with problem solving, spatial planning and hand-eye co-ordination.

3 Melissa & Doug Vacuum Playset, R390, independent toy stores

A wooden vacuum cleaner that 'sucks' up wooden food items when pushed over them, makes for a great fantasy play item. Little children love to imitate their parents or caregivers in doing the chores, and they also love to make things disappear. This hits both those buttons.

4 Poke-a-dot Books, R170, independent stores (not pictured)

Children love popping bubble wrap between their fingers, and these books have incorporated a similar concept, which is fantastic for developing fine motor control and hand-eye co-ordination. Choose from the following beautifully illustrated titles: *Who's in the Ocean?* *Old McDonald's Farm*, *10 Little Monkeys*, and *What's Your Favourite Colour?*

5 Tomy Poppin' Penguin Island, R269.99, Baby City and large retailers

Bath time is fun time, and it's wonderful for stimulating a sense of touch through the skin, which is why your little one generally finds it so soothing. Poppin' Penguin Island will provide big laughs in the bath. Colour-match the water-squirting penguins on their floating, musical iceberg, and be surprised when they launch themselves in the air.

6 Chillafish Bunzi 2 – 1 Balance Bike, R998, Cajees & Cyclelab

This sturdy little balance bike allows your child to move gradually from three wheels to two (and back again, if need be), with no need for tools – just a quick turn of a knob. There's a small storage space under the seat for little goodies, and anti-skid TPE wheels allow for smooth riding both indoors and out. It's sturdy, durable and adjustable, to grow with your child.

7 Fisher Price Record Player, R549.99, Toys R Us and large retailers

Now this is a walk down memory lane for those parents old enough to remember. This retro record player from 1971 features 10 songs on five records, which are stored conveniently inside the record player. A carrying handle enables your child to walk around while playing music, too. This is a real classic that has great entertainment value.

8 Bright Starts, Pop & Roll Roadster, R549, Toyzone and large retailers

This little ride-on will capture your child's imagination in an instant. Post balls into the steering wheel and watch them pop and bounce around inside the bonnet. Pull the gear lever and the balls shoot out from the bonnet in front of the roadster. Press buttons to activate the hooter and make engine sounds, and the ball drop and gear shift to activate silly sounds. Riding has never been such fun!

9 Djeco Crockenvol, R350, independent stores

Every child loves action-reaction toys at this stage, and this is a form of hammer ball, only you don't lose the balls! Your child gets to hammer the keys, making the encased balls jump. What fun! And it's great for hand-eye co-ordination, too. To begin with, they'll hammer wildly from their shoulder, but gradually they'll gain more control and will begin to use only their hand.



PRESCHOOLERS 3-4 YEARS

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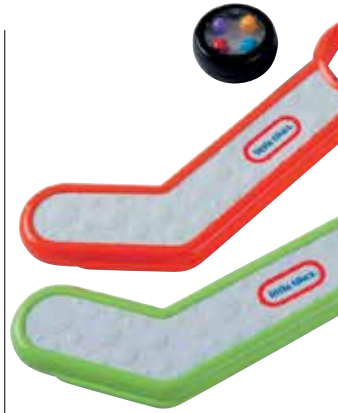
hildren at this age can recognise shapes and colours, they're starting to count, and can show their age by holding up the appropriate number of fingers. They're learning to cut, colour, draw, thread, build puzzles and construct things. First board games and simple matching and association games provide a good challenge. Their vocabulary grows daily and they're continually asking 'why?' Their gross and fine motor co-ordination develops in leaps and bounds, and they can now be more accurate and purposeful with ball games.



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1 Djeco, Primo puzzles, R150, independent stores (not pictured)

Puzzles are as essential as books to a child's development, with well over 18 perceptual skills stimulated, from problem-solving to spatial planning, fine-motor control, hand-eye co-ordination, matching, sorting and more. These gorgeous Primo puzzles are too beautiful not to want to build. Themes include cats, bears, a jungle, and more. They range from four to 15 pieces and come with three or four puzzles in a box.

2 Safari Ltd Toobs Miniatures, R180+, independent toy stores

Exquisitely crafted miniature figurines (4 - 7.5cm in size) for children, that will delight every interest, from 'In the Water', 'In the Sky', and 'Knights and Dragons', to glow-in-the-dark dragons, fairies, zoo babies, monkeys and apes, penguins, and dozens more themes. They're packed in convenient tubes containing six to 24 characters, depending on the size Toob you purchase.

3 Djeco Géant Puzzles, R230, independent stores

This is a personal favourite of mine – six tricky farm puzzles that are beautifully illustrated. Build the 9-, 12- and 15-piece puzzles separately and then put them on top of each other from biggest at the bottom to smallest at the top. Children need to learn how to sort items into a sequence according to various attributes, including size.

4 Orchard Catch & Count, R160, independent toy stores

'1, 2, 3, 4, 5, can you catch a fish alive?' This rhyme has been turned into a fun counting game with a twist. Spin the octopus spinner to see how many fish you can catch; but if you pick up a shark, you have to put all your fish back! The game encourages counting, number recognition and turn-taking.

5 Little Tikes Clearly sports hockey/baseball, R350, Toys R Us

These sturdy, see-through pieces of sporting equipment are well-designed to store the balls inside, eliminating losses and adding to the fun. The body is the architect of the brain, and gross motor exercises such as hitting and kicking balls, is essential for developing spatial planning skills, and to stimulate the proprioceptive skills which send signals to the brain via the muscles and joints. These give your child information about how to judge speed, space, force and distance.

6 No Spill Bubbles, R45, www.toytalk.co.za

The best invention ever – bubbles that children can't spill! These are most unusual and come all the way from France. Once the bubble mixture is finished, you can use any cheap bubbles you can find. Blowing is the foundation for the 'p' and 'b' sounds, which are the only letters that require the use of the diaphragm. Blowing also exercises the lips to form the letter 'o'.

7 Viga Elephant Balancing Game, R210, Helderberg Toys

Colour-matching and fine motor co-ordination are the name of the game here. With this all-wooden game, roll the colour dice and find a matching cylinder. Now balance it on the elephant base. Play moves from player to player until someone topples the pile of cylinders that have been stacked. Children learn to have fun while taking turns and following simple rules.

8 Peacable Kingdom Sunny Pond Day, R300, independent stores

This is a fabulous first board game in which players move around the board collecting the four pieces that belong to their own colour-coded puzzle. Everyone works together because each player must have built his/her puzzle before all the rain drops are on the board. They can help each other, which eliminates stress, promotes team work, and builds self-confidence. It's a quick 10-minute game that stimulates the skill of colour-matching.

The importance of games and toys for children cannot be underestimated, as play is the language of childhood. A child needs toys to entertain, to stimulate, and to educate him/herself. You, as a parent, need toys and games to use as bridge builders to building your relationship with your child. Play is the best way to connect with your child and to teach almost anything with as little stress as possible. So go and play and see your child blossom and grow in every way.



**PRESCHOOL
4-5 YEARS**



Children in this age group are really interested in how things work. They understand winning and losing, and love to show how they've mastered skills. They're able to match colours, shapes and numbers, and combine them, thanks to increased memory and problem-solving ability. So they need games with more complexity combined with lots of fun. Fantasy play is still very important, and playdates begin in earnest. Provide them with creative media and don't be afraid of messy play. Keep things as real as possible, rather than replacing play with screen-based entertainment, which provide insufficient sensory input for a child who's trying to understand his world. Also, encourage gross and fine motor movement.



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1 Leap Frog LeapTV™, R2199 (TV console), R299 (games), Toyzone

This video gaming system comes with educator-approved video games and videos that educate, entertain and encourage kids to keep active. The console changes from a motion controller to an LED pointer controller and is designed especially for kids. The LeapTV™ System has a motion-sensing camera that puts your child right in the game.

4 Leap Frog Leap Band, R499, Toys R Us and large retailers (not pictured)

This is the first wearable activity tracker for kids to get active and learn, while having fun. This wristband combines playful activities that require movement to win points with which to acquire virtual pets. It encourages kids to be active and make healthy choices by participating in 50 activities and challenges. Includes a free downloadable companion app, called the Petathlon Games.



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2 Learning Resources Mini Muffin Match Up, R350, www.thetoycupboard.co.za

Kids learn about colour and numbers, while stimulating fine motor skills. Pop the colour, number or combination cards into the muffin pan. Drop the muffin counters into the matching cups. A colour and a number dice is included, as well as an activity guide.

5 Brain Box Once Upon a Time, R189, independent stores

This game offers a fun way to develop comprehension skills. Looking at a nursery rhyme picture for details, and answering questions, involves visual memory. It can be played slowly with a young child, and fast with older kids. Comes with cards, dice and a timer.



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3 Learning Resources Pancake Pile-Up, R350, independent stores, www.thetoycupboard.co.za

This fun gross motor matching game will have you racing up and down, balancing plastic pancakes on your pancake flipper and piling them up in the correct order. There are 10 pancakes in five delicious flavours.

6 Thomas, Take & Play Around the Rails with Thomas, R199, Toys R Us and large retailers

A portable railway track that opens up to over 60cm of plastic track with play pieces that can be stored in the case. It includes a durable die-cast Thomas Take-n-Play engine. It's easy to set up and can be taken anywhere. **I&I**



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Go to www.livingandloving.co.za and click on 'Child' then 'Products' for Nikki's pick of top Grade R toys.

For more information on these toys, visit www.nikkibush.com or www.toytalk.co.za

