THE SUNDAY MACOMB DAILY

Online: Breaking news all day at macombdaily.com



SCHOOLS JOIN FOR DECA PRACTICE

NEWS | PAGE A2



JONES BOUNCES BACK FROM INJURY

SPORTS | PAGE C1

$3.99 | **SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2026** | MACOMBDAILY.COM

Toy Test 2026

Time to hunt



Putting Tag'd 2 to the test are Rowan Cairns, 9, at left, and her sister Avery, 7, who also tested Watchitude's Slap Watch (3-up, $19.99). **GINA JOSEPH — FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP**

New York Toy Fair shows off what's hot — and perhaps what's scarce — this holiday shopping season

By Gina Joseph
FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP

NeeDoh.

NeeDoh.

In case you haven't heard the chant or just started your holiday shopping, NeeDoh is a line of squishy sensory fidget toys which have been sold out everywhere.

Wendy Bacon knew the toys would be hot.

Squishy was the buzz word at the American Specialty Toy Retailing Association's (ASTRA) event she attended in the spring as a co-owner and buyer for the Whistle Stop Hobby and Toys in St. Clair Shores.

"Everyone had something squishy," Bacon said, displaying examples of the Keycraft brand she's carrying in the family-owned business that's been around since Barbie made its debut at the New York Toy Fair in 1959.

"I think these are going to be the next big thing," Bacon said of the Big Squij Duck, Penguin, Pastry and Hot Dog (3-up, $11.99)

See **TOYS** on Page A4

Inside

What toy will become the next NeeDoh? We posed this question again this year to children, parents and teachers in Metro Detroit, who put the season's hottest toys to the test. Check out their reviews and comments in today's Homefront.

STATE

Whitmer reflects on two terms as governor while hosting her final turkey pardon

By Kyle Davidson
MICHIGAN ADVANCE

This story was originally published by Michigan Advance. Sign up for their weekly newsletter at michiganadvance.com/subscribe

With the end of her 8-year tenure as governor soon to come to a close, Gretchen Whitmer stood outside the Capitol on Wednesday to fulfill a key ceremonial duty for the last time.

Gathering with Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Director Tim Boring, members of the Durand Future Farmers of America and the heads of the Ann Arbor-based Creature Conservancy, Whitmer issued her final turkey pardon, delivering this year's bird, Sparty, from a future on the Thanksgiving table

Named after the Michigan State University mascot, Sparty is the sixth Turkey Whitmer has pardoned since she began the tradition in 2022, granting clemency to Mitch. E. Gander. Over the past four years she's also exonerated Dolly Pardon, Aidan Cluckinson and, most recently, Vernors and Faygo.

"Out of all the traditions I have been a part of, this is one of the ones that I will miss the most," Whitmer said.

See **WHITMER** on Page A4

WEATHER FORECAST

TODAY	MON.	TUE.
H:61 L: 37	H:45 L: 26	H:39 L: 27

Full weather report A3

SUBSCRIPTION

Visit myaccount.macombdaily.com to subscribe to The Macomb Daily, which includes access to our e-edition. To place a classified ad, call 248-745-4500.

INDEX

Arts	A11	Puzzles	B9
Opinion	A13	Classified	B10
Stocks	A14	Sports	C1

6 58744 00125 0



2026 RAM 1500 BIG HORN CREW CAB 4X4
EMPLOYEE 27 MO. LEASE*
$197.91* $2999 down
$272.23* $999 down
$309.35* $0 down
MSRP $62,930 Stk. #T26879

RED BOW SELECT INVENTORY EVENT!
91 UNITS TO CHOOSE FROM HURRY IN BEFORE THEY'RE GONE!
ZERO DOWN DEALS
PICK YOUR PAYMENT!
LOCATED ON VAN DYKE & 17½ MILE
MON & THURS 9AM-8PM | TUES/WED/FRI 9AM-6PM | SAT 10AM-3PM
BLACK FRIDAY SALES EVENT
Lease payments add tax on all rebates, due at signing add first payment,tax,documentary fee, title, licensing fees. Lease mileage allowance is 7500 miles per year. Overmileage is .30 cents per mile. Purchase and lease prices include Stellantis consumer rebates including return lease rebates and Stellantis finance rebates where applicable. Purchase prices, add for tax, title, doc, plates, and destination. Leases include destination. Pictures may not represent actual vehicle, prices and payments are accurate at time of printing and subject to change, Residency and lender restrictions apply, see dealer for details. Expires NOVEMBER 30, 2026.



2026 JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE LIMITED 4X4
EMPLOYEE 24/36 MO. LEASE*
$264.62* $2999 down
$341.46* $999 down
$371.62* $0 down
MSRP $48,540 Stk. #Q26339

855-300-7866
STERLING HEIGHTS Chrysler • Dodge • Jeep • Ram
sterlingheightsdodge.net



Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer held her final turkey pardon on Wednesday. **PHOTOS BY KYLE DAVIDSON — MICHIGAN ADVANCE**

WHITMER

From Page 1

She likened her role of governor to preparing Thanksgiving dinner for the entire extended family.

"You gotta make sure there's enough seats at the table for everyone, you cater solutions to every dietary restriction and need, and still people are a little underwhelmed at times, and every year you deliver a balanced, bipartisan, basted butterball of a budget, right?" Whitmer said.

Reflecting on her almost eight years in office, the governor pointed to several of her crowning achievements on kitchen table issues, including expanding access to free Pre-K and community college, repealing the retirement tax, expanding the working families tax credit and providing free breakfast and lunch for Michigan students.

As for Sparty? She'll live the rest of her life as an animal ambassador at The Creature Conservancy, where founder and Head Curator Steve Marsh says they've recently started a program called "barnyard buddies" to promote rural animals and agriculture.

However, Whitmer's time as governor is not done yet, and lawmakers in the Michigan House and Senate are still scheduled to meet in the coming weeks.



Gov. Gretchen Whitmer pardoned Sparty, a Norfolk black heritage turkey, at her final turkey pardon on Wednesday.

While taking questions from reporters after the turkey pardon, Whitmer pointed to housing as one area where her office and members of the Democratic-led Senate and the Republican-led House could make some progress before the year is done.

Earlier this year, Republicans and Democrats in the House came together to put forth legislation aimed at updating the state's zoning laws to cut down on unnecessary costs and delays in building new housing. However the policies have yet to receive a vote in the House Government Operations Committee following a hearing earlier this year.

"There are a lot of pieces of it that I think we could find common ground and get done," Whitmer said.

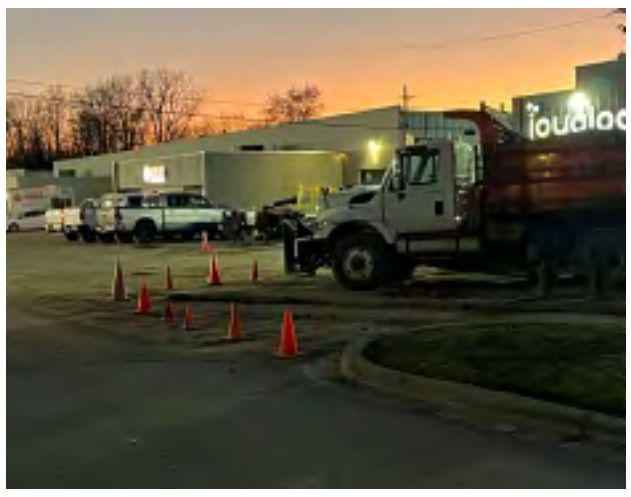
While there are other items on the governor's agenda, Whitmer said it will ultimately depend on what the appetite is from lawmakers and how much work they want to get done.

— Michigan Advance is an affiliate of State Newsroom, the nation's largest state-focused nonprofit news organization. To support, its journalism, donate at michiganadvance.com/donate

MOUNT CLEMENS

City takes steps to shut down Joyology Cannabis Dispensary

By Mitch Hotts
MHOTTS@
MEDIANEWSGROUP.COM



Customers entering Joyology cannabis shop have to navigate their way through construction equipment for the shop's parking lot, which has yet to be completed. **MITCH HOTTS — THE MACOMB DAILY**

A Mount Clemens cannabis retail shop faces the prospect of closing up, leaving 40 people out of work following a third vote by city leaders to revoke the store's operating certificate.

The Mount Clemens City Commission voted 6-1 Nov. 16 to not renew a permit to 222 BIz, LCC, doing business as Joyology Cannabis Dispensary, on Malow Street off Groesbeck Highway. Commissioner Roxanne Brown cast the sole vote against the revocation, but did not comment on her vote.

At issue was the pot shop's lack of progress on constructing a parking lot, which apparently started two years ago. This fall, the commission voted twice to give Joyology additional time finish work on the parking lot, which still isn't done.

Noting the commission has repeatedly pushed back the deadline for the lot, Commissioner Spencer Calhoun said it's likely everyday residents would not receive a similar break from the city.

"It's a disrespect to the businesses and residents to let this go on any further," Calhoun said at Monday's administrative hearing.

According to Mount Clemens officials, the company opened in August 2025, with the knowledge it needed to repair the parking lot. The work was supposed to start in April, but the cannabis shop encountered delays and provided little to no communication with city officials.

City Manager Gregg Shipman said Joyology received a temporary certificate of occupancy in order to open the dispensary. He said since the work to be done was in the parking lot, he viewed the building as safe to open to the public.

As months passed without any sign of the work's progress, the city revoked the company's temporary occupancy permit.

In September, commissioners agreed to revoke the permit, unless "significant and meaningful" progress was made. One month later, the cannabis shop said progress was being made but asked for another extension, which the city granted, but commissioners asked for updates on the progress.

At Monday's administrative hearing, Chris Yermian, owner and director of operations at the cannabis shop, asked for another extension, saying construction was nearly finished. He blamed the delays on the construction company, noting that there currently is a large demand for construction contractors.

"I take this very seriously," he told the commission. "The contractor keeps telling me 'we are just days away' from finishing the job."

Shutting them down would destroy their $1 million-plus investment as well as end jobs for about 40 employees, according to company officials.

On Tuesday evening, a reporter visiting the site saw the parking lot has been paved, but still had not been striped. Piles of dirt and construction equipment were left near the front entrance.

City Attorney Rob Huth said the commission must forward its findings to the state Cannabis Regulatory Agency (CRA), which oversees licensing, compliance, and enforcement for adult-use marijuana.

He said the CRA will be told Joyology failed to comply with a local site plan and engineering approvals., and has become a "public nuisance."

Once the CRA is notified of Mount Clemens' decision, Joyology must stop its retail sales as the store cannot legally sell cannabis without local authorization in place.

Depending on what the CRA decides, a license may be closed, surrendered, placed on hold/suspension, or moved into a "closed pending" status as it prepares to close.

Joyology has shops in Lake Orion, Monroe, and New Buffalo. Its store in Center Line is listed as "temporarily closed" on their website.

TOYS

From Page 1

slow-rise squishy toys designed for sensory play and fidgeting. Keycraft is headquartered in Scotland with North American offices in Watertown, S.D., and Montreal, Canada.

The brand's squishy toys were launched at toy fairs in 2025.

The NeeDoh brand is the latest must-have toy and made by Schylling, a Andover, Mass. company which makes other toys such as Big Wheels and Lava Lamps. It's a line of squishy toys filled with a non-toxic, dough-like material that users can squeeze, stretch, and squish and that snaps back to its original shape. "It never loses its texture, and is genuinely hard to put down once you start squishing," the company says on its website.

Despite its launch in 2017, NeeDoh has become an overnight national sensation joining Cabbage Patch Kids and Beanie Babies as a must-have gift after social media creators filmed NeeDoh hunts at local toy stores which were boosted by word spreading through school hallways.



A NeeDoh may be hard to find this holiday season but Lyla Frabotta, 9, gave several other squishies a whirl, squeeze and stretch including Master Toys' DROP 3-up, $6.99-8.99, and found them to be just as much fun. **GINA JOSEPH — FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP**

How popular is NeeDoh? The company shipped a full year of NeeDoh inventory in the first nine weeks of 2026 and for months some store shelves have remained empty, according to Trackalacker.com.

The good news is the drought may be easing.

"We are hoping to get more NeeDoh before Christmas," said Julie Everette, co-owner and sales executive for the Whistle Stop.

Every year it's something and the hype usually begins at the New York Toy Fair.

"I remember ZhuZhu Pets (WowWee). That was a really hot toy and Fingerlings (WowWee) and Hatchimals (Spin Master)," said Jennifer Lynch, senior manager of communications for The Toy Association, which produces Toy Fair.

The New York City event is among the oldest industry events when compared with the Nuremberg International Toy Fair and Toy Fair London, which stated in the 1950s, and the Tokyo Toy Show, which began in the 1960s.

"Toy Fair is the big show," Lynch said, of the event which started in 1903 when toy manufacturers were beginning to discover a market for the things they made. "What was just a small show with a few companies gathering in an old building in Manhattan has grown exponentially."

Shows are held at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, in a space equivalent to eight football fields, transforming Manhattan's West Side into the ultimate playground.

"It can be a little overwhelming," Lynch said, of the playground open only to professionals, manufacturers, retailers, buyers, inventors, licensors, designers, media and other key players who unveil or discover the latest products, uncover emerging trends, forge partnerships and drive business in a global market that reached $111.8 billion in retail sales in 2024. The Toy Association estimates the industry's impact on the U.S. economy at $155.7 billion.

And though overwhelming, once the curtains go up and the lights come on it becomes a magical place where one toy can become the country's biggest star.

Albert Hakim concurred.

"It's been the center of the universe in the toy industry for decades," said Hakim, who was working in the toy packaging industry when he and his partners decided to stop designing packages for other people and do it for themselves. The result was the creation of Watchitude.

The small New Jersey company, whose sales went from $15,000 to $600,000, before reaching $1.4 million in a matter of three years, specializes in fun, interactive toys and accessories for kids including fidgets, slap watches and mystery boxes.

This year's toy fairs saw the launch of Tag'd 2, a stylish watch that allows children to keep track of time while their parents keep track of them.

"We wanted to make something fun and creative, something that kids would be proud to wear and their parents and grandparents would want to give," said Hakim, who attends Toy Fair and other regional shows like the Toy Association's Fall Toy Preview in Dallas, Texas.

"For me, Toy Fair is all about the people. I get to meet toy store owners from all over the country, and I've learned to really listen to them. They tell us what's working and what needs work, and that feedback shapes what we make next," Hakim said, noting that what he enjoys most is watching people play with one of his toys for the first time.

The a-ha look that they get on their face is always a memorable moment.

"Toy Fair is where we introduced ourselves," said Brian Bernstein, co-owner of Jasey's Toy Chest, a new brand of beautifully designed wooden toys for children ages 1-5.

The family-owned and operated company launched its brand with nearly 50 new toys at this year's fair in February.

"We hit the ground running and in seven months, we won eleven awards," Bernstein said proudly, of the business he and his wife, Lauren ,launched with the help of their two daughters.

While the endeavor is new, supporting a family business comes naturally to the Bernsteins. As the head of sales for his brother's company, Melissa & Doug, which was inducted into the Toy Industry Hall of Fame in 2026, Bernstein not only supported Doug and his wife, Melissa, but helped grow the company from a small family startup into a global brand, now a subsidiary of Spin Master.

Lauren, a classical piano teacher for over 30 years, also brings a deep understanding of child development and lived experiences.

They are also parents and it is this experience that laid the foundation for the company's mission: to honor their late son, Jason or Jasey as their beloved child was known, by supporting youth mental health and helping other families find joy, resilience and connection through play. Nobody knew about Jasey's Toy Chest before the Toy Fair.

But the conversations there have led to new partnerships for the company and its mission, including The Kids Mental Health Foundation and The Jed Foundation.

"As a parent of two kids in the early childhood stage, I am beyond thrilled about the partnership between Jasey's Toy Chest and The Kids Mental Health Foundation," said Dr. Adriana Hoet, executive director of The Kids Mental Health Foundation and pediatric psychologist at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "Parenting can be overwhelming for parents and caregivers. We look forward to working with Jasey's to provide educational resources that help turn play into moments of emotional growth and connection, which are so important to kids' mental health."

"Toy Fair is always a lot of work," Bernstein said of the show, but admitted he wouldn't miss it for the world.

"We've signed up again, already for next year," said the maker of the "On-the-Go Wooden Work Bench (12-months-up, $89.99), Wooden Press & Pop Toaster Set (3-up, $19.99) and Wooden Off-to-the-Rescue Vehicle Carrier (3-up, $24.99) to name a few of the toys creating a buzz.

"You can't predict," said Neil Friedman, president of Tyco Preschool (now a subsidiary of Mattel), in a Washington Post story. He noted that when Tickle Me Elmo was unveiled at the 1996 Toy Fair he never imagined the giggling, shaking, Sesame Street figure would be a big hit.

"But ticklish Elmo became one of those marketplace phenomenons that everyone at Toy Fair dreams about," Friedman said, adding that it was the No. 1 toy for a full year, spanning two Christmas seasons.

Parents making holiday toy budgets

STRETCH



NeeDohs may be hard to find this holiday season but Lyla Frabotta, 9, gave several other squishies a whirl, squeeze and stretch, including Master Toys' DROP (3-up, $6.99-$8.99), and found them to be just as much fun. **GINA JOSEPH - FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP**

Parents going to spend, but makers, retailers keenly aware of affordability concerns

By Gina Joseph
FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP

When Wendy Bacon saw gas prices skyrocket she worried how it would impact her family's business. "I thought we would have a slower year but people are still showing up," said the co-owner of Whistle Stop Hobby and Toys in St. Clair Shores, one of several specialty toy stores in Metro Detroit that have weathered more than a few economic storms over the years. Bacon believes one reason is that there are toys for every budget.

"I carry something in every price point and whether a parent has $15 to spend or $25 there is still something substantial in their price range," said Bacon, whose father, Richard Claggett, opened the first store in 1969.

Bacon said she also believes there's no stopping a parent's quest for toys.

Nori Klar concurs.

"Parents want their children to be happy," said the co-owner of Toyology Toys, a Detroit-area toy store with locations in Bloomfield Hills and West Bloomfield. "So they're going to spend money on toys."

In the United States that amounts to about $329 per child, with nearly three-quarters of families capping annual toy spending at $500 or less, according to a report by ToyByAge.com, an independent gift guide for U.S. shoppers. "By the time a child turns 13, cumulative toy spending reaches roughly $4,300 based on these averages."

Those numbers reflect national data, but the right amount for parents will depend upon their budget, their child's age and how strategically they spend.

"Research shows that 59% of children play with a maximum of 10 toys out of their collection, meaning excess spending often produces unused clutter," according to ToyByAge.com. "Babies for example need far fewer toys than the infant toy market suggests."

The basics might include high-contrast cards or a book

See **BUDGET** on Page B4

Many thanks!

Cheers to another successful toy test.

The stories and reviews in Sunday's editions help parents navigate the season's hot toy lists. Yes, Virginia, it's been our newsroom tradition since digital, collectible and franchise toys like Tamagotchi, Beanie Babies and Power Ranger Turbo Toys premiered at the New York Toy Fair. While it's readers that got us started years ago, it's the work of many today that continue to make the endeavor a success.

This includes toy manufacturers across the United States and around the world who jumped through many hoops to deliver their toys on time or the public relations teams who follow up on queries and take the late night calls about product pricing or toys missing parts.

Thank you.

Of course our reviews would not be possible were it not for our team of toy-testing tykes, teachers and parents, representing several generations, who volunteer to provide honest opinions.

Among the teams participating this year was Clintondale Community Schools' Rainbow Early Childhood Center, Clintondale High School and McGlinnen Elementary, whose staff, including Principal Jamie Lampasona; Amanda Madson, student council advisor; Michelle Hakim, behavior coach; Suzie Woda, math coach; Courtney Kerr, PTO parent; and Kathy Slawinski, teacher and McGlinnen Student Council advisor.

Also part of the team once again was Darrin Winkler and his students at Pierce Elementary in Birmingham and joining the program for the first time this year, Akoya Behavioral Health, who gathered a group to try out some of our sensory toys for children with special needs. Lastly, a special thanks to our own kids who tackle the toys that come in late, need more time or have yet to find a tester.

Five stars to all of you!



Graphics courtesy Metro Editorial Services

> Spin Master's Jurassic World Primal Hatch Interactive Dinosaur (5-up, $38.99).

What if ...



Who knows? Maybe one of the suggestions from our panel of toy testers will make its debut at the Toy Fair in New York City. **PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TOY ASSOCIATION**

What toy would you create in Santa's workshop?

By Gina Joseph
FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP

Over the years toy manufacturers have insisted they follow product reviews for feedback and not only as a means of improving their products but to get ideas for the next holiday season.

So, we started asking our toy testers to think about what kind of toy they would invent if they worked in Santa's North Pole Workshop and anything was possible:— Brock Cairns, 3, said he would create a build-your-own dinosaur set just like Mr. Potato Head, except it would be Tyrannosaurus rex.— Jack Culver, 8, said he would build a vending machine that has whatever you want for free.— Avery Cairns, 6, a dancer herself, said she would create a ballerina doll that stands on her toes without falling and dances to music.— Rowan Cairns, 9, said she would create a magnetic puzzle that changes shapes when you twist it.

Our preschoolers who tested some of the squishy toys including pancakes and butter said they would create a full menu of breakfast squishies including waffles with lots of toppings.

Boroka Purger and Adriana David said they would create a basketball players' version of "Guess Who" the two-player board game in which players guess the identity of the other's chosen character.

One preschool class told their teacher they would create a park where Peppa Pig could ride her bike complete with little roads, bridges and a playground.

Eloise Kuzatkos, Scarlett Levine, Amanda Tsakalak and Itariel Marcelis said they would build a "Best Friends Robot" who was really nice and helpful. It would get things for you or play games and not always win.



Brock Cairns, 3, our test pilot for Miller Boys Vintage Toys wooden airplane said he would make a build-your-own dinosaur set just like Mr. Potato Head. **GINA JOSEPH — FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP**



> Moosh-Moosh Holiday Collection from K2A Brands (3-99, $14.99).

BUDGET

From Page 1

($8-$15), soft rattles or teethers ($5-$10), an activity gym or play mat ($25-$140), board books ($5-$8) and possibly a crib mobile or toy ($20-$50).

As the report by ToyByAge explains, the wide price range in activity gyms accounts for most of the budget variation. The Lovevery Play Gym ($140) is a premium option with developmental guides. Budget alternatives from Fisher-Price and Infantino ($25-$50) serve the same core purpose.

To this a parent might add something like Fat Brain's Spin Again (0-2, $39.99), a colorful tower of rings that's fun, durable and promotes hand-eye coordination and baby engineering skills or a toy they can cuddle such as Madame Alexander's Sweet Smiles Kitty ($49.99) and Wild Republic's Red Panda Huggers ($9.99).

Each age group will have specific toys that encourage newfound interests and skills such as building blocks for toddlers; open-ended and pretend play toys for preschoolers; board games and STEM kits for schoolchildren, ages 5-8, or craft kits and musical instruments for tweens and teens.

Many toy manufacturers are also parents so they are aware of the need to create toys that are affordable.

Albert Hakim said Watchitude's Tag'd watch was especially designed with parents in mind as it's designed to hold an Apple AirTag, so parents get peace of mind without a monthly bill.

"Other kids' GPS watches cost $80—$100 and need a SIM card plan to work," said Hakim, owner and founder of Watchitude.

Brian Bernstein of Jasey's Toy Chest, whose company works to honor his late son, Jason (Jasey), by supporting youth mental health through partnerships with supportive organizations like the Kids Mental Health Foundation and The Jed Foundation (JED), said they have more flexibility when it comes to price points because they are a family-led brand.

"We don't have shareholders so there's no quarterly average report driving us," said the maker of the award-winning On-the-Go Wooden Workbench (12-months-up, $89.99).

Jasey's workbench is a little pricey but it's loaded with features that grow with a child, from taking his/her first steps to learning about gears and how to tell time. Jasey's wood toys also have excellent resale value, a bonus for many parents who are supplementing their wish list with used toys.

"These are all used but they still look new," said Cheryl Herrick of Ye Olde Toy Shoppe in St. Clair Shores, while pulling several preschool toys made by Fisher-Price and Melissa & Doug off the shelf. "I think they're just better made than a lot of toys, so they can be handed down from one child to the next."

Herrick said kids that used to shop with their parents are now bringing their own kids to the specialty store that carries both new and used toys and they're buying trucks, playsets, scooters, wagons and ride-alongs they loved as a child.

How about that cool plastic coupe? Who doesn't know someone who cruised the neighborhood in one of those plastic cars you push with your feet?

New versions can still be found in stores but some parents, tackling their holiday wish list strategically, are also finding big ticket items on social media sites such as eBay or Facebook Marketplace.

Nikki Johnson of Mount Clemens is one savvy shopper.

She wanted to get her 2-year-old son a Step 2 Up & Down Roller Coaster Ride On Toy (3-up, $160) but it was a little more than she wanted to spend so she hopped online and ended up finding one for $70.

"I'm so excited. It was used but it's in great shape," Johnson said, her tone revealing a parent excited for Christmas morning. "I know he's going to love it."

TIPS FOR PARENTS

Having a plan can help to make the job of finding the perfect toy for your child and your budget easier. Here are a few tips from experts in the industry and savvy parents:

- Buy open-ended toys with no specific outcome such as building blocks, dolls, magnetic tiles, STEM toys such as telescopes and remote control cars.
- Watch for sales and discounts and keep an eye on secondhand stores and social media sites.
- Don't go overboard. Besides what Santa Claus brings, think about one big item and a few smaller ones. Fidget toys and squishies are a great way to supplement a child's list.
- Check out your local toy library. Many libraries will allow their patrons to borrow a PlayStation console or check out popular video games for PlayStation, Nintendo Switch or Xbox X. So purchase one item and then rent the other.

BEST OF THE BEST

Every February, the newest toys of the season are paraded through the booths at Toy Fair in New York City. By Christmastime many of these squishy, fidget, gadgets, games and gizmos have already earned recognition among their peers in the global toy community. But every child, like every toy, is different. To help parents narrow their search for a toy their child might love, MediaNews Group has compiled a list of hot new toys and what's being said about them. Some of the reviews were provided by a team of toy-testing tykes, while others were suggested by parents and other experts in the field.

INFANT AND UP

Merry Roll Along (0-12-months, $48) from Miller Boys Vintage Toys features cute characters and wheels that gently roll with a baby's push encouraging little ones to crawl. Meghan, a teacher and parent, loved using the toy to interact with her 7-month-old and the animal sounds that it made. Five stars!

Animal and Friends Wooden Stacking Train (12-months-up, $29.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest was a big hit with Landyn, 168months, who loved switching up the cars featuring cute animal characters. Mom said she liked the interchangeable parts but said the triangles were tricky.

Look At Me! Little Explorer's Babies First Mirror (0-12-months-up, $24) from Miller Boys Vintage Toys is made of a soft wood so babies like the feel of it in their small hands. Oh baby, how our 18-month-old toy tester loved seeing himself in the mirror.

First Friends Bizzikins: Rosie the Gardener (12-months-up, $37.50) from Aleni Brands is both a doll and busy book created for little hands and big imaginations. It was such a hit with our group of toy testers, who work with children with special needs they're planning to order all of the dolls in the line including: Annie the Pet Sitter, Max the Astronaut and Poppy the Forest Ranger. Five stars!

WWII Classic P-51 Mustang Wood Toy Airplane (1-3, $28) from Miller Boys Vintage Toys is small and sturdy. Brock, our 3-year-old test pilot, took it for a few spins in the air and in the back of his Tonka Steel Classics 4X4 Pickup Truck (3-up, $26.68). He loved that the propeller and wheels move. Mom said it's a simple toy but perfect for a 3-year-old. Its design and historical details also make it a great decoration for a bookshelf or desk when the little pilot has outgrown the toy. Five stars!

Magnetic Personalized Letter Train (1-3, $24) from Miller Boys Vintage Toys starts with an engine and caboose, to which you add letter cars that magnetically link together to spell out your baby conductor's name. Our toy testing-toddlers, Landyn, and Zoey, liked it but it was Zoey's brother Christopher, 5, who had the most fun, playing with the train and showing Zoey how to spell her name. It's pricey but a toy that will last from one generation to the next. Five stars!

Wooden Farm Easy-Grip Peg Puzzle (18-months-up,$17.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest features four colorful farm animal pieces with easy-to-grip pegs. Landyn, 18-months, loved the puzzle but still had some trouble getting the pieces in the grooves so his brothers helped him out. His mom said it would be ideal for ages 2 or 3. Oppenheim Toy Portfolio Gold Seal Award!

Happy Farm Shape Recognition Stackable Puzzle Truck Horse Trailer (12-months-3, $85) from Miller Boys Vintage Toys, nominated for the 2026 Aastra Play Award, is another wooden toy that's built to last and sure to be passed down from one generation to the next. Meghan, a second-grade teacher, said her 5-year-old son had some difficulty lining up the shapes but that's what she loved about the toy. It teaches alignment, shapes and perseverance. Five stars!

Tummykins (12-months-up, $18.50) from Wild Republic was first thought to be a beaver but the friendly looking creature is a capybara and member of the rodent family. Our toy testing-tyke loved the feel of the plush made of faux mink fabrics and recycled materials. Also from Wild Republic is **Poppykins Mini Highland Cow (infant-up, $24.95)**, a soft and cuddly plush liken to Scotland's Highland cow. What's cool about this plush is it's also a fidget toy featuring a pop belly.

Wooden Magnetic Mix & Match People (2-up, $19.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest comes with 10 pieces that fit together to create an astronaut, police officer, chef, doctor, and a firefighter or something else. Our group of preschoolers loved the toy and found it very funny being able to put a firefighter's hat on a doctor. Their teachers said they heard a lot of giggles from the group mixing up all the different outfits. Five stars!

Pipes & Tubes & Cogs Building Bath Toy Bundle (12-months-up, $42.99) from Boon is designed for little bathers, but any child who still loves having fun in the tub is likely to enjoy creating waterfalls using interchangeable pipes, tubes and cogs. Our toy tester, Christopher, 5, was given this toy when he was a toddler and loved the new version just as much.



< Animal and Friends Wooden Stacking Train (12-months-up, $29.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest.



3 AND UP

See It Stick it, Sight Words (ages 3-7, $21.99) from Mrs. Wordsmith accelerates a child's reading with colorful and fun stickers for every word. Our second-grade toy testers loved the stickers and how it uses a QR code to read the words. They said they would like to see something similar for math. Five stars!

Kids Book Projector (3-up, $75) from Luna Storytime was a big hit with our toy testers. Landyn, 18-months, listened to the read-aloud stories with his brother, Jack, 8, both of whom enjoyed their time together, especially seeing the story projected on the wall. Another 2-year-old tester also enjoyed seeing the stories come to life. Their parents' only problem was the volume was too loud.

Wooden Little Doc's Medical Kit (3-up, $29.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest was a big hit with all of our preschool testers. They loved pretending to be doctors and taking care of each other. In fact they had so much fun they would like to see the elves make a big, colorful pretend hospital with beds, doctor tools, an ambulance and even a little X-ray machine to go with it. Five stars!

Moosh-Moosh Holiday Collection (3-99, $14.99) from K2A Brands is a cool group of squishy toys for children and even adults. Our fourth-grade testers, Juliana and Alaya, said there's nothing to dislike about these fluffy and soft toys. Characters in the collection are inspired by Christmas-themes including Jack, Yuki, Mitzy, Eduard and Mintie.

Peppa Pig Ready, Pedal Go (3-up, $39.99) from Hasbro had all of our preschool toy testers wanting to give it a try. They loved making Peppa ride her bike. She fell off a couple of times and they found that frustrating, so Santa's elves need to improve on that, but overall the toy was a big hit. They enjoyed the bright colors, fun sounds and watching Peppa pedal. Five stars!

Off to the Rescue Vehicle Carrier (3-up,$24.99) is another award-winning toy made by Jasey's Toy Chest. Our preschool toy testers loved driving the little cars up and down the ramp, pretending they were delivering them to different places. They especially loved seeing how many cars they could fit on the carrier, which comes with four wooden emergency vehicles. One tip for the elves: add something to keep the cars in place. Five stars! Oppenheim Toy Portfolio Gold Seal Award Winner!

Bluey Cruise Ship Playset (3-up, $59.99) from Moose Toys comes with 5 play pieces and five play areas. Our preschool toy testers had great fun playing with the slide and pretending Bluey was sailing across the ocean on a cruise vacation. Five stars!



Bluey Cruise Ship Playset (3-up, $59.99) was a big hit with all of our preschool toy testers including Nathan Sage, 4, at left, and Martez Shelton, 3, who loved pretending Bluey was sailing across the ocean on a cruise vacation. **PHOTO COURTESY OF CLINTONDALE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

Drop (3-up, $8.99), as in gooey, stretchy gum drop is one of several in a line of squishy toys from Master Toys. Others from this company include: **Holiday Qubes ($7.99)** and squishy food such as **Slow Rise Pancakes, Sprinkle Donut, Macaroons ($10.99)** or **Squishy Trend Dill Pickle (3-up, $4.99)**. Our preschoolers loved playing with the soft and squishy pancakes and butter. Their teacher said they had fun squeezing the food and watching it slowly return to their original shape. They couldn't stop touching them. Five stars!

Wooden Busy Wheels Garage Playset (3-up, $84.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest was a big hit with our toy testing tykes. Their preschool teachers said the children absolutely loved watching the little cars race down the ramps and pretending that they were parking their cars and going on little adventures. The elevator was a big hit too. Tips for the elves: Make the elevator a little easier for smaller hands and add a few more cars so everyone can join in the fun.

Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: Re-Ignition Ultimate Megazord Electronic Figure (3-up, $29.97) by Playmates Toys. Our toy testers CJ and Roman loved the cool weapons and the noises it made but said its hands need to be bigger in order to hold the swords.

Clickblocks Kinetic Puzzle (3-10, $15) from Watchitude is a cool new toy that kids can use to build six different puzzles. Designs include: Dinosaurs, Sweet Treats, Flying Machines and Unicorns. Rowan, 9, liked how the pieces click together to form a cube and that one puzzle can become another, and another. Fourth-graders, Scarlett and Max, loved that it was both challenging and fun. Older kids might also enjoy the bigger 27-piece Clickblocks puzzle. Five stars!

4 AND UP

Tag'd 2 trackable watch (3-up, $19.99) From Watchitude was a big hit with several of our toy testing-parents. They liked that it was a working watch for kids and that it keeps track of its location, providing peace of mind for parents and safe independence for the child. The watch also uses **Apple Airtag (sold separately, $23.99)** Rather than a monthly subscription, which also makes it affordable. The kids loved the variety of cool designs including: hammerhead sharks(blue) and unicorn love (pink). One tip for santa's elves. Make the strap longer and add a user's guide for changing the battery. Five stars!

Marvel Legends Series Spider-Man: Brand New Day (4-up, $27.99) from Hasbro was a big hit with our second-grade toy testers, cj and roman. They loved that the action figure and collectible from the series that celebrates the hero working to keep new york city safe shoots webs. Suggestion for santa's elves: add a button to release the web instead of having to twist the action figure.

Dreamworks How To Train Your Dragon Trial Of Flame: Deluxe Action Viking Ship (4-up $32.99) from Spin Master is a viking's ship that kids can pretend to sail across the ocean or transform into a playset. Lanarvis, 6, loved the cannon and played with nothing else. Moms will love that it comes with many accessories, including action figures from the movie, that can all be stored away in the ship. Five stars!

Slap Watch (5-10, $25) from Watchitude, features cool designs for kids who want to tell time and express themselves. It was a big hit with avery, 7, who didn't want to take it off when the test was over. Our fourth-grade toy testers also liked that it's both a slap bracelet and a watch. The fashionable watches with spunk come in several designs including: army camo (green), sharks camo (blue) and donut panda (mint green and pink).

Littlest Pet Shop Like Nastya Besties Bag Charms (4-up, $9.99) from Basic Fun gives young diy besties everything they need to make a cute bag charm. Our toy tester was very excited to make the charm but could not get the string to stay in a knot, even with help from an adult.



Bluey Splash Time Game (4-up, $19.99) from Spin Master had the preschoolers laughing and wondering who would get splashed next. Their teachers said the kids absolutely loved the game and being that it featured bluey made it even better. Five stars!

Hex Bots Alive Inside Explodapede (4-up, $29.99) Is remote control toy **from Spin Master** that rolls into a ball and then explodes into a centipede that slithers along. It's an r/c toy but also has an autonomous motion setting, which delighted our second-grade toy testers, cj and roman. One tip for santa's elves: it needs to be a little scarier.

Barbie Magic Style Studio (4-up, $34.99) from Mattel features 100 plus outfit combos for fans who want to style, design or play with the iconic fashionista doll. Our fourth-grade tester, campbell, enjoyed the toy, especially since no assembly was required.

Little Live Pets Magical Dragon (ages 4-7, $49.97) from Moose Toys was a big hit with our toy tester who loved everything about this interactive toy. It's cute. It's cuddly and it features 60 sounds and reactions to feeding, cuddling or just playing around.

Blah Blah Blah Card Game (ages 4-7, $29.99) from Mrs. Wordsmith Phonics is a card game developed by teachers and phonics experts and a big hit with our second-graders and their teacher who said it was fun to play. They also learned a lot of words helped by a qr code and three levels of play. Five stars!

Jurassic World Primal Hatch Interactive Toy Dinosaur (5-up, $38.99) from Spin Master was awarded action figure of the year at the new york toy fair and for good reason. It's an interactive dinosaur that hatches from an egg and can be trained by kids. Tristian, our second-grade toy tester loved how the dinosaur hatched from the egg and the sounds it made. He said given more time to play with it he probably would have loved many other things as well. Five stars! The toy association's action figure toy of the year.

Word Treasures: A Pirate's Adventure Game (5-up, $24.90) from Starlux Games is a pirate's adventure that can be played indoors and outdoors. The kit features six different pirate themed games, a treasure map and a pirate's booty (gem). Our fourth-grade toy testers thought the puzzle was cool and fun to assemble. They also liked how colorful and detailed the pictures were.

Knead That Sushi: Mystery Squishy Plush (4-99, $14.99) from Watchitude is three toys wrapped in a delicious-looking package. It's a fidget toy but a mystery until opened, a squishy with a soft center and a plush toy. Knead that ice cream is another version of the squishy. Each design features nine mystery box collectibles (8 common, one rare). One of our toy testers said she loves that fidget and squishy toys are allowed in school. When asked what santa could do to mprove the ice cream squishy one of our fourth-grade toy testers said,"nothing, just make sure he puts it under my christmas tree."



A Wooden Magnetic Mix & Match People (2-up, $19.99) from Jasey's Toy Chest.

6 AND UP

Gui-Gui Mega Slime Haul (6-up, $32.99) from Moose Toys makes yucky beautiful. The kit comes with four slimes and 50 pieces to accessorize the gooey stuff including cool tools, charms and figurines. Our fourth-grade toy testers, Campbell, Scarlett and Alexandra loved the texture of the slime and that it was stretchy but Campbell disliked that it was sticky. Moms will love that it comes in a durable carrying case. Tip for Santa's elves: Add some cases to store the slime.

Turbo Loop Track (6-up, $34.99) from Smartivity is a kit that lets children create a high-velocity, customized car track. Its features include a car and plane launcher along with accessories like a race car and glider plane. Fourth-graders, Noah and Jack, said there's a lot of pieces to assemble but enjoyed building the loop, especially since it was mostly done with rubber bands. Five Stars STEM Toy!

Olympia Doll and Story Collection (ages 6-12, $54.99,) from OZ Creations brings ancient legends about the world's first super-heroines to life for today's generation. Each doll is paired with accessories, a symbolic companion and an illustrated story. Our toy testers, Avery, 7, and Reese, 8, were a little too young to understand some of the wording in the stories but loved playing with the dolls including Artemis The Greek Goddess of the Woods and Arthena Greek Goddess of Wisdom and War. They also liked the idea that Artemis and Athena were girls who were hunters and protectors. Campbell, who played with Venus the Roman Goddess said the doll was pretty realistic. Tip for Santa's elves: Make it so Athena's owl can sit on her shoulder and instead of hard plastic make the bag for Artemis' arrows out of fabric so the arrows stay in better. Five stars!

Rubik's Rush: Find The Line, Solve in Time (7-up,$19.97) from Spin Master is a challenge and likely a good choice for an older child more familiar with the workings of a Rubik's cube. Our fourth-grade toy testers liked the sounds that it made and the color choices but couldn't figure out how to play the game.

OneZZZ Animals (6-up,) from Spin Master is a new grouping of collectibles inspired by creatures such as pandas, butterflies and sharks that serve as tiny companions for desks, shelves, bags, and personal spaces. The girls in Mr. Winkler's second-grade class loved them. Each package comes with one surprise figure from a collection of 13.

Dizzy Dreidel (7-up, $9.99) from Hootenanny Games is a card game inspired by the festive season of Hanukkah. Our fourth-grade toy testers said they had fun with the cool and different cards. Tip for Santa's elves: Make the directions easier to understand.

KPop Demon Hunters HUNTR/X Light Stix (6-up, $14.99) from Hasbro is a light-up accessory for kids who want to express their HUNTR/X fandom with pride or dress up their KPop Demon Hunters costume. Naomi, our second-grade toy tester loved that the sword lights up but said it would have been even better with sounds.

Transformers Cyberworld Energon Surge Bumblebee Power Spark (6-up, $54.99) is a giant robotic figure that transforms from an action figure to a car toy. Kids love Transformers but they sometimes require an adult's help to make the transition from a car to an action figure, as in the case of our second-grade toy tester.

Tech Deck Free Riders Extreme Playset (5-up, $29.97) from Spin Master features an exclusive skateboard rider that can do flips and at least seven other tricks on a motorized fingerboard playset.



First Friends Bizzikins: Rosie the Gardener (12-months-up, $37.50) from Aleni Brands.



Blooms by Play-Doh Garden Bouquet (8-up, $39.99) from Hasbro.



Avery Cairns, 7, at left, and Reese Wood, 8, were both excited about the Olympia Doll and Story Collection (6-12, $54.99) including Artemis The Greek Goddess of the Woods and Athena Greek Goddess of Wisdom and War. **GINA JOSEPH — FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP**

8 AND UP

Sneaky Scallywags Bluff Your Way to Bounty! (8-up, $24.99) from Hootenanny Games was a big hit with our fourth-grade toy testers, who said it was super fun and creative. All of the cards and pieces including gold coins and badges come in a nifty treasure pouch adding to its appeal. Five stars!

Solar Flower Ruby Ripple (8-up, $24.99) from Thames & Kosmos is a building set with flower power. Each kit comes with all of the pieces, and there are lots of them, to create a motorized flower model with moving petals, powered by a solar panel. It took a long time but with the help of her engineering father, Alayna, 14, was able to complete the project. Alayna wasn't especially thrilled with the toy but her dad, who was fond of model kits as a kid, loved the time they spent together. Five Stars STEM Toy!

CrunchLabs by Mark Rober: The Crunchinator (ages 8-13, $34.99) by Moose Toys combines science and fun to create a toy that lets kids crunch, smash, squeeze and pop everyday objects like a pop can or banana. Our fourth-grade toy testers, Max and Calvin had trouble figuring out how to turn the top but once they figured it out had great fun with the toy. Tip for Santa's elves: Include some things to crunch.

Capture The Flag Redux (ages 8-12, $59.99) from Starlux Games puts a spin on the classic flag game with glow-in-the-dark accessories. Darrin Winkler's entire fourth-grade class played the game together and loved everything about it; the easy directions, illuminating lights and that it can be played, day or night, although they had more fun playing it in the dark. Winkler also praised the packaging and high quality pieces. Tip for Santa's elves: include more game bracelets. Five stars! Family Choice and Creative Child Awards Game of the Year!

National Geographic World Wonders: Earth's Most Awesome Place (8-up, $39.99) VR STEM activity kit from Abacus Brands got mixed reviews from our fourth-graders. While they loved that it is both a virtual reality toy and a hands-on building toy, which was both challenging and fun, they did not like that it requires a cellphone. Still, tweens are likely to enjoy learning about the wonders of the world and the thrill of recreating amazing structures like Rome's Colosseum. Future paleontologists might also enjoy **National Geographic Extinction: Dinosaur ($39.99) VR STEM** toy.



Glow Battle (8-up, $39.90) is an award-winning toy from Starlux Games designed to keep kids active. Our fourth-grade teacher said the game requires no assembly. Just open the box and play. He loved that it requires lots of movement and how very bright glowing sticks and swords were making nighttime games even more fun. Note: The swords and sticks are made of foam but he still had to remind his Ninja warriors to be careful around other players.

The Music Machine Engineering STEM and STEAM Wooden Building Set (8-up, $88) from Smartivity is an amazing toy. Mason, our 13-year-old toy tester, who is an avid builder and musician, found the toy to be challenging and fun. He had to redo the construction after making a mistake but remained determined to see it through and the results were funtastic. His younger brothers loved the songs that he composed using the machine's mechanisms including Jingle Bells. Five Stars STEM Toy!

Ultimate Marble City (8-up, $34.99) from Smartivity is inspired by the old pinball machines. The kit, which comes with all of the materials needed to build a fully functional marble game from scratch, was the favorite toy tested by our fourth-grade class. John and Nathan said it was difficult to build but loved what they created and had fun playing with the game when they were done. Five stars!



V8 Race Car (10-99, $35.99) from Thames & Kosmos would appear perfect for any kid from the Motor City. However, as our 10-year-old toy tester and his grandmother learned along the way, it's a complicated project that requires a mechanical savvy adult or experience in building motorized vehicles. Each kit comes with parts to build a motorized model car with V8 engine, gearshift, differential and shocks.

Dice Words from Thames & Kosmos (8-up, $10.66) is a tabletop game that has players combining skills, luck and speed to win the game. Our fourth-grade toy testers did not like all of the pieces and found the directions difficult to understand but said it was still interesting and fun to learn.

The Crew Journey to the Ends of the Earth (10-up, $14.95) from Kosmos got a thumbs up from Elizabeth Driscoll's group of eleventh-grade toy testers, who found it interesting and fun to play. A few found the game a bit confusing at first and that it took too long to play but overall it was well received. Five stars!

Storyteller's Card Game (7-up, $17.99) from Mrs. Wordsmith teaches kids rich, descriptive vocabulary to help them write brilliant stories using storycard prompts to fire up their imagination. Our fourth-grade toy testers who enjoyed playing the game said they loved the cards. The pictures were funny and cool, they said.

Hydraulic Boxing Bots from Thames & Kosmos ($35.99) is geared for 10-year-olds who have help or 12-year-olds who are keen builders. The STEM educational kit Builders learn about the physics, design and components of hydraulic mechanisms, including gears, cylinders and pistons. Mason, 13, was anxious to test the toy but he did not have the right tools. Tip: Santa's elves need to add a diagonal wire cutter to the parts included.

My Little Pony Card Game: Friendships Begin (10-up, $24.99) from Hasbro and Kayou is a new trading card game for pony fans. The game comes in a variety of packs including: Pinkie Pie, Twilight (purple) and Applejack (orange). Players can also purchase **five-card booster packs ($4.99)**.

Realtalk Fourth Wing (16-up, $19.95) from Kosmos has players ranking each other according to questions related to the Empyrean universe. It didn't go over with the toy testers from our afterschool high school program but they were all strangers. They said it would be great for a group of people who know each other and have history.

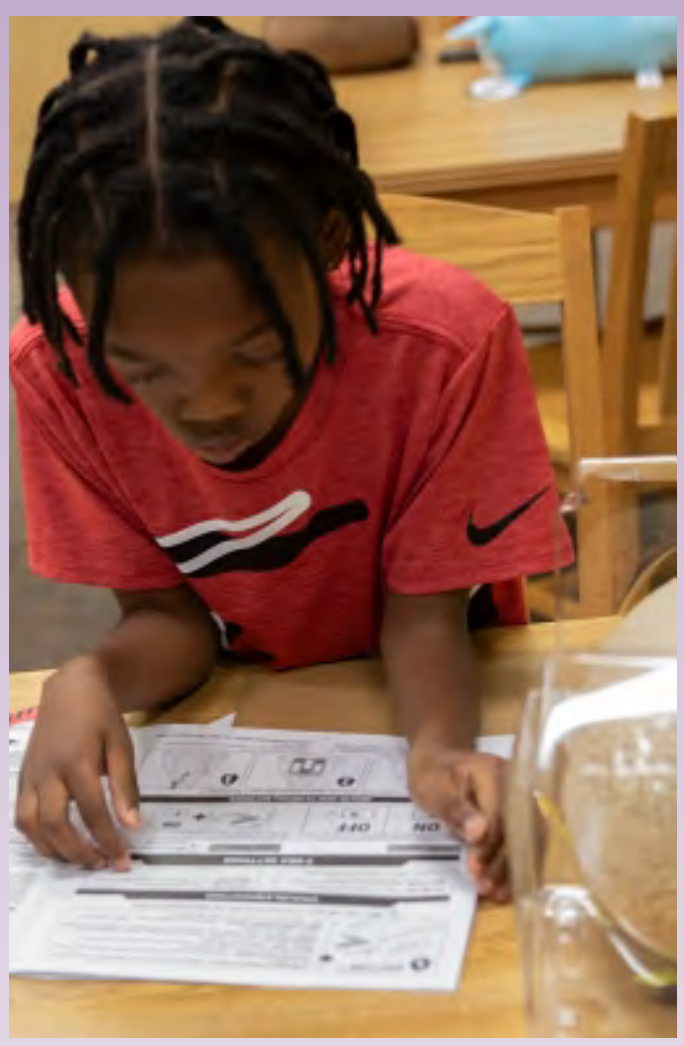
Solar System (8-up, $29.99) from Smartivity is a kit that young astronomers can use to build a functioning solar system model. Our fourth-grade toy testers, Weston and Jacob, said they loved building the model and then cranking the gears to see how the eight planets in their model revolve around the sun. Five stars STEM toy







Fourth-grade toy testers, Juliana Hillard, at left, and Alaya Walker loved everything about Little Live Pets Magical Dragon (4-7, $49.97) from Moose Toys. **PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLINTONDALE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**



Jurassic World Primal Hatch Interactive Toy Dinosaur (5-up, $38.99) from Spin Master was named Action Figure of the Year at the New York Toy Fair and for good reason, according to our second-grade toy tester, Tristan McIntyre.

Introducing...

This year's reviews include kidult toys, an industry term used to describe toys that adults might like for themselves. The category has been around for a while, starting with collectors but its recent growth is attributed to a portion of the population who are motivated by nostalgia, fandom, creativity, or stress relief or just a general desire to have fun.

> Power Glow Dr. Doom ($29.99) from Hasbro.



BIG KIDS

Our toy testers were all impressed with the new line of gadgets and **gizmos from Watchitude including: Spin Cube (ages 5-99, $15.99)** is a metal fidget spinner and one of several new gizmos and gadgets from the company creating toys for play or stress relief and focus enhancement. Others in the fidget line include: **Key Bored ($9.99)**, got to love the name of this keychain featuring computer keyboard keys that light up; **Spin Off ($14.99)** featuring interchangeable tires in three different colors; **Gear Spinner ($14.99)** a super cool metal fidget toy that looks like a real gear; **Endless Bubble Wrap to Go ($16.99)**, featuring a square of bubble wrap on a keychain; **Click-Key Blocks ($15)**; and **Sushi and Icecream Clickblocks ($5.99)**, which are tiny surprise fidgets in a bag. All of these earned a thumbs up from our toy testers, be it schoolchildren, young professionals or college students looking for something they can take to class that's small enough to fit in their pocket. Five spinning stars!

Stack & Learn Coasters ($25) from Playcor are decorative accessories that also serve as infant toys. The fashionable line made of 100% food-grade silicone also includes: **Wooden Sensory Balls ($30), Chain Link Teether ($22), Scalloped Rattle Catch Bowl ($25) and a Play and Display Book (3-up, $42)**. Both of our toy-testing-parents loved the concept. Rachel said her daughter, 19-months, had fun playing with the black coasters, featuring numbers and shapes, but the wooden sensory balls ended up under the couch. Her son, 5, was also able to take one of the balls apart, exposing a screw, so they probably need to be glued. Dawn, another toy-testing-parent loved the play book saying it encourages creativity and storytelling. She had one suggestion for the elves: Include a fashionable easel with the book.

Poppykins Axolotl (0-99, $47.99) is a large pink plush toy **from Wild Republic**. It's made from recycled water bottles but is irresistibly soft and features fidget popper feet, which is why it's a cool gift for a child or adult. Also part of this unique line of plush sensory toys are **Mini Poppykins ($24.99)**.

Mini Brands Really Works Vinyl Playset by Zuru ($19.97) is actually a miniature record player and Bruno Mars mini vinyl record. Kids who collect Mini Brands might like it but adults are lovin' it. Pair this gift with a Mini Brand Capsule featuring other musical artists such as Katy Perry, Kendrick Lamar, Fall Out Boy, and Chappell Roan. Five stars!

Power Glow Dr. Doom ($29.99) from Hasbro got a glowing review from our toy testing adult, who is an avid fan of Dr. Doom. He was impressed with its size and details and said the design bridges the gap between play features and collectible display value. The main feature of the LED green glow around the eyes is very cool. The figure also features some limited articulation and has a missile that can be loaded and fired from Doom's hand. Kids will love that and Doom's cloak, which expands to resemble wings. Our tester said the level of detail on the figure itself along with the amount of cool things it can do make it exactly the kind of action figure I would be begging my parents for at Christmastime. Five stars!

Blooms by Play-Doh Garden Bouquet (8-up, $39.99) from Hasbro was very nostalgic for our toy testing adult as it reminded her of the wonderful hours that she spent as a child playing with Play-Doh. She said the set was incredibly fun, easy to use and the flowers it created were beautiful. She liked the variety of flowers that can be made using the mold provided and the dough's colors and flexibility. She also found the set to be affordable in comparison to many other creative building toys. Five stars!

King of Tokyo Godzilla (59.99) from Blue Orange USA is a hot game for young adults or a great addition to family game night. Also on the hot list for game night among friends is **Exploding Kittens: The Board Game ($24.99)**, which won Game of the Year at the New York Toy Fair.

The Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time ($69.99) for Nintendo Switch 2 is among the hot games millennials have been clamoring to get since its release Nov. 5. Many adults who have played both the original Nintendo 64 version and the 3Ds remake are genuinely impressed with what Nintendo has created just in time for Christmas.

Create Your Custom Photo Puzzle ($39.99) from Mypuzzle.com was a big hit with our toy tester, who took one of her favorite photos and turned it into a puzzle that both she and her kids can build together. Sports shots, scenery, funny faces, or favorite pets, just upload the photo, add the text you want to say on the box, and wait for the 100-piece puzzle to arrive. Choose from a variety of color backgrounds.

