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**THE GIZMO:** 2005 tech toys from the American International Toy Fair, held this week in New York. Kids are growing older faster, a maturation phenomenon called "age compression." And they're aspiring to the same sort of cool tech "toys" that their older siblings and even their parents play with, from game systems to motorized runabouts.

About 54 percent of boys and 24 percent of girls aged 6 to 14, polled recently by **Funosophy**, agreed with the statement "electronics are the best kind of present to get."

And the market research firm NPD found that sales of electronic toys were up 22 percent this past holiday season, while the overall toy biz was down 6 percent.

No wonder, then, that tech-based playthings are very prominent as the toy fair previewed fun stuff that will be available this summer and fall.

Here are some of the coolest toys we spotted.

**TAG, YOU'RE IT:** The same sort of "electro-magnetic field sensor" built into the scroll wheel of the Apple iPod has now found a home in Wild Planet's Tech Tag.

The devices (two for \$19.99) strap to an arm and are programmed to record (visibly and audibly) each time a wearer is "tagged" by another. This breakthrough should end a gazillion of those "Got ya!" "You did not!" playground confrontations. A grateful nation thanks you.

**(JAMES) BOND BRED:** Human beings' ability to retain and combine rapidly blinking images to create a coherent image is called retinal memory, which was used by inventor Thomas Edison to create the first "movies." Spy Gear's Spy Night Writer (\$14.99) works the same way. When waved in the dark by junior spies, the device's blinking LEDs make a series of flashing letters appear as solid words.

The smartest writing device that we've seen is LeapFrog's The Fly (\$100), a computer in a pen that responds to symbols and "reads" aloud words written on special paper. It even translates.

**JUNIOR'S FIRST (SECOND AND THIRD) GAME SYSTEMS:** While parents are reluctant to let very young, sticky-fingered kids near an expensive game system or PC, there's far less concern about the kids destroying affordable (\$9.99 and up), plug-and-play video game systems from makers like Jakks Pacific, Radica, Hasbro, Excalibur Electronics, KIDesigns, Toy Quest and Techno Source.

A huge hit this past holiday season, these battery-operated games-inside-a-controller connect simply to a TV's front audio/video jacks. This year, the category is likely to grow into a billion-dollar industry with a flood of new players, major brand associations (Sesame Street to Monster Garage) and many blasts from video games' 8- and 16-bit past.

Most plug-and-play systems are limited to the two to 20 titles packed inside the memory chip. But Jakks Pacific hopes to hold its market leadership position with TV games featuring an expansion slot to be used for "Game Keys," \$9.99 cartridges inserted to add extra titles.

Also, Jakks will introduce wireless game systems usable up to 25 feet from the TV, starting with a Ms. Pac-Man (\$29.99) that also features seven other Namco arcade games.

**BRAIN FOOD:** Want to teach your kid something more than the fine points of "Texas Hold 'Em" or "Space Armada"?

Learning-oriented portable game systems that also plug into TVs for big-screen viewing are coming this fall from Leap Frog with the Leapster L-MAX (\$99.99) and VTech with the V.Smile Pocket (\$89.99).

The latter is fully compatible with Smartridges from the V.Smile console system and features a "breakthrough color LCD screen with double the resolution of Game Boy Advance and triple that of Leapster," claims VTech executive Julia Fitzgerald.

**SKETCH THIS:** Operating on the premise that many youngsters are more adept at working a computer mouse than they are at the art of writing, VTech hopes to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten with the VTech Write and Learn series. These electronic teaching pads (\$19.99-\$24.99) get the young ones busy tracing letters and numbers with a finger or a chunky stylus.

A kid-friendly remote control and DVD discs help children develop foundational reading skills with the Read With Me DVD Learning System from Fisher-Price and Scholastic, animating classics like "Green Eggs and Ham" and "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" (\$34.99 starter set, \$14.99 for additional DVD titles).

Even the venerable Etch A Sketch is going high-tech with a new model that plugs into a TV's a/v jacks. But one thing hasn't been changed with \$24.99 Etch A Sketch Wired: to "clear" the TV screen, the user turns the controller upside down and shakes it.

**TECHNO PALS:** Mattel extends the theme of "virtual" buddies with Pixel Chix (\$30), LCD-displayed girly inhabitants of tiny doll houses who respond positively to attention and negatively to neglect. Up to 10 houses can be connected for character interaction and sleepovers.

Uncle Milton's squishy P-Brains (under \$20) change personalities as you switch their brain modules. Collect the whole set!

Beware the toy store aisle where Mattel's Pick Me Pups or Radica's Street Muttz (both \$19.99) are on display. Equipped with built-in motion sensors, the doggies lift their fuzzy heads and look beguiling as you pass by, begging (silently), "Take me home."

Kids of all ages will go for Hasbro's I-Dog Interactive Music Companion (\$25), a cute plastic puppy with sound and tactile sensors that moves to music and responds to petting.

**YOU'RE IN THE PICTURE:** Mattel will offer tykes their first video shooting opportunities with V Cam, an easy-to-use, drop-resistant, \$99 video camera that captures moving images with decent picture quality, plays back on its color screen and connects to a computer for storage/editing. Optional SD cards extend the eight-minute on-board memory.

Low-resolution video cameras are deployed as a play element in several new toys. The Fisher-Price Star Station karaoke entertainment system for preschoolers enhances their on-screen images with groovy special effects (\$59.99).

Radica's PlayTV uses a camera to track and score player moves in basketball, soccer and golf games (\$39.99-\$69.99). Copping licks from the PlayStation 2 EyeToy is Toy Quest's Go Go TV (\$59.99), intended to get kids off their butts and exercising by ducking, bobbing and swatting at objects on the TV screen. The similar Somersize System (named after Suzanne) will be hawked on QVC for grown-up use.

**BARBIE, PHONE HOME:** Barbie fans (target ages 8 to 11) will really connect with the My Scene Mobile. While cute as a toy, it's a working mobile phone in a pastel-toned case, made by Nokia and using Verizon service (\$45, includes 30 minutes of air time).

Sure to fool grown-ups is Tiger Electronics' ChatNow Communication System - two-mile-range, FRS walkie talkies that look and operate like cell phones - complete with text messaging, an on-board black-and-white digital camera and a seven-digit phone number for each unit (\$79.99 a pair).

For young'uns with iPod envy, start 'em out with Tek Nek's Cool P3, a \$29.99 digital music player that holds up to one hour of music in MP3 or WMA formats (but doesn't work with Apple's iTunes).

**VOOM, VOOM, VOOM:** The battery-operated Power Wheels Cadillac Escalade (\$289.99) features working doors and trunk, a real FM radio and a digital clock. Riders up to 130 pounds can spin around the 'hood at 2.5 or 5 mph. Can't afford a \$4,000 Vespa for yourself? Live vicariously by giving your child (age 12 and up) a look-alike, battery-operated Pocket Mod "mini-Euro" electric scooter from Razor USA.

Priced at a mere \$229, this step-through, steel-framed transporter is capable of speeds up to 15 mph and a travel distance of 10 miles, and supports weights up to 220 pounds. Hmmm, I wonder how I'd look on it?