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OPINION | COMMENTARY

An Empty Box Is the Perfect Christmas Gift

Its opportunities for play are constrained only by imagination.

By Lorraine Allen

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Christmas is near, but children are already knee-deep in toys. From birth, these items amass, often ignored or forgotten. They line up for landfills, bringing little joy. But there's a gift that truly sparks imagination, creativity and autonomy, and builds life skills—one which offers a child more opportunity to explore, understand and master their world through play than any other: a cardboard box.

We buy puzzles for our children to learn to fit things together, yet a box gives them the chance to conjure their own giant 3-D version and make it by hand. We offer bins full of colorful plastic building blocks with assembly instructions. This might prepare a kid for IKEA purchases, but a box lets children build their own unique contraptions, challenging them to think creatively and act skillfully, choosing tools, testing structures and considering design, strength, purpose and more. Puppets, train sets and toy kitchens stocked with pretend pots encourage imaginary play—a wonderful gift. But a box offers all these options and countless more, all designed by a child's imagination, not a manufacturer's.

After studying the importance of play and creative outlets in early childhood, I thought I knew what to expect when I gifted my kindergartnertener a large box: The box would make a fun, life-size gingerbread house, right out of a fairy tale, for her to play in. I corralled double-sided tape, candy canes and chocolate kisses, permanent markers and paint, scissors and tissue paper for decorating. But soon I realized this gift could become anything my daughter wished: a rocket ship, a pirate ship, a lioness's lair. A barn, a bookshop, an engineering lab.



PHOTO: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

She quickly got to work, plotting, scavenging and designing something entirely different. Soon yogurt cups became flower pots; paper plates and plastic lids became wheels. Cardboard tubes transformed into telescopes and trumpets. My daughter didn't name her creation; it shifted and evolved. In the morning, she might be deep-sea fishing off an iceberg. By noon she would be an astrologer queen, directing subjects from atop a distant star.

For toddlers, a box is an ideal plaything. They can sit in it and take rides along your floor as you pull or spin them along in their caravan, sailboat or race car. They can throw things in it, pretending it's a dumpster, or a hungry alligator. They can flip it over and bang on it to make music, or hide inside it, like a house or a cave.

However a child uses the box, nothing will be predetermined by some other person. And after hours each day being told what to do and not to do—and when, and where and how—boxes offer children true escape, worlds of their very own.

Ms. Allen writes a blog at MixPlayEat.com.

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