

# The Changing World of Toys and Toy Play

by David Elkind

Children learn about themselves and their world from their play with toys. Over the past half century there has been a remarkable transformation of the toy world of children. Toys have changed in quantity, quality, and level of technology. Mass production has made inexpensive toys available in enormous quantities, and in seemingly unlimited variety. Once given to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays and holidays, toys are now routinely purchased all year long. Comforting toys of wood, cotton, and wool are now made of synthetic materials. Microchip embedded toys that mimic human behavior have replaced the wind up and battery operated toys of the past. Too many toys, given too often, made of synthetic material, and run by computer chips have denied children many of the benefits they once took from interacting with less high tech playthings.

## Too many toys, too often

Toy play is one of the ways children nourish their disposition for imagination and fantasy. Like other human potentials, imagination and fantasy can only be fully developed through practice. The sheer number of toys owned by contemporary children weakens the power of playthings to lead children into the world of make-believe. Familiarity breeds contempt but so, too, does abundance.

My three-year-old granddaughter Lily, doesn't really value her toys because she has so many of them. She sometimes seems overwhelmed by the multiplicity of playthings and goes from toy to toy without spending much time on any one of them. She now appears to look to toys for amusement and distraction, rather than for imaginative inspiration. It is really hard to help her parents appreciate that when it comes to toys, less is more. Only when a child spends time with a particular toy can he or she weave it into a story tapestry of his or her own invention.

Too many toys, given too often, contribute among other things to the decline in the imaginative activities of young children. Psychiatrist Alvin Rosenfeld tells the following anecdote regarding young children's imagination.

"I have observed the steady decline of play over the past 30 years, but even I was astonished by a recent call from a counselor at an elementary school nearby. She had been talking with a first grade class and used the word imagination. The children stared blankly at her, she explained the meaning, but the children continued to look puzzled. She gave an example from her own childhood when she loved to play Wonder Woman. She would put on a cape, she said, and run down the hill near her

home with her arms outstretched, pretending to be aloft. 'That's imagination when you pretend to be someone you're not,' she explained to the children.

"'But we don't know how to do that,' said one child and all the others nodded in agreement. Not one child in the first grade seemed to know what imagination was" (Rosenfeld 2000).

To be sure, many children still become attached to their toys and build a fantasy life around them. But it is much more difficult for children to do so when they are receiving new playthings all year long. Nonetheless, children are still drawn to those toys which nourish their need for imaginative play. This explains the longevity of some toys, like blocks, and the short half-life of others, like battery operated toy animals.

## Sensational toys

Young children are very much oriented to the senses. Now that so many toys

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are made of artificial materials, they no longer give children the rich sensory experience they once did. The color and feel of plastic is just not the same as that of real materials. Certainly artificial materials are here to stay. Yet if children are first exposed to toys made of natural materials, they will have a healthy standard against which to compare man-made materials.

There are other reasons why natural materials benefit children. Our pet dachshund, Remy, prefers cotton to synthetics and refuses to rest on a polyester blanket — should we have the temerity to offer him such. Natural materials like cotton and wool (if you are not allergic) have a comfort and warmth that synthetics do not. We now appreciate that touch is a very powerful and important sensory experience. Research demonstrates that cuddling and fondling of infants by caregivers is critical to their healthy development. The human skin is a very comforting sensory experience. We should not underestimate the comfort, and stress reducing qualities of natural materials, particularly for young children.

### Microchip toys

Computer chip embedded toys have also affected what children learn from toy play. Spring- and battery-operated toys were limited in what they could do, but computer chips vastly increase the range of activities performed by toys. Remote-controlled cars, planes, and boats are one example, and toys that respond selectively to a child's voice is another. The complexity of electronic technology changes the child's intellectual engagement with these playthings. The mechanics of jumping jacks and wind-up toys are easy for children to understand. Computer chip toys, in contrast, work as if by magic. Four- to eight-year-old children cannot really understand the electronics that run remote controlled

devices and other chip produced activities.

Does this really make a difference? I believe it does. For one thing, a child who is curious about how a jumping jack or wind-up toy works can figure it out. But there is no way a child of this age is going to understand the electronics of remote control or voice recognition. It is certainly possible that children's inability to figure out how their playthings work can dampen their scientific curiosity. This could, in part at least, help account for the current decline in the number of students taking physics and chemistry courses and majoring in science.

### What parents and early childhood educators can do

It would be wrong to place all the blame for the demise of imaginative play on the plethora of playthings in children's toy chests. The pervasiveness of television, computer games, and competitive sports and academic pressures, all take away time from creative toy play. Yet there are things we can do. Children's toys that have borne the test of time are always a good investment. A set of wooden blocks can be used by children throughout the preschool years. Wooden puzzles, crayons, play dough, and other manipulable materials also encourage imaginative activity. Hand-me-down clothing and utensils help support imaginative dramatic play. But these playthings will only be able to work their magic if children are given the time, and the freedom, to interact with them.

### Reference

Rosenfeld, A., & Wise, N. (2000). *The Over-Scheduled Child*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.