

Gift Guide: Techie kids' toys for every age group

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In this product image provided by Disney Co., the Ultimate Buzz Lightyear is displayed. (AP Photo/Disney Co.)

(AP) -- While stores still sell a plethora of good old-fashioned toys such as board games, action figures and stuffed animals, electronic ones aren't exactly a niche category anymore either.

And fortunately for parents, the selection has grown beyond video games and noisy radio-controlled cars to include educational e-readers, musical instruments and interactive robots.

Whatever your kid's age or personality, here's a short list of toys we think are worthwhile.

For the gamer:

Today's children probably won't remember Simon, the game in which players memorize an increasingly complex pattern of flashing red, green, yellow and blue lights.

Mattel Inc.'s electronic [memory game](#) Loopz (\$30, ages 7 and up) is a loose remake of the classic. It invites players to follow music and light cues and then wave their hands over one of four areas to replicate the pattern - the modern-day equivalent of smacking a color-coded button.

Wordy kids will enjoy Hasbro Inc.'s Scrabble Flash (\$30, ages 8 and up), an electronic game that actually resembles Boggle more than it does Scrabble. The game includes five cubes with digital screens, each of which displays a letter. Players rearrange the cubes, clicking them together to form as many words as they can in the allotted time.

For the spy:

Children have long pretended to be playground secret agents, but over time their spy tools have grown more sophisticated. Jakks Pacific Inc.'s SpyNet Secret Mission Video Watch (\$50, ages 8 and up) records audio, video and photos. Budding spies can play back video on the watch's 1.4-inch screen or upload it to the family [computer](#).

The company also sells the Net Flex Snake Camera (\$30), which sits in one place and beams live video of passersby to the spy watch. Other accessories include night vision binoculars (\$50) and a recording pen (\$20).

And while radio-controlled cars make for noisy gifts, Wild Planet's Spy Video Trakr (\$130) records audio and video and is decidedly cool.

Even Barbie can go into stealth mode. Mattel's Video Girl Barbie (\$50, ages 6 and up) has a hidden camera that records movies from Barbie's point of view. Kids can watch the movies on the doll's small screen or upload them to a Mac or PC and then use Mattel's software to add music, graphics and special effects.

For the musician:

The video game "Rock Band" isn't the only way for kids to live their rock star fantasies. ThinkGeek Inc.'s Electronic Rock Guitar Shirt (\$29.99) looks like a plain black T-shirt with a picture of a guitar on it. (There's also a drum kit version.)

In fact, each of the buttons on the guitar's neck corresponds to a different pre-recorded chord, which kids can play using a magnetic guitar pick that comes with the shirt. The shirt also comes with a clip-on amp and tone knob so that they can play their music louder as well as adjust the sound.

Parents can remove the electronic components, including its AA batteries, before tossing the shirt in the wash. It comes in children's sizes small through large, which should fit kids ages 6 to 16.

For the bookworm:

If Apple Inc.'s iPad and Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle are god-sends for grown-ups on the go, these e-readers will keep young children entertained in the backseat.

Fisher-Price's IXL 6-in-1 Learning System (\$90, ages 3-7) opens like a

book to reveal a touch screen. Kids can draw on it, play games, practice writing, read books and listen to a music sampler. The books are sold separately through Fisher-Price, a unit of Mattel.

VTech's V.Reader Animated E-Book System (\$70, ages 3-7) costs less and has a particularly durable, rubber-coated design. It only offers reading games, though, and has a full on-screen keyboard, which might pose a challenge to young children because it uses the QWERTY layout more familiar to adults.

LeapFrog's Leapster Explorer (\$70, ages 4-9) skews slightly older with a design that looks like a handheld gaming system. Indeed, it uses games to teach kids reading, math, geography, science and music. The Explorer also has a camera for taking photos and recording video.

For the robot-lover:

As far as toys go, 2010 is the year of robots, with animatronic friends taking the form of everything from astronauts to sanitation trucks.

We have a soft spot for Mattel's Prehistoric Pets Cruncher Interactive Dinosaur (\$100, ages 6 and up), a small battery-operated dinosaur whose facial expressions and mean dancing abilities make him more endearing than most.

The little guy comes when you call his name and plays fetch using an included chew toy. All told, he can be trained to remember up to 30 actions and sounds, and is programmed to make 200 sounds and movements.

Meanwhile, Imaginext's Bigfoot the Monster (\$100, ages 3-8) pounds his chest, throws things and moves his shoulders, elbows, hips and eyebrows with puppet-like charm.

Bigfoot comes pre-loaded with more than 30 phrases and noises and can be controlled by a remote control whose buttons correspond to different emotions he can express. However, kids can also forego the remote control and do such things as scratch his belly to tickle him.

Fans of this year's "Toy Story 3" will recognize Ultimate Buzz Lightyear (\$150, ages 8 and up), the walking, talking astronaut who believes he's crash-landed on a strange planet.

Buzz has more than 100 sayings and is fluent in both English and Spanish. He responds to a handful of phrases, including his own catchphrase "To infinity and beyond!" Buzz can also shoot "lasers" from his arms and change his behavior when you repeat the phrase, "You're a toy." It comes with a remote control with a 20-foot range.

Designed for younger children, Matchbox's Stinky the Garbage Truck (\$60, ages 3 and up) can stand on his hind wheels as well as sing and talk with the help of more than 90 built-in phrases. Kids can do things such as touch his head to make him shake it from side to side. Sometimes, he'll even demand food.

Cheap thrills:

Innovation First Inc.'s Hexbug Nano's (\$8 each, ages 3 and up) make for cute, inexpensive gifts. These robotic bugs come in an assortment of colors and can fit inside a child's hand.

They move using vibrating technology, flipping onto their backs by themselves and finding their way through optional "habitats," or holding pens that include raceways and bridges (starting at \$13, sold separately). Kids can register individual bugs online to unlock games.

MechRC's Dave the Funky Monkey (\$30, ages 3 and up) is one of the

most adorable robots around, and it costs just a fraction of what many others do. Available only at Toys R Us, this small, furry puppet is meant to be worn on, say, a shoulder or a backpack and is controlled by a remote control designed to be hidden inside a pocket.

He chatters and flails using 16 pre-programmed actions and sounds, and his eyes move. The designers also made other body parts interactive but won't say what they are, as they hope kids will discover them through play.

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