

# Toddler gifts range from fun to educational

BY HEATHER JOHNSON  
DUROCHER  
Special to the Record-Eagle

From educational to fun to downright silly, toddler toys are in abundance this holiday season.

Once again, Elmo, the furry, red Sesame Street character, will be a hit with young children. In the past the Fisher-Price doll has giggled when tickled and come dressed up as a chicken; this year Elmo will "get down" to an all-time kid-favorite dance tune.

"The Hokey Pokey Elmo is expected to be big," said Mark Chmielewski, toy department manager at Meijer in Traverse City.

Other top toys for toddlers include Fisher-Price's Geo Trax, which is a system of vehicle tracks that children can put together and the Rescue Heroes line of figures, vehicles and other accessories.

On the sillier side, Chmielewski said he's been somewhat surprised at how fast Playskool's

talking vacuum cleaner named Dusty is selling.

"He's just flying out of here," he said.

On the educational end, Leap Frog products will continue to sell well, area merchants predicted.

"They've spanned all the ages," Chmielewski said of the books, toys and software that are available.

Musical toys are always favorites for 1-, 2- and 3-year-olds.

"I can't think of anything a toddler would want to do more than make music," said Leslie Ansted, manager of Toy Harbor in Traverse City, who added that a music cube allowing youngsters to listen to different instrumental sounds is a big seller.

Tried-and-true toys like wooden puzzles (with knobs on each piece for easy handling) and the "roller coaster" on a wooden base (colorful beads strung on wires inserted into the base; these are often seen in doctors' offices) are perennially popular.

It's never too early to

introduce books to little ones. Lois Orth, children's book manager at Horizon Books in downtown Traverse City, recommends these titles for toddlers and preschoolers:

■ "365 Days of Baby Einstein," a collection of stimulating learning experiences designed to enhance verbal acquisition, nurture concept development and promote a lifetime love of learning.

■ "Emergency!" and "Construction!" "These are wonderful board books that have just everything under the sun about police cars and ambulances and excavators," Orth said of the oversized books published by Priddy. "At \$7.95 each they're a real bargain."

■ The Snappy series of pop-up books, including "Snappy Little Bugs," "Snappy Little Dinosaurs" and "Snappy Little Snow Time."

■ "Wiggle, Waggle Fun — Stories and Rhymes For The Very, Very Young" by Margaret Mayo and other contributors.

■ The newest Sandra Boynton book: "Fuzzy, Fuzzy, Fuzzy — A Touch, Skritch and Tickle Book." "It's a board book and another one of her funny, silly books," Orth said.

■ "Brightest Star," "A wonderful story of the nativity for even a very young child," Orth said.

■ "Winter Friends" by Carl Sams and Jean Stoick (authors of "Stranger in the Woods").

■ Sheila Rae's "Peppermint Stick Board Book" and Finger Puppet by Kevin Henkes.

■ "Eyes, Nose, Fingers, and Toes: First Book All About You" by Judy Hindley.

Heather Johnson Durocher is a local freelance writer.

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