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Carroll C. Lambert
Utah State University

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Selecting Creative Toys for Young Children

*Carroll C. Lambert**

Department of Family and Child Development

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A child, through interaction with his environment, is involved in the process of development, the exploration of his competencies. One of the ways a child learns about his environment is through play. With properly chosen toys as tools, a child can be encouraged to imagine, create, and explore. Toys often allow the child's first glimpse of adult life. A fire truck or a fire hat will often initiate play of being a fireman what it's like to climb a ladder, to make a siren, and to make the fire truck go fast. This is also true with a set of dishes or mixing pans. "Now I am the mother, and I can do as I have seen mother do." Or, for a younger child, who is not ready for dramatic play, or acting out what the child has seen the mother do, the pans may provide an equally valuable opportunity to sort, stack, or otherwise manipulate these objects of various sizes.

Choose Toys for Development

In choosing toys, a child needs to be considered as an individual. To be intellectually stimulating, toys should be matched to the child's interests and his stage of development. A challenging, fascinating toy will invite exploration and will help build a sense of competency as the child develops the skills needed for enjoyment of each object.

Toys Are New Experiences

Each toy offers the child one or several different experiences. Currently there is an emphasis on the educational toy, that is, a toy designed to make simple and complex concepts easier to learn. In some cases, these toys are used with the intent of accelerating a child's conceptual growth. Ideally, any toy owned by the child should challenge his problem solving ability. A toy should present a problem that is just enough beyond the child's interest level to present an interesting difference between what is familiar and learned and what is not. If a toy is well matched, the result is that the child's wish to learn is increased, his sense of mastery is confirmed, and he feels secure and ready to accept another challenge.

Toys Are Fun

One thing to consider in choosing a toy for a child is that it be FUN. If a child is not interested in a toy, he won't learn anything from it. Perhaps the most important element in play is human involvement. One should share in the fun at the child's level, explaining concepts, asking questions about the toy, praising the child when he handled it well, helping him if he needs it. It is damaging to a child's self-esteem if an adult "takes over"; such as when a train is very expensive and the child is only permitted to watch without really having the pleasure of using the switches or manipulating the train. Even though it is his train, it has cost so much that it is not his to play with. In contrast, a train which can be assembled by the child, in the order he chooses, is more helpful in developing self-esteem because he can do it his way. However, a toy, no matter how carefully chosen, will, in the end, be meaningless unless accompanied by human interest and involvement.

Margaret Mead says even the most lovely, complicated toys are limited. Children, she notes, can find out everything that can be done with them and that's it. But, if the child is just watching an ant go up a leaf, he or she doesn't know what the ant is going to do, and so the child can be attentive for a long time. (Mead, Margaret. *Young Children*, 28(6), Aug., 1973.)

Toys—Physical Development

Toys for the preschooler should stimulate growth and development in many areas. Development of large muscle coordination is very important to this age group. Some toys which encourage this physical development are the push and pull toys, wagons, sleds, balls, boxes, ladders, and even the household broom or garden tools. Two more dimensions of development to be considered are small muscle control and development of the senses. Toys involving exercise of the small muscles would include peg boards, puzzles, small blocks, and wooden beads to string. These help develop manipulative ability, but also stimulate observation and encourage a child to try out new ideas.

Visual, Auditory, and Tactile Stimulation

Many toys stimulate visual acuity through their attractive or eye-catching coloring and decoration. Little emphasis has been placed on the role of auditory and tactile discrimination in the learning process. Adults need to be aware that these are two areas necessary to total development of a child and plan to include them in the child's environment.

Toys Develop Creativity

Creative expression can be encouraged through providing the child with paints, paper, clay, carpentry materials, crayons, scissors, and glue. Coloring books tend to discourage free expression and originality. Children are inquisitive. A curious child that is continually trying to pry into areas that are off limits may find an outlet with science toys. These are toys that help a child raise questions and experiment, help him to investigate and make discoveries on his own. Some equipment for the preschool child might include magnifying glasses, unbreakable mirrors, prisms, kaleidoscopes, and magnets.

Toys—A Bridge to Tomorrow

To help a child better understand the world around him, the role he plays in it now, and roles he may take on in the future, one needs to provide props to stimulate dramatization and role

playing. These might include dress-up clothes, dolls, play tents, toys for playing store and traveling, cars, airplanes, and much more. Closely related to this is the aspect of social development; this is best achieved through contact with peers. Through participation, with other children a child acquires, although sometimes painfully, a basic understanding of fair play and sportsmanship. Through this contact, children also learn the value of cooperation with others to achieve a common goal.

Introduction, Use, and Storage

It is impossible to discuss toys without mentioning methods of storage and introduction and use of toys. One way to get more mileage from toys is to rotate them: put out a few toys and change them as the child seems to need a challenge. A toy that has been put away for a while and then re-appears is something new and exciting. This is also a good method for introducing new toys and giving the child time to master it. Giving a child all his toys at once doesn't teach him what each toy can do. A perennial problem is what to do with the toys when not in use. The usual solution is the toy box. This is a handy place when it comes time to cleanup, but when a child desires a specific toy, he must search through the contents, often making a mess and distracting and frustrating himself. Toy boxes do not teach a sense of order; they jumble toys together. The use of shelves enables one to display material in a way that is inviting to the child, as well as instilling a sense of order. If pictures or outlines are used on the shelves as guides for placement of items after use, they promote the development of matching, sorting, seriation, and categorization skills. Clean up can be an enjoyable game if the child is given enough cues to deal with the situation successfully and if he is motivated by positive adult attention. When viewed in this way, a toy box can deprive a child of many learning experiences.

Evaluating Toys

When making or buying toys for young children, there are several things to keep in mind. The toys selected for the young child should appeal to sensory motor and intellectual needs. They should catch and hold the child's attention, provide repetition, stimulate exploration, and allow discovery. Toys should develop creativity by inviting fantasy and make-believe play. The child needs the opportunity to work with primary colors, sizes, shapes, sorting, and classification. There are some general questions which might aid in evaluating a toy. What can the child do with this toy? What can the child learn? Can he understand what he is playing with? Can the child manipulate the toy without frustration? Can the child have fun playing with it? Is it durable, can it stand a lot of use? Toys that break easily, not only are expensive, but also frustrating to the child. In order to encourage autonomy, the toy should stimulate the child to do things for himself and should need little adult direction. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics should be that it be a plaything with which the child can do something, not a spectator toy to entertain him.

Age Level Toys

An adult can discern a child's interest and developmental capacities through careful observation. Another criterion for judging toys is some idea of what is suitable at different age levels. The small baby is intrigued by different sounds, colors, and textures. The key to this age group is change: toys that contain movement, sound, color contrast, and pattern. Soft toys that make pleasant sounds when squeezed, as well as toys that can be explored orally, are always successful.

The Toddler

As a child becomes older, he develops a preference for objects he can actively manipulate, especially toys that reward him with results, surprises, and novelty. The toddler is constantly active; now is the time to provide good climbing equipment and other toys for the purpose of large muscle coordination improvement. Two- or three-piece jigsaw puzzles may be introduced; also large beads to be strung or snapped together, and unpainted wooden blocks in various sizes and shapes. In order to allow exploration with more creative media, the child could be introduced to clay, fingerprint, and simple musical instruments.

Toddlers are constantly active and enjoy riding toys. Cuddly toys for nap time and push-pull toys that make noises are favorites. Others might be color cones, stocking toys, a pounding bench, play telephones, small cars, trucks, and dolls. Cloth or vinyl books, as well as bathtub toys, are also good toys for this age group.

The element of surprise is always enjoyed, such as when a “jack-in-the-box” pops up when a button is pushed or a handle is turned. Smooth blocks that can be stacked easily are a great success with the toddler. Knocking them down can, at times, be more fun than building them up. Sandboxes can provide a good time of digging, pouring, and can give a child a sense of “doing it myself.”

The Child from Three to Six Years of Age

In the preschool years (years 3–6), there is the need for unstructured toys which stimulate imagination and provide outlets for the child’s creative urges and his desire for mastery. A child in this age group loves to pretend and imitate. Costumes and dress-up clothes and hats, such as those of a doctor, nurse, policeman, grocery man, fireman, football player, and cowboy are very enjoyable. Housekeeping equipment, such as dolls, dishes, brooms, etc., as well as lawn mowers, garden tools, hammers and nails, provide many opportunities for “let’s pretend” activities. School sets, doll houses, puppets, garages and gas stations, farm sets, with plastic or rubber animals, human figures, and other objects are also good. Don’t forget the large cardboard box which can be made into many things. The mastering of self-imposed tasks enhances a child’s feelings of security and self-worth. Some things he might be able to handle successfully are puzzles and blocks, blunt scissors and paper to cut, crayons, and paste. Toys which have fit-together pieces or beads to string, lacing or threading toys, peg boards, toys which teach sorting (by colors, sizes, or shapes), counting games, toy telephones, tricycles, wagons, and balls can provide delightful experiences for a young child, and the child returns to them again and again. The time for stories is at its prime, and books with colorful pictures and stories into which the child can project himself are always enjoyed.

There is always a question on buying toy guns for children. This is really an individual matter that parents should consider. However, if you live in a community where guns are used for hunting and outdoor sports activities, and this is part of your living pattern, you might provide a toy gun for your child, helping him to develop a proper attitude about and respect for guns.

The Best Toys Are Versatile

In general, the best toys are the most versatile. “Open-ended” toys, including blocks, dolls, playhouses, even carton, pots and pans, are valuable in that they can be used over and over, in numerous ways, by children of varying ages.

Toys with Appeal

The physical aspect of the toy is one more element to be considered in the process of toy selection. Perhaps the most obvious characteristic is the aesthetic appeal. That is: how does it look, feel, sound? To get a foundation for color recognition, the child's toys should have bright, true colors, easily distinguishable from one another. Musical instruments should produce notes in true tone; this will encourage correct auditory discrimination. The texture of a toy should invite a child to manipulate it. Of a more practical nature, toys should be cleanable as well as durable. Soft, stuffed toys, that enjoy a lot of child contact, should be of the type that can be laundered.

Toy Safety

Toys that break easily can either cause sadness or encourage a child's destructive tendencies. Safety is an important consideration of the concerned adult and ties closely with the age factor. Avoid toys with sharp edges, that splinter, or are made of brittle materials. Electrical toys should bear the UL Approval Seal. Toys for young children should have no loose, small parts that might be swallowed, as their test for any toy is taste. Even after cautious choice, adults need to teach the child proper safe play with toys. Toy play should have some supervision, depending on the situation. There should be periodic checks for broken toys repairing or discarding them. Reputable toy manufacturers have agreed to adhere to standards established by the United States of America Standards Institute to minimize hazards to children. Parts, finishes, and other materials that go into a toy that meet these standards have been properly inspected and should not be harmful if used properly. Lists of toys that have been banned for safety reasons are available. Write to the:

Office of Technical Information & Publications
5401 Westbard Ave.
Bethesda, MD 20016

Homemade Toys

Make your own toys. A little imagination and resourcefulness go a long way. You can save money and have the satisfaction that the children will enjoy playing with the toys and learning something at the same time.

Some children have trouble identifying colors. Line a six-cup muffin tin with plastic adhesive tape. Use the three primary colors. Use one color for two cups. Add plastic pieces (in the same colors) you have around the house. Get the small child to call the color as he puts pieces in the same color cup. You can make another toy, using the three secondary colors. Let the child master the first game first.

Match a pair of objects by sound. This toy is used to develop a sense of hearing. Use eight empty plastic pill bottles (paint, if necessary, so contents can't be seen) or film cans. Paint four lids red, four blue. Add beans, wheat, or rice, the same amount in two cans to produce the same sound when shaken. Glue lids on tightly.

Hammering shingle nails into a sawed tree section helps to develop eye-hand coordination, as well as providing hours of fun. Add felt to the bottom of the tree section (saves floors). The log can double as a foot stool. Add a round homemade pillow to the top.

In a rectangular scrap of pine, cut three holes. Insert three graduated sizes of large bolts (check the second-hand store). Add a piece of felt to the bottom. Get three nuts for each bolt.

Preschoolers love this toy. It is great for muscle development, coordination, and teaches patience sequence.

Another homemade toy provide an experience in matching a pair of textured objects by feeling instead of looking. Cut some plywood to form a triangle, about one foot in each dimension. Cut two of these. Cut a hole in each, large enough to permit the child to put his hand through the hole. Fasten three pieces of plywood to the two end pieces to form a box. Or, a large shoe box, taped shut, with a hole cut in each end large enough to permit entry of a child's hand, can also be used. Add matched pairs of textured items, like carpet, patterned upholstery and fringe balls.

Here is a game that teaches colors and shapes. Use a piece of heavy poster board. Cut circles, squares, triangles from colored construction paper. Paste shapes on cardboard, in various patterns. Join shapes with marking pen lines. Make several games. Use two colors and two shapes; or two colors and three shapes; three colors and three shapes; six colors and three shapes. Make a spinner with shapes and colors to match the game. Make spinner center of heavy material held with a pronged paper fastener. Cover game, spinner with clear plastic adhesive. Let child learn lessons with easy game; then progress to a harder one.

A reading readiness matched pair game: Cut two- or three-inch squares of plywood or heavy cardboard. Paint white. Add circles and faces with fine line marking pen. Make two faces alike. Change features on each pair. This game teaches perception and difference in pairs.

A child can learn shapes, simple fractions and imaginative play when playing with blocks made of soft white pine, cut into circles, squares, triangles, and rectangles. If his father or mother is handy with a saw and sandpaper, he can make these items easily.

Summary

In summary, a child learns through activity and play. Adults can best create a positive learning environment through thoughtful selection of toys that will be tools in the process. It should also be remembered that the most disreputable stuffed animal, hairless and limbless, but nonetheless a valued possession, has an important role in the learning experience. It stimulates a sense of value and responsibility for something that is his. This sense of value may be the most important aspect of a child's plaything.

*Carol Lambert, Ed.D., has taught preschool children, in, and was supervisor of, the Child Development Laboratory at Utah State University when she prepared this material. She is the mother of two children, both boys. She is co-author of articles in The Journal of Home Economics, The Utah Educational Review, Childhood Education, The Journal of Marriage and the Family, and two Extension booklets, The Preschool Child: Learning through Involvement at Home, and A Home Arranged for Learning.

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