

Exploring Science Through Toys

By: Jennifer Lynch

With calls to improve science education in U.S. schools increasing, some parents are taking matters into their own hands. And for many, toys can be fun and valuable tools to help improve their child's skills. "Kids can obtain more knowledge by working with a good science project or toy, things that are hands-on and give them brain-power," says Walter Larsen, national sales manager of Elenco, makers of Snap Circuits.

Now science toymakers are trying to strike a balance between meeting the educational demands of parents and the fun requirement for kids. The approach for many is to peak kids' interest early both in terms of age and their first encounter with the product. "Then, kids do the experiment, see the 'wow,' and want to know 'Why did that happen?'" says Renee Whitney, vice-president, sales and marketing, Be Amazing! Toys.

Many companies use manuals to explain the "why" but incorporate color-coding, cartoon characters, and simple wording to make the information more accessible. "Science can even be an intimidating field for many parents," says Esther Novis, president of The Young Scientists Club. So if it's difficult for a parent to understand and explain, the product won't be used. The Young Scientists Club offers a collection of The Magic School Bus-themed science kits, in which Ms. Frizzle guides consumers through the experiments.

Because most science toys use the scientific method to encourage kids to test new ideas and customize their experiments, science is a category built for open-ended play. "It's the open-endedness that fosters their creativity," says Grant Cleveland, president of DuneCraft, which lets kids personalize its growing kits through different planting techniques and by decorating its themed terrariums.

The Thames & Kosmos Forensics Fingerprint Lab even lets kids roleplay to get hands-on and test new scientific principles. But for younger kids, "there still needs to be a balance between open-ended play and having a parent guide the child through lessons that teach them something in the end," says Thames & Kosmos president Ted McGuire.

For consumers seeking licensed science toys, evergreen brands that have traits that tie into real world science are key. Uncle Milton has found success by doing just that with a new outdoor exploration line set to launch in 2012 tying products to actual National Geographic-sponsored expeditions. "Toyetic angles are entering into the science area like never before," says Frank Adler, president of Uncle Milton. "And, as long as there's something valuable to be gleaned, it's a good thing."

The Young Scientists Club:



The Young Scientists Club celebrates the 25th anniversary of Scholastic's *The Magic School Bus* with The Magic School Bus: Chemistry Lab. Inside the iconic school bus-shaped kit is a chemistry lab for ages 5 and up. Using the kit, kids can make sticky ice, create slime, form a bouncy ball, learn about density, and much more. The kit also includes 51 colorful experiment cards and a data notebook to record observations.