

Play: Toys vs Imagination

Does the title of this article sound like a contradiction? Let's look at how children play to explain this. For years, in "the olden days" very few toys were available and only to the very wealthy. Therefore, children engaged in imaginative play that did not need toys. They improvised, self-regulated and made up their own rules. With the arrival of T.V. that drastically changed. Not only did children spend their time in front of the T.V., they were being told by advertisers what they needed to be able to play. Children became reliant on toys to play, which has affected them in their cognitive and emotional development.

"Here's some of the evidence: back in the late 1940's some psychological researchers did a series of tests on children. In one of the tests, they asked kids ages three, five, and seven to stand perfectly still without moving. The three-year-olds couldn't do this exercise at all. The five-year-olds could do it for about three minutes. And the seven-year-olds could stand pretty much as long as the researchers asked. In 2001, some researchers actually repeated this experiment, but as psychologist Elena Bodrova explains, the results were very different. Today's five-year-olds were acting at the level of three-year-olds 60 years ago, and today's seven-year-olds were barely approaching the level of five-year-olds 60 years ago."*

This is not to say that we should take children's toys away from them, there are some pretty cool toys available now and many of them do encourage creativity. Help children master such skills such as self-regulation, sharing, and problem solving by providing creative play opportunities where they have to use their imagination. Props are helpful in encouraging children, so provide an eclectic mix of dress-up clothes, big cardboard boxes, large pieces of fabric – nothing complicated and not too much of any one thing, keep it simple and let the children decide how they will use the props. When left to their own devices, children will make decisions themselves – the less structured the play is, the more children will develop self-regulation, and learn how to make choices, skills they will need as they grow up.

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