

## Toy Favorites and Gift Ideas from VIPS Staff



### We Are Thankful for YOU!

**Thank you** for sharing your precious children with us!

**Thank you** for opening your homes and arms to us!

**Thank you** for taking our recommendations to heart and putting them into action with your children!

**Thank you** for your advocacy!

And if you are thankful for VIPS and are able to give a gift to VIPS this Holiday Season...

- *Please consider making a donation to our annual holiday fundraiser*  
~ or ~
- *Purchase an item or two from one of our wish lists.*

**VIPS CKY**  
**VIPS Indiana**  
**VIPS Louisville**

It's that time of year when we are bombarded with advertisements for a host of new toys. It can be difficult to visit toy stores and try out new toys to see if they will be a good match with your child's interests and needs. VIPS teachers to the rescue!!

Every Holiday Season, VIPS staff put on their thinking caps and come up with some wonderful recommendations for great toys and gifts for VIPS children. Age recommendations for toys are typically listed by each manufacturer but should be taken as suggestions. Depending on your child's level of development and physical and cognitive skills, a toy recommended for a three-year-old might be appropriate for a much younger child and a toy recommended for a three-month-old might be appropriate for an older child.

VIPS does not endorse any seller – we have used Amazon links for convenience. The blue product name contains the link.

### **Ashley Emmons, TVI/COMS, Kids Town Preschool Teacher, VIPS Louisville**

**[Mighty Bright XtraFlex12 LED Book Lights](#)** are very useful in the KidsTown classrooms. These also come with many products from the American Printing House for the Blind (APH). A tap of the button turns on one or both bright white, energy-efficient, LED bulbs, which never need replacing. The light is spread evenly through an optical grade lens. The free-standing base supports the light although the sturdy clip easily adjusts to grip most keyboards, Kindles or tablets. Amazon has it for \$26.79.



I have used the **[AbleNet Blue2 Bluetooth Switch](#)** with several students over the years. It connects wirelessly to Bluetooth compatible devices such as computers, tablets, and/or smartphones. It has two large switch surfaces that can be programmed independently of the other, which makes it able to control multiple functions or actions. It can be custom programmed to emulate various keyboard keystrokes or mouse

clicks, enabling the user to interact with software, apps, or devices according to her specific needs and preferences. It is very portable and lightweight although fairly durable as well. It can be mounted on various surfaces: desktops, tabletops, wheelchair arms, or even on other assistive technology devices, which makes it very versatile. The switch surfaces are large with very bright, different colors to make them more visually accessible as well as easier for users with limited hand skills. Find this versatile switch for \$260.00 at Amazon.



### **Trisha Conklin, TVI/COMS, Louisville**

The **Alilo Smart Bunny Rattle** encourages auditory skills and brain development by playing soft soothing music, classic natural sounds, and nursery rhymes and stories. It lights up in 7 colors to encourage visual tracking and attention. It also plays 66 natural sounds, 16 nursery rhymes, and 13 stories, encouraging cognitive development and memory enhancement.

It has an easy-to-hold, lightweight handle to help baby master grasping. Its fun textures promote tactile interest while encouraging the development of cause and effect, observation and predicting outcome skills. The bunny's ears change colors, motivating and visually stimulating, and the bunny can also be used as a night light (after 30 minutes of use, it automatically enters sleep mode). The soft silicone ears also serve to soothe teething. Enclosed cards list activities for parent and child interactions. \$45.99 from Amazon.



The **John Deere Tractor** with motion activated monster treads and lightning wheels is a very motivating toy while also encouraging the development of needed skills. The motion lighted treads are activated by rolling the plastic tractor forward

or backward and encourage the development of visual tracking and scanning skills and cause/effect skills. The sturdy design of the durable oversized monster truck tires makes it perfect for both indoor and outdoor play for all kinds of terrain. Despite their size and looks, the light-up monster treads roll silently, ensuring quiet play. These officially licensed John Deere tractor toys are perfect for kids, monster truck fans, and farm toy collectors ages 3 and up. (Read Paige Maynard's suggestions to give gifts "just like you use" for yet another reason to buy this toy!). The tractor includes 3 AAA batteries. \$27.99 at Amazon.



The **Bright Starts Light & Learn Drum** with Melodies provides fun auditory feedback when tapping/beating the drum and encourages the use of one or both hands. It also promotes the development of cause/effect concepts and skills. Bright lights blink, reflected against a shiny surface, and engage visual attention as the child taps the drum to control the lightshow. A mirror promotes self-awareness and the shiny/reflective surface provides motivation for reaching/rolling. The handle makes the drum easy to transport. Two volume settings can be used on any of the three modes: numbers, colors and drumming. The drum is geared for ages 3 months and up. \$13.47 at Amazon.



### **Rebecca Dunda, Kids Town Preschool Classroom Assistant, Louisville**



Children love to open the **TOMY Toomies Hide & Squeak Eggs** and find the adorable chicks inside. Bright contrasting colors and an auditory element (the chicks squeak when pressed gently on their heads) make them well suited for kids with visual impairments. This squeak toy contains 6 colorful chirping Easter eggs that crack open to reveal the chicks. Children can improve recognition of colors and shapes as well as matching and sorting skills as they place each egg into its own special base in the box. \$15.99 at Amazon.

**Michelle Flora, Blind/Low Vision Specialist,  
Indiana**

**Spike the Fine Motor Hedgehog** allows children to build fine motor skills and even work on color recognition, hand/eye coordination, counting and sorting skills. Chunky, peg-shaped “quills” fit into the back of this colorful hedgehog and are a nice fit for small hands. The fine motor set includes the 2-piece hedgehog about 6” in diameter, 12 quills, and an activity guide. Storage is simple since the quills fit in the hedgehog. For children 14 months and up, Spike is also available in pink. \$11.99 at Amazon.



The **VTech KidiBeats Kids Drum Set** has three drum pads and a cymbal, each with its own unique sound and LED light. There are 4 modes of play: Free Play, Letters, Numbers, and Follow-Along and 9 melodies in styles including rock, dance and pop. All are easily activated with the included drumsticks for tiny hands. The lights and several different types of sounds, especially the animal sounds, are fun and very motivating. Children can drum along with the music but can also learn letters, numbers and the sounds they make. The lights draw attention to the drums which can be a great way to work on cause/effect. The drum set also encourages sensory development, visualization, memory and musical creativity. \$12.79 at Amazon.



**Rattle and Roll Car** is made of flexible environmentally friendly BPA free materials, with soft rubber finger holes designed for easy grasping by little fingers. The colors are perfect for children with low vision, very motivating. The 5-inch car not only rolls but it also rattles with 5 sounds. Baby's first toy car is recommended for 3-12 months. \$5.99 at Amazon.



**Marchelle Hampton, former KidsTown Preschool  
Classroom Assistant, Louisville**

**Gigilli Rechargeable Light-Up Whale** is a bath toy that spews water. It is a perfect bath toy now that the new and improved version of this popular toy has large capacity USB rechargeable batteries (150 minutes when fully charged!). Batteries are encased in a compartment with a silicone waterproof cap. The spraying time is lengthened and no more batteries to replace. Children 3 and up (small parts) can be motivated by the lights and spraying water that make bath time so enjoyable! It is made of high quality, durable ABS plastic, with rounded and smooth edges that make it safe for small hands to handle. \$7.99 at Amazon.



**Meredith Howell, Director of Development,  
Indiana and**

**Pam Holladay, TVI/Developmental  
Interventionist, Louisville**

Meredith's special needs community is going crazy over the **Fisher Price Sensory Bright Light Station**, a fully customizable electronic sensory light box. Pam has also found it very useful with her students. It features a variety of textured buttons, dials and switches that children of differing abilities can press, twist and turn to design colorful visual, auditory and tactile experiences or to limit those options if they prefer a more limited sensory load. Colors, patterns, animation speeds, sounds and volume are all customizable. Sensory play can help children



develop more flexibility in their thinking, express themselves creatively, and regulate their behavior.

There are six interactive play modes to explore with three engaging games plus a musical light show mode, creative tracing mode, and an open-ended, audio-visual sensory play mode. A light-refracting fidget spinner and a goo pack to place on the Light Station tabletop provide an interesting aspect to the sensory play and are sold separately. The Light Station is for children of all abilities ages 3 years and up. \$49.99 only at Target.

### **Lesley Lusher, Developmental Interventionist, Central KY**

The **Skip Hop Developmental Learning Crawl Toy** in the shape of a brightly colored hedgehog provides encouragement and motivation for children beginning to crawl. Two settings challenge the child to learn to crawl with colorful lights, fun sounds and three energetic tunes. Stage 1, the first setting, encourages beginning crawlers with the hedgehog staying close but moving in an enticing circular pattern so new crawlers don't have to go far.



Stage 2 is for more advanced crawlers where the hedgehog moves in a random pattern to encourage chasing. This toy encourages the development of motor and sensory skills. \$14.99 at Amazon.

The **ALASOU Silicone Suction Cup Spinner Toys** for children ages 1-3 years are small spinning toys that come in several shapes (tiger, unicorn, bee, star) and will stick on any flat surface via strong suction cups. They are great for encouraging vision and hand-eye motor coordination. Place them on a highchair or wheelchair tray to encourage your child's lower field of vision or her central or upper field by placing them on the refrigerator, windows or bathtub. They assist with



developing fine motor skills along with visual awareness. The fast spinning is motivating and draws the child's attention. \$9.99 at Amazon.

The bright colors of the **Large Magnetic Building Blocks (1.41 inch cubes)** are a great way to encourage little ones with a visual impairment to make stacking blocks a little easier. The blocks make a small rustling sound when shaken and a small click when stuck together. The strong magnets allow the blocks to be rotated even while stuck to another block.

Their vibrant colors and rounded edges encourage safe touching and are very durable, resisting fading and abrasions. A booklet showing examples is included with purchase. \$25.99 at Amazon.



### **Paige Maynard, TVI, Developmental Interventionist, Louisville**

Learning to use a sliding board is an important developmental skill that involves practicing climbing, developing strong core muscles, and exploring concepts of up and down. I like the **Pop2Play Toddler Foldaway Cardboard Indoor Slide** for its price compared to others, and because it folds flat to be put away when not in use. It is also very sturdy for home use! This slide is perfect for children whose desire is to master climbing and who are learning to take age-appropriate risks!

The slide is sturdy, patented StrongFold cardboard that supports up to 50 pounds and is a safe, durable and eco-friendly (100% recyclable) toy with



simple, easy clean up by wiping clean. It folds flat in a jiffy and can be easily stored until the next time your child is ready to slide. It is lightweight and portable – you can easily take it with you and unfold it wherever there is room for it to open (push in the side flaps for added reinforcement). It comes in four colorful designs: Sunny, Barbie, Baby Shark and Paw Patrol. Each measures 59”L x 25”W x 28”D. Ages 2-5. \$35.99 at Amazon.

Your child may not be able to tell you yet, but what they want more than anything is to be “just like YOU!” I recommend getting your child a set of tools that are “just like YOURS!” Think through your day and consider 5 activities that you do. Which items are involved? What tools do you use? Then make it your mission to buy duplicate items for your child. Examples include: a whisk, a toothbrush, a hairbrush, keys, and a loofa. A set of tools can be hung from a play frame for very young children, placed in a container for young toddlers, or used for pretend play for older toddlers and preschoolers.

Caution: Be sure to check items for safety hazards as you shop. Items should be used under adult supervision.

The **NiTsai 3 Piece Suction Cup Spinning Top Toy** is a great gift for littles who are learning to reach out in their environment. The name of the game with these spinners is simple activation and bright colors! They pair wonderfully with a light box as a fabulous first toy that your child can learn to work on their own. I like the mostly solid colors of these spinners and that red and yellow are available, perfect for children with Cortical Visual Impairments!



Made of food-grade soft silicone, the spinners will stick on any flat surface and cling well. They spin very quickly, enhancing the colorful patterns which can motivate children to reach out for them, a hand-eye coordination skill. Ages 1-3 years. \$9.99 at Amazon.

**Staci Maynard, TVI/Developmental Interventionist, Kids Town Preschool Classroom Teacher, Louisville**

One of my new favorite toys in the classroom is the **Tactile Turtles Math Activity Set**. As a turtle lover, I’m a little biased, but these are more than just adorable. These turtles can also

be used for a variety of sorting, matching, and patterning games during play with your preschooler or elementary schooler. Their shells have easily distinguishable textures that make them ideal for early tactile discrimination practice, and the bottom of the turtles have different raised shape outlines. The turtles can also be sorted by color or size. If you want to use the activity cards along with the turtles, the cards might benefit from some adaptations to make them more appropriate to your individual child. However, these turtles can be used for many play and learning activities without the use of the cards and may be a toy that children of different ages and abilities enjoy playing with together.



The set includes 36 Tactile Turtles in 6 vibrant colors, 6 unique textures, and 3 sizes. Also included are 10 double-sided Activity Cards and Activity Guide which introduce early math skills. Not for use with children under the age of 3 due to small parts which may present a choking hazard. \$11.64 at Amazon.

**Tammy Maynard, Developmental Interventionist, Central Kentucky**

**Learning Resources View-Through Geometric Solids** are 14 transparent 3-D shapes in bright, bold colors that will be very appealing on a light table. They may challenge younger children but names and concepts can be adapted to fit their needs and supervision may be necessary due to the smaller shapes. The solids are easy to fill with liquids or dry solids and are easy to clean. They can be used as a tool to develop math skills and lay down a foundation for other STEM skills. \$15.18 at Amazon.



The **Crayola Light Up Activity Board** for Ages 3 - 6 features a light up activity board, three markers (although reviews indicate these may produce very light marks or may be too dried out), 22 shape clings (which do adhere quite well) and three “Complete the Scene” Transparency Sheets along with instructions for use.



The board is designed to assist with learning shapes, mixing colors, improving fine motor coordination and problem solving. There are four ways to play including constructing pictures with the cling shapes. One reviewer mentioned that the colors were “rather hard on the eyes” so consider your child’s visual responses when considering. The board has built-in storage so clean-up is quick and easy. Three AA batteries are required but are not included. Amazon has it for \$24.82.

**Fisher-Price Linkimals Learning Toy Smooth Moves Sloth** with music and lights is an interactive toy sloth that claps its hands and bobs its head along with fun lights, songs and music. Press the buttons on its feet to hear songs and phrases about the alphabet, numbers, opposites and colors. Colorful



lights on its belly add motivation and soft arms encourage exploration for infants and toddlers. Ages 9 months and older. \$42.19 at Amazon.

## **Amy Nichols, Teacher of the Blind/Low Vision, Indiana**

**LEGO Braille Blocks** are a great way to practice Braille, develop fine motor skills, and include the whole family. They were recently released for the general public.

Each set includes 2 baseplates and over 250 bricks in five colors: white, yellow, green, red and blue, with studs that correspond to dot numbers and letters in the braille code. Each LEGO braille brick also shows the printed version of the symbol, letter and number. These are fully compatible with all other LEGO products. Intended for children age 6 and up but can be used with younger children with monitoring due to the small pieces. \$89.99 from lego.com.



**Hot Wheels Braille Racer Twin Mill** includes braille on the typical Hot Wheels cars many young (and old) children enjoy. Hot Wheels recently partnered with the National Federation of the Blind to produce a special Hot Wheels that promotes an inclusive play experience and a greater awareness of Braille.

The iconic design dating from the 1960s has an all-white paint job including white wheels and tires, separated from the chassis only by a black trim. The 1/64 scale braille racer has braille on either side of the car which spells “TWIN” in braille on one side and “MILL” on the other side. The only other visual decoration is a pair of gray racing stripes. Only 250 new Hot Wheels are released each year; this new collectible is collector number 085/250. The car came packed in a 2023 card with the [National Federation of the Blind](#) branding and braille that spells out its name.

Amazon sells it for \$5.95, but you may be able to find one on eBay or at a dollar store. Amy found one at Kroger for \$1.19.

**Alfie Sees Love** was written by the mother of two young sons with oculocutaneous albinism (OCA). The main character, Alfie, is a white rhinoceros who has OCA, which is explained in detail as a genetic condition. The use of rhymes, bright pictures, and other characters who use dog guides and canes, wear glasses, and use a wheelchair makes it a sweet book that celebrates differences.



A portion of proceeds from every book sold goes to NOAH, the [National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation](https://www.noah-usa.org/), where people with albinism and their families can find acceptance, support and fellowship. Find it for \$19.99 from [Alfie Sees Love.com](https://www.alfieseelslove.com/).

### **David Sterne, Teacher of Blind/Low Vision & First Steps Coordinator, Indiana**

I want to be the first to recommend the [hand2mind See My Feelings Mirror](https://www.hand2mind.com/).

In addition to a typical shatterproof mirror for children, this mirror contains photos of other children displaying a specific emotion: happy, surprised, scared, sad, silly or angry so the child can match their face with the child in the “other” mirror. It is designed for kids to learn on their own what clues to look for when others are displaying a specific



emotion. In addition to teaching social emotional skills, it can assist with learning how to manage anger, decrease anxiety, and increase self-awareness. Children can learn to recognize and identify with various pictured emotions in themselves and others. The mirror comes with several social emotional learning activities. It can be purchased from Amazon for \$6.96.

### **Stephanie Santiago, VIPS parent, Louisville**

The **Glo Pal Sensory Jar** is a unique sensory toy that lights up with just a tap. You can fill it with your own visually interesting items or purchase the Fun Fillers from Glo Pal (\$5 each for Outer Space, Under the Sea or Sensory Safari themes) for a stimulating toy for a child who has some vision. The seal-proof lid keeps items inside the jar intact. The jar is available in 6 colors. It is designed for children 18 months or older; requires 3 AAA batteries, not included. \$20 at <https://glopal.com/>.



### **Kenneth Herrmann, M.D., retired pediatrician and Grandfather of current VIPS Preschooler**

Dr. Herrmann has written a guide for grandparents of blind babies and has graciously allowed us to reprint his suggestions that are easy to implement with typical household objects. We have made some adaptations to his original suggestions.

#### **Ages 5 – 20 months:**

- **Anything that rattles and can be held in the hand** (any baby rattle, a wooden rattle, window blocks that rattle, egg shakers) – making fun and interesting sounds.
- **Pop tubes or paper towel/toilet paper cardboard tubes** – talking or making funny noises into the tubes
- **Stacking toys** – upending the spindle makes the stacks fall, producing a fun sound; spinning the base creates interesting sounds
- **Colorful wooden cubes** – manipulating a single block and banging blocks together
- **Metal hand bell** – shaking easily for a ringing tone
- **Duck calls** – making good “quacking sounds”
- **Dog toys with squeakers, bells** - holding, carrying, shaking, throwing and retrieving



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Visually Impaired  
Preschool Services

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**Ages 20 – 30 months:**

- **All of the above** toys are still amusing
- **Rattles for larger hands** (water bottles: empty/crunchy; beans/rattle; water/slosh) – creating fun and interesting sounds
- **Sensory books** –reading and touching (VIPS offices lend books)
- **Small drums with or without drumstick** – creating opportunities for imitation, experimenting with rhythm and counting and sound variation
- **Baby or toddler push toys** – encouraging gross motor skills (some make popping sounds)
- **Playground balls (5”, 10”, and 16”)** – encouraging movement, turn taking, eye-hand coordination

**Ages 5 – 30 months**

- **Pop tube toys/cardboard tubes** - encouraging vocalizations and making other interesting sounds
- **Empty Kleenex boxes** – encouraging tactile exploration and fine motor development by placing a variety of objects inside (blocks, goldfish crackers, or other surprises)
- **Large laundry basket or box** – putting child inside and sliding back and forth while singing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”
- **A Simple ramp** made by a footstool or sturdy box and the plastic top of a large storage container – rolling noisy objects down (balls with internal bells; cardboard oatmeal containers with a few Cheerios inside for noise; metal cans with lids and Cheerios inside and any other noisy toys or objects that can roll) – encouraging movement and language activity
- **A microphone** -- encouraging vocalization and amplifying sounds to make them amusing and interesting
- **Goldfish crackers** -- dropping one at a time in various locations on the highchair tray and encouraging child to locate objects by their sound

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