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## New York City's Specialty Toy Stores

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Look past the holiday ad campaigns and instead to neighborhood streets and you'll find the last of New York City's independent specialty toy shops.

Specialty toys offer variety, provide educational experiences, and often outlast more mass-produced objects. These toys encourage children to think about what they're doing and persevere in an activity while learning at their own pace and developing hand-eye coordination.

Specialty toy stores each have their own specialty. Christina Clark, owner of [Kidding Around](#), seeks family-oriented products for her shelves, which hold tens of thousands of items. She offers games as well as craft and science kits, which often require some help to complete, bringing the family together. "There are virtually no electronics. There's no sit you down in front of the TV and let you watch this DVD, or go put

this in your computer and play with it,” Clark says.

With around 500 different items for sale, [Dinosaur Hill](#) carries baby toys, puzzles, science kits, games, plushies, books, handmade clothing, and artisan-made crafts. Owner Pam Pier focuses her worldly stock around environmentally aware themes. A volunteer group recently brought in handmade felt animals made in Tibet. A woman from Amsterdam brings in old-style plush mice, teddy bears, and rabbits that she makes. “I do in many ways run sort of counter to mass-market trends,” Pier says.

While most specialty toy stores aren't concerned with trends, some of Manhattan's shops carry popular products and brands for the convenience of their customers. Judy Ishayik, manager of [Mary Arnold Toys](#), says she stocks some electronics and products from Hasbro, Mattel, and Lego, so the store can have a bit of everything. “We want to be the store that customers can come here and find everything that they need, specialty toys and mainstream toys.”

“We really try to make it a one-stop shop where you can come, get some service, get your presents, and you're done with your holiday shopping. I think that's why we specialty toy shops are a little bit more full-service than the mass market,” she adds.

But regardless of what lines their shelves, customer service is what separates specialty store stores from their rivals. Where big box retailers cut corners, specialty toy stores excel, from gift-wrapping to shipping with employees who are knowledgeable about the products in stock.

“You walk in and say, ‘I've got a 5-year-old with autistic needs who likes spinning,’ and we can show you several things,” says Clark. “We work as personal shoppers on a daily basis, so Christmas doesn't intimidate us. I constantly get: ‘Here's a description of my son. What do you have for him?’ It's something we're used to handling, love handling, and it's part of the fun of the job.”