

Kids and toys help make spirits bright

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As the holiday season approaches, a smile creeps up on most parents' faces. We don't know exactly where this little bit of joy comes from, but it likely has to do with our kids.

My mother always associated Christmas with children and her own youth and family traditions. In her day, gifts were never the centrepiece of the celebrations. It was the awe that was Christmas, the music, food, and family gatherings. Put simply, it was love and that indescribable feeling of mystery that permeates the season.

In her youth, kids were given one special toy and they cherished that single item (usually their favourite) with all their might.

If we close our eyes tightly, I think we can all remember that one or two really neat toys from our childhood. In my era, Hot Wheels were always a solid choice and I never tired of making these cars whiz down that orange track. The best was, of course, Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots which arrived in the mid-1960s and saw a resurrection in the 2000s.

Any parent who has children knows full well the evolution of toys in our midst. Any trip down the aisle of any retailer will expose you to a cornucopia of modern wonders ??playthings that were unimaginable a decade ago.

Kids today have it made. I have yet to shed my inner child and I am often on the lookout for ?collectibles? on various online sites. My tastes centre around miniature model aircraft and spacecraft, typically available from Asian suppliers. ?To offer that unique item, there's always Shapeways or Sculpteo, on which designers provide plastic, laser-cut models of every description.

While toys themselves have changed, the joy around them has not.

Venerable toy and game distributor Hasbro offers a great lineup for the young and young at heart this holiday season.

There's a range of Play-Doh products and who among us doesn't remember that stuff, that dates back to the mid-1950s?

Marvel action figures abound and given their popularity lately, this fascination won't end any time soon. I'm sure there are adult collectors out there who buy them and display them in the package in their ?man caves.? Spider Man, Captain America and Guardians of the Galaxy seem to be fan favourites.

There's a line of Nerf products that continue to thrill young and not so young. These soft weapons are great for basement skirmishes among siblings. Trust me, it's one of the best ways for them to get their frustrations out and even bond! Zombies don't stand a chance in the face of the Zombie Strike lineup.

For the girls, the Nerf Rebelle line gives them all they need to take on their male counterparts. Believe it or not, these items can be quite empowering for my little, assertive girl child.

As the world is poised to welcome the latest installment of the Star Wars saga, toys and vehicles are front and centre. There are a host of action figures, light sabres, space ships and miniatures.

For the girls, there is a wide variety of playthings that will keep them busy long after the holidays fade away.

Baby Alive continues to be a popular choice.

Doh Vinci, a creative play set that provides hours of self-absorbed fun, is another great choice. My daughter enjoyed hers immensely.

Annual favourites, The Littlest Pet Shop, has proven its longevity. I remember when my first-born, who's now 17, enjoyed these

things. Our youngest is fond of them, too. The figures and sets have become even more colourful and elaborate.

Along a similar vein is My Little Pony figures, play sets and accessories.

Families who really 'get it,' will have a staple of games in their arsenal. Nothing brings a family together like a good meal, or a great board game.

There are some Disney-inspired Pop-Up Magic Games; old favourites and new twists.

The Game of Life is North America's first popular 'parlor game' that dates back to the 1860s. The modern version hit the shelves in 1960.

Monopoly speaks for itself as one of the most popular games ever. It has gone through several incarnations and some are quite interesting and exciting. The original is by far the best.

Scrabble is another family favourite and it's one of those games the kids enjoy and it never really gets old.

There's a new 'Twist,' with a hand-held electronic version.

There's also a new game, Pie Face. It's a very simple concept but it gives you the opportunity to see your entire family covered in whipped cream. How great is that?

Toys were created so human beings can take a few moments away from the hustle and bustle, and just enjoy themselves. It's been said that the more complex the mind, the greater the need for the simplicity of play.

How many of us simply want to unwind and entertain ourselves at the end of a hectic work day? That may involve a good book or a glass of wine, but it may also involve a round of Twister or Monopoly. And there's nothing wrong with getting down on the floor with your little one and exploring their worlds for a while.

I recommend it for everyone.