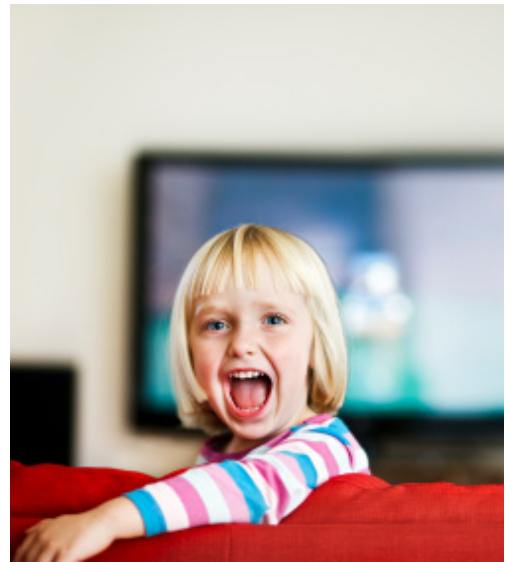
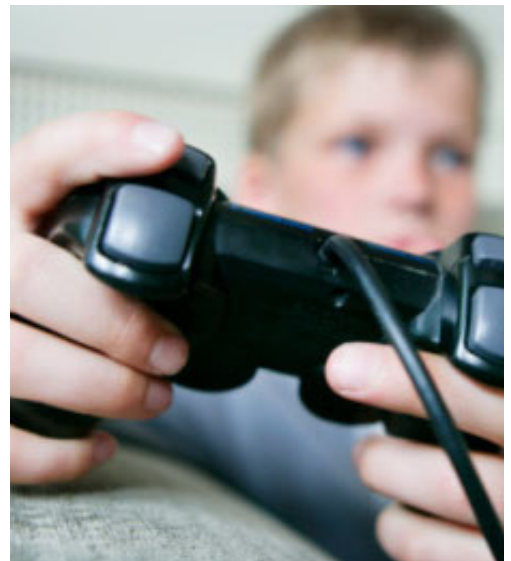










# HOLIDAY GIFT IDEAS 2011



Our editors'  
70+ favorite picks  
for games, books,  
TV shows, movies,  
music, websites,  
and apps for  
kids of every age.



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# Our At-a-Glance Recommendations by Age



## Preschoolers

- GAMES** **Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster** (Xbox 360)
- BOOKS** **Press Here** (by Hervé Tullet)  
**The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man** (by Michael Chabon)
- TV** **Pocoyo** (online)
- MOVIES** **The Gruffalo** (G, 2011)  
**Winnie the Pooh** (G, 2011)
- MUSIC** **Flying!** (by Recess Monkey, Children's Music)  
**Radio Wayne** (by Wayne Brady, Children's Music)  
**The Merry Goes Round** (by Jewel, Children's Music)  
**Little Nut Tree** (by Dan Zanes, Children's Music)  
**Jake and the Never Land Pirates Soundtrack** (by Various Artists, Soundtrack)  
**Making Silly Faces** (by Nick Deysher, Children's Music)
- WEBSITE** **Pocoyo World** (<http://www.pocoyo.com/play.html>)
- APPS** **Pat the Bunny** (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)  
**Harold and the Purple Crayon** (iPad)



## Young kids

- GAMES** **Magical Zhu Zhu Princess: Carriages & Castles** (Nintendo DS, Nintendo DSi)
- BOOKS** **The Bippolo Seed and Other Lost Stories** (by Dr. Seuss)
- TV** **Prep & Landing** (ABC)  
**Amazing Planet** (National Geographic Channel)
- MOVIES** **Tangled** (PG, 2010)  
**Kung Fu Panda 2** (PG, 2011)  
**The Lion King** (G, 1994)
- MUSIC** **Muppets: The Green Album** (by Various Artists, Children's Music)
- WEBSITE** **BrainPOP Jr.** (<http://www.brainpopjr.com>)  
**DisneyFairies** (<http://disney.go.com/fairies>)
- APPS** **Don't Let The Pigeon Run This App!** (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)



## Kids

- GAMES** **The Magic School Bus: Oceans** (Nintendo DS)  
**FIFA Soccer 12** (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PSP, Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation 2)  
**Kirby Mass Attack** (Nintendo DS, Nintendo DSi)  
**NBA 2K12** (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PSP, PlayStation 2, Windows)
- BOOKS** **EllRay Jakes Is a Rock Star!** (by Sally Warner)
- TV** **Jem and the Holograms** (The Hub)  
**Lemonade Mouth** (Disney Channel)
- MOVIES** **Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope** (PG, 1977)

## AGE 7-8 Kids (continued)

- MUSIC** **Lemonade Mouth Soundtrack** (by Various Artists, Soundtrack)  
**Hold on 'Til the Night** (by Greyson Chance, Pop)
- WEBSITE** **Club Penguin** (<http://www.clubpenguin.com>)  
**Poptropica** (<http://www.poptropica.com>)  
**WhatsWhat.me** (<http://www.whatswhat.me>)
- APPS** **Bobo Explores Light** (iPad)  
**iDiary for Kids** (iPad)  
**Geo Walk HD - 3D World Fact Book** (iPad)  
**Strip Designer** (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)  
**Wreck This App** (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)



## Preteens

- GAMES** **LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean** (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo DS, PSP, Nintendo 3DS, Windows)  
**Skylanders Spyro's Adventure** (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo 3DS)  
**Dance Central 2** (Xbox 360)
- BOOKS** **Every Thing on It** (by Shel Silverstein)  
**Secrets at Sea** (by Richard Peck)  
**Wonderstruck** (by Brian Selznick)  
**Breadcrumbs** (by Anne Ursu)  
**The Apothecary** (by Maile Meloy)
- TV** **Adventure Time with Finn and Jake** (Cartoon Network)
- MOVIES** **Make Believe** (NR, 2010)
- MUSIC** **When the Sun Goes Down** (by Selena Gomez, Pop)
- WEBSITE** **MiniMonos** (<http://www.minimonos.com>)  
**Franktown Rocks** (<http://www.franktownrocks.com>)  
**Imbee** (<http://www.imbee.com>)
- APPS** **Nano Panda** (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch, Android)  
**First Touch Soccer** (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)



## Teens

- GAMES** **Professor Layton and the Last Specter** (Nintendo DS)
- BOOKS** **Lola and the Boy Next Door** (by Stephanie Perkins)  
**Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children** (by Ransom Riggs)
- TV** **Glee** (Fox)  
**Modern Family** (ABC)  
**Monty Python's Flying Circus** (PBS)
- MOVIES** **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2** (PG-13, 2011)  
**The Help** (PG-13, 2011)  
**Jurassic Park** (PG-13, 1993)
- MUSIC** **21** (by Adele, Pop)
- WEBSITE** **Spotify** (<http://www.spotify.com/us/hello-america>)
- APPS** **GarageBand** (iPad)



# Games

What do kids want for the holidays? Cool games! Whether they're on Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii, Kinect, PSPgo, DS, or DSi, here are our editors' top picks for challenging, fun, and age-appropriate games for 2010 holiday gifts. Puzzle games? Yup. Mario games? Yup. PC games? Absolutely. All that's left to do is unwrap the boxes and play!



## Age 2-4



### Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster (Xbox 360)

2 age 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Engaging and funny interactive adventures are pure joy.

*Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster* is definitely among the best preschool video games out there. Its polished presentation, wonderfully witty script, and easy-to-learn-but-not-too-easy-to-play mini-games make it a package that little kids will adore. Moreover, the entire experience is designed to work equally well for one or two players, making *Once Upon a Monster* the perfect game for parents to play with their kids (or for siblings to play together). Rarely do we see a game that is so utterly appropriate for preschool audiences that is also simultaneously appealing to older kids and adults as well. It's an absolute winner.

## Age 7-8



### The Magic School Bus: Oceans (Nintendo DS)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Hooks kids with fun games and loads them with knowledge.

*The Magic School Bus: Oceans* is perfectly designed to make kids feel like they're really part of this magical field trip to the depths of the sea. It's quite a feat, really. There are a ton of hard facts in here, not just generalized basic info. And yet, *Oceans* always feels like a game, never a homework session. Some of the activities are pure games, like steering a sideways-walking crab through a maze of rocks and seaweed. But others draw directly on the knowledge that kids should have picked up through their exploring time. It's a great strategy, because it forces kids to go back, re-read, and really absorb the information if they want to earn enough points to unlock the next level. This is a wonderful model for educational games.

## Age 5-6



### Magical Zhu Zhu Princess: Carriages & Castles (Nintendo DS, Nintendo DSi)

2 4 age 5 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Adorable toy-based game is well-designed for young players.

*Magical Zhu Zhu Princess: Carriages & Castles* takes what kids love about the Zhu Zhu toys -- caring for them like real animals and then racing them through tube mazes -- and translates it perfectly to a video game. The formula may not be varied much from previous Zhu Zhu games, but the controls feel smoother and more refined here -- certainly easy enough for kindergartners to handle. The only complaint one might have about the game is that it's not very "princessy" as implied by the title of the game. But really, it's so adorable and sweet-hearted -- and so well-constructed as a game for younger kids -- that nitpicking in such a way doesn't feel right. Zhu Zhu fans will love this game -- and they should.





## FIFA Soccer 12 (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PSP, Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation 2)

2 4 6 **age 8** 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

One of the best (and best-looking) sports simulations.

The world's most popular sport has never looked or played so good in video game form. Even better than last year's impressive game, FIFA SOCCER 12 offers incredibly realistic physics, including how the players react to one another and ball dribbling, passing, and scoring. Combine this with high-definition graphics shown through broadcast-style cameras and passersby might just think it's a real televised match. Artificial intelligence (A.I.) has also been greatly improved, therefore computer-controlled teammates act in a smarter way, including a more tactical defense that reacts more like the real thing.

From the tight controls and high production values to the depth and breadth of solo and multiplayer matches, *FIFA Soccer 12* is simply one of the most gratifying sports games available today. Note: The Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions of the game look and play the same but the others don't fare as well visually; and they handle a little differently (such as utilizing the Nintendo Wii motion controller). These other versions don't all offer the same robust set of modes and features as the high-def discs.



## Kirby Mass Attack (Nintendo DS, Nintendo DSi)

2 4 6 **age 8** 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

New twist on sidescrolling action games with easy controls.

While some of the action in *Kirby Mass Attack* is obviously derived from the classic Pikmin (moving around little heroes en masse, flicking them at enemies), it's put to fantastic use in this wonderful new 2-D side-scrolling adventure with a nice old-school feel to it. Using the stylus to control your band of Kirbys is remarkably easy, and launching them at giant baddies is a blast. But the combat is only a small part of the adventure; there's also a great deal of exploration, with plenty of bonus items to discover. This game isn't much like Kirby games of the past, which could disappoint fans of the franchise, but as a stand-alone adventure, it's an awesomely good time.



## NBA 2K12 (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PSP, PlayStation 2, Windows)

2 4 6 **age 8** 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Stellar hoops sim honors league's legends.

Once again, 2K Play's NBA sim shines with polished, authentic gameplay. On the consoles with high-definition graphics, the game looks fabulous. The NBA's Greatest mode is wonderful at educating players about the history of the league, while the team owner and My Player modes offer players greater control. Overall, it's a great game for any NBA fan.

## Age 9-11



## LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo DS, PSP, Nintendo 3DS, Windows)

2 4 6 8 **age 9** 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Explore all four movies' worlds, with unique LEGO humor.

*LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean* boasts all the best features of previous *LEGO* games: a whimsically satirical sense of humor, simple controls, vast environments to explore with tons of secrets to discover, and a huge cast of playable characters to collect and use in free-play levels. While you get your fair share of combat here, the focus definitely feels like it has been put on exploration and puzzle-solving (which seems appropriate for pirates). Each level contains a number of buried treasures that Captain Jack will need to use his compass to track down; some of the hidden items are necessary in order to move the story forward, while others are just to add more treasure-hunting fun.

There are so many cool secrets to discover in the hub world alone that you can spend hours playing around there in between levels. The *LEGO* games' typical sense of humor really shines here as well, with loads of visual gags that can make you laugh out loud. And it feels like the developers have made it a bit easier to earn new characters here, having many more low-cost characters available (you buy characters with the *LEGO* coins you find during play). If there's any real flaw here, it's the inability to save mid-level, which is a perennial problem with the *LEGO* games.



## Skylanders Spyro's Adventure (Wii, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo 3DS)

2 4 6 8 **age 10** 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Toy figurines become characters in exciting action game.

*Skylanders Spyro's Adventure* is an absolute blast to play. It has all the fun, challenge, and excitement of classic adventure games like *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Ratchet and Clank*, and even *Super Mario 64*. The game looks great graphically, has a clear and simple a control scheme, and offers a load of variety that goes far beyond just the changeable characters. There's some great writing in here, too, especially when it comes to the humorously creative deathtraps that Kaos comes up with (like a waterfall full of sharks).

There's a legitimate gripe about having to buy extra characters in order to fully experience all the areas of the game world, but if you take that out of the equation and rate the game on its merits as a game, it's definitely a great one. Plus, the toy characters can be used to play in a friend's version of the game, and they bring their gaming history with them whenever they are inserted into a game.



## Dance Central 2 (Xbox 360)

2 4 6 8 10 age 11 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Exciting Kinect dance game keeps the party going strong.

Even if you have the grace of a spastic camel, you can't help but have fun with *Dance Central 2*. The game is forgiving for beginners, challenging for experts, and features a terrific lineup of songs (ranging from Lady Gaga to Justin Bieber to Usher to Sir Mix-a-lot). This year's inclusion of co-op and multiplayer challenge modes adds more depth to the game and is guaranteed to make it more of a party standard.

The game introduces plenty of new moves and is loaded with 44 new songs. Players of the original game can import that game's original 32 songs in as well for 400 Microsoft points (about \$5). The original *Dance Central* was a must-have game last year. This sequel is miles ahead of its predecessor — and could well be the best Kinect game on the market.

## Age 12-14



## Professor Layton and the Last Specter

(Nintendo DS)

2 4 6 8 10 age 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Captivating puzzle game makes doing brainteasers a blast.

*Professor Layton and the Last Specter* continues to live up to the outstanding reputation of the franchise, with an all-new round of captivating and truly unique puzzles and riddles. This latest entry continues to use the same addicting formula of puzzles that are instantly accessible but sometimes seemingly impossible to figure out. Just like its predecessors, players earn more points if they can solve the puzzle on their first try and without a hint, making the rush of submitting an answer for each puzzle as addicting as ever. The story is likewise brilliantly told and captures the imagination. This game is a must-have for puzzle aficionados and is sure to bring hours of fun and enjoyment to *Professor Layton* veterans as well as newcomers to the franchise.

To view the complete review and rating for each game, visit:  
[commonsense.org/game-lists/gift-ideas-games](http://commonsense.org/game-lists/gift-ideas-games)

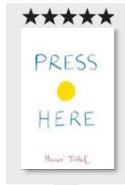


# Books

You can never go wrong giving kids books for gifts—whether they’re already big readers or just need the right story to get them hooked, our top picks are sure winners. Dig in and open up a whole new world of fiction and fun for your kids.



## Age 2-4



**Press Here** (by Hervé Tullet)

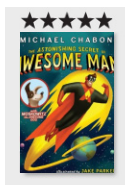
2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Delightful, interactive fun — no batteries required!

As more and more books really do require batteries, this fresh book is a magical gem. A giddy read-along of this deceptively simple book will make those flashy phone and iPad apps seem a lot less charming.

Artist Hervé Tullet uses a palette of primary colors and a bold brush. He cheerfully encourages readers to play along, sharing their surprise and delight as the dots morph from page to page. Tech-savvy kids and their parents will delight in the silliness. It’s a wonderful read-along for preschoolers, with opportunities to reinforce counting, patterns, and following instructions. And like the best apps, it’s a game the family will love to play again and again.



**The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man** (by Michael Chabon)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

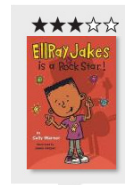
**common sense media says**

Exciting look at the fun (and fatigue) of being a superhero.

This book is awesome, like Awesome Man. It’s fun, exciting, and readers can readily identify with all of the adventures of this superhero — before they find out his secret identity. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon does a fantastic job of capturing the creative and open qualities of imaginative play. What makes the story even awesome-r is that Chabon doesn’t forget the trials of being a superhero — running out of energy (needing a snack), staving off trashing a city in anger (temper tantrum), and needing a big hug from a superhero’s biggest ally, his mom.

The dazzling illustrations by Jake Parker are bright and engaging. They are almost begging to be used as room decorations for superhero fans. The astonishing secret isn’t so astonishing, but Chabon’s connection to the life of a child is pretty close.

## Age 5-6



**EllRay Jakes Is a Rock Star!** (by Sally Warner)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Third-grader’s struggle to look cool gets him in trouble.

*EllRay Jakes Is a Rock Star!* is not long on details or character development — half a dozen two-dimensional third-graders are rapidly introduced in the first couple of pages. However, EllRay’s situation in his peer group seems realistic, and the feelings of guilt and confusion EllRay faces definitely hit home. Warner’s humorous approach to playground struggles, and the structure of the book — with the narrative broken up by the mental lists that EllRay makes — keep things light and engaging for middle-grade readers.

## Age 7-8



**The Bippolo Seed and Other Lost Stories**

(by Dr. Seuss)

2 4 age 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Treasure of lost Seuss tales a great all-ages read-aloud.

This book is not just for kids. Adult readers, especially those who may remember one or more of the stories from various magazines they may have read as kids, will enjoy the collection, too. As readers may expect, the rhymes and rhythms carry the tales from one crazy moment to the next as zany characters work out whatever silly situation they find themselves in. New words are created, bizarre beasts strut about the pages, and imagination carries the day. Dr. Seuss books are always fun to read aloud, and the stories in this collection are no different. Readers of all ages will find themselves picking it up more than once, and giving it voice even if no one else is in the room. Finding these lost stories is, as Cohen says, like “finding a silver box containing a Bippolo Seed.”

## Age 9-11



### Every Thing on It (by Shel Silverstein)

2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Another classic poetry collection by the master of whimsy.

Shel Silverstein's mastery is on display as he takes mundane or imagined situations and spins them into laughs or meaningful observations. Many of his poems are bite-sized — just two to six lines long. Most reflect a kid-like goofiness, some reveal the mature wisdom of someone who remains young at heart, as in "The Dollhouse": *You can't crawl back in the dollhouse --/ You've gotten too big to get in./ You've got to live here/ Like the rest of us do./ You've got to walk roads/ That are winding and new./ But oh, I wish I could/ Crawl back with you./ Into the dollhouse again.*

Silverstein's line drawings are the perfect accompaniment to his flights of fancy. Some characters have the deadpan, overburdened demeanor of a person in a *New Yorker* cartoon. Some have the loose, offhanded look of a notebook doodle. All are guaranteed to give a lift to readers of any age.



### Secrets at Sea (by Richard Peck)

2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Great story, characters make mouse journey instant classic.

SECRETS AT SEA is a great novel, with an inventive plot and ingenious characters who, despite being mice, are easy to relate to as they deal with their sibling issues. Younger kids who aren't quite at this reading level will still enjoy the characters, the story, and the cute illustrations, even though some nuances of the narration will go right by them. Older kids will love these details, from snarks at the boy-crazy Beatrice to the complicated protocols of being a faithful mouse retainer in the royal palace, unbeknownst to the actual royals involved.



### Wonderstruck (by Brian Selznick)

2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Inventive story of runaways in New York, 50 years apart.

WONDERSTRUCK is visually gorgeous and emotionally satisfying and will leave readers quite fond of the characters. The issue of Ben and Rose's deafness is a strong theme; it's presented with complexity and a strong emphasis on the practical, which both deaf and hearing kids of today may find thought-provoking. The novel is not afraid to delve into the esoteric, so some of the specifics may not be every kid's dish. While the theme of finding your own people, the ones who understand you and share your interests, is pretty universal (what kid cannot relate to Harry's joy at landing at Hogwarts after life among the Muggles?), not every kid will share Ben and Rose's passion for curating per se.



### Breadcrumbs (by Anne Ursu)

2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Brilliant tale of girl's enchanted-woods search for friend.

Hazel is a sensitive and imaginative girl, and readers will relate to and root for her even when she is filled with doubt about her own self-worth. Ursu delicately weaves classic fairy tale themes into Hazel's very real world and addresses dark subjects such as depression and isolation without trivializing them in the fantasy setting. The tale is fraught with metaphor that doesn't have to be understood by children who simply want an exciting adventure story, but it will add an extra dimension for those who want to dig deeper.





### The Apothecary (by Maile Meloy)

2 4 6 8 10 **age 11** 14 16 17

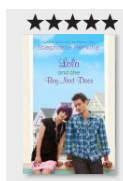
**common sense media says**

Cold War kids use magic to save world in brilliant novel.

This is a great book — well written, deft in its handling of themes and issues, and full of characters who are engaging even as we see their flaws. The magic is handled in a matter-of-fact way, as just part of the landscape — as the gardener says mildly to Benjamin early on, “You must allow for the possibilities” — and it is all the more effective for taking place with a minimum of fuss. The story moves along at a fast pace; the characters are busy saving the world while dealing with common teen woes. There’s a lot going on in this book, enough to reward more than one reading, and it’s hard not to hope for a sequel. Luckily, one is in the works.

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## Age 12-14



### Lola and the Boy Next Door

(by Stephanie Perkins)

2 4 6 8 10 12 **age 14** 16 17

**common sense media says**

Winning romance between quirky neighbors is funny, clever.

After falling in love with Anna and St. Clair’s adventures in Paris in *Anna and the French Kiss*, fans of breakout novelist Stephanie Perkins will adore Lola and her swoon-worthy neighbor Cricket’s love story. Once again Perkins uses the setting — in this case, San Francisco — as a central character in the book. And unlike Anna, whose story was set in a boarding school, Lola has a fantastic homelife with two doting dads and a feisty dog cleverly named “Heavens to Betsy.” Lola is self-possessed and quirky — a Lady Gaga-lite who creates fabulous costumes as an extension of her personality. She’s beautiful, funny, and comfortable in her skin, so it’s hard to resist Lola’s charms as a protagonist.

But despite Lola’s love of presentation, she’s nakedly vulnerable when it comes to Cricket. His re-emergence in her life makes her rethink whether her relationship with Max, the 22-year-old punk star, is the Real Thing or a first love that can’t go the distance. As Cricket and Lola reconnect — adorably via their facing second-story windows — readers will undeniably root for the impossibly tall inventor to win Lola’s heart. As an added bonus, Lola works at a movie theater with Anna and the ever-present St. Clair, making it clear that their intercontinental love story is of the forever variety. With its vivid descriptions of how friendship blooms into love, this is a winning romance with sparkly language and a lot of heart.



### Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children (by Ransom Riggs)

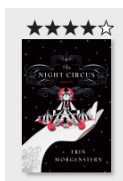
2 4 6 8 10 12 **age 14** 16 17

**common sense media says**

Eerie gothic fantasy a satisfying creep fest for teens.

Just picking up this book, holding it, feeling its heft, and looking at its cover will entice older YA readers to read it. And they will not be disappointed, especially if they like gothic fantasy sprinkled with a little time-traveling adventure, quirky characters, and spine-tingling action. The use of more than 40 unusual but authentic vintage photographs makes the story all the better by lending a sense of eerie realism to its almost absurd, shadowy atmosphere. How the author uses each photo to develop his characters and their story truly is inspiring.

The ending may leave the reader a little unsatisfied and awaiting more adventures from Jacob and his peculiar friends, but those are sure to come. Also, *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* is soon to be made into a movie.



### The Night Circus (by Erin Morgenstern)

2 4 6 8 10 12 14 **age 15** 17

**common sense media says**

Illusionists compete in dream-like literary romance.

*The Night Circus* is a rich, dreamy tale of theatrical enchantment and thwarted love. Erin Morgenstern writes with grace and flair and walks the fine line between the lyrical and the precious. After a while, the nebulous nature of the illusionists’ challenge puts a drag on the narrative, but all the elements come together beautifully at the book’s climax. *The Night Circus* is reminiscent of the best of Ray Bradbury, though without his darkest edge.

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To view the complete review and rating for each book, visit:  
[commonsense.org/book-lists/gift-ideas-books](https://www.commonsense.org/book-lists/gift-ideas-books)



Collections of great TV shows can be a wonderful gift for superfans who want to stock up on their favorites. It can also be a great way to give (or get) something that you can enjoy together. Check out these titles for some familiar and lesser known titles that are available on DVD in 2011.



## Age 2-4



### Pocoyo (Online)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

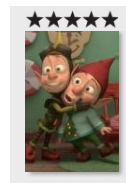
#### common sense media says

Adventurous kid's curiosity will appeal to preschoolers.

Pocoyo's simple, contrasting animation lends itself nicely to the show's style, which uses physical interplay and gestures rather than verbal exchanges between the characters to tell a story. The narrator speaks directly to Pocoyo, asking questions and offering encouragement, and he engages kids in the story by asking for their input as well.

Preschoolers will relate to Pocoyo's imaginative curiosity about the world, as well as his less admirable qualities like selfishness, jealousy, and frustration, which often cause problems between him and his friends. In each story, he's faced with a situation that causes him to address one of these traits, and he must figure out a way to overcome it and retain his relationship with his pals in the process. Need another reason to like it? Each segment is less than 10 minutes long, making it easy for parents to keep their preschoolers' TV time to a minimum. Check out the companion website for more Pocoyo fun.

## Age 5-6



### Prep & Landing (ABC)

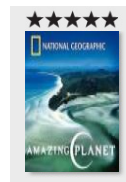
2 4 age 5 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Clever holiday story is merry fun for the whole family.

Just when you thought every avenue had been explored in the world of Christmas stories, along comes a story that will captivate you with its unique spin on a tiny facet of the magical holiday. This sugarplum of a tale will delight any kids who've fretted over the contingencies of Santa's visit — how does Santa land safely on my roof? what if my dog barks at him? how can he be sure I'll be asleep when he comes? — and reassure them that the North Pole team is a step ahead of every conceivable mishap.

Disney is well known for designing entertainment for both kids and parents, and this cute Christmas tale is no exception. Adults will pick up on the minor details that escape kids' attention (tie-ins to spy and action movies and a wealth of clever, high-tech gadgets) and will sympathize with Wayne's frustration over being slighted on the job and stuck with an overzealous coworker. But in the end, holiday spirit conquers all, tying in happy messages about unselfishness and compassion.



### Amazing Planet (National Geographic Channel)

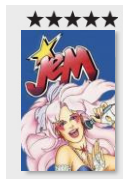
2 4 age 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Stunning nature series for the whole family.

Not only will *Amazing Planet* educate the whole family about the scientific processes that created the Earth as we know it, but it will also inspire viewers to think about the future of the planet and how to preserve its well-being. (The series occasionally touches on the potential hazards of the current global warming trend, but that's just the tip of the proverbial conservation iceberg.)

## Age 7-8



### Jem and the Holograms (The Hub)

2 4 6 age 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Flashy '80s 'toon boasts positive heroines for tween girls.

Splashy colors, big shoulder pads, and '80s hair return to the screen in *Jem and the Holograms*, a retro cartoon that's sure to stir nostalgia for some parents. This "truly, truly, truly outrageous" rock band is steeped in glitz, glamour, and fashion, and although modern girls might challenge the teens' dated style, they'll enjoy coming along for the ride on their many adventures. There's appeal in certain aspects of the heroines' lives, including their overnight rise to fame, the secrecy behind Jem's identity, and their youthful independence, but the show is so fantasized that young tweens are hardly likely to misconstrue what they're seeing as reality.

The Misfits' disreputable behavior is worrisome and in many cases dangerous, and although their actions usually wind up costing them their chance to best the Holograms onstage, they're never subjected to any realistic repercussions for their crimes. This is a great reason to start a discussion with your tweens about bullying and its consequences. While you're at it, be sure to point out how the Holograms use their talent and fame to be positive role models for others.



### Lemonade Mouth (G)

2 4 6 age 8 10 12 14 16 17

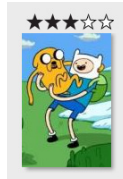
#### common sense media says

Melodic Disney movie has great messages for families.

Based on a book of the same name, *Lemonade Mouth* is a celebration of the human spirit. The teens' refusal to back down to an establishment that discourages students' talents and interests should be inspirational to viewers of any age. The friends identify a problem that has far-reaching consequences, and they set out to fix it in a way that showcases the moving, unifying nature of music and encourages others to take pride in the gifts they have as well.

Families who tune in to this movie are also treated to a laundry list of positive messages they can discuss at its end. Friendship, empowerment, self-esteem, self-confidence, and the courage to stand up for what you believe in are just a few of the gems to be found here, and each is illustrated in a manner that will ring true with your kids. Besides the social themes, there are plenty that relate to family life, and the movie's message about honest communication between parents and kids is impossible to miss. The movie's only sticking point may be its unavoidable ties to its soundtrack, but rest assured that those same happy messages transfer to the songs' lyrics as well.

## Age 9-11



### Adventure Time with Finn and Jake (Cartoon Network)

2 4 6 8 age 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Quirky duo's escapades are fun but include mild weapons.

If you put an 8-year-old boy's imagination to paper, the result would be pretty close to the place Finn and Jake call home. Few rules that exist in the real world apply in Ooo, where adventure is the common goal, and there's really no telling what each day will bring. Older kids with a sense of adventure will enjoy the nonsensical fun, though younger kids may find the show's dissimilarities to their own world confusing.

The show does feature a fair amount of marginal language ("sucks" and "friggin'," for example), so if your tweens are apt to repeat everything they hear on TV, you may want to opt out of this one. Another concern is Finn and Jake's reliance on weapons (swords, sticks, fire, etc.) to resolve disputes, though their victims (zombies, in one case) are mostly inhuman.

## Age 12-14



### Glee (Fox)

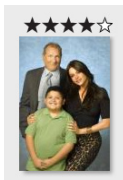
2 4 6 8 10 12 age 13 16 17

#### common sense media says

Edgy-but-quirky comedy's music, message will win teens over.

If you love singing, musical theater, or show choir, *Glee* is going to make you happy. For one thing, there's the presence of two big Broadway names (Matthew Morrison has starred in shows like *Light in the Piazza*, while Lea Michele is known for her stellar work in *Spring Awakening*). But there's also a talented supporting cast that includes the always-reliable Jane Lynch (of *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*, and *Party Down* fame), a comedienne whose gift for deadpan one-liners practically guarantees that she'll steal any scene she's in.

Glee's atypical blend of high school fare like *Election*, *High School Musical*, and *Mean Girls* is exciting -- and its hip sensibility have had music-loving teens buzzing for three seasons.



## ★★★★☆ **Modern Family** (ABC)

2 4 6 8 10 12 **age 13** 16 17

### **common sense media says**

Fresh take on sitcom families includes some iffy content.

*Modern Family* accomplishes just what it sets out to do: It updates the classic family sitcom to reflect the ever-changing canvas of American family life. Though its primary intent is to entertain -- and it offers plenty of laughs -- the interplay between the characters is often heartwarming, reminding us that family relationships are rarely perfect but always play important roles in shaping who we are.

Because the show's content touches on mature topics like sexuality and divorce and includes some salty language ("hell," "damn," "bitch," etc.) and sexual innuendo, this really isn't a show for tweens. But for teens and adults who can put the chuckles into context, *Modern Family* is a sharp comedy with characters that reflect society's modern definition of "family" -- and might make viewers a little more forgiving of the idiosyncrasies within their own clans.



## ★★★★★ **Monty Python's Flying Circus** (PBS)

2 4 6 8 10 12 **age 13** 16 17

### **common sense media says**

Madcap, classic sketch comedy with adult themes.

The Pythons are an amazingly talented comedy bunch -- their humor is a mix of downright silliness, brilliant intellectualism, and over-the-top exaggeration. But with its sexual themes and innuendo (more on that below), cartoonish violence, and cerebral humor, this show is best for teens. What's more, some skits poke fun at the mentally and physically challenged, homosexuals, and people of other races and ethnicities (particularly the French). It's all in the name of humor/good fun, but younger kids won't be able to put it in context. Violence is exaggerated but all in fun -- a man is crushed by a 16-ton weight, dowdy matrons mix it up in a rugby-like brawl, a bloke reminisces about the time a gangster nailed his head to the floor, and a crazy self-defense instructor shoots his students when they attack him with fruit.

Overall, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is a great example of what creative minds can accomplish when they work together. Anyone with an appreciation of comedy will see that these mates are masters of comedic timing, clever writing, character creation, and the art of physical comedy. Teens interested in acting and theater arts may be inspired by the show -- even though it originally aired in the late 1960s and '70s, it remains a grand example of talent and creativity and, frankly, is still hilarious.

To view the complete review and rating for each TV show, visit:  
[commonsense.org/tv-lists/gift-ideas-tv](http://commonsense.org/tv-lists/gift-ideas-tv)





# Movies

DVDs make great media gifts for kids because they usually lead to a family movie night. So if you need some ideas this holiday season, look no further than our hand-picked list of the top DVD releases of 2011. There's a stocking stuffer here for every type of movie fan on your list.



## Age 2-4



### The Gruffalo (ABC Family)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Favorite book adaptation promotes brains over brawn.

Masterfully animated to reflect the book's original drawings and set to beautifully crafted music, this enchanting adaptation is a great opportunity for parents to hit the couch with their kids and take in a truly wonderful story. Based on the award-winning children's book by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, the show breathes life into these loved characters and teaches a lesson about not letting size intimidate you. The crafty mouse uses his smarts to escape the larger and more powerful animals, who fall for his tricks out of unfounded fear.

There are some perilous scenes when the mouse envisions his own death at the hands of the animals, but other than that, it's perfectly suited -- and very entertaining -- for kids of all ages.



### Winnie the Pooh (G, 2011)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Adorable big-screen Pooh adaptation is short and sweet.

With its old-fashioned animation and easy-to-follow storylines, *Winne the Pooh* is one of those rare children's movies that's both simple and sweet. Like the beloved books on which the animated characters are based, there's no artifice or trendy references, just funny jokes (behold the comeback of the "Who's on First" routine), cheery musical numbers, and the occasional wink-wink to parents in the audience (who will laugh more than they ever thought possible in a Pooh flick).

Although the movie is really two intertwined vignettes (the pals search for Eeyore's tail and then try to trap the enigmatic Backson), at barely over an hour, there's no time for the plot to lag or bore even kids who can't read. That said, literate children will get an extra bonus of seeing how the characters form objects and words with the letters on screen, and adults will enjoy John Cleese's narrator, who talks directly to the enchanted animals. The Pooh is back, and thanks to sticking closely to A. A. Milne's roots, Disney has a winning little film for kids who love the fluff-stuffed bear.

## Age 5-6



### Tangled (PG, 2010)

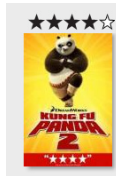
2 4 age 5 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Fantastic princess adventure is fun, with great messages.

It's a relief to see that Disney can still conjure up a princess movie to rival its all-time greats. In 2009 there was the lovely, hopeful Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog*, and now there's another fairy tale heroine who's worthy of adoration: *Tangled*'s Rapunzel. She's guileless, strong, and beautiful -- and so breathtakingly good that you can't help but weep with her when she thinks all hope is lost. And her chemistry with Flynn is so heart-flutteringly good that you don't even need to use the kids as an excuse to go watch: This is a perfect date-night pick. Their relationship is built on mutual respect and trust, something completely missing in many earlier Disney movies. And it's Flynn who nearly dies and requires Rapunzel to save him, not the other way around! What a refreshing turn on the age-old damsel-in-distress meets dashing-prince story.

As for the dramatic tension, it's best in the form of Mother Gothel -- brilliantly played by Donna Murphy, whose signature Broadway voice (on fabulous display in the amazing number "Mother Knows Best") adds the necessary punch to Moore's sweet, airy vocals. Mother is, at least as princess film villains go, a Mandy favorite. In a youth-obsessed culture, who couldn't extend the tiniest bit of sympathy for an ancient, shriveled old hag who'd rather look like a young Sophia Loren-meets-Cher? Composer Alan Menken's songs -- from Murphy's show-stopper to Moore's eternally optimistic "When Will My Life Begin," the inspiring "I've Got a Dream," and the love song "I See the Light" -- are all great, as is singer-songwriter Grace Potter's theme, "Something I Want." *Tangled* has it all -- lovable characters, fantastic songs, and a powerful message about how your life can change if other people believe in you and your dreams.



### Kung Fu Panda 2 (PG, 2011)

2 4 age 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Panda hero saves the day in surprisingly deep family film.

There are so many ways that *Kung Fu Panda 2* could have gone wrong. It could have traded on the same old jokes. It could have had Po still proving himself. It could have had an identical theme song. But *Kung Fu Panda 2* does none of that, and that's why it's one of the best sequels to grace the screen in a while, fully able to stand on its own.

First, there's the timing. The movie doesn't start exactly where the first installment left off but rather with Po and the Furious 5 already a well-trained unit. And then there's the plot. By taking the storyline in a more serious, though still entertaining, direction -- Po yearns to discover and understand where he came from, and the movie makes a strong point that your past need not define you -- it has more heft and heart, a potent and sometimes profound combination. And yet, the film is still whimsical and funny, with thrilling 3-D special effects to boot. (The trees and the landscapes are nearly palpable.) Now *this* is winning.



### The Lion King (G, 1994)

2 4 age 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Musical king-of-the-beasts blockbuster is powerful, scary.

One of Disney's biggest hits, *The Lion King* has echoes of Shakespeare, bringing to mind the plots of both *Richard III* and *Hamlet*. *The Lion King* was not just a movie but a marketing phenomenon: This blockbuster was the highest grossing film of 1994. Of course kids won't know -- or care -- about that; they'll just be enthralled by the memorable songs and great characters.

The scene in which cub Simba's father, Mufasa, is trampled to death, is both sad and genuinely scary. And some of the fights between animals later in the movie can be frightening as well. But the lesson Simba learns -- that you have to stand up to your problems instead of running away from them -- is a solid one.

## Age 7-8



### Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope (PG, 1977)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Sci-fi action classic perfect for sharing with kids.

*Star Wars* is one of those films that has become sewn into the very fabric of our popular culture. And yet, every day new kids are born who have never seen it. Watched through the lens of a young child, some of the scarier moments of the film suddenly become more striking. Darth Vader is one of the great film villains for a reason -- he's a frightening figure who engages in some very real moments of violence. With the continued prominence of the *Star Wars* story through animated series, video games, and toys, it may be tempting to introduce the films to children when they are too young to handle these more intense moments.

But if kids are old enough or mature enough to handle these moments, then it's likely that *Star Wars* will blow their little minds. It remains an enduring classic for the same reasons it made such an explosive impression way back in 1977. It's full of pulse-pounding action lifted straight from the classic 1930s film serials, it's got humor and character to spare, and the story guides you effortlessly into a completely original universe full of strange creatures and amazing sights. It's easy to be cynical about *Star Wars* given the billions of dollars it's earned selling everything from DVDs to toothbrushes, but returning to the original film with fresh eyes will remind you just how remarkable *Star Wars* was -- and continues to be.

## Age 9-11



### Make Believe (NR, 2010)

2 4 6 8 age 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Teens chase magical dreams in inspiring documentary.

This award-winning documentary is a fun and inspiring story, following the lives of quirky single-minded teenagers as they focus all of their energies into being the best magicians they can be. Even for those who aren't fans of magic, this compelling story of teenagers aspiring to, in the words of magician Bill Koch, "excellence: nothing less," is nothing less than enchanting. By the time they make it Las Vegas for the World Magic Seminar, you know what's at stake for these six as they each take the stage to perform their tricks.

Also, for those who are interested in learning magic, the DVD includes over an hour of magic tutorials.

## Age 12-14



### Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2 (PG-13, 2011)

2 4 6 8 10 age 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Spectacularly epic, poignant end to a magical series.

Director David Yates has been at the helm of the Harry Potter series since *Order of the Phoenix*, and he sends it off with a spectacular finish. He switches from *Part 1*'s sparse, atmospheric tone to a relentlessly intense war film. Rupert Grint and Emma Watson add some much-needed levity with their sweet romantic overtures, but while they're off fighting Death Eaters hand-in-hand, it's Daniel Radcliffe's big moment to propel the action to Harry's final confrontation with Voldemort. Shining brightly are Matthew Lewis' Neville, who, after years of being the class wallflower, proves just how brave a Gryffindor he is, and Kelly Macdonald, who plays a ghost with fiery intensity. Alan Rickman gets his best scenes ever in a series of flashbacks that explore his true nature, and Maggie Smith is surprisingly gleeful as Professor McGonagall in warrior mode.

For once, Yates and screenwriter Steve Kloves' adaptation could have been even longer to properly represent crucial moments like Molly Weasley (Julie Walters) taking on Bellatrix Lestrange, or Ron and Hermione finally admitting their feelings through a kiss (neither scene is quite as heart-stopping in the film as on the page). Other sequences, like Harry's momentous walk in the Forbidden Forest, the Weasley family convening in grief, a look through Snape's memories, and even the controversial-to-readers epilogue, are all handled quite beautifully -- poignant moments of the heart to punctuate the nonstop action of the battle. Much of the film is either a tearjerker or an epic battle scene -- sparks flying, wizards dueling, creatures crushing each other. It all builds up to a last indelible shot ... one that reminds us while all may be well, it's sad to know there will never be another Harry Potter.



### The Help (PG-13, 2011)

2 4 6 8 10 age 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Poignant, thought-provoking Civil Rights tale.

On the surface, *The Help* looks like yet another Civil Rights story told from the perspective of an open-minded white character who acts as the catalyst for change. But director Tate Taylor is careful not to put an overwhelming spotlight on Skeeter at the expense of Aibileen (who narrates the drama) or Minny. Emma Stone continues to solidify her stellar reputation with her understated performance as the ambitious but slightly misfit young writer. But the real revelations are Viola Davis, who's such a nuanced actress that she can elicit a storm of emotions with her soul-piercing stare, and relative newcomer Octavia Spencer, who's not only playing the opinionated Minny but is her inspiration (she's a close friend of both the author and director). Both actresses are deserving of an Academy Award nominations.

All of the performances are remarkable in this drama. There's not a flat note in the production, although special mention must be made of scene-stealers Bryce Dallas Howard and Jessica Chastain. Howard plays Hilly Holbrook, one of the meanest, most heartless villains this side of Cruella DeVil. She's the Junior League set's queen bee and is so racist that she wants a bill passed forcing white homes to have a separate bathroom for their black servants. Chastain, who wowed critics in *The Tree of Life*, lets loose as Minny's kind and charismatic employer, who's desperate for a friend. *The Help* is one of those perfect movies for parents and mature tweens/teens to see together. It sparks discussion, teaches a history lesson, and makes everyone think about how we treat others. And yes, don't forget the tissues. There will be weeping.



## Jurassic Park (PG-13, 1993)

2 4 6 8 10 age 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Terrifyingly realistic dinos run amok.

*Jurassic Park* boasts Academy Award-winning special effects, lots of frightful moments, and some good laughs. Director Steven Spielberg and his effects team deliver some stunningly realistic dinosaurs. Gone are the days of stop-motion lizards and jerking beasts of vastly varying sizes, replaced by animatronics and digital effects. The movie also has a superb soundscape; hear it with a top-notch sound system to get all the thrills. Of course, actually seeing the monster is not always the best thing. In *Jaws*, Spielberg's early masterpiece, the audience didn't get to see the shark until well into the movie -- and the suspense was excruciating. That kind of storytelling elegance is missing here. And for all its technical achievements, a lack of character development weakens this thriller.

The movie's terrifying realism earned it a PG-13 rating. Seen in the theater, children and adults alike turned away from the screen, particularly during the young-children-in-peril sections. Viewed at home, the effect is somewhat less fearful. Still, sensitive pre-teens may want to avoid this one, and parents may want to watch and gauge the response of their children. With all the thrills, the movie has some very funny touches. The animated film detailing the genetic engineering of the dinosaurs resembles a grammar school educational movie from the '70s. Even funnier: "Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear" glimpsed in a side mirror as a huge T. Rex chases a fleeing jeep.

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To view the complete review and rating for each movie, visit:  
[commonsense.org/movie-lists/gift-ideas-movies](https://www.commonsense.org/movie-lists/gift-ideas-movies)





# Music

Looking to add a few new songs to the road-trip/ bedtime rotation? That's all the excuse you need to pick up some of our 2011 favorites for gifts this holiday season. We've chosen the best soundtracks and our favorite albums for preschoolers, elementary age kids, and tweens. Pick your favorites, then start the family dance party!



## Age 2-4



★★★★★ **Flying!** (by Recess Monkey, Children's Music)

age 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Outstanding music celebrates the joys of childhood.

Who knew elementary school teachers could be so cool? Recess Monkey's music is playful and sometimes theatrical and goes from sounding like The Beatles to Buddy Holly, bringing childhood memories to life through clever lyrics about the awesomeness of a bunk bed or the sweetness of an imaginary friend. Whether driving in the minivan, er, supervan, or chasing your kiddos around the house in a bed sheet cape, the songs on *Flying!* will bring out the superkid in anyone.



★★★★★ **Radio Wayne** (by Wayne Brady, Children's Music)

age 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Important kid lessons put to fun, danceable music.

If you're tired of nagging your kids to eat their veggies or say "thank you," then DJ Wayne's appealing tunes just might do the trick. Sounding like Will Smith doing a children's album, *Radio Wayne* offers smooth beats and a fun, kid-friendly twist on each track. Little ones will love the silly oinking and mooing in the *Doctor Doolittle* classic "Talk to the Animals," while "You Are What You Eat" will have your preschooler rapping about vegetables. This is one album you'll be happy your kids want to listen to again.



★★★★★ **The Merry Goes Round** (by Jewel, Children's Music)

age 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Jewel's sweet sound enchants little ones with artful music.

Parents and their preschoolers will be charmed and delighted at the sing-along songs and lullabies on *The Merry Goes Round*. Jewel's angel-like vocals make her the perfect voice to serenade anyone. "The Supermarket Song," about that oft-dreaded and unpredictable trip to the grocery store, will appeal to both parents and fidgety 4-year-olds, and "Bucky the Bull" is a preschooler's answer to the Beatles' classic "Rocky Raccoon." "Only Shadows" will soothe the fears of bedtime with lyrics like "that thump thump is just the dog's tail waggin'" (Phew...!). The Celtic-like lullaby, "Just Like Penguins Do," will ease your little ones off happily to dreamland. Most of the songs are mellow folk with the addition of Jewel's top-notch acoustic guitar skills and feel-good messages about life as a little one, love, and just being happy. You and your kids will feel better, and maybe even be better, just by listening to these sweet songs.



★★★★★ **Little Nut Tree** (by Dan Zanes, Children's Music)

age 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Folk tunes encourage kids to enjoy life's simple pleasures.

It's no surprise that Dan Zanes continues to make great children's music, and he doesn't disappoint on the endearing grab bag of tunes on *Little Nut Tree*. Whether he sings about dancing in your basement ("where you won't get carded at the door") or gives homage to all the things around us in "Thank You" ("thank you when the lion runs and for the morning mist out on the golden plain") his music and lyrics teach kids about the sweeter, simpler things in life without preaching or pretense. *Little Nut Tree* makes you appreciate family, life, and the everyday beauty we might sometimes forget in the rush.



## Jake and the Never Land Pirates Soundtrack (by Various Artists, Soundtrack)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

These pirates rock! Fun tunes for mates of all ages.

This soundtrack will have little pirates singing and shouting, “Swim away!,” “Swab the deck!,” and “Arrrr, matey!” With the popularity of pirates these days, the music on the *Jake and the Never Land Pirates Soundtrack* will satisfy the pirate in any family, big or small. Much of it sounds like a mix between The Wiggles, Imagination Movers, and the Talking Heads -- all in a good way. Every track is fun and catchy, but fans will especially love “Castaway on Pirate Island,” “Aw, Coconuts,” and the “Shipwreck Shuffle.” The whole album is great for a pirate-themed party, Halloween, or even if you’re just in the mood for some pirate fun. Yo ho!



## Making Silly Faces (by Nick Deysher, Children’s Music)

2 age 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Creative, kid-friendly music that entertains and educates.

Known in some circles as “The Toddler Whisperer” for his ability to connect with young kids, Nick Deysher obviously has a knack for creating music that kids love and actually relate to. There’s a wide range of sounds on *Making Silly Faces*, so there’s bound to be several songs that engage your kids. The changing genres certainly keep you guessing and listening and ultimately leave the listener a little bit wiser in the end. Kids will love singing like pirates and mimicking silly faces, and parents will appreciate the music and mini-lessons in every song.

## Age 5-6



## Muppets: The Green Album (by Various Artists, Children’s Music)

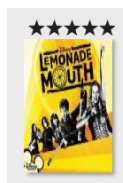
2 4 age 5 8 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Cool, modern remakes of classic, clean Muppet tunes.

It’s hard to say which are the truly standout songs among the many excellent tracks on this record. The light, lovely quality of Andrew Bird’s “Bein’ Green,” the eclectic rendition of the “Muppet Show Theme Song” by OK Go, and the hilarious take on “Mahna Mahna” by The Fray are just a few of the tracks that families will find themselves listening to over and over. This is an excellent album for kids (and parents) of all ages to share and enjoy together.

## Age 7-8



## Lemonade Mouth Soundtrack (by Various Artists, Soundtrack)

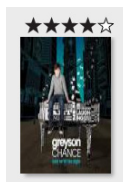
2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Disney movie music is fresh and hip; great for all ages.

The music of *Lemonade Mouth* is a sweet concoction that’s a refreshing break from the usual Disney cookie-cutter pop. The songs range from those reminiscent of ‘90s bands The Red Hot Chili Peppers (“And the Band Goes,” “Don’t Ya Wish U Were Us?”) and B52s (“Here We Go”) to more mainstream synth-pop and folk-rock tunes like “Somebody” and “More Than a Band.”

Despite the diverse sounds, the songs are all equally entertaining and infectious. They include positive messages that let kids know it’s OK to “raise your voice and let the world know it’s wrong” and show that everyone deserves to be the person they want to be.



## Hold on ‘Til the Night (by Greyson Chance, Pop)

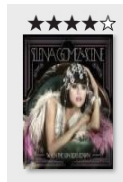
2 4 6 age 8 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Teen vocal powerhouse sings clean yet semi-sad songs.

Listening to the strength behind the vocals on this record, it’s hard to believe Greyson Chance was a mere 13 years old when he recorded it. The teen is every bit as talented as his oft-cited peer, Justin Bieber, with a bouncier pop sound that shines through on songs like “Little London Girl” and “Unfriend You.”

## Age 9-11



## When the Sun Goes Down (by Selena Gomez, Pop)

2 4 6 8 age 10 12 14 16 17

### common sense media says

Slightly more mature content, but still OK for older tweens.

Some things get better with age -- like Selena Gomez. Stronger, more mature vocals and more creative beats characterize this step forward for Gomez, who’s clearly making a (good) attempt to break free of the synth-pop crowd and strike out with a more adult sound.

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## Age 12-14



★★★★☆  
**21** (by Adele, Pop)



**common sense media says**

Clean songs about love; most likely to appeal to older kids.

This record starts out with fireworks, featuring two fast yet deeply soulful songs (the radio hit “Rolling in the Deep” and “Rumour Has It”) that hit you at your core. However, things cool off rather quickly, with the remainder of the songs doing a good job of showing off Adele’s fantastic vocals yet failing to ignite the same spark. One bright spot in later in the record: the excellent cover of The Cure’s classic tune “Lovesong.”

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To view the complete review and rating for each music title, visit:  
[commonsense.org/music-lists/gift-ideas-music](https://www.commonsense.org/music-lists/gift-ideas-music)

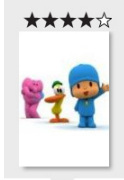


# Website Membership

Has your kid asked you to purchase a membership for a virtual world, social network, or another website with paid membership options? Maybe you've been hesitant, but these upgrades can make a great holiday gift—and there's usually a discount for purchasing an entire year up front. Here are some of our favorites.



## Age 2-4



**Pocoyo World** (<http://www.pocoyo.com/play.html>)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

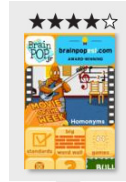
Virtual world preschoolers can enjoy with adult help.

*Pocoyo World* lets kids create a customized avatar and cruise around the zoo, amusement park, playground, and other areas, jumping, dancing, and exploring while peppy music plays. The virtual world also includes several fun, graphically impressive games that younger kids are bound to love -- such as a golf game where the ball bounces off characters and objects before landing near the hole.

Playing games earns users tickets, which can be used to buy accessories and stamps for their online character-based stamp collection, but the emphasis is on having fun, not earning credit. Supportive messages like "hooray for Pocoyo!" at the end of some of the games reflect the site's cheerful, supportive tone -- and thanks to the constant guidance about what to see and do from a British narrator, even very young kids can easily find their way around Pocoyo World.

Online interaction: Pocoyo World is super safe. Kids can pick from a number of emotions, like frazzled or sleepy, that can be broadcast over their head, or can blow a kiss or dance, but can't directly chat.

## Age 5-6



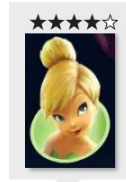
**BrainPOP Jr.** (<http://www.brainpopjr.com>)

2 4 age 5 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Animated educational content for kids to explore, for a fee.

BrainPOPJr.com is a high-quality educational site that kids can navigate easily on their own. This interactive site includes videos, audio prompts, and graphics familiar to kids in an ideal format for young learners. Kids can take their enjoyment of videos to the next, more effective, level and do something with what they've just watched online. Kids can spend hours on this site exploring many of the ones that contain more sub-categories, like the science and math sections. If your K-3 child likes to learn things online, this site is worth the subscription fee.



**DisneyFairies** (<http://disney.go.com/fairies>)

2 4 age 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

A safe Neverland of fun and Disney products.

The site gives kids random name choices for their characters (a good safety tool) and a fake fairy address. Overall, Disney-Fairies.com is safe, beautiful, and just plain fun imaginative fantasy for younger girls through perhaps second or third grade. But while she's dressing her fairies in fancy forest fashion, you may want to help your kid become aware of the site's subtle marketing practices and the sometimes overwhelming Disney branding.



## Age 7-8



### Club Penguin (<http://www.clubpenguin.com/>)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

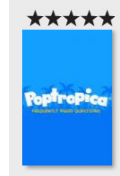
#### common sense media says

Site unveils new chat tool, makes it easier to find friends.

*Club Penguin* is a cool way for kids to get their feet wet in the world of social networking and online gaming -- as long as parents use the site's parental controls, and as long as kids are taught how to block rule breakers and how to report any bad behavior. On the site, kids enjoy dressing up their penguin, waddling around the many different areas of the virtual world -- all with cool themes -- and playing fun games. Plus, players should be able to find their friends' penguins more easily -- but still remain anonymous -- with the new friends list.

The new chat tool includes only phrases that have been approved by monitors. Some 300,000 of the most used phrases were mined from chat logs to create the approved list; kids can use these words and phrases in so many combinations that it should not feel limiting. The end result is that kids are safer but still have more opportunities for real conversation than with highly scripted chat.

Virtual coins -- which paid members can earn via games or the *Puffle Launch* app -- are used to buy virtual clothes for penguins or the latest gear for igloos. Unfortunately, there's very little you can spend the coins on if you're not a paid member.



### Poptropica (<http://www.poptropica.com>)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Island-hopping adventure is hours of safe fun, but with ads.

Ready for some island hopping? Then head on over to *Poptropica*, a virtual world from the creators of FunBrain. Players get an avatar and name, then board the Poptropica blimp for one of many islands, including Spy, Reality Television, Super Power, and Mythology Islands. Each island holds its own adventure; players climb, jump, and collect objects in order to complete missions, which they learn about by talking to the locals. Along the way, they can stop in at destinations like the Pop Shop or Poptropica Arcade to chat or play mini-games with other visitors. After saving their game once, players can leave and come back at any time to pick up where they left off.

Poptropica is completely appropriate for kids, but its missions are challenging enough to keep older tweens entertained, too. Exploring the islands takes hours of game play, and the site develops new islands frequently (though only players with paid memberships get early access). Kids need to have solid reading skills and basic understanding of point-and-click operations in order to play (and enjoy themselves). Younger kids might find completing some missions difficult without help, since they sometimes require maneuvering quickly or completing a series of steps in a specific order. Parents will appreciate the educational tidbits woven into the adventure -- players encounter famous historical figures and learn about ancient civilizations on Time Tangled Island, for example. Poptropica also gets points for cleverness -- the original settlers of Early Poptropica Island are rendered in 1980s-style 16-bit animation.

Online interaction: Kids can chat with other players, but only through pre-scripted chat phrases, so there is no chance of profanity, bullying, or other inappropriate behavior. When a kid says no to another player's offer to play a game, the player sometimes cries and throws a brief tantrum.



### WhatsWhat.me (<http://www.whatswhat.me>)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Tween social network with top-notch safety features.

WhatsWhat.me was created by law enforcement and cyberspace experts, so the safety features are top-notch. As one of a number of sites competing for the "too young for Facebook" crowd, there aren't a lot of games or groups on this site yet, so it may take a while to see how the content will develop and how kids will respond. One of the best features of this site is that site moderators turn any problem posts into "teachable moments" for the kids whose photos or posts are removed or whose group is rejected. Overall, this site has gone above and beyond to create a safe space for kids to learn how to interact safely and have fun with social networking.

Online interaction: Lots of safeguards here for positive online interaction between members. All posts kids receive must be approved by them before being seen by others. Groups are pre-approved by moderators so you won't find mean groups. There is one-to-one, email-style messaging so kids could potentially use that as a way to get around the anti-bullying measures. Kids can only interact with other kids within one grade level above or below them, unless approved by their parents.

## Age 9-11



★★★★☆ **MiniMonos** (<http://www.minimonos.com>)

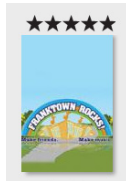
2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Game-based virtual world encourages kids to go green.

Founded by environmental advocate (and mom) Melissa Clark-Reynolds in 2007, the *MiniMonos* virtual world teaches kids how to be green with games and activities. (Not every virtual world has its own recycling center!) Kids crawl through the site as monkeys and can partake in green activities like recycling their treehouse trash and playing games like Tic-Tac-Poo, where monkeys convert waste into fertilizer to create power. The site's pro-environment stance is an admirable one, but *MiniMonos* also deserves kudos for its efforts to keep kids safe. In addition to the usual precautions -- such as the reminder during registration not to use your real name as a username -- the site also strictly limits and monitors chats and emails, and *MiniMonos* TV episodes that are housed on YouTube can be viewed without users having to leave the site. The one catch: You may end up shelling out some green to help your child be green. There's plenty to do on the site with a free membership, but if your kid's clamoring for more accessories and chatting capabilities, you'll need a paid membership.

Online interaction: Users can chat, but all conversations -- including public and friend-to-friend chats -- are monitored.



★★★★★ **Franktown Rocks** (<http://www.franktownrocks.com>)

2 4 6 8 age 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Music and social networking combine in safe, cool hangout.

Praised by *Parents* magazine as one of the "best of the next generation" of junior social networks, this site is safe, educational, and a crowd-pleaser. While some of the videos posted are kind of choppy and dull and the games could be more challenging, it's not really about the games and videos here. The *Franktown* virtual world is cute and safe. Yet the music selection is the big draw -- hip enough to grab tweens' attention while diverse enough to sprinkle in some encouraging music appreciation lessons.



★★★★☆ **Imbee** (<http://www.imbee.com>)

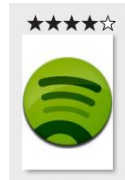
2 4 6 8 age 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Safer social networking if parents stay involved.

For kids age 8-14 who like pop culture news, current music, and want to try a Facebook-like account of their own, *Imbee* is a safe place to enter into the worlds of social networking and legal use of online music. There's a promising pitch here for a No Bully Zone "Think Before You Send" campaign, as well as good tutorials and Internet safety information for parents (who can connect with the site through their Facebook page) and kids. The more active users this site attracts, the more groups and fan sites will form, which will also boost the overall experience. Kids on the younger side of the 8-14 spectrum may find that the site is not directed enough for them.

## Age 12-14



★★★★☆ **Spotify** (<http://www.spotify.com/us/hello-america>)

2 4 6 8 10 12 age 13 16 17

**common sense media says**

Free cloud-based music service focuses on sharing.

*Spotify* offers users free access to more than 15 million songs -- you can find and listen to full-length versions of everything from torch songs to 2 Live Crew, and drag-and-drop your favorites into a personal playlist. The application also automatically syncs with your iTunes or Windows Music Library to let you access songs you've already saved or downloaded. You can build playlists, share them with friends, and enjoy playlists and song suggestions from friends as well. Although there are two paid subscription options -- \$4.99 or \$9.99 a month -- you don't need to pay a dime to find and listen to the music you like.

So what's the catch? Well, you have to download the application to use Spotify, and you can no longer do that without agreeing to log in through Facebook -- if you don't have an account, you're asked to create one. Logging in through Facebook means you automatically agree to share your music picks with friends you're linked to (unless you change your Facebook settings). And parents concerned about lyrical content should know that teens using Spotify can easily search for and find songs with iffy content.

To view the complete review and rating for each website, visit:  
[commonsense.org/website-lists-app-lists/websites](http://commonsense.org/website-lists-app-lists/websites)



# Apps

Looking for a unique stocking stuffer this year? Try giving your kids an app or two (or treat yourself and just let them play sometimes!). Whether you've got little kids who will appreciate interactive storybooks or older ones who can't get enough of *Rock Band* in any format, apps make affordable, fun holiday gifts. Not sure how to give an app? Look for the "Gift This App" option in the App Store.

## Age 2-4



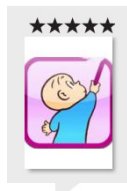
### ★★★★★ Pat the Bunny (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)

age 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Innovative update of the original tactile book.

*Pat the Bunny* is a clever twist on the original print book by the same name. With the same artwork style and characters (plus a few new ones), the book encourages kids to interact with the story images in new ways, while practicing their reading at the same time. Though it still has the soft illustrations done with a two-dimensional quality of the original book, much of the content is different. However, it still retains the same charming bunny who will capture the interest and imagination of people much older than the intended audience. In addition, the simple painting activity can be very satisfying for the very young who may be frustrated by other painting apps, since they only need to swipe their finger to bring color to the canvas.



### ★★★★★ Harold and the Purple Crayon (iPad)

2 age 3 6 8 10 12 14 16 17

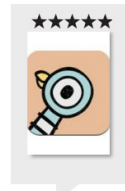
#### common sense media says

Wonderful adaptation allows kids to "be" Harold's crayon.

With the finger-drawing abilities offered by the iPad, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* seems like the perfect storybook to translate into app-hood. And Trilogy Studios has done a remarkably fantastic job of doing so. The original illustrations are adorably animated, the narration is superbly performed, and the interactive elements are seamlessly integrated into the storytelling experience. Every time Harold draws a new element into his environment, readers follow those crayon lines with their fingers, literally helping Harold create his world. The help button, which maps out the interactive spots on each page, is also a wonderful feature. Some book apps highlight the hotspots so kids can see them easily, but the help button offers a great way for kids to make sure they haven't missed anything, without taking away their chance to first explore and find the hidden spots themselves. Excellent.



## Age 5-6



### ★★★★★ Don't Let The Pigeon Run This App!

(iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)

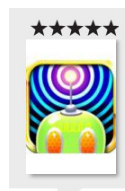
2 4 age 5 8 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

More than a storybook, app lets kids help craft the tales.

*Don't Let The Pigeon Run This App!* feels like the perfect way to go in adapting Mo Willems's Pigeon character for the app world. Rather than simply turn one of the Pigeon books into an app, the developers chose to let kids help craft their own Pigeon stories. It's wonderful that the app gives you the ability to either take the multiple-choice route or to let your imagination run free -- or just sit and watch a randomly generated story if you want. The animation and voice-acting (by Willems) are pretty great. And the bonus lesson on how to draw the Pigeon is remarkably good; you will really be able to draw that pigeon!

## Age 7-8



### ★★★★★ Bobo Explores Light (iPad)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

#### common sense media says

Thorough, and thoroughly entertaining, interactive science.

There is so much information in *Bobo Explores Light* that anybody of any age would be hard-pressed to make it all the way through without learning something new. It's all explained in clear, simple language that elementary schoolers should be able to take in with no problem. The videos and interactivity add both extra insight and a genuine entertainment factor. This app exemplifies the old mantra: "Learning can be fun."



### iDiary for Kids (iPad)

2 4 6 age 7 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Excellent journal-writing tool for creative kids.

*iDiary for Kids* provides a perfect format for today's tech-minded kid to create and keep a memorable, unique summer vacation journal and for teachers to encourage kids to journal daily in class when school begins. Younger kids can combine the stickers and hand sketching for creative pictures of their day, while older kids can write, draw, add photos, and email entries. Parent or teacher involvement for setting guidelines in privacy, safety, and appropriate sharing may be necessary. On the downside: The odd music is an unnecessary distraction that can be avoided; there's a three-page per day maximum entry; and parents should be sure to read backing-up instructions to avoid any data loss.



### Geo Walk HD - 3D World Fact Book (iPad)

2 4 6 age 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Brilliantly designed app about Earth's people, places, more.

In an era where expertly researched encyclopedias are nearly extinct and crowd-sourced ones often contain faulty data, *Geo Walk HD - 3D World Fact Book* is a breath of fresh air. Loaded with information in easily digestible nuggets, the app makes learning truly fun. And a quiz mode helps owners review what they've learned (or test their existing knowledge) in an entertaining fashion. Rather than focusing on space or theoretical concepts, the app sticks to the real world but finds plenty of unheard-of creatures that might as well be aliens -- like the Blobfish or Fishing Cat. This is, hands down, one of the best educational apps in the App Store.



### Strip Designer (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)

2 4 6 age 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Simple, exciting way to create comic books using own photos.

*Strip Designer* is appropriate both for users with only an ounce of creativity and some free time, as well as budding graphic designers who want to spend hours tweaking their creation until it's just right. Every comic book that users create will no doubt be unique, as even the layout is customizable -- users can choose between a "film strip" look or an "embossed" comic book style, among several other designs. The possibilities are also endless; make those vacation photos even more exciting, turn the birthday party into a graphic novel, or change an otherwise humdrum day into an extraordinary adventure. All this combined with an intuitive user interface, just the right amount of customizable options, and the ability to export comic books to PDF format, makes this app as productive as it is rewarding and fun.



### Wreck This App (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)

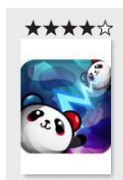
2 4 6 age 8 10 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Permission to be destructive can inspire creativity.

The genius behind *Wreck This App* lies in the way it allows kids to feel subversive but is really teaching them ways to harness their own creativity. Whether a child is suffering from a youthful writer's block or is just plain bored, her imagination can easily be sparked by the chance to drip ink all over a page or scribble a mustache and eyepatch onto a hated photo of herself. The scrawling, smearing messiness of the activities here feel uniquely different from those found in more traditional creativity journals. This being an app (in which anything you do is inherently temporary), there may be somewhat less of a visceral thrill than you'd get from defacing the pages of an actual paper book -- but the app factor has its upsides, too, as in the ability to upload photos and share copies of the messy art you make.

## Age 9-11



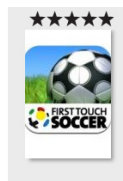
### Nano Panda (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch, Android)

2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Challenging physics puzzler revolves around magnetism.

*Nano Panda* takes the trajectory-based physics game to a new level by adding the element of magnetic attraction. You need to launch tiny pandas so that they will smash into and destroy evil block creatures -- but when two or more pandas are launched on screen at the same time, they will be attracted to one another. The gravitational pull between pandas alters their flight paths, allowing for some very nuanced strategies. It can be tough (especially if you want to collect all the bonus stars on each level) but is refreshingly unique. And fun to boot.



### First Touch Soccer (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch)

2 4 6 8 age 9 12 14 16 17

**common sense media says**

Challenging, well-paced sim with impressive features.

Soccer sims on iDevices have been so-so so far, but *First Touch Soccer* offers almost everything the true fan could ask for. The game is challenging and well-paced, with terrific AI, impressive graphics, and (amazingly) a play-by-play/color commentating system that doesn't get annoying. It's as close to a console experience as we've seen on an iOS system. Additionally, there's a headline feed of soccer-themed stories (which sometimes can be a bit much for younger players). There are also several customization options and a ton of teams, game modes, and other gameplay options. The interface is a bit busy, but in the end, this is a game that truly feels like a team experience -- which makes it stand above most of its competition.



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## Age 12-14



### GarageBand (iPad)



#### common sense media says

Feature-rich iPad version of the Mac music sequencer.

Although *GarageBand* for iPad isn't as sophisticated a sequencer as its Max OS X counterpart, it still boasts an impressive number of features at an affordable price. Users can record and layer up to eight tracks per song using the app's collection of virtual instruments, which include touch-sensitive keyboards, Smart Guitars and Basses with pre-programmed chords and scales, and drum kits. Users can also connect a microphone to the iPad to record vocal tracks or plug in a guitar and use the iPad as a virtual amplifier. The app is also intuitive and accessible enough that people can jump right in and start creating music that sounds good without first needing to spend hours trudging through the help files.

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To view the complete review and rating for each app, visit:  
[commonsense.org/mobile-app-lists/gift-ideas-app](http://commonsense.org/mobile-app-lists/gift-ideas-app)