

# Troy Wolverton: These gifts might be educational, but your kids will call them 'fun'

December 5 2013, by Troy Wolverton

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When it comes to their holiday wish lists, my preteen kids are a lot like their peers.

My son wants video games and "Hobbit" themed Lego sets. My daughter wants stuffed animals and a doll based on the new "Frozen" movie to complement her collection of other Disney princesses.

They're both likely to get some of those under the tree this year. But they'll also likely find some things that are a bit more, well, educational. With U.S. students trailing behind their global peers in STEM education - science, technology, engineering and math - my wife and I, like many parents, want to encourage a love for such subjects in our kids.

I generally hated getting "educational" gifts as a kid, but they seem a lot cooler these days. Instead of cringing like I did, my kids enjoy getting such gifts.

If you're looking for something this holiday season to get your kids excited about [science and technology](#), here are some ideas:

-Make: magazine. Serving as the Bible of the maker movement, Make (\$35 for a one-year, 6-issue subscription) is filled with projects ranging from the simple to the hard and covering items and subjects as diverse as handmade musical instruments to food preparation. Past issues have given instructions on making homemade water and chemical rockets, an aquarium for jellyfish and a "machine" whose only function is to turn

itself off once you turn it on. The projects can be time-consuming or costly, but many offer great ways to spend time learning and building with your kids.

-GoldieBlox. These may end up being the hip gift for girls this [holiday season](#), thanks to a new marketing campaign featuring a rewritten version of the Beastie Boys song "Girls." Designed to get girls interested in engineering, the GoldieBlox sets (which start at \$20) include pastel-colored pins, plastic rollers, ribbons and a crank. And they include a book with a story intended to set things in motion - literally. Budding engineers can use the parts to design any number of Rube Goldberg-like spinning contraptions for Goldi, the girl inventor who is the company mascot, and her friends.

-Roominate. Why have a boring old dollhouse when you can have one you design yourself that lights up and has a working elevator? The Roominate sets (starting at \$30) include modular panels and pieces that can be connected to form the walls, roofs, stairs and furniture of a dollhouse. They include motors, switches, battery packs and, in some sets, fans that can be used to cool off houses, or lights to illuminate them.

-"Make: Electronics" and component pack. The folks behind Make: magazine have published a series of books to help instruct aspiring makers. For budding engineers of all types, "Make: Electronics" (from \$20 online) is a great place to start. It takes users from learning the basics of electricity and building simple circuits to understanding complex electrical diagrams and working with a wide range of components. My kids loved the early experiments, in which they alternately licked and then intentionally shorted out batteries. While you can buy the components for the experiments piecemeal from Fry's and other places, Radio Shack sells a prepackaged sets of components for the first two sections of the book (\$80 and \$100, respectively).

-MaKey MaKey Kit. Have you ever wanted to control your computer with a banana or play a [video game](#) with Play Dough buttons? Maybe not, but your kids might have - and the MaKey MaKey (\$50) makes it possible. The device, which is basically a circuit board, plugs into a Mac or Windows computer via a USB cable. Using wires with alligator clips, users can connect just about anything to the board and use it to control a particular key on a computer keyboard or a mouse.

-Scratch. If your child has an interest in making video games, creating animations or computer programming, you should check out this program. Scratch allows users to program "sprites" - simple animations using an easy-to-learn coding language. Then they can share their creations with the world via the Scratch website. My 8-year-old son, with no background in programming, was able to put together a simple animation the first time he sat down with Scratch. And one of the best parts about it is that it's free!

-"The Book of Totally Irresponsible Science." A great way to get kids interested in science is through hands-on experiments. This book (\$11 on Amazon) offers 64 of them that can be done at home, typically with materials already lying around the house or available at your local grocery store or Target. You'll find old standards, including how to make a "volcano" and use Mentos to create a soda-powered geyser. But you'll also learn how to make a rocket out of an old film canister and how to make "blubber" with oil and a Ziploc bag.

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