

What is a toy? And the importance of free play

“Play is the only way the highest intelligence of humankind can unfold.” Joseph Chilton Pearce

A toy can be defined as ANY item that can be used for play.

What is a toy? Is it something to take up the slack of a boring and lonely afternoon? Something that keeps the child busy and out of the way? Something to have fun with? Something to fan the spark of creative play? What are we looking for when we choose a toy for our child? Are we choosing it with the child in mind, or is it the child in our grown-up bodies with adult consciousness choosing? For each of us at one time or another, all of the above have been true. When we consider how much time our children spend with their toys, how much more important it becomes for us to make conscious choices about what we give them. Do we not all carry with us the fond memories of toys we loved and cherished when we were young? What memories are we offering our children through their toys, with all of our best intentions?

How many toys should we give our children? This has become a real question in our affluent times and presents us with hard decisions. Do we follow the dictum of “the more the merrier?” In this question we may be reminded of those excellent family cooks who always became their most creative and joyful in the kitchen, not when the pantry was stocked from top to bottom, but when the rest of their family had already despaired that any meal could possibly come together from such scanty reserves.

This raises the question: what stirs creativity the most, fullness or vacuum? A doll with perfect features is certainly a pleasure to look at. But if it is perfectly finished, is there much left for the child to play with? A doll with only the hint of eyes, nose, and mouth is an unwritten book of expression for the young child. Present children with potential, and they will fill it out of their own unlimited fountain of creativity. Present them with finished products, regardless of how beautiful, and we will have unwittingly limited their own resourcefulness.

This is one of the maxims of Waldorf education: give children only enough to stir their own creative processes, and give them guidance in expressing what the lessons have awakened. This fosters true creative activity in the soul-life of the child and leads to imaginative thinking in the adolescent.

Cedar Valley Waldorf School, Squamish.

What is an ‘open-ended’ toy?

Anything that inspires your child’s imagination in more than one way – something that can become anything!

“We should have busy children, not busy toys!” **Magna Gerber, RIE approach**

Here are some things to look for when selecting toys for your children.

- Good quality, durability
- ‘Playability’
- Anything healthy for humans and the planet
- Natural materials that feel good to all our senses – including visually beautiful toys, toys that feel good to hold.
- Toys that can be put away in 5 minutes
- Non-competitive, social toys
- Toys that are *toys* – where ‘learning’ is not forced.

You DON'T have to spend money on awesome toys. In fact, the best toys ever are free, or very inexpensive.

Top 10 open-ended toys EVER

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A stick2. A box3. A rope/piece of string4. A cardboard tube5. A spade, a bucket, and some sand/dirt/snow | <ol style="list-style-type: none">6. A ball7. Wooden Blocks8. Large pieces of fabric (silks are lovely: anything will do!)9. A doll10. Jars with lids |
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Also highly recommended:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Wooden train sets (not with the tables – the table can be limiting to imagination and skill level!)▪ Baskets to put toys in (and to carry them around in)▪ Costumes – don't have to be fancy AT ALL. Old grown up clothes work beautifully!▪ Art supplies – glue, scissors, paper, large crayons/pencil crayons etc – no need for fancy kits | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Baskets of buttons & beads, string.▪ Polished crystals, geodes, river rocks▪ Pine cones, dried bark & materials from the natural world▪ Deck of cards▪ Real life cleaning tools – child sized broom etc.▪ Real life cooking tools▪ Real life mending tools |
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It's important to allow your children to discover the toys themselves.

Resist the urge to show your child what to 'do' with their toys, and let them do whatever they will do – let go of your expectations when it comes to play, and you will be rewarded by a peek into a child's true imagination!

Why open-ended toys and play?

In her book *Playing to Get Smart*, Betty Jones, Ph.D., urges parents to understand that children and adults who are skilled at play with both things and ideas, have the power, influence, and capacity to create meaningful lives. They are more receptive to ambiguity than those who are stuck in the way things are or were. Play is a "happy talent."

Open-ended play helps foster happy talent in a relaxed way. It also supports the mission behind the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2006 Report on the Importance of Play, which emphasizes that all children need free, undirected play for creative growth, self-reflection, and decompression. Here's why it works:

- **Less pressure.** With no predetermined outcome, open-ended play eases off the gas pedal of achievement and allows children to focus on creating based on inner inspiration. During play, children have choices and decisions to make. This format offers great potential for self-discovery.

- **No errors.** Since trial and error is part of open-ended play, unintended mistakes cause children to pause and wonder. "Errors" produce fascination and foster new creation. Self-initiating behaviors are developed.
- **Liberty at last.** Open-ended play gives children a sense of freedom and autonomy to develop initiative and self-confidence. They enjoy making choices themselves, affirming their ability to be responsible and self-directed.

<http://www.scholastic.com/parents/resources/article/creativity-play/endless-possibilities>

Kinds of toys you may want to consider discarding or storing:

1. **Anything broken:** put it on a 'to mend' pile if it can be mended. If you haven't mended it within 2 weeks, recycle it.
2. **Anything missing pieces.**
3. **Anything developmentally inappropriate** – toys they have grown out of, or not yet grown into.
4. **Anything 'fixed' in concept.**
5. **Anything that requires you to buy more of to make it work/keep it working**
6. **Anything that comes with social pressure to you buy more/ collect**
7. **Anything too complicated or that breaks easily**
8. **Anything that requires batteries, makes electronic noise, flashes – generally high stimulus.**
9. **Anything annoying, offensive or which encourages corrosive & dangerous play (evil characters / war games)**
10. **Anything environmentally unfriendly or toxic - made of plastic**
11. **Anything that 'forces' learning** – it's just not as fun as figuring things out yourself!

What is a 'closed' toy?

- Anything that only has one specific function
 - Anything that has one clear 'right' way to do it – for example, puzzles.
 - I put gender-specific toys into this category too, as they close off imaginative play for boys or girls, and direct them away from avenues of empathy and understanding the opposite gender.
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Simplifying and sorting through your toys:

"An avalanche of toys invites emotional disconnect and a sense of overwhelm," Dr. Kim John Payne

Create and choose your OWN guidelines for your OWN family. You have the power to create, choose and live by your own family values, and this includes decisions about your family environment – including toys.

Rotation: You don't have to throw out all your toys. But there's a lot to be said for rotating them – much the same way we rotate our adult 'toys' of skis in the winter, canoes & bikes in the summer – and aren't they so much more fun when we haven't seen them in a while? Rotating toys seasonally or on a monthly basis is a great idea for de-cluttering, seeing the power of less, without having to 'give up' toys on a permanent basis.

Keep a 'Grandparents Box' of those well-intentioned toys from grandparents that just don't fit in... or better yet, be honest with grandma about your family values, and ask her to respect your parenting choices. They're yours to make.

2 easy ideas for gift giving:

4 little Somethings

Something they want

Something they need

Something to wear

Something to read

5 Hands

Handmade

Hand-me-down

Second hand

A helping hand

Hand in Hand

Article on toys & environment

Walt Whitman once wrote:

“There was a child went forth every day, And the first object he look’d upon he became. And that object became part of him for a day or a certain part of the day, Or for many years or stretching cycle of years.”

Young children absorb the essence and form of everything they see. My 3 year old daughter is so taken by everything she sees, that she immediately wants to pretend to be the object or person she just encountered. Children learn sensorally from their immediate surroundings. They soak it all in on multiple levels and absorb their impressions directly into their beings. These early impressions shape the way they come to understand and view the world.

For this reason, we must make a concerted effort to use discernment with the things we expose our children to. The optimum environment for their development is within the immediacy of the family and the home, where they can touch, play and discover the world with their own hands an within a nurturing safe place.

They need to hear the natural sounds in your home and play and climb and get attuned to their immediate environments. We have been wrongly taught that children need to be constantly entertained, that more is more, and that the sooner they can learn the better, but things have spun out of control. We need to get back to basics, back to the essentials, back to nature.

We have to strip away all the layers of illusion, and beliefs and fear and listen to our hearts when it comes to what is best for our young children. They are bright new little angels, so impressionable, we must take good care and protect their innocence, their childhood. Times are moving so fast, children are young adults; they are exposed to so much and are developing so young. As parents, we are their guardians, and our job is to protect and nourish their development.

We need to go our own way, listen to our inner knowing and create a new reality for them. The most important thing we can hope for our children is they feel connected to source and grounded in a strong sense of self for who they uniquely are. Isn’t this what every parent would hope for their child? Isn’t this what we hope for ourselves?

“Be as simple as you can be; you will be astonished to see how uncomplicated and happy your life can become.” ~Paramahansa Yogananda

For when you make the effort to create the space to allow your child to develop organically, they learn to develop their imagination and will spend hours engaged in creative playing on their own and you will get the time you will need! It’s hard to imagine but it’s true.

When you are not constantly filling up their space with things to “entertain” them, they will reach that space where they will feel “bored.” They will hit that wall and they will move through it! For out of boredom a new idea eventually arises and is born. We cannot fill time with constant distractions. They must learn to abide in their own selves and learn to use their imagination, their brilliant minds, to imagine possibilities and endless ideas of fun and play. That is truly the greatest gift you could give your child. Allow him to develop those muscles by creating that space for exploration.

Open-ended Toys

Open-ended toys are toys that are not defined and therefore can become many things within play. For example Dora will always be Dora, she already has a storyline and persona attached to her as does every

other character or media-based toy. A toy that you press and it does something only captures a child's interest for so long and then its function is over. What else to do with it? With open-ended toys, they sky's the limit! A block can become a car, it can become a plane, it can be used to build a castle etc. With play silks, children can play dress up, they can build forts, they can become blankets for their babies, they can become a river, or a snake. The possibilities are endless.

Instead of getting your children a bunch of defined toys that "do" things or that are media characters, get them a few open-ended toys you will create the space for their creativity and imagination to thrive. Fewer resources force you to get creative, to learn to make something out of nothing, to problem solve.

These are the skills you want your child to develop. True intelligence is not the regurgitation of information, true intelligence is about being able to think creatively and develop solutions. So like in keeping with Whitman's quote, be mindful of the objects you surround your child with. Stick with a few simple, open-ended toys and watch them become what their imagination and spirit dictates.

I encourage you to realize that you have the power to create the optimum space and life you desire for you and your family. Whatever resonates with you, it's time to follow that calling. We are living in new times and they require us to take new actions than before. Have courage and follow your heart!

<http://www.mysticmamma.com/simplicity-parenting/>