

Here's How Many Toys One Kid Really Needs, According to Experts

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Key Points

- When it comes to toys, parents should not feel guilty for taking a less-is-more approach
- Make sure you rotate the toy selection available to your kids, and create accessible storage
- Encourage repeat gift-givers to supply the family with experiences rather than objects, if gifts must be given

The never-ending churn of capitalism starts at birth. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to believe that, by buying all the latest gadgets and [must-have toys](#) for their kids, they'll be able to provide the best possible life for their children and to create a sense of control amidst the inevitable chaos that is parenting. And yet most caregivers quickly realize that this is all a myth—there is indeed such a thing as too much baby gear.

As children grow from toddlers to big kids to tweens and teens, the types of toys they ask for may change, but the volume doesn't diminish. This proliferation of toys makes tidying difficult, bordering on impossible, leading to household conflicts. And then there are the gifts. Well-meaning [friends and family](#) (Looking at you, Grandma!) add to the pile with their own gifts, which tend to balloon around the holidays and birthdays.

So, how are parents supposed to wrangle all these toys? By examining how many toys a child truly needs and ways to manage what they already have. Here experts weigh in on many toys your kids *actually* need.

When It Comes to Toys, Less Is More

If you're feeling like the toy clutter has reached its tipping point, and you need to downsize, there's no reason to feel guilty—kids might actually benefit from a less is more approach.

According to a one study, toddlers between 18 and 30 months showed higher-quality play skills when they played with just 4 toys rather than 16 toys.¹

The influence of the number of toys in the environment on toddlers' play. [Infant Behavior and Development](#). 2018.

The study demonstrated that, when presented with too many options, children are easily overstimulated and distracted without engaging in [long-term play](#) (ie. the kind of play that can actually let busy parents get stuff done).

Father of two Evan Gold is the founder of [Simplify Parenthood](#), a resource dedicated to minimalist parenting approaches. Gold says he struggled to find a solution for his two kids' growing toy collection in the family's small apartment.

In attempting to determine whether or not kids need a certain toy, Gold considers the toy's function and level of engagement.

“There is far more developmental value in having 10-15 open-ended toys that can be used in multiple ways, than having over 50 single-use toys,” says Gold. “When we went through a purge and cut our number of toys in half we found that our kids were playing for longer and were actually playing more creatively.”

How Many Toys Should One Kid Have?

It can be hard to know what the sweet spot is for the actual number of toys a kid has to play with. Gold uses this simple rule of thumb for thinking about the quantity and quality of toys based on a child's age:

- Infants: 4-6 simple toys that [stimulate different senses](#)
- Toddlers: 8-12 toys that [encourage different skills](#), like stacking, sorting, or pretending
- Pre-schoolers & older: 12-15 core toys to rotate through plus a handful of specialty toys as interests change

Too Many Toys Lead to Feelings of Overwhelm

Having too many toys to choose from encourages children to behave restlessly, jumping from one stimulus to the next, never really slowing down for longer play, or quickly getting bored and antsy.

Feelings of overwhelm around toy accumulation are real for both the caregiver and the kids, who may begin to ignore their toys if they have too many or can't access the ones they want.

That being said, [play is an important part of childhood development](#)—and toys are just part of the deal when you have kids. Through play, children are able to learn about their world and gain essential skills.

Rachel, the mother of a 6-year-old, shares a common refrain many parents can relate to. “The visual clutter stresses me out because it sits gathering dust between only occasional bouts of hyper-interest,” she says. “And the more toys that are available to throw around means exponentially more time spent tidying up so we can all use our shared spaces.”

Rachel says it would be impossible to pinpoint exactly how many toys her child actually has but that [craft supplies](#) and dress-up items tend to get the most action.

“The toys that they beg for around holidays are always the first to be forgotten,” she adds, “Which feels to me like a waste of money and space. And even like an ecological waste since these unloved toys end up given away or thrown out.”

How Can Parents Manage Their Kids’ Toy Load?

It may not be realistic or even desirable for your family to pare the kids’ toys down to such small numbers, but there are some techniques for making the toys they do have more accessible—and to stop yourself before buying more.

Toy rotation is one way to hold on to the most loved toys while still encouraging kids to focus on a few toys at a time.

“We keep about 1/3 of our toys available at a time and rotate them every few weeks,” Gold explains. “We have found this keeps our kids interested and as they get older they can help decide which toys to rotate.”

Here are more tips for helping your kids’ toy collection become more manageable.

Create a toy criteria for your household

More than the number of toys, it’s the quality that’s important. Think about what your family values about toys — their ability to teach and to ignite your kids’ imaginations while keeping them occupied for long stretches of time — and then commit to only bringing home toys that fit that criteria.

“Purchase [open-ended toys](#) instead of those with a single purpose,” says early childhood expert, preschool teacher, and mother of two, [Sally Macaluso](#).

“For example, electronic toys can be fun and flashy, but they are limited in their scope and tend to lose their novelty pretty quickly,” she explains. “So, stick with classic toys like magnetic tiles, blocks, and craft materials that can be used in multiple ways and encourage creativity and exploration.”

Focus on accessible to storage

Storage is another factor in the quest for toy nirvana. Gold says, “Fewer toys makes clean-up easier and less of a chore. Low open shelves with clearly defined spaces are great for categorizing your toys and helping your kids pick what toys to play with. This also allows them to more easily assist with clean-up and keeps your space clutter-free.”

Parents may want to go in the playroom and start throwing things away while the kids are in school, but this can backfire, leading kids to feel even more covetous of their toys (and distrustful of their parents).

Instead of that toy-purging approach, encourage your kids to participate in the culling process. In my house, when my kids were around 3, we play a game we call ‘Keep It Or Leave It,’ in which we sit

down and go through one area of toys at a time, toy by toy, and my kids tell me if they want to keep something, donate it, or throw it away.

By focusing on one small area or group of toys at a time, we avoid getting overwhelmed by the process, and every time there are at least a few toys that my kids are able to get rid of.

‘No gifts please’ — opting out of the cycle of gifts

You may have been invited to a [kid's birthday party](#) in which the invite says, ‘No gifts please’ (or ‘Your presence is present enough’). I’ve had some ambivalent feelings about these parties because I can’t help but wonder what the child thinks about the idea of opting out of gifts. At the same time, I do understand the appeal: The sheer volume of toys that accumulates after a [birthday party](#) can be staggering.

Opting out of gifts can be a nice way to focus on spending time with friends and family and to celebrate the occasion without racking up a bunch of new stuff—it might also be one way to teach your kids to value spending time with friends and loved ones without expectation of a reward.

You could also ask friends to make a donation or simply bring a book for your child, in lieu of a gift.

Around the holidays you may also want to talk to family and close friends about the types of gifts that are the most meaningful to your family — maybe it’s craft supplies, updates to needed sports equipment, museum memberships, or contributions to family vacations.

Encourage frequent gift givers to emphasize experiences, like special dedicated time together doing things you love, as gifts, rather than objects.

Key Takeaway

When it comes to kids’ toys, less is more. By selecting a few developmentally appropriate toys to focus on at a time, kids can derive more pleasure from the toys they have, leading to longer stretches of engaged play. By creating criteria around what kinds of toys you will buy and keep, creating accessible storage, employing toy rotation, and working with your children to discard unused toys, it is possible to climb out from under the avalanche of toys many families typically accumulate. To help you, let family and friends know about your goals and encourage them to emphasize quality time and experiences over stuff.