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Homemade Toy Town

By Deborah Shelton

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With a few items found around the house, and a little imagination, you can make your very own toy town. Once your town is built, fill it with your favorite dolls and toy cars.

1. Yarn: Use yarn to outline streets for toy cars. Roads can be as straight or as winding as you'd like.
2. Pinecones: "Plant" these trees along the edges of a street or in a park area.
3. Cardboard Tubes: Form toll bridges and tunnels with these easy-to-find tubes.
4. Tin Foil: Create lakes and rivers with flat pieces of tin foil.
5. Cardboard Boxes: Make buildings such as schools, banks and churches from small cardboard boxes.

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6. Magazine Cut-Outs: Glue pictures from magazines onto small cardboard boxes to represent the type of buildings in the town. For example, glue a picture of a store or school onto a box.

7. Thread Spools: Set these in a park area, to use as tables.

8. Cotton Balls: Turn your town into a winter wonderland with fluffy puffs of cotton.

9. Popsicle Sticks: Great materials for building fences and bridges.

10. Kitchen Scale: Bring into play a small kitchen scale to use as a weigh station for the cars.

Deborah Shelton is a mother, a freelance writer, and author of the brand new book, "The Five Minute Parent: Fun & Fast Activities for You and Your Little Ones." Visit Deborah's website for more fun ideas and book ordering information: <http://www.fiveminuteparent.com>

Thrifty (but Unique) Holiday Gifts for Young Children

By Dian Dewi

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Does this situation sound familiar to you ?

If your answer is yes, don't despair ! Chances are, almost every parent, have come across this situation. In one hand, you want to make your children happy, but in the other hand, you know that you dislike those toys and buying those expensive toys will definitely create a huge dent in your pocket.

The question is, how are you going to deal with this situation ?

These are some strategy you can use to deal with this situation and at the same time dramatically decrease your spending on toy and other gifts during the holiday season. The key are: skillful budgeting, advance planning and creativity.

To begin with, figure out your budget for each child. If you don't like your child's choices of toys, you

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can do either of these followings:

not buying the toys that your children want, but replacing them with toys that you know your children will definitely like.

buying one toy that your children want, and add some more toys of your choice.

To find out which toys are the best buys, I suggest you to jot down previous toys your children got during the holiday celebration. Make note on how often those toys are used and the estimated price. By doing this, you can roughly determine the cost of use for each toy. You may find that something like board games or construction toys are the best buy. In this case, plan on buying a different version of these toys. Chances are that your child will also love them.

To decrease the spending, you may want to add homemade gifts to the mix. The beauty of the homemade gifts are that they can be unique and more personal. These features are something that the store-bought items cannot compete with. And of course, price-wise, they are cheaper.

In making homemade gifts, always try to make use of what you've already had at home since this can decrease the cost even further. And don't try to replicate any store-bought toys because you may not

be able to compete in that area. Instead, go for uniqueness and personal touches.

Here are some ideas to make your creative juices flowing:

Personalized scrap book.

Personalized apron for girls.

Personalized draw-string bag for girls with some jewellery and home-made hair accessories.

A couple of 'coupon' for: one day outing, staying up late, one chore-free day and so on.

Customs for pretend play.

Doll accessories: clothing, blanket, towel, diaper.

Homemade wooden blocks, felt puzzle or personalized wooden puzzle.

Homemade bedroom decoration accessories or a bedroom makeover.

Homemade car mats for boys. To make one, get 1 yard of canvas fabric, seam the edges. Paint the roads, stores, stadium, and so on.

Homemade sock puppets.

Old toy make over. This includes: repainting an old bike and adding 'bells-and-whistles' to it.

Personalized treasure box.

Audio cassette of your own voice reading aloud your children's favourite book. The other variation of this item is to tell a story using your child as the main character.

Homemade dolls and stuffed animals.

One of the best idea for a homemade toy gift is: gathered items for pretend play. To do this cheaply, you need to plan in advance.

For instance, you can make a doctor office set by putting an eye dropper, syringe (with no needle), popsicle sticks (as tongue depressors), store-bought toy stethoscope, office supply, bandage, X-ray film imitation (use black construction paper with cardboard backing. Draw skull on it), flashlight, cotton wool, and many more.

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You can also make a store set, detective set or other set which you know your children are interested in. The nice thing about homemade pretend play set is that you can use real items and is often more complete than the store-bought one.

Finally, I would like to encourage you to think that expensive does not mean better. In fact homemade gifts can be as satisfying as the store-bought one. And more importantly, they are much less expensive.

Dian Dewi is a reseacher and busy mother of two young children. She is the webmaster of Best Child Toys, which provides information on how to choose toys which are fun, safe and educational.

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