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The toy

selection problem

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no. 10.205

JUN 10 1987

in Adult Education Resource Center

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Englewood, Colorado 80110

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colorado state university extension service

Quick Facts

- Christmas is often a time for toy oversell. A child's toy should be chosen with quality, safety, suitability and price in mind. Parents should explain to a child why a toy should not be expected, rather than to allow a false anticipation.
- Involving a child in the whole scope of Christmas will turn his or her attentions away from toy commercials.
- Child's play is valuable and should not be overlooked for its contribution to individual development and expression.
- Toys should be chosen in relationship to their value of meeting needs, not according to the sex of the child.
- Christmas is a time to reassess the toy situation, evaluate toys for quality, safety and usefulness, and encourage values in toy selection.

Each year at Christmas time, children receive a not-so-subtle brainwashing, thanks to toymakers and the family television set. The programs on Saturday morning, and at any other time children are likely to be watching, are laced with lavish advertisements for dolls, race sets and other expensive "gimcracks" that whet a child's pre-Christmas appetite.

Advertisers know what they are doing. They have studied the needs of children and know the best way to create desire in a youngster. Some toys are advertised over and over, making the child feel that he or she just can't get along without them.

The very simplest solution to this Madison Avenue style onslaught is to turn off the TV set, but this isn't likely to happen. The best advice, if a child is clamoring for expensive toys seen on television, is to meet the problem head-on.

Parents should listen to the child's wants, then check on the toy, either in a catalog or store. Asking the following questions will help in deciding whether the toy should be purchased:

- Is it suitable for the child's age and interests?

- Could the toy be operated without parental help?

- Would the toy remain unbroken with the kind of use the child may give it? Is it made well so as to last?

- Is the price within the family budget?

If "no" is the answer to one or more of the questions, then it is best to sit down with the child and explain the reasons why he or she should not expect that particular item. This may be difficult to do, but it is better than letting the child eagerly anticipate something that may not be forthcoming.

If the child is young, it may be easy to steer the youngster's desires toward something that is on the gift list. An older child may be offered the alternative of saving his own money to purchase the toy.

A second step in combating Christmas commercialism is to interest the child in other aspects of the holiday season. Have the youngster make a simple gift for each member of the family. Allow the child to string popcorn or make paper chains or other tree decorations. The youngster can help with Christmas baking, wrap presents, or learn to sing carols.

The most important thing is to involve the child in the whole scope of Christmas. A child with this involvement will have less interest in toy commercials.

Child's Play

It may look aimless to an adult, but to a child, the hours spent in play are the training ground for self development. The type of person the child will become, the individual characteristics and habits that will be developed, all come from play. Among the values of play are:

- It helps children understand the activities around them as they learn by doing and by experimenting with reality.

- It helps develop such personality traits as cooperation, sharing, sense of fair play, dependability, neatness, alertness, resourcefulness and initiative.

1/gordon g. geddes, csu extension assistant professor, child development and family relationships. (11/15/74)

—It develops physical ability.

—It gives the child an opportunity to discover the physical environment, the size, shape, color, weight and texture of things.

—It provides a channel for expressing thoughts and feelings. (By listening to children at play, adults can learn the children's feelings about themselves, others, and the world in general.)

—It helps develop a sense of ownership and property rights.

—It develops joy in creative ability; satisfaction and happiness come through making, doing, creating, taking apart and putting together.

—It gives practice in problem solving; by trying various solutions, the child learns to concentrate, to think and to make decisions.

—It gives practice in acting out adult roles.



Child Development Through Toys

Most parents select toys according to the sex of the child—trucks for boys and dolls for girls. Actually, the basis for toy selection should depend upon whether the toy will help the youngster develop mentally, socially, physically and emotionally. For both boys and girls, the following criteria are recommended for selecting toys:

To develop muscles and coordination, choose such toys as pounding boards, blocks and similar items.

To develop socialization, choose toys with which children can play together; even dolls fit this category.

For mental stimulation, puzzles, books, crafts, and other items which the child can work on or complete are the answer.

For emotional experiences, dolls and stuffed animals are a suggestion, as these give children an opportunity to express their feelings. A doll or teddy bear can be a companion—a role that a truck can never fill.

A parent should not worry about whether a boy will become a sissy or a girl a tomboy if he is presented with a doll or she with a train. By selecting a toy to fill the child's needs at the time, a parent will be helping the youngster to develop in a healthy way.

(When Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, presented dolls to the children of New Guinea, it was the boys not the girls who wanted to play with them. This was a society where there was no concept of "sissiness" associated with dolls.)

Loss of Interest in Toys

"She's got a roomful of toys but never plays with them!" If this is a parental complaint, perhaps the toy situation should be reassessed. New toys would not solve the problem. If the child does not play with the old toys, he or she would not play with the new ones, either, after the newness wears off.

The word "newness" is the key. Faced with the same toys day after day, children become bored and disinterested. An accumulation of toys—often the result of a growing family—teaches waste and a false sense of abundance. The child with a large selection to choose from—including many broken or inexpensive toys—cannot seem to settle down and play.

A child's toys should be chosen with an eye on quality, to build their own sense of quality in what they will purchase and choose for themselves.

To keep the "newness," toys can be alternated—some put out of sight for a few weeks, then brought out and the others put away. Toys which are broken or seldom used should be repaired, given away or thrown out. Toys which have been broken deliberately or through carelessness should not be replaced without a lesson in values.

Perhaps a rearranging of toys from a toy box to low shelves, so that the child can see what is available without dumping everything on the floor, will spur his desires to play with the toys.

The gift-giving season is a good time to take stock of a child's toy inventory and provides an opportunity to discard broken or damaged toys, to think about which play things will be of the most value for play, and to provide a valuable lesson in sharing by giving some of the toys to children who have none.

This Christmas may be a season for no purchased toys at all but, rather, a time for new clothing, educational and entertaining books, handmade toys and trips to theaters, museums and zoos.

Children learn from parents. If adults are compulsive buyers, helpless to demanding children, the youngsters are learning the same habits.

Christmas is a time to encourage sharing, thrift and other values which may have slipped. A child without store-bought toys may find a mansion in a cardboard box.