



Artistic Play

BY Suzanne Wright

In the 21st-century workplace, creativity is something of a required skill.

Inspire play now to build your child's resume later.



The 2014 Toy of the Year is hardly high-tech, but you might say it's gone viral.

With the Rainbow Loom, kids weave rubber bands into colorful creations using a plastic pegboard. The tool has become a digital sensation, as thousands of kids watch and post how-to videos on YouTube.


Damaris Oldham's 8-year-old daughter, Kaydance, is hooked. She uses her mom's iPad to watch videos and make colorful rubber bracelets for friends, family and teachers.

"She's using her creativity and her brain," says Oldham, of Connellsville, Pa. "It's better than sitting in front of the TV watching senseless stuff."

Oldham has been amazed at how quickly her daughter has picked up the jewelry-making skills and how much focus it requires. "There are a lot of steps to remember," says Oldham. "When she's making something there is a lot of frustration, but when she's finished, she brightens with excitement. She feels excellent about herself."

Confidence and pride are just two of the many positive outcomes that creative outlets — digital or hands-on — offer kids. Along with giving them an outlet for expressing emotion, children also learn to solve problems and develop skills. And because we learn from failure as much as from success, artistic play gives kids a safe place to fail. These skills serve kids throughout their lifetimes.

Though technology has long been synonymous with science, technology, engineering and math (the STEM subjects), increasingly art is recognized as a major transformer of our 21st-century economy. For digital natives — kids who have grown up with technology, as kids of today do — a whole new universe of play has opened up. »



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Parents like Oldham are understandably concerned about the increasing amount of screen time their kids log. But experts counter that fear.

"I love that kids are able to interact with and make their own content with the newest apps that are on the market," says Angela Santomero, creator of the award-winning kids' TV show *Blue's Clues*. "I especially push my own kids towards the more creative and empowering apps, as research continues to show that creativity is integral to academic, cognitive and socio-emotional success."

ROBIN RASKIN, FOUNDER and president of Living In Digital Times, agrees. Her organization puts on the Kids@Play Summit, a one-day conference and four-day exhibit that explores how technology is integral to the way kids learn and play.

She references the "maker movement" that has flourished online, as hits such as the Rainbow Loom show. The best high-tech tools are far from passive; they let kids imagine, build and share, she says.

Raskin acknowledges that some parents are nostalgic for a more idyllic childhood, but she doesn't see the dichotomy between traditional play and today's more technology-driven play.

"Good play experiences endure," Raskin says. "The characteristics of play — fun, open-ended and exploratory — don't change; the tools change."

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Hits like the Rainbow Loom highlight the "maker movement" that has flourished online.

Jody Sherman LeVos, director of LeapFrog's Learning Team, understands these changing tools. LeapFrog specializes in creating educational tablets, apps, toys and games that incorporate digital elements.

"Our philosophy is that technology and digital play can be part of a balanced 'diet' of experiences," she says.

When selecting digital tools for children, parents should look for toys that are age-appropriate, that build comprehensive skills and have ways to personalize learning, LeVos says. She also encourages parents to use third-party review sites, such as Common Sense Media, and ensure that sites and apps comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA), which protects children's online privacy.

"Economically, we need a nation of creators, and kids are naturally creative," says Raskin. "Technology is like breathing air for our kids — it's part of who they are and who they will become." ●

Nostalgia Goes Next Gen

High-tech versions of much-loved iconic toys have caught fire with a new generation of kids.

TONY BORDEN, DIGITAL CONSULTANT at Lionel Trains, helped the 114-year-old model train company develop its first iPad game, *Lionel Battle Train*.

"(Kids today) are consuming info quickly," says Borden. "As a result, play patterns have changed radically. The beauty of digital is that it allows for more engagement and more individual expression. It injects 'cool' into a play experience."

Lego also has gone digital. The company's research shows that parents concerned about screen time welcome the integration of physical and virtual play.

"Our Mindstorm robotics tool kit is a great example of how we marry physical and virtual play to enhance the building experience, allowing children to bring their creations to life through programming software," says Michael McNally, senior director, brand relations.

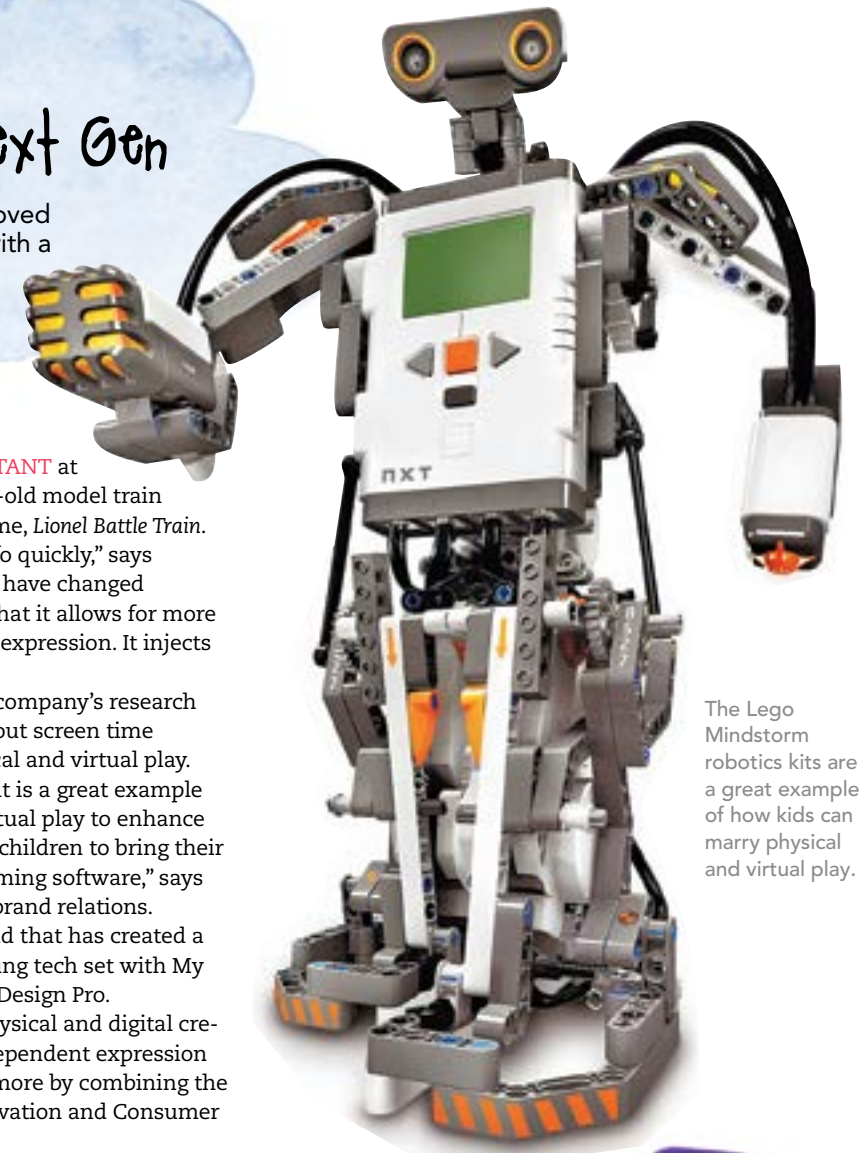
Crayola is another beloved brand that has created a digital play experience for the young tech set with My Virtual Fashion Show and Virtual Design Pro.

"Moms realize the benefit of physical and digital creative experiences and believe independent expression and creativity will be stimulated more by combining the two," says Sharon DiFelice of Innovation and Consumer Insights at Crayola.

DiFelice says digital play helps build essential 21st-century skills like creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration.

"Children will have a greater sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, self-expression and pride because they can begin or finish the process of what is created with personal, individual involvement, wherever they are," says DiFelice.

And like Pennsylvania mom Damaris Oldham observes, play — of any kind — makes kids feel great. »



The Lego Mindstorm robotics kits are a great example of how kids can marry physical and virtual play.



Crayola is another brand that has created a digital play experience for the young and tech-minded.

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Cool Sites and Apps

Countless fun, engaging and inexpensive digital tools channel kids' creativity. Here are some to check out with your kids.



► **MAKEZINE.COM**
A website chock-full of DIY projects sorted by category. *Free*

► **MAKEBELIEFSCOMIX.COM**
Kids write and illustrate their own comics. *Free*

► **PLAY AT HOME WITH DANIEL**
This PBS app allows preschoolers to spend time with Daniel Tiger in a modern take on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. \$

► **FASHIONPLAYTES.COM**
Budding fashionistas ages 5 and up design their own clothes. *Free*

▲ **VIDEO STAR**
With this iOS app, kids make and star in their own music videos. *Free*

► **STORYBIRD.COM**
Visual storytelling community open to children of all ages. *Free*

► **MINECRAFT.NET AND TOCABOCA.COM**
Kids use cubes to construct buildings in a 3-D world. \$

► **DRAWASTICKMAN**
App lets preschoolers draw a stick figure that becomes a game piece. \$

▲ **DISNEY INFINITY**
Provides a toy box full of virtualized Disney and Pixar characters in story-driven adventures. \$

◀ **TOONTASTIC**
Young children animate cartoons with their voices via this app. *Free*

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