

# The 5 Best Toys of All Time by Jonathan Liu

Here at GeekDad we review a lot of products — books, toys, gadgets, software — and I know it's impossible for most parents to actually afford all of the cool stuff that gets written up. Heck, most of us can't afford it either, and we're envious of the person who scored a review copy of a cool board game or awesome gizmo. (Disclosure: that person is probably me.) So while we love telling you about all the cool stuff that's out there, I understand that as parents we all have limited budgets and we sometimes need help narrowing down our wishlists.

So to help you out, I've worked really hard to narrow down this list to five items that no kid should be without. All five should fit easily within any budget, and are appropriate for a wide age range so you get the most play out of each one. These are time-tested and kid-approved! And as a bonus, these five can be combined for extra-super- happy-fun-time.



1. Stick  
What's brown and sticky? A Stick.

This versatile toy is a real classic — chances are your great-great-grandparents played with one, and your kids have probably discovered it for themselves as well. It's a required ingredient for Stickball, of course, but it's so much more. Stick works really well as a poker, digger and reach-extender. It can also be combined with many other toys (both from this list and otherwise) to perform even more functions.

Stick comes in an almost bewildering variety of sizes and shapes, but you can amass a whole collection without too much of an investment. You may want to avoid the smallest sizes — I've found that they break easily and are impossible to repair. Talk about planned obsolescence. But at least the classic wooden version is biodegradable so you don't have



to feel so bad about pitching them into your yard waste or just using them for kindling. Larger, multi-tipped Sticks are particularly useful as snowman arms. (Note: requires Snow, which is not included and may not be available in Florida.)

As with most things these days, there are higher-end models of Sticks if you're a big spender, from the smoothly-sanded wooden models (which are more uniformly straight than the classic model) to more durable materials such as plastic or even metal. But for most kids the classic model should do fine. My own kids have several Sticks (but are always eager to pick up a couple more when we find them).

One warning: the Stick can also be used as a sword or club, so parents who avoid toy weapons might want to steer clear of the larger models. (On the other hand, many experts agree that creative children will just find something else to substitute for Stick, so this may be somewhat unavoidable.)

Although she is not generally known as a toy expert, Antoinette Portis has written this helpful user manual for those needing some assistance in using their Stick.

Wired: Finally, something that does grow on trees.

Tired: You could put someone's eye out.

Disclosure: I have received several samples of Sticks from one manufacturer for review.

## 2. Box

Another toy that is quite versatile, Box also comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Need proof? Depending on the number and size you have, Boxes can be turned into furniture or a kitchen playset. You can turn your kids into cardboard robots or create elaborate Star Wars costumes. A large Box can be used as a fort or house and the smaller Box can be used to hide away a special treasure. Got a Stick? Use it as an oar and Box becomes a boat. One particularly famous kid has used the Box as a key component of a time machine, a duplicator and a transmogrifier, among other things.

Still stuck for ideas? Check out this Box user manual by Antoinette Portis for a few more

ideas.

The Box may be the most expensive item on my list, available from many retailers and shipping companies, but they can often be had cheaper if

you know where to look. Amazon is one of my main sources of the small- to medium-sized Box; I include one with virtually every order I place there. If you don't mind second-hand toys, the grocery store, bookstores and recycling centers are also great sources for Boxes. Oh, and the best place for the extra-large version is an appliance store (though sometimes they'll try to sell you an appliance along with it, which could get pricey.)

Note: If you're in a pinch, Laundry Basket is a similar item and can often be substituted for Box in some instances, though it's generally not as great for costumes (other than a turtle). And if you're thinking of using Box for your next building project, Mr. McGroovy's Box Rivets make a great optional accessory.

Wired: Best celebrity endorsement: Calvin & Hobbes.

Tired: Paradox: what do you put Box in when you're done playing with it?





### 3. String

My kids absolutely love String — and when they can't find it, sometimes they substitute other things for it such as scarves or blankets, but what they're really after is String. Now, I should start off by saying that String is not intended for toddlers and babies: it is a strangulation hazard and your kids must be old enough to know not to put it around their necks. However, when used properly your kids can really have a ball with String.

The most obvious use of String is tying things together, which my kids love to do. You can use it to

hang things from doorknobs or tie little siblings to chairs or make leashes for your stuffed animals. Use String with two Cans for a telephone (and teach your kids about sound waves), or with Stick to make a fishing pole. You'll need String for certain

games like Cat's Cradle — there's even an International String Figure Association for lots more information. String is a huge part of what makes some toys so fun — try using a yo-yo or a kite without String and you'll see what I mean. Try the heavy-duty version of String (commonly brand- ed Rope) for skipping, climbing, swinging from trees or just for dragging things around.

Although you can buy String at a store, it's generally sold in much larger quantities than your children will probably need — usually my kids are happy with roughly two or three feet of it. I actually have no idea where it comes from, because I don't remember buying them any, so it must be pretty easy to come by.

Wired: It really ties everything together.

Tired: There's a reason "no strings attached" is a benefit.

### 4. Cardboard Tube



Ah, the Cardboard Tube. These are kind of like the toy at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jacks — they come free with a roll of paper towels and other products but you have to wait until you get to the end of the roll before you can finally claim the toy. (Perhaps this explains why my kids — who love the small size — go through toilet paper so quickly.) The small- and medium- sized are most common, but the large versions that come with wrapping paper can be more

difficult to obtain — I had a roll of Christmas wrapping paper that lasted about three years before my kids finally got the Tube. There's also an extra-large size that is sometimes sold with posters, and a super-sized industrial version which you'll generally only find from carpet suppliers. (Of course, carpet stores aren't toy stores, and while their product also goes by the name

Cardboard Tube it's hardly the same thing and probably shouldn't be considered a toy.)

My kids have nicknamed the Cardboard Tube the "Spyer" for its most common use in our house, as a telescope. (Or tape two of them together for use as binoculars.) But if you happen to be lucky enough to get a large size, the best use is probably whacking things. Granted, Stick is also great for whacking, but the nice thing about Cardboard Tube is that it generally won't do any permanent damage. It's sort of a Nerf Stick, if you will. If that sounds up your alley, look up the Cardboard Tube Fighting League — currently there are only official events in Seattle, San Francisco and Sydney, but you could probably get something started up in your own neighborhood if you wanted. Or if you're more of a loner, perhaps the way of the Cardboard Tube Samurai is a better path.

Obviously if your own kids are younger you'll want to exercise discretion about these more organized activities, but it probably wouldn't hurt to provide them with a Cardboard Tube or two just so they'll get used to the feel of it. You never know if your kid will be the Wayne Gretzky or Tiger Woods of Cardboard Tube Fighting, right? Best to give them the opportunity so that if they show some particular aptitudes they'll have that early advantage. And if not, well, there are still plenty of people who enjoy playing with Cardboard Tubes casually without all that pressure.

Wired: Comes free with purchase of toilet paper, paper towels, and wrapping paper. Tired: Doesn't hold up to enthusiastic play.

## 5. Dirt

When I was a kid one of my favorite things to play with was Dirt. At some point I picked up an interest in cleanliness and I have to admit that I'm personally not such a fan of Dirt anymore — many parents (particularly indoor people like me) aren't so fond of it either. But you can't argue with success. Dirt has been around longer than any of the other toys on this list, and shows no signs of going away. There's just no getting rid of it, so you might as well learn to live with it.

First off, playing with Dirt is actually good for you. It's even sort of edible (in the way that Play-doh and crayons are edible). But some studies have shown that kids who play with Dirt have stronger immune systems than those who don't. So even if it means doing some more laundry (Dirt is notorious for the stains it causes) it might be worth getting your kids some Dirt.



So what can you do with Dirt? Well, it's great for digging and piling and making piles. We've got a number of outdoor toys in our backyard, but my kids spend most of their time outside just playing with Dirt. Use it with Stick as a large-format

ephemeral art form. (Didn't I tell you how versatile Stick was?) Dirt makes a great play surface for toy trucks and cars. Need something a little gloopier? Just add water and — presto! — you've got Mud!

Dirt is definitely an outdoor toy, despite your kids' frequent attempts to bring it indoors. If they insist, you'll probably want to get the optional acces-

sories Broom and Dustpan. But as long as it's kept in its proper place, Dirt can be loads of fun. Wired: Cheap as dirt.

Tired: Dirty.