



BEST TOY STORE

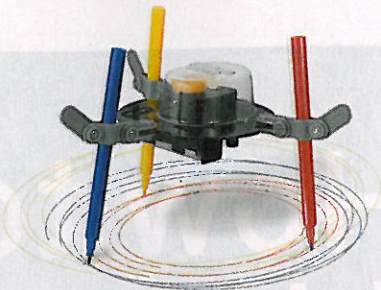
OAKBRIDGE HOBBIES & TOYS
7511 Lemont Rd., Darien,
630-435-5900

★ This family-owned local toy store has mostly flown under the radar for those living outside the western suburbs. But in 2011 the business moved to a more visible location in Darien, and its new incarnation is nothing short of kid heaven. Stocking the perfect mix of mainstream and offbeat toys, this play superstore also carries high-quality hobby supplies: model trains, dollhouses ready for decorating, and slot-racing cars. Oh, and a train chugs around a halo-like ceiling-mounted track.

BEST RESALE TOYS HAND ME DOWNS

614 Dempster St., Evanston, 847-475-0803

★ Resale is always hit-and-miss, but Hand Me Downs consistently has a great selection of toys. Kids cruise right past the clothing racks to shelves stocked with puzzles, board games, trains, classic toys, the ever-popular Fisher Price Little People sets (both vintage and modern), and ride-on toys. On a recent visit, we spotted a wooden airplane rocker for \$100, but most items come in under \$10.



BEST PARTY VENUE FOR BOYS ROBOTCITY WORKSHOP

3226 N. Sheffield Ave., 773-281-1008

★ Suffering from Pump It Up fatigue? Next time, throw a robot-building party. This is the only store of its kind in Chicago, and the wildly popular workshops have become ground zero for boys from five to eight years old. Partygoers spend two hours playing with interactive robots, assembling snap circuits, and building a miniature automaton to take home. A party costs \$40 per child and includes robot supplies, decorations, paper products, and goody bags.

BEST PARTY VENUE FOR GIRLS

ALL ABOUT DANCE

501 W. North Ave., Chicago, 773-572-8701

★ Tea and scones at a fancy hotel sounds like fun. But girls up to age ten really don't have much to chitchat about, which is why throwing a choreographed dance party at All About Dance is a much better idea. The party warms up with glitter and light makeup (costumes optional) before the kids learn an easy routine set to the birthday girl's favorite song. The choreography is basic, and the teachers dance with the children as they learn. "So they don't feel nervous about being up there," explains the owner, Jessica Goldman. Bonus: Parents, you can wait out the festivities in your own room—and are welcome to BYO. Two hours cost \$625, including tables, chairs, and souvenir water bottles.



BEST BABY

Buffalo calf at the
Brookfield Zoo
(3300 Golf Rd., Brook-
field, 708-485-0263)



BEST USE OF KID ART

OUTSIDE THE LINES DESIGNS

outsidethelinesdesigns.net

★ Turn pintsize artistry into a family heirloom with the help of Wonder Lake-based textile artist Donna Brandt, a retired elementary school teacher. "My two daughters drew many pictures as they were growing up, and I used the appliqué and embroidery method to make a large quilt of my favorite pictures," Brandt says. Now she has adapted the process to clothing with the help of technology and an embroidery sewing machine. Submit your kid's work of art—the simpler the better—and let Brandt do her magic (custom onesies and T-shirts from \$30).