

SO MANY CHOICES

... but what do your kids want?

(and what will they actually play with?)

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Once a year, a conference room in our newspaper building transforms into Santa's workshop, and the Lifestyle staff turns into elves.

We fill a large room with some of the season's most popular toys and choose more than a dozen children from all over the metro area to give the toys a thorough once-over. The slightly chaotic experiment gives us a firsthand look at which toys stand up to abuse while holding a child's interest for more than a few minutes.

And because we assemble the toys in advance, it gives us a chance to curse those toymakers who include too many useless parts and offer shoddy instructions.

There are always a few expected hits (Zhu Zhu Pets) and some surprises (that a Barbie drew no interest).

Most of the toys can be purchased from mass market retailers, such as Toys R Us and Target or gaming stores such as Game Crazy or online at amazon.com. We've listed the manufacturer's suggested retail

price, but many of these items can be found on sale, sometimes at half off.

stltoday.com

You can find a video and picture gallery from the toy test at **STLmomsanddads.com**.

ALSO TESTED

6- to 9-year-olds

Citiblocs (\$49.95) • One of the easiest and safest games in this age group. Just open and 200 safe wooden building blocks fall out. This toy is an educational product letting kids create and build almost anything. Dominic said, "You can build everything."