

Presents for the younger crowd

BY JILL JENKINS
Special to the Record-Eagle

From the latest in electronic gadgets to old-fashioned wooden games, from fashion-savvy dolls to movie-inspired items, it's not hard to find the perfect gift for children ages 5 to 12 on your list.

At chain stores like KB Toys and Wal-Mart are pushing what they believe will be this season's biggest sellers.

KB Toys, in Traverse City's Grand Traverse Mall, even produces a Holiday Hot Toys List.

"It's a pretty diverse list," said KB Toys spokesman John Reilly. "We do not count on there being a hot, breakout toy every year. We're just seeing the sales spread out over more items."

Some of the items to look for at stores include the VideoNow Player, Beyblades, Hulk Hands, Smithsonian Science Toys and LEGO Bionicle.

VideoNow, targeted at kids ages 6 and up, is a mini-video player that kids can watch anywhere. A sampler disc is included with the initial purchase, and additional discs are sold separately.

Wal-Mart spokeswoman Karen Burk expects the player to be a popular gift this season.

"The portable personal video player is kid-friendly and designed specifically for children," Burk said. "It features a crisp black-and-white LCD screen that kids can view and listen to their favorite shows on discs."

Beyblades are a reasonably priced variation of a spinning top and are intended for kids ages 8 and up.

"These are spinning tops you can build, customize, launch and battle for hours of friendly competition," Burk said. "They are offered in more than 60 assortments."

Riding the popularity of last summer's blockbuster movie "The Hulk," shoppers can purchase a pair of gigantic green electric Hulk Hands (ages 6 and up).

"When kids want to feel as strong as the Incredible Hulk, they can slip on these action-packed hands and feel just like their superhero," Burk said. "These electronic Hulk Hands include smash and bash sound effects and will send kids into a role-play world where they can be the Green Goliath."

According to Reilly at KB Toys, the Smithsonian Science line contains "high-quality toys that deliver fun and meaningful lessons."

Some of the items include a 525-Power Telescope,

Crime Lab Investigation Unit, Mega Science Lab, Bio Dome Habitat, 300-power Microscope, and the Projecting Planetarium.

A KB Toys exclusive item is Zodiac Girlz Dolls and Accessories. Reilly describes the line as "dolls with a message."

The dolls are supposed to recognize and appreciate individual differences. Each doll has its own personality based on her astrological sign.

Along with the multitude of new toys debuting this year, there are also many old favorites making a comeback.

"There's a little bit of a retro thing going on this year — Care Bears, Transformers," Reilly said. "People now are buying (as gifts for their kids) some of the toys they played with themselves as kids."

If you're looking for retro toys, though, head to downtown Traverse City's Children's World. Owned by Karen Bobay, the toy store has been in business for 31 years.

"The things I mostly sell are the old-fashioned toys," said Bobay. "I think they can only come out with so many new things, and then they always go back to the old stuff."

Some of the "old stuff" Bobay sells steadily are Erector sets, Breyer horses and wooden board games. Bobay does carry newer items, too, such as wrist-racers — a watch that comes with a radio-controlled car, Magz and Crystal Caves (for children ages 8 and up).

And if you're looking for a challenging board game, Bobay has just the thing: The Tower of Hanoi (ages 12 and up).

"The Tower of Hanoi is a mind teaser that you play alone," Bobay said. "It had a great write up in the New York Times."

Many of Bobay's most popular games are both fun and educational. Bobay also cited Quarto, Squint and Apples to Apples as popular gifts this season.

If educational toys are must-haves on your shopping list, remember to stop at Creative Classrooms in

Traverse City. According to Sally Tummelson, who works at the Eighth Street store, people are looking to purchase items with educational value.

"Parents and grandparents of school-aged children are looking for fun things to do that are educational," Tummelson said. "A lot of people call us the teacher store. We're definitely education-oriented. A lot of the games and toys we have here are all found in classrooms."

"Whether it's a fourth-grade classroom or a preschool, these are the types of activities that are used in the classroom for learning."

Some of the more popular items are dry-erase boards, globes and math-related activities.

"We've got a lot of math manipulatives like pattern blocks, unifix cubes and geometric shapes," Tummelson said. "For the younger children we have lacing beads and pattern activities."

Other great gift ideas Tummelson mentioned include puzzles, laminated mats, posters, globes and maps. And don't forget fun stocking stuffers like pencils, pencil groupers, stickers, and flashcards.

"Once (people) get in here, they find something they can't live without," Tummelson said.

Jill Jenkins is a local freelance writer.



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

Clockwise from top: Many hot ticket toy items can be found at retailers like KB Toys in Traverse City. The electronic Hulk Hands, which fit like gloves and have smash and bash sound effects, is for ages 6 and up. VideoNow is a portable mini-video player that can keep children occupied anywhere, anytime. The Smithsonian Science line has toys that offer both educational and fun projects.

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