

Children's toys range from trendy to timeless

BY REBECCA KALIJEAN
Special to the Record-Eagle

Whether naughty or nice, sugar or spice, it's a great time to be a kid during the holidays. Today's children are hardly locked into the toy choices of yesteryear — blocks for boys, dolls for girls, etc. Rather, hot items this year run the gamut from nostalgic to extreme technic.

No matter what they choose, however, parents and grandparents are happy to shell out the green.

This year, the average holiday shopper will spend \$608 on gifts, up 4 percent from 2003, according to polls released this month by the Macerich Company and the International Council of Shopping Centers.

Despite the willingness to spend, the myriad choices parents and Santa face can be daunting. Area parents, however, say they are turning to hot toys from the past for their little ones.

Cherie Hitchens, a mother of three children under the age of four, is shopping the

classics this year.

"I try to avoid the electronic toys because I think they get addictive and I don't want to introduce them to that at such an early age," said Hitchens, who researched her gift choices for her two girls and toddler son on the Internet.

Hitchens plans on buying a wooden train set for her son and an E-Z Bake Oven for her daughters. Beyond that, she's sticking to toys that the kids can play with outdoors.

It's all about keeping it simple, Hitchens says. "Jack can play with a ball outside all day, while the girls can sit and do crafts for hours," she said. "They really like the hands-on things."

As children get older, their interests branch out as marketing messages get more attention from the little ones. Even so, this year Missy Russell says she wants to keep her 7-year-old daughter's holiday simple, traditional, and "real."

"The things we're buying

for Anna are leaning toward real-life items, like the American Girl Bitty Baby twins," said Russell, who also has a toddler son. "Not to mention lots of arts and crafts items, which she loves."

Both Hitchens and Russell agree that it doesn't take a lot to make their children happy during the holidays. Price points in the \$20 to \$30 range are "more than enough," Hitchens says. "I'm just not spending a lot this year because you don't need to," she said, adding that in addition to shopping local toy stores, she also hunts for \$1 stocking stuffers.

Although the trend for the classic toys like Hot Wheels, Lite Brite, and Legos remains strong every year, teens and pre-teens are clamoring for something quite different: Video game systems and their components.

"Back then, the kids used to want Barbie, but now we're not seeing that so much," said Ray Dommer,

the store director for Toys R Us. "Everybody is all into the electronics now."

Game systems and their accessories continue to be the hottest seller for the holidays even at prices that begin at \$149, said Dommer. The latest game to come out, Halo 2 for the X Box system, even had customers downstate lined up at midnight, he said.

The desire for all things video is something Anne Boyles fights every holiday season. Her teenage son, Jared, has three systems at his father's house and none at hers.

It's for a good reason, she says. "We're nags about enough stuff around here — I don't want to yell at him about the video games, too," Boyles said.

Rather, she and her husband Peter focus their holiday spending on Jared's sports equipment, which is "equally pricey but at least he's outside," she said.

Rebecca Kalijean is a local freelance writer.

Toy trends by category

Although the trends for toys are veering sharply away from each other — classics for the little ones, electronic for the older set — here are the categories that have caught the retailers' attention this holiday season.

Technological Toys

Video games and the systems to play them on. Nintendo, PlayStation and X Box systems are leading the pack.

Action Toys

Action toys like scooters, dirt bikes and skateboards for both boys and girls remain popular.

The Razor E battery-powered scooter and the Fisher Price Power Wheels Go-Cart have shown strong sales early as well.

Remote Control Toys

Hobbytron's remote control stunt cars are hot as well as remote control boats, hovercrafts and various kinds of action figures. Classic Toys Barbie and other Disney character toys, games and accessories remain popular. The new E-Z Bake Real Meals Oven bakes macaroni and cheese. Even Cabbage Patch kids have been updated for a new generation.

Educational/Creative Toys

Leapfrog Enterprises has junior computer games called Leap Pad, which focuses on early start reading and math skills. V Tech has introduced educational video games for the 4 and under age group. Other creative and educational games include the classic Fisher Price toddler's line and Discovery Toys.

Source: Jim and Audri Lanford, www.wow-christmas-gifts.com

PLAN

Friends' divide and conquer shopping

FROM PAGE 1

Thanksgiving and being able to take advantage of the sales. In addition to streamlining the shopping process, her divide-and-conquer method also ensures that gifts are paid for that day and that there aren't credit card bills looming on the horizon.

If one shopper wants a big-ticket item that will go on her credit card, she is the designated shopper at the store where her big purchase will be made.

Tammy Jarvis has known Porter since their elementary school days in Elk Rapids. She has joined Porter on her shopping adventure on at least three occasions and is already gearing up for this year's event. She considers her friend a genius for coming up with the idea.

"She's a mastermind," Jarvis said.

Jarvis says that shopping with Porter and the rest of the "teams" turns the shopping experience into something that's fun again.

"It's not a lot of stress," she said. "It's actually a lot of fun. It's the atmosphere and having another

SANTA FACTS

Top toys for the season

Here's what the kids want this year, according to *Toy Wishes* magazine:

- 1 **Amazing Spider-Man Action Figure**
Toy Biz/Ages 6 & up/\$24.99
- 2 **Cali Girl**
Mattel/Ages 4 & up/\$5.99
- 3 **Doc Ock's Hideout**
LEGO/Ages 7 & up/\$49.99
- 4 **Harry Potter Championship Quidditch**
Mattel/Ages 7 & up/\$24.99
- 5 **Just Build**
Mega Bloks/Ages 4 & up/\$1.99
- 6 **Shrek Wise Crackin' Donkey**
Hasbro/Ages 5 & up/\$29.99
- 7 **SpongeBob Bounce 'Round**
Spin Master/Ages 3 & up/
\$199.00



- 8 **Sun-Kissed Summer Bratz Dolls**
MGA Entertainment/Ages 6 & up/\$19.99
- 9 **Super Soaker Monster Rocket**
Hasbro/Ages 8 & up/\$29.99
- 10 **Transformers Alternators**
Hasbro/Ages 5 & up/\$19.99
- 11 **Triple-Action Web Blaster**
Toy Biz/Ages 5 & up/\$27.99
- 12 **Wave Hoop**
Maui Toys/Ages 3 & up/\$3.45

SOURCES: *Toy Wishes* magazine

Copley News Service / Paul Horn

er person to shop with."

Jarvis says she's even become a smarter shopper through the experience. She recalls waiting outdoors with other shoppers for Target to open last year in a line so long that she almost gave up.

Then she remembered the store's mall-side entrance and found only two or three other shoppers waiting in line at that door.

"I will definitely do this every year," Jarvis says. "It's like tradition now."

Kristen M. Hains is a local freelance writer.

TOYS

Season's top items have familiar faces

FROM PAGE 1

SquarePants.

To keep children reading, Publications International has come out with Story Reader (\$24.99), a portable electronic storybook reader for children 3 to 8 years old. According to Publications International it was one of the most successful new products in the 2003 holiday season and its popularity is continuing to grow.

"We are thrilled with Story Reader's performance," said Kerry Cunnion, executive vice president of Publications International. "Since Story Reader's debut, we have received thousands of consumer requests for new titles."

Among the selections are the Sesame Workshop featuring "Elmo's Colorful Adventure" and "The Last Cookie."

Stories also feature Barney, Winnie the Pooh and Scooby-Doo. New for the holidays will be a Christmas series of "A Christmas Carol," "The Night Before Christmas" and "The Nutcracker." A

Bible series will feature the stories of "Jonah," "David and Goliath" and "Noah's Ark."

For the older ones, new designs in riding toys are coming out.

"You can never go wrong with cars for boys," Joester said. "We also have some new Barbie designs for the girls."

Along those lines are the Power Wheels Kawasaki Adventure 4x4 (\$250), a pint-sized ATV that features oversized tires and a trailer to tow a passenger. It has two child-appropriate speeds of 2 1/2 and 5 miles per hour. Built for ages 3 and up, it carries a weight limit of 90 pounds.

For girls, there's the Barbie Take-Along Tunes Jeep 4x4 (\$240). In sporty pink and purple, the 12-wolt vehicle features a boombox that plays Latin, pop, country and island beats. Designed for one or two riders, ages 3 and up.

Also on children's wish list for the holidays are the Matchbox Hero City Rocket Park. Matchbox cars have been a favorite for little boys for a long time. Now, children can experience an even bigger adventure when they load cars onto a motorized Ferris wheel which sends them on two roller coaster tracks. Fun sound effects add to the adventure.

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