

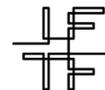
# The definitive parents' guide to the hot new toys of 2026



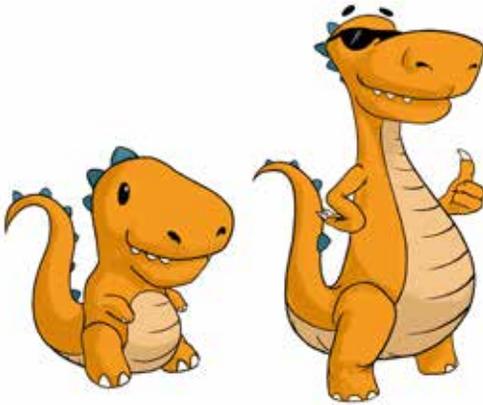
by Dylan Hendricks

# Rock or Block?

**As we wade deeper into the 2020s**, the lines between fun, learning, and data-mining continue to blur beyond recognition. Every day it seems like there's a new toy on the market that's more platform than plaything, offering to transform your unsuspecting offspring's way of life in exchange for a monthly subscription fee and unfettered access to their moldable little minds. Our intrepid research staff have opened their hearts and wallets to this year's ecosystem of super-powered toys, sorting the prime virtual wheat from the 3D-printed chaff. What new toys will rock your children's world, and which ones should you kick out of the sandbox? We're here to help.



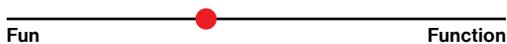
INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE



**Best New Toy to Replace Your Kid's Friends**

HOBBS™ Virtual Buddy  
 Augmented Empire  
 Cost: \$199 (plus subscription)

Like the wise-cracking animal sidekicks from every worthwhile children's movie, the HOBBS™ line of augmented plush dolls has always straddled the line between comforting ally and powerful virtual assistant. This year, Rhona Rhino and Paulie Panda return from extinction to join Augmented Empire's lineup of rugged, machine-washable toys, all of which spring to life in your favorite blended reality setup. With over a dozen algorithmic personalities available across 43 languages, HOBBS™ virtual buddies adapt to your child's behavior and learning styles, playing the role of invisible friend and furry mentor from childhood through early adolescence.



HOBBS™ has many education-themed activities in its wheelhouse, but its strengths lie more with sass than skill sets.



HOBBS™ evolves alongside your child's developmental milestones, but doesn't share or sell their personal info in the process.



While the virtual buddies all pal around together perfectly, try to pair them up with anything outside of Augmented Empire's toy roster and you're on your own.

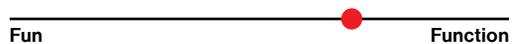
**Rock or Block? ROCK.** Just because the love is software-based doesn't mean it isn't real.



**Best New Toy to Replace Your Kid's Pet**

Micro-Biodome Bacteria Farm  
 BioTots  
 Cost: \$179 (plus subscription)

Now your young microbiologist-in-training can explore the wild zoology of the bacterial world with this surprisingly accessible bacteria farm from BioTots. Styled more like an upside-down fishbowl than the ant farm for which it's named, the Micro-Biodome can identify more than ten thousand different bacterial varieties within a 5-inch pocket of air. From your living room carpet to the front lawn, the playful visualizations of each unique bacterial cloud offer hours of childhood wonder for scientists of all ages.



Come for the colorful and imaginative circus, stay for the up-to-date information on your local bacterial soup.



Your Micro-Biodome's findings contribute directly to global bacterial research. This is one category of data that you don't want to keep to yourself.



This microbiome garden is anything but walled. You'll be able to see its plush textures and vivid colors on all the surfaces and screens of your home, no matter what operating system they use.

**Rock or Block? ROCK.** There's nothing so raucous as a pet Micrococcus.



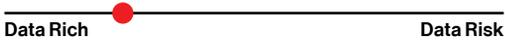
**Worst New Toy to Replace Your Kid's Diaper**

Poop-4-Me Potty Training Smart Toilet  
BioTots  
Cost: \$239 (plus subscription)

Also from BioTots, the Poop-4-Me smart toilet wants to guide your little ones to diaper-free independence, but it's not the kids who will be pissing their money down the drain with this one. Leveraging the same biotech found in the Micro-Biodome, the Poop-4-Me can analyze your child's daily deposits for infections and dietary irregularities. Unfortunately, these teachable moments aren't worth the hours you'll spend scrubbing mis-fired guano from the unit's many nooks. Between the condescending voice assistant and the inexplicably steep monthly subscription, you're better off cutting the bottom out of your toddler's coveralls.



More potty than pal, not that it excels at either.



The toilet itself is pretty smart, but you'd still be stupid to drop over \$200 on it.



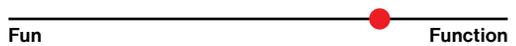
You locked into paying the steep monthly subscription fees, so if you wanna take your business elsewhere, you'll be left scrambling for a place to drop it.

**Rock or Block? BLOCK.** Like its raison d'etre, this thing is a piece of crap.

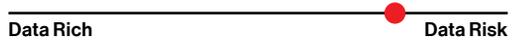
**Best New Toy to Replace Your Kid's Teacher/  
Babysitter/Guardian**

BoosterPak Complete Learning System  
Shahrazad Group Holding LLC  
Cost: \$277 (plus subscription)

Hugely popular in China, the BoosterPak Complete Learning System comes west this year, offering a unique combination of learning, gaming, and ambient childcare. The BoosterPak system consists of an all-in-one backpack and blended reality visor that will turn any physical environment into an immersive classroom and virtual playground. The Beijing-based curriculum operates at a frenetic and sometimes troubling pace, but Shahrazad promises integration with major American e-learning platforms in the near future. In the meantime, your child won't run out of things to do with the system anytime soon.



The BoosterPak favors curriculum over creative chaos, nudging your child to complete active missions before moving on to the next activity.



We're pretty sure the BoosterPak leaks its activity data all over the known world, but doesn't require full data access to be usable.



Shahrazad is selective about its partners, which keeps the quality well under control. But if you're looking for harmony with your local school curriculum, you'll have to wait.

**Rock or Block? ROCK.** The BoosterPak is the wearable babysitter you didn't know you needed.



**Best New Toy to Replace Your Kid's Dreams with Nightmares**

Spammy Bear  
Original manufacturer unknown  
Cost: N/A

Everybody knows the story: a cheaply made stuffed animal shows up in your child's bedroom one day. It's emblazoned with the logos of obscure companies. It smells bad. It's ugly. It randomly blurts out corporate slogans. You try to throw it out, but a week later it's somehow back. Nobody knows who first manufactured the spammy bears, but tear-downs have revealed that these unwanted teddy bots are hiding enough computing power to host a generic DAC (decentralized autonomous corporation). Programmed to infest, they can order on-demand gig workers to ferry themselves out of the dumpster and reemerge into your child's life.

**Fun** \_\_\_\_\_ **Function**

Freakshow. Failure. Fungus. Foe.

**Data Rich** \_\_\_\_\_ **Data Risk**

This particularly ambitious specimen carries always-on cameras and motion sensors, elevating the already terrifying risk of exposure.

**Solo** \_\_\_\_\_ **Symphony**

Spammy Bear will pair with anything and everything to keep itself in your life—including holding your bank account, bio-data and personal correspondence hostage.

**Rock or Block? BLOCK.** Like a bad horror movie, they won't stop until you cut off their heads and burn the stuffing.



**Best New Toy to Replace Your Kid's Toys (Special Mention for Resource-Strapped Families)**

Malaika Super Doll  
AfriCare Communication Systems  
Cost: \$35-\$79 (plus subscription)

Named for benevolent spirits from East African folklore, the Malaika Super Doll is more than just a toy, it's an investment. Beneath the Makonde-styled exterior, these dolls are mostly battery, offering a generous 50000mAh of juice for supercharging your family's lifestyle (or just recharging your devices). Already a mainstay from Sudan to Mozambique, these ornate figurines have gained popularity in recent years with hip urban nomads and international migrant camps. When the grid's unreliable, this is one mythological spirit whose generosity won't go unnoticed.

**Fun** \_\_\_\_\_ **Function**

Admittedly, the Super Doll doesn't really *do* much, but maybe you can convince your kid to lug it around for the good of the family?

**Data Rich** \_\_\_\_\_ **Data Risk**

This is one of the few toys left on the market that requires no data at all, and gives much more than it takes.

**Solo** \_\_\_\_\_ **Symphony**

Malaika's base is stuffed with sockets in every different size, shape, and format you might need to charge any device you could conceivably have sitting around.

**Rock or Block? ROCK.** Malaika will warm your child's heart, so why not let it warm your hearth?