



# The Perfect Play Space

A ThreadBear Guide



**ThreadBear**<sup>®</sup>

*toys & gifts*

# Foreword

*by Alexis Ralphs from 100 Toys*

When we used to sell toys, one of my favourite brands was Tender Leaf.

Their focus on beautiful toys that foster imaginative play made them a perfect fit for us.

My children are now 4, 6, 8 and 9, and the blocks and train sets that I championed on the site still get lots of use. But by far the most popular toys in my home are the doll's house, play kitchen and Woodland Stores.

With four children, my big fear is cluttering up the house with more toys. Everything has to earn its place. So I'm especially reluctant to buy something with a large footprint. I thought long and hard before getting a toy kitchen and doll's house. But my experience as a nursery teacher taught me that these resources become the heart of your child's

play space. Don't tell my nine-year-old son's friends, but he will happily play 'shop' with his four-year-old sister for hours at a time. Long after the toddler toys have gone to the charity shop, the toys for imaginative play remain.

And that makes sense, of course. Babies and toddlers inhabit the here and now. They like to explore materials and their properties. In, out, over, under and through; hard, soft, twisty and squashy; hidden and revealed. It's the time of picking up and posting, building and knocking down.

But preschoolers develop the ability to make one thing stand in for another. That is, they can think *symbolically*. This block is a mobile phone, that horse is a unicorn. Eventually, they themselves become the symbol. *I am a policeman. You are the crook.*

And so the shop and the home corner become more interesting. It's no longer about what the toys can *do* but rather what they can *become*.

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# What makes the perfect play space?

The best play space is one in which your child is calm and engaged. It's fun but distraction free. Learning happens through play.

That sounds wonderful but what does it mean in practice? What's the right furniture? Which toys should you include?

These things matter but your child's attitude is key. And the way to get that right is to **present the materials in the right way.**

Here's the secret:

- Rotate toys
- Make them accessible
- Offer open-ended materials
- Allow enough time
- Celebrate your child's work
- Tidy up together



You are giving your child the skills she needs to succeed at school and in life. She is learning how to motivate herself, how to stay on task and how to get the most out of every activity she encounters.





## Your play space can teach

Did you know that your child has three teachers?

You are the first, of course, and her school or nursery teacher is the second, but who is the third?

The third is the environment. The materials and spaces we give our children to play in can *teach*.

The space your child plays in matters.

## The play space can ask questions

Imagine a room where all the furniture is soft, like at soft play. Now put your child's toys in that room. How would it affect her play?

Now put those same toys in the garden.

And now on a sandy beach.

The furniture you use and the toys you offer have a direct effect on what learning takes place.

Now imagine a room with organised storage.

A basket for each type of toy, with labelled drawers, an alphabet chart and number frieze on the wall.

Your child can find the toys she wants. She learns that everything has its place. Even before she can read she associates the name label on the drawer with its contents.

*I know that that box contains my wooden railway because the label starts with a 't' for train.*

What games would she invent if you left a box of dice for her to play with or a selection of sand timers? How would her play change if you made craft materials freely available?

The people your child encounters will also have an effect on her play. Is she alone? Does she share the space? Do people visit or pass through? Is it peaceful or distracting?

Tidying up, putting things back in the right place, is an important skill. It's part of sorting, of early maths. *Where does this wooden animal belong? In the box with the farm? In a box just for animals? Or with the wooden railway?* There are no wrong answers. The learning happens simply by making a choice. You need a reason and that means you must think about the toy's properties and uses.



*Even the box that the toy came in can be a toy. Where should I put this peg doll? Girls at the top and boys at the bottom? Hats vs no-hats? In order of colour, like a rainbow?*

*Happy Folk Hotel*

The types of toys you offer also matter.

If you only ever offer closed-ended materials such as puzzles, or electronic toys that entertain rather than challenge, how will your child learn to problem-solve? Difficult tasks promote creativity and perseverance. Your playroom should be full of these. What change could you make to your play space today to encourage a new type of play?

## Open-ended Play

Some toys are better than others. They invite investigation and discovery and draw us into storytelling and creativity. They are open-ended. They fill your place space with possibility. [Read more about open-ended play](#) on the blog.





## Fewer distractions = more play

Is your child always focused and engaged in her play?

Or does she move from one activity to the next, never stopping for long at any one activity?

Have you ever considered that she might have too many toys?

It turns out that **too many toys can be distracting.**

At first glance, this seems counterintuitive. Wouldn't more choice mean a greater chance of finding something you liked to play with? Surely, fewer toys leads to boredom?

To prove this hypothesis, researchers gave children varying numbers of toys to play with. The group who were presented with sixteen toys were less focused. They wanted to try out each one.

The children given just four toys still explored the available options but then settled more quickly on the one that interested them the most and were much less likely to switch their attention. They were less distracted.

But here's the important part: the longer they played with a toy, the more creative they became. They were able to explore its possibilities more fully.

Fewer toys encourages greater creativity

## What this means for your child

- Provide fewer toys at any one time.
- Keep toys fresh by using toy rotation.
- Turn off the television and remove other background distractions.
- Try a toy-free day. Make room for boredom. It leads to creativity.

There is evidence that children can be trained to pay more attention and that an environment with fewer toys might be one way to achieve this.

On birthdays and at Christmas, consider drip-feeding the presents over a the course of the day (easier said than done!). You'll avoid the sudden glut of toys.

All that frenzied opening and discarding of brand new toys in the rush to get to the next one does little to instil a sense of gratitude for what has been received. Bonus points if you can keep back some of the gifts for the following days.



*Tender Leaf Farm*

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# Toy rotation

Put too many toys out at once and, rather than enjoying endless hours of play, your child will become restless and bored.

Why?

**Too much choice is distracting.** Just when she is settling down to explore an activity in depth, she catches sight of something more interesting across the room.

But soon enough, the cycle repeats itself. A glimpse yet another toy and off she goes to explore.

And because she doesn't stay with any particular toy for very long, she doesn't see its depths, she doesn't meet its challenges. She plays with toys in a superficial way and their potential is never understood.

So what's the solution?

Have fewer toys out at once.

## What is toy rotation?

Instead of having all the toys in the house out at once, you divide them into smaller, more manageable groups. Every few days you swap - rotate - the toys so there is always something fresh to play with.

## How does it work?

There are no rules with toy rotation. You can do it any way you like. Any time you remove toys from the play space for a few weeks, they are welcomed as if they were new upon their return.

Having said that, you will get better results if you group the toys in some way. When thinking about how to categorise toys, a good tip is to think of the different types of toys almost like food groups, and try to ensure that something from each group is available. Here's a table showing how you might do it (but remember, this needn't be complicated and if you don't always manage to get something from each group in, it's really not the end of the world):

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Construction	Wooden blocks	Duplo	Train set	Wooden castle
Vehicles	Cars	Aeroplanes	Diggers & tractors	Boats
Mark-making	Crayons	Chalks	Paints	Stamps
Play figures	People	Woodland animals	Jungle animals	Sea animals
Soft toys	Teddy bears	Rag dolls	Animals	Puppets

## Don't rotate big toys

If a toy is sufficiently open-ended that it can form the basis for all kinds of play, there's not really any need to rotate it. A three-year-old will probably enjoy having a doll's house or farm to play with, some figures and a few blocks to extend the scene. The scene will change with her imagination and the scenarios she decides to work with (a play kitchen can be a cafe one day, a home-kitchen the next), so there's probably not much need to rotate it out.

How often should you do it?

You can rotate daily or weekly or even fortnightly. The only rule is that you leave the toys out for long enough that your child has the opportunity to explore their play possibilities fully, but not so long that boredom sets in. A week is usually a good length of time. But some toys merit longer stints than others. For example, a small-world scene like a farm or a city floor mat, may provide days of fun, but threading materials could become boring by the

afternoon. Observe your child at play and use your judgement to inform your decisions.

Where do you put the toys you are taking away?

This might sound like an odd question, but it's actually quite important that your child doesn't have easy access to the toys that are taking a break. We are all for child-friendly, easy-to-use toy storage, but if the toys on rotation are too visible and accessible, you might find they are distracted by them, and will want to get them out or pull them down if you turn your back for five minutes.

Our advice is out of sight, out of mind. Try to find a place that is well away from the toys they are playing with and don't let them know where it is. A bedroom wardrobe or another cupboard away from view is ideal. If space is tight, simply making sure they are out of reach is a good start.



What if my child is really enjoying playing with a certain toy but it's been out for a while and it's time to rotate? If they ask to keep something specifically, we're inclined to let them. This isn't a rigid set of rules! And hopefully it means they're inspired to do something with it.

## Toy rotation leads to creativity

If your toy collection is limited, rather than taking toys away in order to rotate them, why not rotate what you *add*. A wooden train set gets stale after a while but you can breathe new life into it by bringing in other toys and materials.

For example:

- Week 1: farm animals
- Week 2: craft materials
- Week 3: make junk model buildings (i.e. using the contents of your recycling bin)
- Week 4: loose parts

## Toy rotation throughout the year

Toy rotation is a great way to explore the calendar's many celebrations and the changing seasons. At Christmas, you could augment your toy groups with cotton wool for snow and matchbox 'presents' ready to be wrapped in paper and tied up with string. What could you add at Easter or Halloween? How about making play food? In this way, even the oldest, most familiar toys can get a new spark.





## Added Play Value

Many of our toys have free printable downloads to extend the imaginative play, in fact our designer has created over 100 resources to download and use to add to the play value.



## Which room is best?

Your play space can be anywhere: a bedroom, a corner of the kitchen or a dedicated playroom. What's important is that your child knows it's hers. Her constructions will be left unmolested, even overnight. She has the time and space to get creative.



## Keep it tidy

When you have young children, your home is messy for long stretches of the day, and that's fine.

But it really helps children to see that orderliness is valued.

It can be a challenge to get your children to join in and help with the clean-up but before you convince yourself that they are too young, remember that *they do it all day long* at nursery and school.

Everything back in its box at the end of the day (even if you have to do most of it) gets the play space ready for the morning. Starting with a clear, tidy play space makes for a calm day's play.

Aprons



## Uninterrupted play

Young children learn through discovery and exploration. They have a hypothesis. *I want to build my tower even higher but I have run out of blocks. Perhaps I can use wooden animals figures, stacked on their sides.*

There's only one way to find out, of course. Get the figures and pile them up.

If the materials are to hand in a readily accessible container, the investigation can proceed with minimal friction.

But what happens if the figures are spread between several, undifferentiated toy boxes? How long will it take to find them?

Or if the box is high up, out of reach?

Your child's train of thought is interrupted.

And while she waits to get access to the resources, she may be distracted by something else.

The moment has gone and the idea is lost.

What's the solution?

*Start with the child.*

Put yourself in your child's shoes. Does she have enough of what she needs? Can she reach it? Is there enough time and space to explore?

We all know the feeling of needing another five minutes to finish what we were doing, to reach a stopping point. We are happy to work through our lunch break or stay late at the office if we are immersed in a task.

Are our children any different?



## Make it accessible

One of the great secrets of the Montessori method is its relentless focus on making the child responsible for her own choices.

Materials are on open shelves at child height. Children know where to go to get what they want. Everything is within reach.

But, crucially, they can't take another toy out until they have tidied away the one they played with before.

Of course, in a domestic setting that's an aspiration rather than a rule. Depending on our children's ages and moods, we often have to clear up after them and that's OK. The point is that our children understand that tidying up is something they *should* do. It's part of play.

Refrigerator

This is where toy rotation comes in. Yes, it's nice to have everything accessible, but sometimes that's too much choice for a rampaging toddler. The toys that you do decide to make available should be easily accessible but those that you have rotated out of the play space this week should be well hidden.





*Bunny Storage Unit*

## Storage unit

What would your child make of a storage unit? A surface to lay out puzzles and games. A home for a toy castle?

And what of the baskets? A car to ride in? Giant blocks to stack?

Even the openings that house the baskets have play potential. A cave for dinosaurs? A garage for cars?

When you consider all the concepts that power the play of the under 5s - in, out, under, through, along and over, for example - is it any wonder that a simple cupboard can be so much fun.



*Forest Steps*



## Steps

Is there a piece of furniture that makes a child feel more grown up than a set of steps? Now everything is in range. The sink, the table, the worktop.

If you're short of space, these hard-working steps also double as both storage and a play surface.





10% off your next order with code:

**PERFECT**



*Forest table*



*Play table*



## A play table

A child-height table is perfect for reading, writing, drawing and painting. But it's also a brilliant surface for laying out small world scenes, vehicle play and train sets. And at the end of playtime, tidying everything away is a cinch.

# From the blog



## Small world play

Small world play is about telling stories. It helps children make sense of the world. By playing with small figures, they live vicariously through the characters, exploring situations that they never could in real life.

[Read more](#)



## Imaginative play

How can you get back that feeling of wonder from your childhood? Do you reminisce about playing with blocks or a wooden railway? Digging around in the garden or the sand pit? Those were all happy days, for sure, but to truly reawaken the spirit of childhood we need some magic words:

*Once upon a time...*



# From the blog



## How to play with a doll's house

Did you have a doll's house when you were a child? What made it so special? Was it the size or style or furniture?

Or was it the *stories* you told?

[Read more](#)



## The home corner

The home corner is the heart of your child's home.

It's where she goes to *become*.

[Read more](#)

# Recommended toys



A play space isn't a play space without toys. But toys are the final piece in the puzzle, not the first. We have to get the environment right. Only then can we decide how to fill it.

Some toys form the centrepiece of a room - a doll's house or a play kitchen, for example - and these need to be planned for.

But others are more low-key, such as a collection of wooden animals or some simple blocks. These are the workhorses of every toy box - unspectacular but essential.

The trick is to get the balance right. In this section we look at how to do this.

# A well-balanced toy collection

Like a capsule wardrobe, your toy collection should contain a mix of classic pieces that you can combine and accessorise.

You may have the best collection of blocks in the world but without vehicles and figures, the play value will be limited.

Far better to have a good mix of toys. The more varied your toys, the more possible combinations there are.

Something from each of the following categories will easily get you through the toddler and preschool years - and beyond.

Augment with craft materials, natural materials, loose parts and the (safer) contents of your recycling bin.



- doll's house or castle
- wooden play shop
- puppet theatre
- wooden animals
- soft toys
- rag dolls
- toy kitchen
- stacking toys
- train set
- blocks
- vehicles
- puzzles and games

# Enclosed space

Here is the Woodland Stores. It's brilliant fun. A shop on one side, a puppet theatre on the other.

What makes it so special?

The *opening*.

I stand here and you go round the back. Let's *talk*. Let's exchange things. You show and I'll watch. The opening makes it conversational. We are obliged to consider our

playmate, to think about things from their perspective. It's the highest form of play. The toy imposed a barrier, it closed off space. By dividing the room it created positions, roles and a *story*.

You're this and I'm that.



# Shops and kitchens

Can you see how a shop or a kitchen can fulfil the same function as the Woodland Stores? They also have openings to serve through but there is another benefit:

You can use them to create a **corner**.

Not all homes have the space for a dedicated playroom but most of us can set aside a corner somewhere. Like a folding screen, a kitchen encloses the area, keeping toys in and distractions out.



Even without a kitchen, you can still get some of the play value by using a cardboard box, table or low bookshelf.

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# Baskets

What is a toy?

It's anything that your child plays with.

And a lot of young children's play is spent moving things from A to B. Dolls in a pram, blocks in a trolley, pretend food in a basket. They are motivated by their innate desire to understand the idea of *transporting*.

Toy kitchens need food, but don't forget the baskets. They have as much play value as the things they contain.

No-one remembers what Little Red Riding Hood was taking to Grandma's but we all remember that she had a basket and where she was going.

The story was about *taking* something.



# A doll's house

The doll's house is the centrepiece of any play space. It sees more action than any other toy over the span of a childhood. From the toddler years to the end of primary school, it is ever present, your child's constant companion.



*Rosewood Cottage*



*Dovetail House*

But a doll's house is BIG. Where should it go? Is there room? If your play space is small, you still have options with plenty of play potential. The value of a doll's house stems from being a venue for dolls to meet and interact. More rooms make for more storytelling possibilities but they are a nice-to-have, not an essential.

Alternatively, you can create your own nook for your dolls and their furniture in the corner of a bookcase. With a bit of imagination, it's easy to make it feel like home.

[Read more about how to play with a doll's house here](#)

# Final word

The perfect play space is a space that is ready for your child. It gets out of the way and gives her the freedom she needs to play her way.

What you put in your play space is up to you, but keep it clear. Rotate toys. Make it easy for your child to find what she is looking for.

The right furniture can help. It divides the room, helps your child to sort and organise, and provides surfaces for play and display.

But, at the heart of everything is play. Make room for play and good things are sure to follow.





# Gift guides

The right toy at the right time



## Babies

The world is a jumble of sights and sounds to a newborn. Learn how they make sense of it all with this introductory guide.

[Read the guide](#)



## Toddlers

The best toddler activities focus on heuristic play - that is investigations into the properties and functions of materials.

[Read the guide](#)



## Preschoolers

The years before your child starts school are a time of wonder. It's the time of Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy - and magic.

[Read the guide](#)



# ThreadBear

*toys & gifts*



## About us

We create small worlds of beautiful, contemporary toys in nature-inspired colours. Designed in the UK, both brands are united by their warm, friendly styles and by a love of good design - sometimes charming, sometimes quirky, always imaginative and engaging.

Our products are all dreamt up by our lovely designer Danielle Hanson.

ThreadBear Design is a Seed Partner with international organisation Eden Reforestation Projects, through which it plants 10 trees for every order placed.



Great  
Service



Reclaimed  
Timber



Planting  
Trees



Toxic  
Free