

The Truth About Toys for Infants And the Need to Resist Rampant Consumerism



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Introduction

Toys are the child's means of discovering both self and the world. Infants are not born knowing the difference between red and green, hard and soft, sweet and sour, loud and quiet, and so on. In the same way, babies are not born knowing the difference between self and others. Toys are the tools that help the infant, and young child, make these discriminations. Ironically, this "playful" process of discrimination is effortful and time consuming. Infants (and older children) process information much more slowly than do adults. It may take an infant hours, or days, to explore all of a toy's facets. That is to say, a baby learns a great deal from playing with the same toy over an extended period of time. Variety may be the spice of life, but it is a turn-off of infant learning.

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Stages of Toy Play

Toy play during the first year develops through several stages that are related to age and the maturation of ability. During the first months, thanks to his or her underdeveloped sensory and motor systems, the infant is relatively passive. Accordingly, the best toys for the newborn and young infant are those that do not require much directed interaction. A colored rattle, for example, will stimulate the infant's grasping reflex. By grasping the rattle, the baby learns colors, shapes and sounds. In the same way a plush toy, such as a teddy bear, provides touch as well as visual stimulation. Soft music, of the lullaby variety, provided by CDs or some toys, is comforting to the young infant and also provides age appropriate auditory stimulation.

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Towards the middle of the first year, as the infant develops better control of his or her head, arms and legs, toys that require more intentional interaction can be placed in the crib or play pen. At this age a crib gym with objects the infant can grab, push and pull helps further the baby's sensory and motor skills. Crib gyms are just right for those in mid infancy. Such toys provide bright colors and interesting shapes and often offer pleasing sound stimulation as well. Now the baby can interact not only with eyes and ears but also with hands and by kicking things with the feet. This is also a good age to begin reading simple picture books to a baby, and for pointing out and naming the pictures. “See the horse, see the bird,” etc. In addition to the visual and language stimulation such reading provides, it has the special benefit of cementing the parent-infant bond. As the infant learns more about things, he or she also learns more about the self, Once the infant can crawl about on his or her own, he or she discovers the ability to create new learning experiences by finding new places and by turning objects around to see all of their facets. At this stage the child really doesn't need much more than the play gym and the rattles and plush toys that he or she has already befriended.

At the end of the first year, a good set of wooden or plastic blocks, offers the infant the opportunity to begin constructing different patterns of different shapes and sizes. At this age children can also play with form boards, boards with geometric recesses into which the child can place the corresponding wooden piece. Other form boards have cut outs of farm animals, or fruits and vegetables. In the process of playing with form boards, the

child not only learns the size, shape and colors of things but also acquires a sense of personal efficacy through successfully placing a cut out in its correct recess. Also during the last months of the first year, the infant really likes to point at the pictures in the book as you read the names to him or her. If the child is walking by the first year, quality pull toys are also great fun. Such toys give the one year old a real sense of control over his or her world because they are in charge of making something move from one place to another.



Too Many Toys

Although toys are the tools by which the infant discovers self and world, too many toys may actually discourage, or inhibit, the discovery process. And all too many infants and children today, have all too many toys. This is a fairly recent phenomenon. Up until the last half-century, toys were given to children on their birthdays, at Christmas and perhaps at a few other holidays like Thanksgiving. The same was true for infants who were usually limited to a rattle, or a plush toy for the first few months of life. But the world has changed and the toy industry has become big business. The ability to mass-produce toys at a low cost, has led to a superabundance of toys. As a result, toys are no longer given a few times a year; rather they are purchased all year long. Infants as well as children have been targeted as consumers who can be sold any and all variety of toys. A toy packed crib, for example, presents the infant with too many colors, too many shapes, too many textures and too many sounds at the same time. Such an environment can overwhelm an infant. The golden rule of providing toys for a child is that *less is best*.

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With a crib full of rattles, plush toys, and musical contraptions, the infant may be unable to focus on any one. This not only limits the child’s ability to make discriminations, it also affects his or her capacity for concentration and attention. When interested in a particular toy, an infant can spend quite a bit of time with it. The ability to stay focused is a very important skill that may be difficult to acquire if the child’s attention is scattered among a wide variety of playthings. To be sure, the cornucopia of gifts for infants is well intentioned. But from the infant’s perspective, it may create an environment of busy, noisy, bustling confusion.



Harmful Products

For some infant toys, it is merely their number that limits meaningful play. Other “playthings,” marketed to infants may however actually be harmful to their development there are, for example, the so-called Lapware, computer programs for infants from 6 months to two years. It is called Lapware because the infant sits on the parents lap and pushes a mushroom like mouse while watching the computer screen. The Lapware programs are advertised as teaching infants and toddlers many concepts and skills as well as enhancing self-confidence and self esteem.

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Those who write these programs, however, have little or no understanding of child development. One program, to illustrate, purports to teach the infant colors. But infants have color discrimination at four months and already prefer red. In addition the sense of self does not begin to emerge until the child is well along in language development and can use pronouns like me, and I. So the contentions that these programs build self-esteem and self-confidence are entirely bogus. Likewise, although extremely popular, the claims for the efficacy of Baby Einstein videos have yet to be demonstrated. Other DVD’s like Athletic baby that depict sports like soccer, baseball and tennis for infants are simply bizarre.

Products like Lapware and the many DVD’s for infants and young children are not only inappropriate they may be harmful. The National Academy of Pediatrics suggests that infants not watch computer screens and television before the age of two years. The visual system is not fully developed till then, and the speed and complexity of computer and television imagery has the potential to do harm. Harm may come from other directions as well. Recent research has shown that for every hour an infant spends watching TV, he or she loses 5-7 vocabulary words. Even more pernicious is the fact when the infant’s limited waking time is spent watching TV; it takes away from time spent with parents. It is well established that parent-child interaction is most conducive to the infant’s healthy social, emotional and intellectual development.



Parental Dynamics in a Changing World

Parenting is never easy and each generation of parents has its unique challenges. Parents rearing children during the great depression faced one set of challenges, while those parenting children during War II confronted different but equally difficult ones. For today's parents the challenges are of a different order. First and foremost is the need to resist the rampant consumerism that dominates contemporary society. The explosion of mass media, including the Internet, has meant that parents are bombarded with advertising aimed at getting them to buy various products for their infants and children. Advertisers have no qualms about making totally unsubstantiated claims about the value of their products. In this way they build upon parents fears that they are "not doing enough" for their children. Parents find it hard to resist the pressures to buy what everyone else is buying and to put their infants into swimming and Gymboree programs so that they will not be different from their peers.

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There are ways you as parents can insulate yourselves from getting caught in the consumer net. It is important to find other parents who also feel as you do and who do not want to be pressured into buying unneeded toys and DVDs and to putting their infants into programs they believe are unnecessary and/or are unhealthy. It is also important to learn about healthy child development, from books, magazines and non-sponsored programs like JustAskBaby.com There is a growing chorus of experts who are writing about the negative effects upon children of the new consumerism. With support from peers, and knowledge gained from the experts in the field, you will be better prepared to resist the pressures to buy your infants potentially harmful products and to put him or her in programs that have no demonstrated long term value.

Additional Reading

Levin, Diane E. Kilbourne, Jean (2008) So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and what Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids. New York: Ballantine Books.

Paul, Pamela (2007) Parenting Inc: How we are Sold on \$800 Strollers, Fetal Education, Baby Sign Language, Sleeping Coaches, Toddler Couture and Diaper Wipe Warmers –and What it Means for Our Children. New York: Times Books.

Quart, Alissa (2003) Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers. New York Basic Books

Seiter, Ellen (1993) Sold Separately: Parents and Children in a Consumer Age Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

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Take a look at how we can help you help your child at www.justaskbaby.com.



About the Author

Just Ask Baby's Chief Scientific Advisor is the highly respected David Elkind, one of the leading thinkers, researchers and teachers on child development in his generation. David Elkind has spent his life bringing together and advancing the work of some of the greatest thinkers on child development from around the world, including Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson.

David Elkind is currently Professor Emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. He was formerly Professor of Psychology, Psychiatry and Education at the University of Rochester. Professor Elkind obtained his doctorate at U.C.L.A. and then spent a year as David Rapaport's research assistant at the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He was a National Science Foundation Senior Postdoctoral Fellow at Piaget's Institut d'Epistemologie Genetique in Geneva. His research has been in the areas of perceptual, cognitive and social development where he has built upon the research and theory of Jean Piaget.

Professor Elkind has published research, theoretical articles, book chapters and 18 books. He has also written children's stories for Jack and Jill, and been published in the New York Times Magazine, Good Housekeeping, Parade and Psychology Today. Recent articles include Computers and Young Children, The Authority of the Brain, The Cosmopolitan School, On Becoming a Grandfather, and Thanks for the Memory: The Lasting Value of True Play.

Well known for his writings, he is probably best known for his popular books including The Hurried Child, a 25th anniversary edition of which was released in 2007, along with Professor Elkind's newest book, The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally.

A member of many professional organizations, Professor Elkind is also on the Editorial Board of numerous scientific journals, and a consultant to state education departments, government agencies and private foundations. He lectures in the United States, Canada and abroad. He's also appeared on The Today Show, The CBS Morning News, Twenty/Twenty, Nightline, Donahue and the Oprah Winfrey Show, has been profiled in People and Boston Magazine, and co-hosted the Lifetime Television Show, Kids These Days.

At university Professor Elkind fell in love with psychology. His doctorate was in clinical psychology, where he was trained as a Freudian. He took his postdoc with David Rapaport, a noted Freudian scholar who introduced Professor Elkind to Jean Piaget.

Professor Elkind has three sons and four granddaughters. He enjoys gardening, sailing and has recently taken up pottery.

Tune into David Elkind's blog at www.justaskbaby.com/blogs/professor-elkind to read more about, and comment on, his experiences, opinions and insights on children's perceptual, cognitive and social development.

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