Classic Toys for Preschoolers

Preschoolers learn through playing with toys and materials that let them be creative, make decisions, solve problems, and use their imaginations. Parents can find gently used items at yard sales and thrift shops; always look carefully to make sure the item is in good shape and all the pieces are included. Dollar stores offer arts and crafts items and props for playing house.

**Playdough**
Children like how it smells and feels in their hands. They strengthen their finger muscles as they squeeze and shape the dough and engage their imaginations while rolling snakes or patting cookies. Add rolling pins and letter-shaped cookie cutters so children can cut out letters and form their names.

**Wooden unit blocks**
Alone and in small groups, children build tall towers, farms and zoos, roads and bridges, houses and cities. They count, look for certain sizes and shapes, make plans, and solve problems, such as balancing structures. Offer a variety of small props—people, animals, vehicles, road signs—and watch children take their play to a higher level as they create dramatic play scenarios.

**Pretend play props and clothing**
Firefighter hats, a mail carrier’s bag, pretend food, and a cash register support play scenarios that reflect what children know about the world. Vary props and clothing to respond to children’s current interests or topics the class is studying.

**Plastic connecting blocks**
Whether from Lego or another manufacturer, these blocks come in many sizes and with a variety of props to enhance play. While building, children look for the right colors, patterns, and shapes to fit their creations. Flat building plates are a handy extra that make it easy to save unfinished projects on a table or the floor. Offer containers of blocks of different sizes and assorted people, animal, and vehicle props so children can build anything they imagine. Kits with just the pieces needed to build one specific item are less flexible and less useful. For variety, offer other kinds of construction toys with interlocking and connecting pieces, like Lincoln Logs, Magna-Tiles, and Bristle Blocks.

**Puzzles**
Preschoolers enjoy puzzles with the alphabet or numbers, puzzles with just a few pieces, and puzzles with many pieces. They enjoy assembling a puzzle again and again, even after mastering it. And they like doing puzzles that are hard to do. Set up a jigsaw puzzle on a table. Puzzles help children build fine motor skills, learn to solve problems, face and meet challenges, and stick with a task until it’s done.
Wooden dollhouses and props

Children love to organize the furniture and create play scenes both inside and around a dollhouse. Offer multicultural family sets and sets in which a family member has a disability. Promote conversation by asking questions such as, “Who lives in this house?” “What do they like to do?” “How did you decide where to make the bedrooms?”

Puppets

Simple hand and finger puppets let children act out different roles and stories. Offer animals, families, and characters from stories you read aloud. Add a puppet theater and the children might put on a show.

Board, lotto, and card games

Board games for two to four players, lotto matching and memory games, and card games such as Go Fish and Snap are great fun for preschoolers. Join the children at first so they can catch on to how people play games. Soon they will be playing together and learning to take turns, follow directions, and cope with winning and losing. Some games introduce simple math and literacy concepts, build visual memory skills, and require strategic thinking.

Balls

Children develop physical skills and coordination and have fun as they roll, kick, throw, catch, and bounce balls. Preschoolers enjoy adult-led games using balls of different shapes and sizes.

Tricycles and wagons

Clearly preschoolers build and use their big muscles while riding trikes and pulling wagons, but these activities build social and emotional skills too. Children pull each other around the playground in a wagon, ride trikes together on a track, keep themselves safe by wearing a helmet, and learn patience while waiting for a turn to use these popular items.

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