Kids aged five and under learn best through play. Instead of buying just any toy, look for toys or activities with things to teach: like the alphabet or names of different animals, and more. Children will play with their new toy and not even realize they’re learning while they play.

But you’ll know.

“There’s a connection between the hand and the brain,” explains Wendi Schoenberger, a parent as well as preschool and elementary educator of 20 years. “Starting from birth, kids are learning.” And you have to be doing it to learn it, she says. For instance, kids learn the letter A by seeing it, saying it (and what it sounds like), holding it (on a toy), tracing it, dancing with it, throwing it (on a beanbag), and more. You need to expose kids to learning concepts at a young age.”

That’s why we decided to put together a guide to choosing and using learning toys this holiday season.

Gifting with Purpose
Choose Learning Toys This Holiday Season

Play and Learn Letters
Kids love to toss beanbags. But if the beanbags have ABCs on them, then they begin to recognize the look of letters, giving a simple game of toss the power to build a solid foundation in written language. “If your child can recognize you in a photograph, he or she can recognize a letter,” Wendi says. “Then it isn’t really much more to recognize a series of letters as a word. Once they recognize the letter, have them do something with it. This is A. It sounds like Aaaah… Bring A over to the toy box. Toss A to your friend. Etc.”

Take toss to the next level with foam letters, and encourage kids to aim for word-building. Toss C, then A, then T: C-A-T. With a toy fishing rod and magnetic letters, children can use fine motor skills to retrieve – instead of project – the letters they want to use in the order they want to use them. This variation will help them understand the conceptual difference between “to” and “from.” (Make sure to narrate this activity to help with concept recognition.)

Get physical with letters: find an alphabet floor mat or spot markers to run, hop, step or squat on for basic recognition and even spelling games. You
can even turn a game of Twister into a see, touch and spell activity by pasting, taping or writing letters on the colored dots. “Physical activity is great for gross motor development,” Wendi explains. “And often, kids just don’t want to sit and play. The younger they are the more active they tend to be.”

Play and Learn Numbers
Did you know that there are beanbags and balls that are numbered too? Not only do they help with recognizing the visual representation of numbers (1, 2, 3 and so on), but they often bear the spelling of the words (O-N-E, etc.) and countable dots to help children understand quantity. And increase movement beyond tossing and catch, with numbered spot markers.

There are many tools for fine motor number fun. An oldie but a goodie is an abacus, the ancient “wooden calculator.” (The abacus dates back to a time before written numbers existed!) Plus, with its rudimentary moving parts, an abacus is fun for little fingers. “This is great for learning one to one correspondence. You say ‘one,’ and they move one bead. The abacus can be used on and on...up to double digit multiplication,” Wendi says.

Brightly colored disks or shapes on sorting posts are another colorful way to teach numbers. Children think they’re just choosing how to sort and stack, when really they’re counting too, learning how many disks it takes to fill up a post. And peg or puzzle boards with numbers pose a pre-writing challenge in addition to their sorting/counting task. It takes focus and precision to count and place pegs, especially if you’re adding a stacking dimension to the task.

Play and Learn Shapes
Look for geometric-shaped beanbags instead of just squares. And encourage gross motor fun with geometric-shaped spot markers too. Update your Twister game from numbers (above) to match body parts to different shapes rather than just dots.

“But keep in mind that, as Howard Gardner shows us, one child will learn better sitting and another through active play,” Wendi says. “It’s really important for a teacher or a parent to incorporate all forms of play.” (She’s referring to Psychologist Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic.) That means that a great learning environment can be one with multiple exposures (ABCs on blocks, musical toys,
multi-sensory panels, etc.) and a freeform approach to letting kids explore these exposures as needed.

Shape sorting peg boards, knob puzzles and stacking posts are popular with young children who are beginning to work with wooden puzzles. “Their brains are being constructive: creating order from chaos. So what might sound like housework to you (matching socks, sorting silverware, etc.), is actually fun and satisfying for them,” Wendi explains. “Their brains are working something out. It’s work, and play.” (But no, that doesn’t mean you can get them to do all the house chores, silly!)

Over-sized brushes or cut up sponges for tiny hands. Make sure to provide non-toxic and washable paints, however. And if you’re worried about stains, look for or create an art studio out of a transparent box with arm holes. This can be a terrific alternative for children with autism and other developmental challenges—or almost anyone with anxiety—if they become agitated by spots and spills on skin, clothing and nearby surfaces.

“I think that anyone can make use of these tips,” Wendi concludes. It’s easy to gift with purpose: “Instead of providing plain beanbags, give kids ABC beanbags.” The rest will fall into place as children play with purpose.

**About Wendi Schoenberger**
Schoenberger is the mother of two—a 4 year-old boy and 6 month-old girl—and a teacher of 20 years. She is a graduate of Hofstra University and a certified teacher of N-8, and speech and drama. She began her career as a preschool teacher and graduated to public elementary school, working at various capacities including science and enrichment, for a collective total of five years. She then returned to her preschool roots in 1995 with Montessori Schools, certified to teach ages 3 to 6 and 6 to 9.

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