# Selecting Toys for Preschoolers and Kindergartners

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**Abstract**

Public knowledge in matters of toy evaluation seems to be limited. The aim of this article is to inform and raise awareness amongst stakeholders (parents, teachers, etc.) on key issues related to the selection and exploitation of toys for preschoolers and kindergartners. Our key positions are that toys can be linked to key aspects of the development of the preschool child (cognitive, social, physical and emotional) and that toy selection criteria must be part of the idea to create a wider play environment (at home, in kindergarten or in preschool centers), where children will be able to engage in all types of play. The importance of toys and play classification and the role of adults for the accomplishment of this objective are discussed. Moreover child safety, interests and abilities of the child, patterns of behavior, design features, manufacturing quality and cost of the toys are analyzed as they are important factors that should be considered from adults before selecting which toy to buy.

**Keywords:** toys; preschoolers; kindergartners; toy evaluation; play environment

## 1. Introduction

Play enables children to come in contact with a wide range of stimuli and experiences that create the conditions for a pleasant and experiential way of learning, while all aspects of development are directly or indirectly promoted (Cohen & Stern, 1978). Toys are an essential element in play activities and adults, parents and teachers, often seek to relate their use to achieve specific goals they have set themselves for children, such as working for hours autonomously, practicing specific skills, accelerating academic knowledge, etc.

Despite the fact that the quest for selecting appropriate toys is an important pedagogical issue that concerns everybody involved with children, related research is very limited. Kabadayı (2014) found that there are differences among Turkish parents in toy preferences for their children in relevance to their education and their economic status and Pantazis (1997) found in a previous research that Greek kindergarten teachers` criteria in toy selection for their class vary and in many cases are significantly different, suggesting limited awareness in toy evaluation issues. The fact that public knowledge in matters of toy evaluation appears in literature to be ambiguous shows that there is a need for more succinct knowledge about this issue. The aim of this article is to raise awareness amongst stakeholders (parents, teachers, etc.) on key issues related to the selection and exploitation of toys for preschoolers and kindergartners. Our key positions are that:

- *Toys can be linked to key aspects of the development of the preschool child (cognitive, social, physical and emotional).*
- *Toy selection criteria must be part of the idea to create a wider play environment, both at home, in kindergarten and in preschool centers, where children will be able to engage in all types of play.*

The article is developed in two parts. In the first part are analyzed some criteria that are considered important for the selection of toys for preschool children and kindergartners. The second part describes the basic elements that should characterize the wider play environment, both at home, in kindergarten and preschool centers, in order to give opportunities to children for whole development. Toys have a special place in it.

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## 2. Part A: Basic criteria for selecting toys for preschoolers and kindergartners

### 2.1 Child safety

Our first thought when buying a toy for a child of any age is to look at safety issues. The American Committee for Consumer Protection (CPSC), which is an independent authority, has established relevant safety criteria and has published general and specific guidelines on what public attention should be paid to, such as the risk of electric shock, lead rates and toxic elements. Particular reference is made to the need for a warning to be displayed on certain toys for the risk of suffocation and choking that may arise if the child swallows the toy itself or a piece of it (Goodson & Bronson, 1993). In Europe, the European Toys Safety Directive (2009/48/EC) is implemented respectively and transposed by the EU Member States into their national legislation. Therefore when adults select toys they should look for the relevant CE mark (for Europe) on them and in addition they should also check them by themselves for possible dangers from their use.

### 2.2 Interests and abilities of the child

A second issue to consider is whether the toy we choose will be appealing and interesting for the intended child/children. With this parameter we try to ensure, as much as possible, that the toy will keep the child's interest for a long time. For this purpose, we need to take into account children's personal interests, their degree of development and their capabilities. We also need to consider gender. There are toys that appeal to boys or girls but also "gender neutral toys". Knowing the physical, cognitive and social development of children is usually an indication of their competencies for corresponding skills. Age is a useful element that can guide us in our choices, although we must not rely entirely on it as each child may differ in his/her development in relevance to other children of his/her age.

We have to point that exploring the relationship of a toy with age is based on the studies of Piaget and subsequent researchers who have dealt with the subject. Piaget distinguished play into three types that evolve alongside the stages of cognitive development: practice play, symbolic play and games with rules (Piaget, 1962). Smilansky (1968) later proposed constructive play as a distinctive play type. At the same time, the social dimension of play in relation to age is analyzed in two classic surveys of Parten (Parten, 1932; Parten, 1933), which showed that children prefer to play more group forms of play and to form larger peer groups as they grow up. The characteristics of children's play have also been found to evolve qualitatively as children become more mature (Rubin, 1977a).

According to NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) "preschoolers and kindergartners like to experiment with things and with their still-emerging physical skills. They like to play with friends and don't like to lose. They can take turns and sharing one toy by two or more children is often possible for older preschoolers and kindergarteners". They are also familiarized with the basic colors and geometric shapes, are interested in simple activities with the numbers and the alphabet, have the ability to match things to each other and are also interested in subjects related to nature, science, animals, and how objects of their environment work. In addition, they can direct their actions towards a goal, but rather prefer board games based on luck rather than strategy (Goodson & Bronson, 1993). Finally, older kindergartners enjoy taking roles that are prestigious in adult society and at the same time gradually replace polite and sensitive models with more dynamic heroes that draw on the characters of television (Therrell, 2002).

### 2.3 Patterns of behavior

Another important aspect that needs to be considered when selecting toys is that some of them clearly bring children into contact with social and cultural patterns as they are bodies of such elements that are mainly reflected in their design. It is worthwhile checking whether the toy we offer to a child, displays desirable patterns and values. Nowadays, an example would be to prefer toys that display humanitarian, social values and ecological sensitivities. On the other hand, an important issue that we need to check is the negative social patterns that can be displayed. Special reference should be made to video games because they are distinguished by an excellent ability to relate to learning processes and therefore their effect may be powerful on children. According to the principles of social learning, children learn more easily a behavior they see when they think that the pattern that manifests this behavior has strength and authority, when they find common points in themselves with the pattern that manifests them, when they are able to encode the behavior and then repeat it and when they receive positive reinforcement for their behavior (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). Video games respond to the above context to a large extent. It is often intended by their designers to identify the player with characters of the game, who are projected to have strength, prestige and special "abilities".

In addition, the scenario of these games usually creates conditions for modeling certain behaviors, which are often rewarded with points as they work interactively. Research has shown that multiple negative forms of social behavior are obvious in commercial video games even among those officially designated as being suitable for all categories of the public and marked as "appropriate for all" (Kimberly, Thomson & Haninger, 2001).

### 2.4 Design features, manufacturing quality and cost

Novelty in design usually attracts the interest of the child. Apart from this general incitement, reference is made to the relevant literature to specific design issues that can be considered before buying a toy and also to the cost and the quality of construction. The "Good Toy" Labor Committee, set up in Germany, has proposed a list of criteria for informing the public and the industry about "suitability" of toys. The most corresponding criteria to preschoolers and kindergarteners are the following (see: Pantazis, 1997):

- Toys should leave space for the imagination of the child.
- Toys should provide children with a variety of possibilities for playing.
- Their construction and operation should be understandable.
- Wood and fabric are more interesting as materials for children in comparison with artificial materials.
- Basic colors are preferable, as the variety of colors prevents the discovery of color.
- Toys have to be strong in hard everyday use.
- The cost is evaluated in relation to the durability of the toy. In many cases durable toys end up being cheaper than the cheap ones with a short life span.

### 3. Part B: Configuring an appropriate play environment

### 3.1 The importance of toys and play classification

Having considered all of the criteria that we analyzed in the first part of this article, we have to put each of our choices in a wider context, which enables the child to engage in all types of play. This context includes kindergarten or preschool centers and home. Research has shown that different types of toys have an impact on children's play (Karadimitriou, Pantazis & Sakellariou, 2012; Mellou, 1994; Rubin, 1977b). Therefore, it is very useful to use a classification of toys and play as a guide in our choices so that we can choose the most appropriate toys depending on the types of play we want to promote in a play area. Of course that cannot be absolute as "children have a way of doing things with toys over and beyond the apparent character of the toy" (Sutton Smith, 1986). A model proposed by Kudrowitz and Wallace (2010) defines four general categories of play:

- Sensory: This play involves aesthetics and entertaining the senses.
- Fantasy: This play is about role-playing or it has a level of pretense.
- Construction: This play is about creating something.
- Challenge: This can be physical or mental. Physical challenges include both fine and gross motor skill development.

Kudrowitz and Wallace (2010) argue that these categories "can be applied to any toy or play and that all toys or play can be classified into one of four categories or as a combination of two or more of these four categories". We argue that the above classification may help us to create a desirable play environment first by assessing a play area in relevance to the play types that are mainly promoted in it and then by placing in the same play area toys which are connected with play types we would like to promote.

### 3.2 The role of adults in shaping a desirable play environment for children

In creating a desirable play environment the responsibility lies primarily to adults. Kindergarten and preschool centers can exploit their potential through the organization of play areas and their program in a way that promotes all types of play. They can also provide children with toys that usually do not exist in their home (Johnson et al., 2005). On the other hand home can provide the child with different stimuli. For example, frequent exits in an open space environment, visits to playgrounds, offering a rich variety of toys including hand-made toys that are made jointly by children and parents, playing with siblings and relatives, visits to friends, etc. Kindergarten or preschool centers and home should be complementary and collaborate with each other. Furthermore intervention of adults in creating the environment in which children play does not mean that children's wishes in specific toys must be overlooked.

A good advice would be to create a list of children's wishes and then after they have been properly prepared with discussion on the fact that they cannot get all the toys they want, parents can choose among the children's preferences the most appropriate toys based on the criteria we have mentioned so far (Auerbach, 2006).

Until now, we have discussed mainly issues related to toys. Creating the right playing environment presupposes two more important conditions: the frequent involvement of parents in children`s play and the promotion of group play with their peers. Through parent - child play, parents can show direct or indirect ways to make play more productive for the child. By exemplifying and providing help, where necessary, they can guide children to more complex forms of play. Joint action among them is also crucial for the emotional development of their children as toys cannot substitute human contact in the parent - child relationship (Morantz & Torrey, 2003).

Finally, group play gives children opportunities to engage in learning processes through interaction. As far as social skills are concerned, children in group play learn to manage through social friction with their peers many situations they will also face as adults (Mc Ardle, 2001).

As shown above toy selection for preschoolers and kindergartners is a multifactorial issue. What we mainly sought to do with this article is to highlight the key aspects of it and approach it in a wider context, which also involves the organization of the play environment and the active role of adults in children`s play as well.

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