

# From High-Tech

# to High-Touch

## Gift Ideas for Kids of All Ages

by Kelli Matthews

**K**ids are multi-faceted little beings — fueled by curiosity for new experiences and an interest in the world around them. Gift giving can provide a unique challenge for parents or other loved-ones to find toys, games and gadgets that encourage their curiosity and also provide the playtime that young brains need.

We tested two dozen such toys, games and gadgets for this year's holiday gift guide and we're sure you'll find something that's just right for the kid in your life. Look for the ★ to see which ones were our absolute favorites!

### TOY TESTERS:

**Xander, Age 5:** If it's not hands-on, don't bother. He wants to tinker, build and explore — especially with toys that he can co-opt mom, dad or big brother to try with him.

**Braxton, Age 11:** He's tested toys for all six gift guides and this year helped to sort through all the options to pick his favorite ideas. He wants to be challenged, entertained and doesn't mind if a toy or gadget sneaks in a little new know-how or a new skill. (Xander and Braxton are my kids.)

**Brandon, Age 12:** Always up for a challenge, Brandon loves building sets and engineering kits that require focus and determination.

Brandon is the *Oregon Family Magazine* publisher's son.

**Sammi, Age 7 and Allison, Age 13:** These sisters love tech and science toys with a girlie twist. While far enough part in age to be interested in different things, they're also close enough to enjoy working on projects together. Sammi and Allison are the daughter's of my lifelong friend, Carissa.

## Interactive Friends

An interesting theme emerged from this year's round-up. Several of our favorite toys focused on creating and interacting with new "friends." What better way to encourage programming and building?

### ★ Cue & Dot from Wonder Workshop

Wonder Workshop has three programmable, interactive robots. We tried two of them — Cue (ages 11+) and Dot (ages 5+). Xander and Braxton were in love with these two the moment they turned them on. Each comes with easy-to-use apps that provided some guided activities so your kid can get to know how the robot functions. Once the basics are out of the way, they can either continue

to more advanced activities or just "free play" with an open canvas on which to build programming and code. Dot's free play was a little overwhelming for my five-year-old on his own, but we found plenty of clever activities to do together — our favorite was created

a door alarm. Hang a programmed Dot on the door of the bedroom and the door opening triggers Dot to replay a message that your kid records (ours was, "hey there! where do you think you're going?"). Each robot has a distinct

personality and memorable one-liners that I hear my kids repeating all the time.

- [makewonder.com](http://makewonder.com)
- \$199.99 and \$79.99

*Programmable, interactive Cue and Dot appeal to both beginner and advanced roboters!*



The GoTrax Hoverfly was our favorite pick of the year, hands down. See page 10 for more details.



**Parker Bear**

Parker is a new twist on a traditional teddy bear. With a set of wooden doctor's tools and an easy-to-use augmented reality mobile app, your child can practice diagnosing and treating Parker's ailments. Augmented reality (AR) creates virtual layers when the mobile device is pointed, in this case, at Parker. You can see if he has a tummy ache or maybe a broken bone. Then when it's all said and done, he's an excellent soft, cuddly friend to watch a movie or share some quiet time.

- [seedling.com](http://seedling.com)
- \$59.99

*Parker Bear is soft and cuddly with a fun twist.*



**OffBits**

The OffBits are decidedly low-tech — each kit uses “spare parts” like nuts and bolts — but the end result is a set of fun new friends that you can build and rebuild into a range of bots and vehicles. Recommended for 6 and up, but it was still a fun project for my 5 year old and I to build together. He helped with some of the easier parts and had fun playing with them when we were done. The kits are at such a great price point, it's easy to pick up a few friends to build and play with.

- [fatbraintoy.com](http://fatbraintoy.com) or [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)
- \$14.95



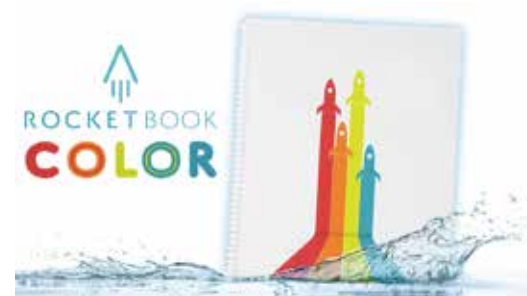
*Get your bot creativity on with OffBits!*

**★ Cozmo**

My 11-year-old couldn't have been more excited about the new Cozmo from Anki and when we got our hands on one to try, it did not disappoint. This little 'bot is fun, challenging and engaging with personality plus. Cozmo is packed with interactive features and games that has kept my tween engaged and challenged — he needs care and interaction to stay happy and healthy. With the newly released Code Lab programming language, Cozmo owner's can tap into his advanced robotics technology to program the robot. The 2017 Cozmo is also a little sleeker in a collector's edition with a pretty hot looking Liquid Metal finish.

- [Toys 'R' Us](http://Toys'R'Us.com) or [Anki.com](http://Anki.com)
- \$179.99

*Keep your tween engaged and challenged with Cozmo.*



*Rocketbook Color allows your kids to save, erase and re-create their masterpieces.*



**Rocketbook Color**

The mommy guilt when I need to recycle my young artist's work is strong. Rocketbook Color helps with a clever solution using pages that work with Crayola wet and dry erase crayons and markers and an app! The 12-page book has 8 blank pages for free-form art, 2 dot-grid pages for structured drawings and 2 lined pages for handwriting. I was especially interested in the lined pages for my kindergartener to practice his letter and number writing. The app was easy to use and it integrates with Google Docs, Evernote, Dropbox, Box, Microsoft OneNote, Slack, iCloud, and iMessage.

- [getrocketbook.com](http://getrocketbook.com)
- \$22



*Infinite Spin makes a fidget spinner as it should be: seen but not heard.*

**Infinite Spin Fidget Spinners**

The fidget spinner fad confuses me, but when Infinite Spin offered to send one for review, I figured we should try it. The spinner is a weighty metal with extraordinarily smooth movement that's completely silent. That's right! You can't hear the little ball bearings at all. So different from plastic spinners available at every department store. After playing with this spinner, I can see how some kids (or adults) would appreciate having a fidget spinner like this one to calm a busy mind.

- [infinite-spin.com](http://infinite-spin.com)
- \$24.97

**Get Outside**

The weather looks an awful lot like Winter in the Willamette Valley, but it's still important to get some outside time — maybe even more important! We're moving, grooving and exploring our outside world with these three products.

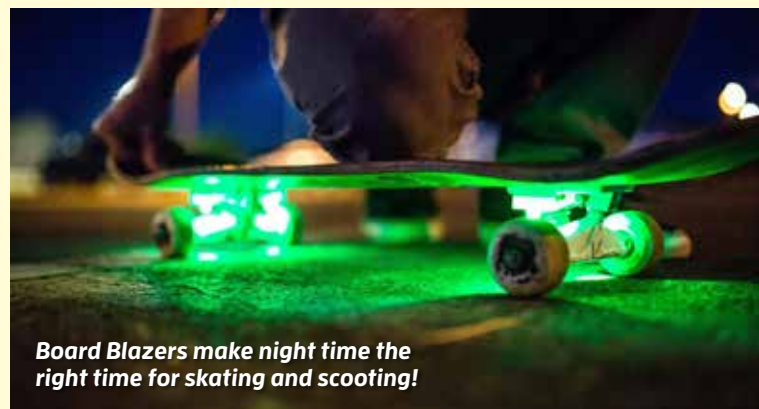
**★ GoTrax Hoverfly XL**

If we had to pick one favorite product from this year, my 11-year-old would, hands down, pick the GoTrax Hoverfly. And with all the great stuff in this year's guide, that's a high bar. I must admit, I was skeptical of the hoverboard. But the founder of GoTrax helped me to understand that the “bad press” from hoverboards in the past came from cheap models without safe batteries or charging functions. The GoTrax Hoverfly is an “offroad” hoverboard with thick tires and a substantial frame. The board comes with a great instruction book, a “learning” mode that's a little slower so you can find your balance and the company's website has some really great blog articles about exploration and travel. GoTrax provides an all-around great experience from the minute you open the box.

- [gotrax.com](http://gotrax.com)
- \$299

**GeoSafari SeaScope**

We have a big pond in our backyard that provides countless hours of speculation about what's under the water every year. The SeaScope magnifies underwater exploration



*Board Blazers make night time the right time for skating and scooting!*

with a 5x scientific scope with built-in LED that helps kids investigate sea life, from sea stars to kelp beds, without getting wet! No major discoveries yet, but we expect our developing scientific observation skills to pay off soon.

- [educationalinsights.com](http://educationalinsights.com); [Amazon](http://Amazon.com)
- \$36.99

**Board Blazers**

Your kids thought skateboarding or scootering was fun before Board Blazers — just wait! These under board LED lights amp up the fun for skateboards, scooters or longboards at twilight. And for teens out later at night, the lights are not only awesome looking, but increase visibility and make boarding safer. I found that the four little lights attached easily and kept the kids outside long after they'd have normally been whining about being cold or bored (without actually being cold or bored). I call that a big win.

- [Amazon](http://Amazon.com)
- \$19.95

**Chill Out**

Sometimes we just need to chill out. And with kids who are running non-stop with school, sports, after school activities and more, it can be especially important to have some down time. These five toys, tools and gadgets can help calm busy minds with creativity.



*The Creative HALO speaker will send your (and your kids') music over the rainbow.*

**★ Creative HALO Bluetooth Speaker**

There's nothing like music to help relax, focus or shake your groove thang. Our whole family gives the Creative HALO speaker our enthusiastic endorsement. It has great, rich sound for that shared playlist of pop sing-along songs or soothing wind-down tunes for a cozy Sunday at home. Download an app, and program the lights on the front of the speaker to suit your mood or your music. I like the “full spectrum” infinite rainbow lights, while my tween likes to change the lights to match his favorite sports team colors. Oh, and it can also function as a speakerphone.

- [creative.us](http://creative.us) or [Amazon](http://Amazon.com)
- \$69

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# Mom's Gift Guide

Whether looking for a gift for your Mom or to treat yourself, I reviewed some delightful smells, tastes and feels for this "stocking stuffers for Mom" guide. I know, it's a terrible job, but someone had to do it.

## Smells

### High Street Soap

Moms know sometimes the only time we have to a few minutes of uninterrupted time is in the shower, if we're lucky. High Street Soaps are great for your skin and also use the power of fragrance to transform your mood. Relax, breathe deep and enjoy.

- [highstreetsoap.com](http://highstreetsoap.com)
- \$10+

### ADORATherapy Gal on the Go Mood Boost

Smells have a powerful affect on our mood. Why not harness that? ADORATherapy comes in small on-the-go, stick-in-your-purse sprays that use a combination of essential oils that can be used anytime. The set comes with Seductive, Beautiful, Smart, Balanced, Inspired, Awake and Peaceful sprays.

- [ADORAtherapy.com](http://ADORAtherapy.com)
- \$70 for a set of 7



Come for the marshmallow caramels, stay for the fruit lollipops.

### ★ Willow & Birch Apothecary

The WillowBirch lip balms are my new favorite find. Truly the best lip balm I've found (and I am very picky). The all natural ingredients include things like sweet almond oil and Catskill Mountain beeswax. Three flavors: Chai Spice (my favorite), Cocoa Mint and Cafe Mocha. Pair your new lip balm with perfume made from an exclusive blend of essential oils. I tried (and loved) the English Fog perfume with bergamot, clove and ylang ylang.

- [shopwillowandbirch.com](http://shopwillowandbirch.com)
- \$6+

### Source Vital Apothecary

The Holiday Skin Care gift set cleanses, soothes and nourishes your skin. I particularly liked the Silt Scrub, a fragrant, natural scrub with Colloidal Freshwater Silt with naturally occurring humic acids. But the whole kit makes your skin smell and feel wonderful.

- [sourcevital.com](http://sourcevital.com)
- \$17.95 - \$24.95

## Tastes

### QUIN Candy

Portland-based artisanal candy maker has some delicious options for simple gifts or stocking stuffers. The marshmallow caramels might be made of rainbows and unicorns. I'm not kidding. But if caramels aren't your thing, I strongly endorse QUIN's fruit lollipops, too. But really, have some of the caramels. You can often find QUIN at Marché Provisions at 5th Street Market and Market of Choice or you can order online.

- [quincandy.com](http://quincandy.com)
- \$2+

### Barrow's Intense Ginger Liqueur

I was absolutely intrigued by this product. I love creative cocktails. Handcrafted in Brooklyn, New York, Barrow's Intense is created from only four ingredients – 200 pounds of fresh ginger per batch, water, sugar and neutral cane spirit. It smells amazing. I tried it in a couple of simple cocktails, based on what I had in my cabinet and I can't wait to try it in a food recipe. It's not available in Oregon stores, so you'll need to buy online. Visit the website for online retailers and lots of recipe ideas.

- [barrowsintense.com](http://barrowsintense.com)
- \$24 - \$40

### ★ Beso del Sol Sangria

Sometimes mom just needs a simple, light, yummy beverage. Beso del Sol sent me three types of sangria in TetraPacks (sort of like juice boxes for grown ups). The Red Sangria was my favorite and the single-serve, resealable packaging is awesome! Serve over ice and even add your own fruit.

- [WinCo Foods](http://WinCo Foods)
- \$4+



Keep your beverage of choice safe, the right temperature, and close at hand with HydroFlask.

### ★ Hydro Flask Wine Tumbler

Recipe for relaxation: One Hydro Flask wine tumbler, one TetraPack of Beso del Sol Sangria (above), add ice and... that's it. The new Hydro Flask wine tumbler is a great way to enjoy your favorite wine at the right temperature. While probably intended for outdoor wine drinking at parks or on day hikes, it works just as well for keeping your beverage safe (a.k.a. not in a breakable glass) in a living room full of rowdy kids at the end of a long day. Ask me how I know.

- [hydroflask.com](http://hydroflask.com)
- \$29.95

### Bean Box

Moms need their morning coffee. Need. The Bean Box Coffee Sampler delivers four small coffee bags from one of Seattle's top roasters. The result is coffee that feels a little extra special. And we can all use a little of that in our morning routine. You can even have a box delivered every month during the year along with chocolates.

- [beanbox.co](http://beanbox.co)
- \$24+

## Feels

### Cozy Reader Club

The Cozy Reader Club, based in Wilsonville, Ore., takes curling up with a good book to the next level with its

subscription box. Reading is a great way to relax and ease your stress – combine a great women's fiction novel with locally-made treats like candies or cookies, warm cozy beverage like coffees and teas, handcrafted items like pillow covers, candles or handmade socks and your mom will be in heaven. Be sure to subscribe by December 13 to get the first box in time for Christmas.

- [cozyreader.club](http://cozyreader.club)
- \$64.95

### ★ BelEssence

The transition to winter weather can be brutal on your skin. A great moisturizer makes all the difference. It can be hard to pick skin care for mom, but this is an easy choice. I tried the intensive anti-aging cream and I'm hooked. The moisturizer is creamy without being heavy (which is key for great moisturizer). It really feels like a much more expensive cream. BelEssence products are natural, cruelty free certified, made in the US, paraben and sulfate free.

- [belessence.com](http://belessence.com)
- \$31

### Medicine Springs Sport Formula Hot Spring Spray

Even if you love working out, you often get sore and tired muscles. Rather than rely on ibuprofen, try a natural approach with Medicine Springs. The formula includes minerals found in hot springs throughout North and South America that have been sought for a millennia for their healing properties. With this "hot spring" spray, sore muscles don't have to slow you down. Medicine Springs also has bath products to complement the on-the-go sprays.

- [medicinesprings.com](http://medicinesprings.com)
- \$9.99

### Crayola Signature Series Detailing Gel Pens

Coloring can have a positive affect on your stress level. But coloring, hand-lettering and organizing your life with your planner all require really great writing utensils. And "really great" in this case means Crayola. I know! I was surprised, too. The Crayola Signature Line is not just for kids and includes dual-tipped markers, blend and shade colored pencils and these gel pens. The pens are metallic and sparkly, writing equally well on light and dark paper. Pair with a new coloring book or sketch book and you have a perfect gift.

- [crayola.com](http://crayola.com) or Amazon
- \$19.99

### Tech Armor ActivePower Power Bank

Okay, so a power bank is a bit of a stretch for the "feels" category of our gift guide, but hear me out. Little is more stressful than watching your battery move into the red and knowing that you are no where near a charger. Keep that kind of stress at bay with this power bank. It's light, easy to carry and powerful - it will give you two full charges on a phone (or one on a tablet).

- [techarmor.com](http://techarmor.com)
- \$39.99

Moms definitely deserve wonderful smells, tastes and feels for the holidays. Feel free to clip this article, circle your faves and leave it in an obvious place for your family to find.



### The Cube

The Cube provides a new twist (pun intended) on the Rubik's Cube. This speed cube from aGreatLife incorporates a generation's worth of ideas to make cube 3D puzzles better (including an online solution guide to help). It is a fun, inexpensive and unique gift for everyone... perfect for kids or teens. They come in a bunch of sizes, too (from 2x2 to the more familiar 3x3x3 size). Oh, and besides the cubes, aGreatLife has all sorts of clever, inexpensive gifts like kites, craved wooden slingshots and whistles.

- [agreatlifebrand.com](http://agreatlifebrand.com)
- \$12

### Earth Paints

The Children's Earth Paint Kits are made here in Oregon. The kits come with packets of vibrant, gorgeous paint colors in powder form. Add equal parts water and powder and you get beautiful earth-based paints that you can use on rocks, wood, fabric, glass, paper and more. The colors are made with natural earth and minerals – just like paint colors have been made throughout history. My kids have always loved playing with paints and we've often relied on cheap materials for their at-home projects. But I am so impressed with the quality and colors of this kit! The Earth Paint Kits would make great classroom gifts, too.

- [naturalearthpaint.com](http://naturalearthpaint.com)
- \$19.95 - \$29.95



Quality materials make Earth Paints a natural choice.

## Taking Shape

Science, Technology Engineering Art and Math (STEAM) is still all the rage – for good reason. STEAM toys help to build critical thinking and problem solving skills. We found a new batch of toys and kits for kids to develop these skills in sneakily fun ways.

### ★ Groovy Lab in a Box

In each Groovy Lab in a Box is a unique engineering design project that uses project-based learning to teach kids ages eight and up about STEAM. While probably ok for kids 8 and up, our 13-year-old tester found it appropriately challenging (and rewarding). His mom says that it kept him engaged for hours and he was so proud of himself when he was able to build something that actually worked. You can get a one-off box or subscribe so you get a new box every month.

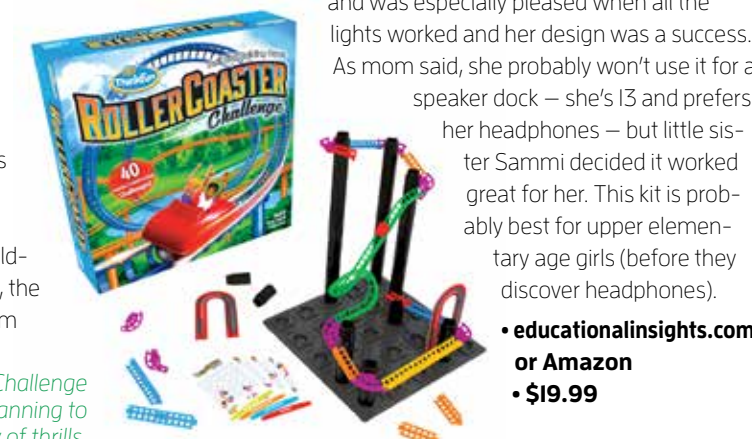
- [groovylabinabox.com](http://groovylabinabox.com)
- \$36.95

### Roller Coaster Challenge

This game is more than just a building kit – and that's very much what set it apart for Braxton (besides the fact that he loves roller coasters of all sorts). The kit comes with 40 cards to challenge your logic and building prowess. Outside the challenges, the set provides tons of fun with freeform coaster building, too.

- [Amazon](http://Amazon)
- \$29.99

Roller Coaster Challenge blends logic and planning to give plenty of thrills.



### City Engineering & Design Kit

With big, easy pieces and tons of great ideas to get you started, this building set is great for younger elementary school kids. My five-year-old needed a bit of support and encouragement, but we had fun building a zip line and parking garage together. The garage stayed together for several hours while he tested all his die cast cars to make sure they could navigate around.

- [learningresources.com](http://learningresources.com) or Amazon
- \$24.99

### IllumiCraft Light Up! Cell Phone Speaker Dock

This kit encourages girls to build a simple electric circuit that creates a speaker dock that lights up. The sound gets amplified through the box (not electronically). Our teen girl tester enjoyed putting this kit together and was especially pleased when all the lights worked and her design was a success. As mom said, she probably won't use it for a speaker dock – she's 13 and prefers her headphones – but little sister Sammi decided it worked great for her. This kit is probably best for upper elementary age girls (before they discover headphones).

- [educationalinsights.com](http://educationalinsights.com) or Amazon
- \$19.99

### Magnaflex by WowWee

The big, bright colorful pieces in this creative construction set immediately appealed to our five-year-old tester. Each individual piece has a strong magnet on both ends that can be used to join the pieces and create tons of great projects. We made a crown, an octopus and a rainbow from the instructions provided. Beyond building specific things, I have to admit it was just as fun playing with the magnetic ends, making patterns and exploring the magnets' polarity.

- Amazon
- \$19.99 - \$49.99

### Soft Circuits from ChickTech

ChickTech is a Portland-based nonprofit focused on facilitating hands-on technology-centric events and

programs to empower, support, and increase the confidence of women and girls. The Soft Circuits Kit provides materials for two projects — an LED bracelet and an interactive totebag. The kit is totally accessible and helps girls to learn the basics of electronic circuits and coding with Arduino. It took a little patience and focus, but our teen tester was stoked about the projects she was able to create. Plus your purchase will support broader ChickTech programs.

- chicktech.org/kits/
- \$99



### Boom Blast Stix

Boom! The goal is to lock and stack the "stix" as high as you can before the pieces explode all over the table. Simple in concept, but high in anticipation! And there's definitely a bit of thinking about the physics of the game in the strategy or locking and stacking.

- moosetoys.com or Amazon
- \$14.99

I'm sure you'll find something unique, creative and maybe even a little educational on this year's gift guide for the kids in your life!

*Boom Blast Stix is a simple but exciting game the combines strategy and physics.*

## Explore

Whether your kid is interested in a country on the other side of the planet, how seeds grow or why our fingerprints can identify us as individuals, the four products here will help him or her explore their world.

### Oregon Scientific SmartGlobe Explorer Augmented Reality

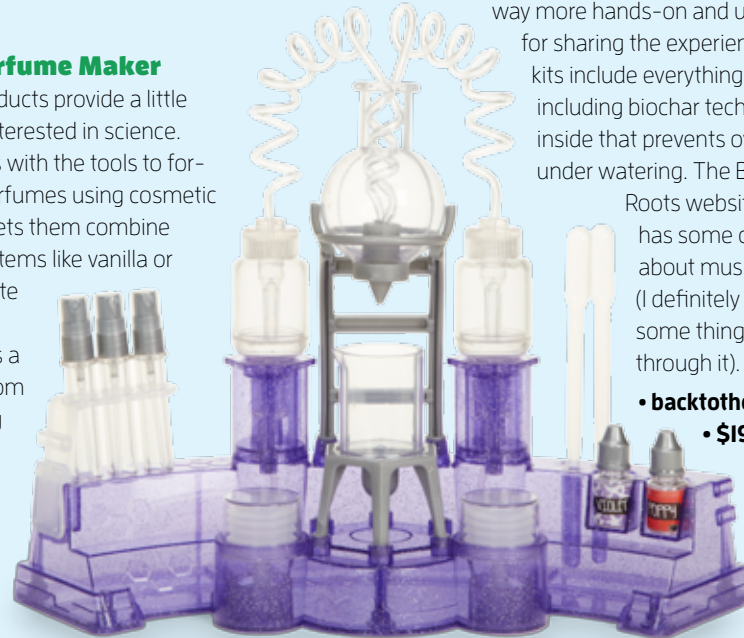
Oregon Scientific SmartGlobe's have been a big hit with our reviewers in previous gift guides. This year was no exception. The updated SmartGlobes have a pretty amazing augmented reality feature. After downloading an app for your Apple or Android phone, you can point the phone at the globe and animated content pops up giving you a new way to explore landmarks, animals and even dinosaurs. The globe also splits in half for even more exploration of the solar system and earth's internal structure. My tween is taking social studies for the first time as a sixth grader and the globe is reinforcing much of what he's learning in school. I get a lot of "Mom! Did you know?"

- Amazon
- \$129.99

### Project Mc2 Perfume Maker

The Project Mc2 products provide a little glam tech for girls interested in science. This kit provides girls with the tools to formulate their own perfumes using cosmetic chemistry and also lets them combine fragrant household items like vanilla or flower petals to create unique scents. Our testers agreed it was a fun project. Their mom added that following the directions reinforces the science and chemistry behind perfume.

- Amazon
- \$29.99



### Forensics Fingerprint Lab

My young detectives got such a kick out of this kit. Thankfully everyone that's come through the house in the last week has now been fingerprinted. The kit is pretty basic — collect fingerprints by dusting them with black powder and then lifting them with clear stickers. There's also a bit of info in the box about fingerprints and why they're used by detectives.

- Amazon
- \$14.95

*It's no mystery why Forensics Fingerprint Lab is so fun!*



### ★ Back to the Roots

It may be winter, but the Back to the Roots indoor garden kits will let you harvest herbs, mushrooms, cherry tomatoes or chili peppers all season long. These indoor gardening kits are 100% Guaranteed to Grow. We've set up mint, basil, cherry tomatoes and an oyster mushroom garden and the kids are excited to see their progress. We have a big backyard garden in the summer, but this is way more hands-on and up-close for sharing the experience. The kits include everything you need, including biochar technology inside that prevents over & under watering. The Back to the Roots website even has some curriculum about mushrooms (I definitely learned some things reading through it).

- backtotheroots.com
- \$19.99 - \$99.99



*Back to the Roots gives kids a hands-on, close-up gardening experience year-round.*

*Project Mc2 is the perfect blend of fashion and science.*

- Tree Trimming
- Tree Removal
- Emergency Services
- Land Clearing



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## WINTER WONDERINGS

For Gifted, Talented and High-Ability 3rd-10th Graders



Winter Wonderings provides a variety of challenging, engaging Saturday courses designed specifically for gifted, talented, and high-ability 3rd-10th graders. Participants discover new and exciting areas of study in a fast-paced learning environment.

The program takes place on the Oregon State University campus in Corvallis every Saturday, Jan 20 - Feb 24.



For more information visit [winter.oregonstate.edu](http://winter.oregonstate.edu)

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