FOR FAMILIES · TOYS AND PLAY · BIRTH TO FIVE

Holiday Toy Buying Guide

Building listening and spoken language through play

For families of children who are learning to listen and talk, including families who also use ASL. Current as of November 2026.

1. How to use this guide

The toy matters less than how you play with it. Children learn to listen and talk through back-and-forth play with you, so a few well-chosen toys used every day do more than a big pile. This guide is for families of children who are learning to listen and talk, with hearing technology on and working.

Ages and stages are guides, not deadlines. Shop for where your child is now and one small step ahead, and ask your child's teacher or therapist to help you pick the next step. Families who also use ASL can use every toy here with signs, and section 8 has signs, books and dolls for signing families.

2. Toys and materials by stage of language

Find the row that matches what your child is doing now, then look one row ahead. Ages come from the Cochlear Integrated Scales of Development and the Hearing First stages chart, and they are averages.

Stage	What it sounds like	Toys and materials that fit	Try saying
Listening and sound play (birth to 12 months)	Coos, laughs, babbles, turns to voices, knows own name	Rattles and shakers, soft books with crinkles, unbreakable mirror, soft dolls and animals, scarves for peekaboo	"Where is baby? Peekaboo!"
First words and gestures (12 to 18 months)	Follows one-step directions, points, first words and sounds	Stacking cups, knob puzzles, balls, toy phone, toy animals and vehicles, board books, bath toys	"Put the ball in." / "The cow says moo."
Putting words together (18 to 24 months)	About 50 words understood, first two-word phrases	Play food and dishes, doll and bottle, blocks, cars and trains, shape sorter, picture books	"More juice, please." / "Go, car, go!"
Short sentences (2 to 3 years)	Three-word phrases, asks "where" and "what", understands in, on, under	Play kitchen, doll house or toy farm, dress-up clothes, 4 to 12 piece puzzles, play dough, simple story books	"The baby is eating." / "Where is the ball?"
Telling and asking (3 years and up)	Longer sentences, asks "why" and "how", retells a story, follows two or three steps	Turn-taking games, felt boards or story sets, farm or zoo sets, art supplies, sequence cards	"First we ___, then we ___." / "Tell me what happened."

If your child's sentences are mostly one or two words, start with the 12 to 24 month rows, even if your child is older.

3. More toy ideas by category

Build a small collection with a few toys from several categories rather than many from one. A toy listed for one age often works at the next with different words.

Category	Birth to 12 months	12 to 24 months	2 to 3 years	3 years and up
Sound and music	Rattles, bells, crinkle toys, a toy keyboard or sound mat	Shakers, xylophone, toy piano, songs with motions	Toy instruments for a "band", finger plays	Rhythm games, stop-and-go music games
Pretend play	Soft doll, soft animals, small blanket	Doll and bottle, toy phone, toy dishes	Play kitchen, doll house, toy farm, dress-up, doctor kit	Puppet theater, store or restaurant play, tool bench
Building and puzzles	Soft blocks, stacking rings	Stacking cups, large blocks, knob puzzles, shape sorter	Wooden blocks, magnet tiles, chunky puzzles, matching cards	Construction sets, floor puzzles, memory games
Vehicles and outdoors	Soft ball, blanket outside	Push and pull toys, ball, walks with a collecting bucket	Cars and track, wagon, sidewalk chalk, magnifying glass	Treasure hunts, nature scavenger hunts, obstacle courses
Sensory and art	Bath toys, textured balls, fabric books	Bubbles, chunky crayons, stickers, sand toys	Play dough with tools, water table, washable paint	Kinetic sand, craft kits, collage
Games with rules	Peekaboo and pat-a-cake	Rolling a ball back and forth, taking turns on a tower	Picture lotto, *Hi Ho! Cherry-O*, *Don't Spill the Beans*, simple bingo	*Candy Land*, *Go Fish*, *Zingo*, *Hoot Owl Hoot!* (cooperative), "I Spy"

Pair toys together

Two or three toys together make more conversation than one:

- Toy farm, a cardboard barn and an animal book: "The cow is in the barn."
- Play kitchen, play food and a toy phone: set a table, call Grandma, feed the baby.
- Blocks, toy cars and a ramp: "Go fast! Go slow! The car crashed."
- Play dough, cookie cutters and a rolling pin: roll, cut, push, flat, bake.
- Magnet tiles with animals, cars or a flashlight: build a barn, a garage or a colored light show.

Rotate a few toys at a time and put the rest away. Familiar toys give you chances to repeat the same words, which is how new words stick.

> **Magnet tiles and small magnets.** Most magnet tile sets are labeled for ages 3 and up. Check often for cracked tiles, keep loose magnets away from children under 3, and ask your audiologist how close magnets can safely be to a cochlear implant before your child builds with them.

4. Words to build: action and describing words

Children need action words and describing words as well as names for things before they can put words together. Choose toys where your child does something you can name, and say the word while it happens, in a short phrase.

Action words

Toy or material	Action words	Try saying
Balls of different sizes	roll, throw, kick, bounce, catch	"Roll the ball to me." / "Kick it!"
Bubbles	blow, pop, catch, chase	"Blow the bubbles. Pop, pop, pop!"
Dolls with a bottle, blanket and brush	feed, rock, wash, brush, hug, sleep	"Feed the baby. Rock the baby to sleep."
Play food, pots and a play kitchen	stir, pour, cut, cook, eat, drink	"Stir the soup. Pour the milk."
Play dough with tools	roll, squish, poke, cut, press	"Roll it long. Squish it flat."
Toy people or animal figures	walk, run, jump, sleep, swim, fly	"The dog runs. The bird flies."

Describing words and opposites

Describing words are easiest to learn when your child can feel, see and compare two real things. Offer a pair that is very different, and use the same two words each time.

Toy or material	Describing words	Try saying
Nesting cups, rings and blocks	big and little, tall and short	"The big cup. The little cup."
A feely bag with a soft ball, rough sponge and smooth rock	soft and hard, rough and smooth	"It's soft. This one is rough."
Bath time with a sponge, cup and towel	wet and dry, full and empty	"The towel is dry. The sponge is wet."
Ramps with cars	fast and slow, up and down	"Fast car! Slow car."
A drum or shakers	loud and quiet	"Play it loud. Now play it quiet."
Pairs of socks, shoes or mittens	same and different	"These two are the same. This one is different."

> **Tips that help.** Act out the word while you say it, and let your child copy you. Use the word many times in one play session and again in other activities (open the box, the door, the juice). Then wait, so your child has a turn to try it, and repeat it back with a little more: "Open! Open the box."

5. Books and social stories

Books with repeated lines, rhymes and a pattern are some of the best language tools. Your child hears the same words again and again, starts to predict what comes next and can fill in the line. Read the same book every day for a week or more. Library copies are fine.

Stage	Book examples	Why it works
Birth to 12 months	*Goodnight Moon* (Margaret Wise Brown); *Peek-a-Who?* (Nina Laden); *Moo, Baa, La La La!* (Sandra Boynton)	Rhythm, rhyme, faces and animal sounds to listen to and copy
12 to 24 months	*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Bill Martin Jr., Eric Carle); *Dear Zoo* (Rod Campbell); *Where's Spot?* (Eric Hill)	One repeating line per page and lift-the-flap fun for first words

Stage	Book examples	Why it works
2 to 3 years	*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Eric Carle); *Where Is the Green Sheep?* (Mem Fox); *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* (Eric Litwin)	Repeated phrases build short sentences, colors and action words
3 years and up	*We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Michael Rosen); *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (Laura Numeroff); *The Gingerbread Man*	Longer repeated lines and sequences for retelling and predicting

How to read them

- Read it the same way each time at first, with the same words and a little acting out.
- Pause before the repeated line and wait with an expectant look, so your child can finish it with a word, a sound or a gesture.
- Name the picture your child is looking at, then add one more word: "Bear. Brown bear."
- Sit close, turn off the TV and, when your child is ready, say the line before showing the picture so your child practices listening first.

Social stories

A social story is a short, simple book that shows your child what to expect and what to do and say. Use your child's own photos, one photo per page, with one or two short, positive sentences. Read it at a calm time, before the situation comes up, and read the same story every day for a week or two.

Topic	Example sentences
Potty training	"I go to the bathroom. I sit on the potty. I wipe. I flush. I wash my hands."
Cleaning up	"It's time to clean up. I put the blocks in the box. All done!"
Going to bed	"I take a bath. I put on my pajamas. We read a book. Good night."
Hearing device checks	"We go to the clinic. I sit in the chair. The doctor looks at my ears. Then we go home."

If a behavior like biting or hitting continues or is hard to manage, talk with your child's teacher of the deaf, speech-language pathologist or pediatrician.

6. Make it at home and first words

Some of the best language tools cost almost nothing. Real objects and your family's own experiences give your child words that matter to them.

Experience books

An experience book is a homemade book about something your child actually did, with your child as the main character.

1. Choose an event: baking cookies, putting up decorations, opening presents or a visit with grandparents.
2. Take photos while it happens and save a real item or two, like a ribbon or a wrapper.
3. Put one photo and one or two short sentences on each page, using the language your child is working on.
4. Read it again and again. Pause so your child can fill in words and "tell" the story from the pictures.

Real objects to gather

Material	How to use it for language
Kitchen items (spoons, cups, bowls, pot lids)	Name each one while cooking; practice big and little, in and out, full and empty
Cardboard boxes	A house, a car or a cave; practice in, on, under and behind
Laundry basket and socks	Sort by color, match pairs, find the same and different
Wrapping paper and bows	Wrap and unwrap a toy: open, close, surprise, inside
A small "listening bag" (bell, shaker, spoon, toy cow)	Hide an item, make the sound and ask "What did you hear?"

First words to target

Choose words your child sees and uses every day, and pick toys that match. Children usually need about 35 to 50 words, including action, describing and place words, before they start putting words together, so a mix of word types matters more than a long list of names.

Category	Example words	Toys and materials that bring them up
Animals	dog, cat, cow, duck, pig	Toy farm, animal puzzles, animal books
Body parts	eyes, nose, mouth, hands, feet	Dolls, mirror, dress-up clothes
Food	apple, banana, milk, cookie	Play food, real snacks, play kitchen
People	mommy, daddy, baby	Family photo book, dolls
Toys	ball, block, car, train	Blocks, ride-on toys, vehicles
Action words	go, eat, sleep, open, push	Pop-up toys, dolls, ball, bubbles
Describing words	big, little, hot, cold, all done	Nesting cups, bath play, snack time

> **The word-use ladder.** Children learn a new word in steps: first they understand it, then they repeat it, then they say it after a prompt (wait 5 to 10 seconds), and finally they use it on their own. Use the same few words many times across different toys. "Open" can come up with a box, a present, a door and a snack bag in one afternoon.

7. Shopping tips and safety

Before you buy

- Pick toys that two people can play with. A toy that needs you to talk with your child beats a toy that talks for them.
- Choose fewer, more open-ended toys over many single-purpose ones.
- Think about sound. Loud, constant electronic noise makes it harder to hear your voice, especially with hearing aids or cochlear implants. Look for a volume control or toys that stay quiet until you press a button.
- Match the toy to your child's stage, not the age on the box.

Hearing device checks

- Check that hearing aids or cochlear implants are on and working before play starts.

- Sit close, face to face, at your child's level, and keep the TV and music off.
- Keep sound toys from being held right against a device.
- Ask your audiologist before using magnetic toys near a cochlear implant processor.

Safety for children under 3

- No small parts that fit through a toilet paper tube, and no button batteries or loose magnets your child can reach.
- Skip long cords, strings and balloons.
- Supervise play with buttons, beads and dry beans, even for older children.
- Follow the age label, then use your own judgment about your child.

A quick holiday plan

1. One gift for pretend play (dolls, kitchen or farm).
2. One for building or problem solving (blocks, puzzles or nesting cups).
3. Two or three books.
4. One art or sensory material (play dough, crayons or bubbles).
5. A family activity, like baking or decorating, to turn into an experience book.

8. ASL options for signing families

This section is for families who also use ASL, or want to try it. Every toy in this guide can be used with signs, and a child who is learning to listen and talk can also benefit from seeing language on the hands.

- ASL is a full language with its own grammar. The signs below are written in capitals as English glosses, which are labels for the meaning, not a sign-for-sign script.
- Pair each sign with the spoken word, and keep your face and hands visible.
- Check each sign in a Deaf-made or Deaf-reviewed resource before you teach it, because signs can vary by region and family.
- Learn from Deaf adults when you can, through a Deaf mentor program, your local Deaf community or Deaf-made videos and books.

Signs to pair with toys

Age	Toy or material	Signs to pair (English glosses)
Birth to 12 months	Unbreakable baby mirror	MOTHER, FATHER, BABY and name signs
Birth to 12 months	Scarves for peekaboo	WHERE, PEEKABOO, FOUND
Birth to 12 months	Adult-blown bubbles	MORE, POP, BUBBLE
12 to 24 months	Pop-up toys and ball ramps	OPEN, HELP, BALL, GO, AGAIN
12 to 24 months	Play food and a play kitchen	EAT, DRINK, MORE, ALL-DONE, HOT
12 to 24 months	Toy vehicles and push toys	CAR, GO, STOP, FAST
24 to 36 months	Doctor kit and dress-up	DOCTOR, HURT, HELP

Age	Toy or material	Signs to pair (English glosses)
24 to 36 months	Sorting and picture lotto	SAME, DIFFERENT, BIG, LITTLE
24 to 36 months	Hand puppets	HELLO, HAPPY, SAD

Signing board books

Look for books made with Deaf authors, artists or mentors. Mass-market "baby sign" books often simplify or change signs.

Book or series	Who made it	Format
Simple to Sign	Laura Blum, illustrated by a Deaf artist, with QR-code videos featuring a Deaf mentor	Board books with signs in rhymes
American Sign Language Babies	Dawn Sign Press, a Deaf-owned company	Four board books of everyday signs
Baby's First Signs	Kim Votry and Curt Waller, Gallaudet University Press	Durable board books of first signs
Nita's First Signs	Kathy MacMillan, an ASL expert and interpreter	Pull-tab board book

Dolls and toys that look like your child

Product	What it shows	Age note
Miniland "My Friends & Me" doll	Baby doll with a cochlear implant	Check the age label
BrightEars	Handmade dolls with hearing aids or cochlear implants	Ask the maker about materials and age
Build-A-Bear plush hearing aid	Soft hearing aid for a bear, to practice putting devices on	Detaches, so supervise
Uncle Goose ASL Blocks	Wooden blocks with letters, ASL handshapes and pictures	Listed for ages 2 and up
DIY hearing aids on a baby doll	Puff-paint aids added to a doll you already have	No loose parts once dry

Signed media

Watch together and keep it short, so the screen supports play instead of replacing it.

- PBS KIDS episodes with onscreen ASL, including *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*. Best near age 3.
- ASL story videos shared by the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind.
- Nashville Public Library signing story time, made for infants and toddlers.

> **Visual tips for play.** Get your child's attention first with a gentle tap or wave, wait for eye contact and then sign. Hold the toy near your face so your child can see the toy, your face and your hands together. For books, use good lighting and sit where your child can see your face and hands as well as the pages.

9. Strategies to use with every toy

These strategies turn any toy into a language toy. Pick one or two to try this week rather than all of them at once.

Strategy	What it looks like during play	Try saying
Notice the "serve"	Watch what your child looks at or points to, then join in instead of redirecting	"You see the truck!"
Narrate what is happening	Talk about what you and your child are doing, in simple words	"Mommy is cutting the apple."
Expand what your child says	Repeat their word and add a little more	Child: "Ball." You: "Big ball. Roll the ball."
Listen first	Say the word before showing the object, then show it	"Find the cup." (then point if needed)
Wait and look expectant	Pause 5 to 10 seconds and lean in; don't rush to fill the silence	(pause) "What do you want?"
Offer two choices	Give your child the words they could say	"Banana or cookie?"
Ask open questions	Invite your child to tell you rather than quizzing	"Tell me what you see!"
Let your child finish the line	Start a familiar phrase and pause	"Ready, set, ..."
Highlight the key word	Say the important word a little louder or longer, several times	"The car goes FAST. Fast, fast!"
Use learning to listen sounds	Pair a sound with a toy	"Ahhh" for an airplane, "oink oink" for a pig

Five Es for listening and learning

1. **Expose:** let your child hear the word during the activity.
2. **Expect:** wait for a response and expect one.
3. **Experience:** make it real and hands-on.
4. **Expand:** add words to what your child says.
5. **Express:** give your child chances to say what they think and feel.

> **If your family also uses ASL.** These strategies work with signs too. Get attention first, sign and say the same word together, then pause so your child can answer in speech, signs or gestures, and expand what your child signs the same way you expand spoken words.

10. Sources

This guide draws on the resources below. Stage ages, strategies and word categories follow them, and the toy suggestions are matched to them.

- Cochlear, Integrated Scales of Development (Listen Learn and Talk), 2009.
- Hearing First, Developmental Stages Birth to 8 Years, 2016.
- Hearing First, Serve and Return Checklist.
- Stages of Language and Brown's 14 Grammatical Morphemes.
- Auditory Learning Guide.
- Word Use Over Time chart.

- First 100 Moog Words; Next 150 Basic Vocabulary; Following 300.
- How to Create an Experience Book (Cochlear and Hearing First).

> **Sources for the ASL section.** Checked October 2026. Products, ages and availability change, so confirm them on the product page before buying.

- CCHAT Sacramento: Inclusive Toys for Children with Hearing Loss.
- Book Riot: Baby sign language books.
- Laura Payne: Favorite baby sign language books.
- Alabama Public Television: PBS KIDS episodes with onscreen ASL.
- Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind: ASL story videos.
- NDCS: Representation in your child's toys matters.
- Start ASL: Deaf-owned businesses.

This guide is general information to help families choose toys and play with them. It is not a substitute for advice about your own child. Hear Talk Grow · heartalkgrow.com