

The toys of summer

Wet and wild, or sweet and mild — there's something for every child

By Valerie Kuklenski, Staff Writer

Article Last Updated:05/30/2007 07:10:11 PM PDT

Remember your childhood summers, lying on your back to find shapes in the clouds, jumping rope for hours or running through sprinklers to cool off?

Well, your kids probably don't play like that. Outdoor summer games today take some specialized equipment.

Americans spend an estimated \$2.9 billion a year on outdoor and sports toys, according to The NPD Group, making outside toys the biggest category in the \$22 billion toy industry behind only infant/preschool items.

Charlotte Reznick, former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology, says that's something to celebrate.

"Anything we can do to get kids and families outdoors would be great," she said. "My patients' parents tell me they can't get their kids out. They're bored, glued to their GameBoys, their video games. But if they have really fun outdoor play equipment, that might be tantalizing.

"If this is something that parents can do with their kids, that's even better, because then you have good family time," she added.

Beating the midday heat generally calls for water toys. But there are also some great made-in-the-shade games that work in the backyard, the park or a campground. So bring your own SPF 30 sunscreen — and follow the safety instructions — as you enjoy the great outdoors with the family.

Here are our picks:

Island Hopper 3-passenger Whale Ride water sled

(\$549.99, Toys R Us)

You may want to charge a fee to give your passengers a spin around the lake in order to recoup your investment for this sturdy inflatable that tows behind a boat. Also offered in six- and 10-passenger models (\$1,299.99 and \$1,599.99 respectively).

Aqua Blast Bumper Boats

(Ages 5-10, \$39.99, Toys R Us)

Operated on 12-volt batteries, these inflatable saucers spin and cruise at up to 2 feet per second. Water cannons that spray an endless stream of pool water guarantee battles that will leave both sides dripping wet.

Minimoto Submersible Cruiser

(Ages 8+, \$79.99, Toys R Us)

What's that down at the deep end of the pool? Get a close-up of the mystery object with this personal diving chauffeur. The underwater cruiser tows a swimmer up to 2 feet per second with a 70-watt motor powered by a rechargeable 12-volt battery. You can continue cruising after the sun goes down by flicking on its headlamp.

Triple Wave Racer

(Ages 5-12, \$19.99, Toys R Us)

Slippin' and slidin' as a competitive sport? Why not? Fire a starting (water) gun and see which of three racers belly flops to the other end of the 16-foot, triple-lane water slide first.

Pirates of the Caribbean Body Board

(\$19.50, Disney Store)

Arrrr you ready to hit the beach? Capt. Jack's got your back as you ride the waves to shore at Zuma or Malibu.

Crayola Giant Sidewalk Stencils

(\$9.99, Target, Toys R Us, K-Mart and other toy retailers)

Sidewalk art reaches new heights with large stencils of SpongeBob SquarePants or Disney's Little Mermaid. Each comes with sidewalk paint for the outline and five sticks of colored chalk for filling in the design. Or try The Rainbow Rake, which holds up to five sticks of colored chalk (\$9.99), and the Sidewalk Paint Sprayer, a motorized dispenser that releases wide or thin streams of water-washable paint (\$14.99).

Disney Fairies Badminton set

(\$24.50, Disney Store)

Tinkerbell inspired the look of this girly badminton set, with a green and purple color scheme throughout, from four rackets to net and shuttlecocks.

Innova DiscGolf Traveler

(\$129.99, Toys R Us)

Disc Golf could be described as Frisbee with rules. A few parks have established courses, but to take the game on the road, consider the DiscGolf Traveler made by Innova. It's a collapsible 12-pound target with mesh sides for quieter scoring than in those heavier targets with metal chains. If you haven't seen this game played yet, there's a pro-am tournament this weekend in Sylmar. See www.pdga.com for details.

Blongo Ball

(\$69.99, Toys R Us)

Set up this lawn game almost anywhere outside for play by two people or two teams. The idea is to fling the Blongo Ball — actually a pair of rubber balls joined on a rope — and drape it over the racks for points. The set includes two goal racks and two sets of three Blongo Ball pairs.

Spider-Man Super Soaker

(\$17.99, Toys R Us and other retailers)

What sets this water gun apart from other high-volume spray toys is the weblike spiral form the water takes as it shoots up to 30 feet. The design will likely appeal to Spidey fans looking to snare friends in a backyard battle.

Ben Wallace Inflatable Defender

(Ages 6-14, \$53.99, Target)

If hitting nothing but net is a little too easy when playing solo basketball, up the challenge with a life-size inflatable obstacle in the form of Chicago Bulls guard Ben Wallace. Created in his old Detroit Pistons uniform, he's 84 inches of goal-tending PVC. A referee can't order him to move, but you can make it happen with handles on his sides.

Cars Golf Set

(Ages 3+, \$19.50, Disney Store)

Pint-sized putters can get into the swing of golf with this lightweight plastic golf set. The bag, which stands 19-inches, includes two mini golf clubs and four plastic golf balls. Choose between Disney's "Lightning McQueen" Cars character or a Disney Princess design. Backpack straps let kids pull the bag over their shoulders for a walk to the park. The rolling wheels work too.

Valerie Kuklenski, (818) 713-3750
valerie.kuklenski@dailynews.com