Babes in an RD Toyland

Inside Fisher-Price's Play Lab, where the ultimate compliment is a baby's drool

By [Douglas McGray](http://www.fastcompany.com/user/douglas-mcgray)

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, and elves (sort of), and, most important, a sprawling workshop, which, it turns out, is how Santa knows how much fake vomit Cookie Monster can withstand before he will discolor. And why he knows exactly how 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds will play with -- and try to destroy -- their Christmas gifts. He knows because of the way his helpers at Fisher-Price build toys.

"The number-one thing we focus on is observation," explains [Tina Zinter-Chahin](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/tina-zinter-chahin), Fisher-Price's pleasantly manic senior vice president of research and development. The centerpiece of that philosophy is the Play Lab, the only full-time, on-site facility of its kind at an American toy company: a sunny, toy-strewn space where, since 1961, lucky kids have tested Fisher-Price prototypes. This morning, three boys and three girls, all 4-year-olds, speed through the front door. Two boys tug quietly, but firmly, for the wheel of a new radio-controlled race set -- a brand-new offering this Christmas. The girls skid to a stop near a small subdevelopment of dollhouses. And from behind a wide panel of one-way glass, toy designers study the action intently, occasionally stepping out to join in the play.

At the Play Lab, creation and (attempted) destruction happily coexist. Engineers at a nearby Product Integrity Lab scientifically torture toys until they are proven safe, but designers still need to see how real kids might strain a toy's "integrity" over time. Today, for instance, product designer Jared Pardi is working to bolster the popular Magna Doodle's defenses against the simple pleasures of preschool play. "They beat on them!" he says, grabbing a stylus in his fist and stabbing the drawing surface. "It's a raw, primal thing."

Over an eight-week session with these kids, designers will test dozens of toy concepts, sending out crude models, then increasingly sophisticated revisions, to figure out what gets kids worked up into a new-toy frenzy.

"Kids are pretty humbling," says [Don Stucke](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/don-stucke), a sweet-natured View-Master product designer. "You can have what you think is a great idea, and they shoot it down in minutes."

Infants are the harshest critics. Show babies something that they don't like, and they'll cry, push it away, or throw it on the floor. Drool, however, is high praise.

Stucke is testing a prototype of a secret new View-Master that will double as a science toy. At the Play Lab, Stucke's team learned that kids spend a lot of time asking grown-ups to look through their View-Masters. And they learned that if designers don't set the eyepieces slightly wider than is ideal for a young child's face, grown-ups can't see anything through them.

"Look!" a blond girl squeals, handing her View-Master to Stucke. "Things like that are predictable," Stucke explains later. "But remembering what's predictable when you're sitting in front of your CAD station is hard. I can come down here and learn something in five minutes that I could spend weeks wondering about."

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