

Zoombox, other tech toys aim to please kids

A digital camera that can stand to be dropped is one of the gizmos coming soon.

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 of the Philadelphia Daily News

That temporary breakup of Barbie and Ken (now dating again, whew!) may have been partially responsible for the recent slowing in toy sales.

But industry analysts more often blame competition from electronics manufacturers who are stealing even pre-teens' (a.k.a. "tweens") hearts with iPods, two-way radios, digital cameras and such. So it's interesting to see how toy manufacturers are reacting for 2006.

Here are some finds at the recent American International Toy Fair in New York:

Higher power

◆ Even a 3-year-old should be able to handle the Digital Song and Story Player or the Kid-Tough Digital Camera, coming from Fisher-Price at \$70 each. The media player arrives (in July) preloaded with preschool-appropriate songs and stories—easily identifiable on the display screen with pictures as well as titles.

Headphones have a volume limiter. Mom and Dad will need to be involved to download more entertainment from the dedicated Fisher-Price Online Content Store, though the company promises the process will be, ahem, "child's play."

A tough, rubberized shell protects the Fisher-Price Kid-Tough Digital Camera (available in June) against repeated drops,



while dual hand grips and dual eye viewers should help even tipsy toddlers take a steady shot. The camera includes a 1.3-inch color LCD screen to view/delete shots. Resolution is a modest 640-by-480.

◆ "Mirroring what the parents are doing and bringing it down to kids" is the ambition of several gizmos coming in MGA Entertainment's new To-Ku electronics line for the 8- to 12-year-old set, said a company executive. Most ambitious is a BlackBerry-aping Wi-Fi Messenger, which uses 802.11b Wi-Fi technology to send and receive messages via a free Internet account (\$69.99, fall).

◆ MGA also unveiled an iPod-like Bratz digital audio player (\$49), branded with its popular doll line, and three Bratz iPetz devices (\$24)—a cat, frog, pig and rabbit that dance to the music of connected players.

◆ Mattel will update its Vidster digital video camera (about \$80) with an Apple-like white gloss finish and software for transferring movies to an iPod.

◆ Tiger Entertainment hopes to win over slumber-partying tweens with its Zoombox Entertainment Projector. Scaled down from (four times as expensive) grown-up

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Courtesy photo

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versions, Zoombox uses a halogen bulb to project a 60-inch (max) video image on a wall, with the content coming from either its built-in DVD/CD player or from a connected device like a video game system.

Zoombox has built-in stereo speakers, a headphone jack and an image resolution of 557 by 234 pixels (that's a VHS-quality picture). The product goes national in August, priced at \$249.

Fun factories

◆ Learning-obsessed VTech grabbed attention with the Write & Learn Spellboard Advanced (\$39.99, out in June).

Children 6 and up will use it first to sharpen printing and spelling skills, then move up to cursive, with both Zaner-Bloser and D'Nealian writing styles recognized by the smart board.

◆ Even 9-month-olds will be able to get into the learning game this fall with the VSmile Baby Infant Development System (\$39.99, plus plug-in cartridges.) It starts as a stand-alone busy box, then grows into the wireless keyboard for a TV-linked computer serving up to 3-year-olds.

◆ Getting kids off their duffs is the goal of the Jammin' Gym Class (\$29.99), a new exercise pad and "smartridge" accessory for the original VSmile system.

◆ That's a bit of a trend. We also saw human footpower motivating the action in Fisher-Price's ESPN Fast Action Football (\$219.99), an arcade-style electronic table game. When the ball is in motion, players must jog in place (atop a touch-sensitive pad)

or they won't make any headway!

◆ Number-crunchers (of all ages) will love TechnoSource's Sudoku Mega Touch Screen (\$15), an enhanced version of 2005's best-selling hand-held game. It boasts 2

million puzzles, an extra-large backlit screen and the ability to input your own puzzles.

◆ Learning to play a keyboard and read musical notation is as easy as hitting objects in a shooting gallery, in the I Can Play Piano keyboard system from Fisher-Price (\$79.99, August).

◆ Designed for kids 4 and up, it has proprietary Piano Wizard technology that helps students make connections between the keys and moving objects on a TV screen. Eventually, they graduate to reading color-coded notes on a musical staff.

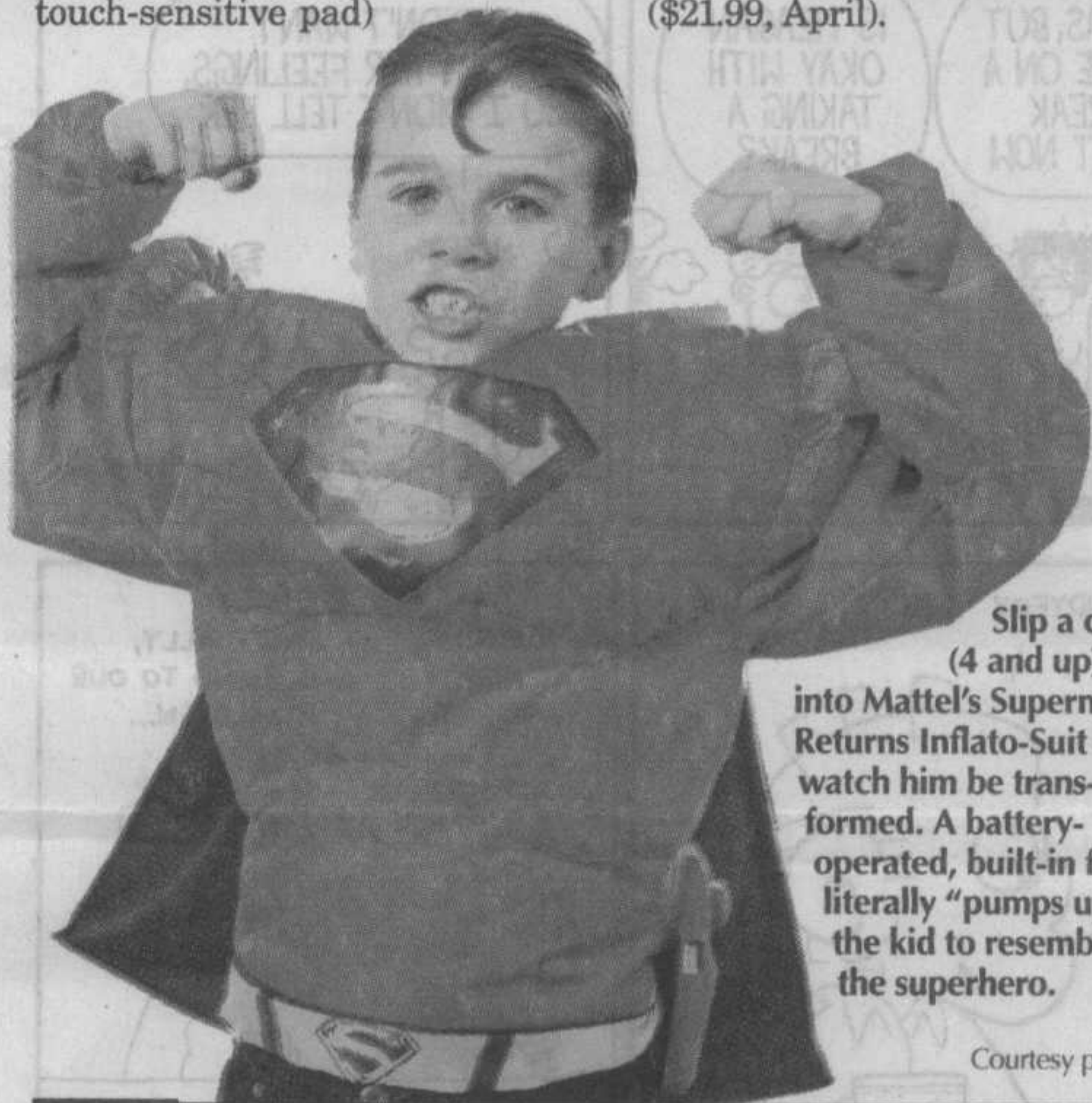
Just for laughs

Thank goodness, some techie toys have no redeeming qualities, except providing fun.

◆ Tied to the forthcoming Pixar animated feature "Cars" is Mattel's Fast Talkin' Lightning McQueen, a large-scale car with a freaky motorized mouth/grill that moves when it talks (strangely, in actor Owen Wilson's voice). Lightnin' can be programmed to do stunts and tricks and makes fun of himself when he crashes. (\$34.99, May).

◆ Equipped with a night vision video camera, the remote-controlled Spy Video Car from Wild Planet lets you sneak up on people in other rooms. You're watching and maneuvering safely — up to 75 feet away — on a monocular LCD headset screen. (\$129.99, fall).

◆ Slip a child (4 and up) into Mattel's Superman Returns Inflato-Suit and watch him/her be transformed. A battery-operated, built-in fan literally "pumps up" the kid to resemble the super hero. (\$21.99, April).



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Courtesy photo