

NO MORE JUNK TOYS: RETHINKING CHILDREN'S GIFTS

BY JUDITH L. RUBIN, MOTHERING MAGAZINE

One night, not long after Christmas, my pacifist friends Jay Levy and Su Zuniga quietly crept down to the basement with a hammer while their three-year-old daughter, Samantha, slept. There, they methodically banged on the belly of her new mechanical dog until it stopped yapping.

Another friend's daughter received a Victorian makeup table for her fourth birthday. "It's plastic, it's ugly, and it's huge. It's totally inappropriate for a four year-old. Not to mention that my daughter is a tomboy." When asked about the fate of the gift, she replied firmly, "It is going to 'disappear' very soon."

Some parents are creative in their disposal of "junk toys," as my husband calls them. "The worst toy our daughter ever received," notes one mom, "was a hard-plastic, realistic, talking doll. She purported to be your child's 'best friend' by using a set of pre-recorded diskettes that get inserted into her back. We were saddened to think there might be some lonely children out there for whom this doll might actually be enriching. The doll stands in the center of our peace garden as our scarecrow." But approaching friends and family about their gift choices can be awkward. As one friend put it, "I don't want them to think I disapprove of their taste." So the gifts wind up at the Salvation Army or the dump.

Making gifts "disappear" is a last resort for parents who receive junk toys-i.e., toys out of line with their values or taste. Like junk food, junk toys can be fun but are devoid of nutrition. Buying them requires little forethought. They are excessively commercial, and are often linked to cross-marketing schemes. They excite children at first, but that initial flicker doesn't endure. Also like junk food, junk toys have hidden environmental and social costs for which the consumers pay.

The issues involved in junk toys are deeper than the layer of clutter on the playroom floor. These issues are as deep as the ocean, where thousands of yellow Lego toy life rafts drifted ashore after three million toy pieces inadvertently spilled from a tanker in 1998.¹ But more important than the occasional freak toy-pollution disaster are the routine environmental insults associated with most toy production.

When we buy a Barbie doll, the relatively low price belies the full cost of her petroleum-intensive plastic manufacturing process, her plastic and paper packaging, and transporting her and her billions of accessories from Southeast Asia to the US. These hidden costs, what economists call "externalities," are paid (or more commonly

unpaid) not by individual consumers or corporate producers but by collective society at large. We don't - and probably can't - pay enough for the product and its packaging, shipping, and manufacture to justify the damage caused by these processes.

The vast majority of plastic commercial toys are made by children themselves, working in overseas sweatshops. Girls as young as 13 years, some working the night shift, stitch Barbie's dresses.² In Thailand in 1993, hundreds of workers, including child laborers, died in a fire while stuffing Cabbage Patch dolls for Hasbro, Inc.³ The Asia Monitor Resource Center and the Coalition for the Charter on the Safe Production of Toys reported that Vietnamese workers making McDonald's Happy Meals toys for as little as six cents an hour had been poisoned by acetone, a chemical solvent used to manufacture plastic Disney characters such as the 101 Dalmatians line.⁴ All of this so that I can pull up to the drive-through window and toss my child a Happy Meal figurine? No, thanks.

Then there are the social costs of marketing. Marketers broadcast programming designed to hypnotize toddlers into "cradle-to-grave brand loyalty to these toys."⁵ Marketing professionals cross-reference, cross-market, and cross-pollinate products and entertainment. By intentionally blurring the distinctions between entertainment, products, school curricula, and advertisements, marketers readily capitalize on young children's limited ability to differentiate between them. It's no accident that, in the children's section of Barnes and Noble, the books starring such television-based characters as Arthur, Clifford, and Blues Clues are displayed most prominently, while the classics get the cheap seats.

Despite warnings from the American Medical Association that children who watch more than 10 hours a week of television and/or video are more likely to be overweight, aggressive, and slow to learn, more products and entertainment than ever are designed to capture the imaginations of children aged one to three years, and to encourage them to watch TV.⁶ Experts with PhDs conduct sophisticated focus groups to ensure that each and every episode of TV shows such as Dora the Explorer hit the mark with preschoolers.⁷ The TV show sells the books and movie, the movie ads sell the Happy Meal action figures, and these in turn sell next year's patented Halloween costumes. Then the media hero du jour is immortalized and consumed, literally, as a fluorescent, frosted birthday cake from the local supermarket. If you were hosting, say, a Dora the Explorer party, you could choose from more than 70 party accessories, including blinking fiesta beads.

It's brilliant marketing, and it works. The only problem is that it works against parents, children, and the environment.

North Americans have come to rely on commercial institutions to furnish our stories, heroes, icons, and expectations. The old traditions and rites of passage have been eclipsed by a boy's first Nintendo, a girl's first Barbie, a computer, a first toy gun.

Last Christmas, when the US was bombing Afghanistan, JC Penny advertised Forward Command Post, a 75-piece set that includes: a bombed and blood-stained play house, one 11 1/2-inch-high figurine in military combat gear, toy weapons, an American flag, chairs, and more.⁸ "Take command of your soldiers from this fully outfitted battle zone," the ad boasted. Forward Command Post is recommended for ages five and up. Last December, the Toys-"R"-Us website listed it as "sold out."

Julie Convisser, a movement therapist and mother of two small boys, worries about the messages kids get from commercial culture. "I feel like they are being groomed to be materialists, to buy into an evil-vs.-good world paradigm, and to ignore the spiritual heart of life and the bounty of nature." She buffers the influence of commercial culture as much as possible by limiting her boys' TV viewing and being picky about videos, avoiding media-promotion toys, and sending her older son to a school at which the other children's parents share her values.

Others argue that children should be exposed to commercial culture to avoid becoming victims of it. In fact, direct experience can be a fast way for kids to learn the ropes of misleading ad campaigns. Karin Purdy, mother of three, says, "I let my kids watch TV, and I let them buy some of the products they see. They are usually quite disappointed when they get them and they aren't as great as they thought. They get smarter as they get older."

Michelle Sobel, a film editor, a creator of educational software, and the mother of two girls, thinks about this issue constantly. "We live in a consumer culture and kids are going to be confronted with it all the time, despite your best attempts to control it." When her three year old, Willa, sees a seductive ad for a toy and says, "I want that!" Michelle asks, "What do you like about it?" She transforms the indulgence/denial struggle into an interesting conversation about what is appealing to her daughter. Engaged in discussion, during which mom may even begin to talk about something else, it's easier for the daughter to walk away from the toy.

Whatever their individual approaches, many parents work hard all year long to protect children from pervasive and cloying commercialism. But despite our best efforts, holidays and birthdays can become gift-crazed free-for-alls. Why allow our friends and

relatives to fall into the trap of giving meaningless gifts when a simple, genuine gesture can mean so much more to the children? "Disappearing" junk toys only compounds the environmental and cultural costs; it's up to us to stop the charade and transform the culture of gift-giving.

It's perfectly natural that adults love to give children things and that children love to receive them. Even in Waldorf schools-which discourage plastics, TV, and commercial images on clothing-there exists a strong understanding that, according to writer Gisela T. O'Neil, "in the beginning of life, roughly till we reach adulthood, we are at the receiving end of life: parents, teachers, and society bestow their care upon us. Later follows the time when we ourselves are called upon to contribute to other people and to society. Think of the boundless expectations with which a young child anticipates his birthday or other gift-bestowing events, how he feels at the center of the world! Actually, most of the early part of life is a continuous receiving."⁹

Changing the Culture of Gifts

Alicia Daniel, field naturalist, teacher, and mother of two daughters, offers a radical checklist:

- 1) Will this toy eventually turn into dirt-i.e., could I compost it? Stones, snowmen, driftwood, and daisies-they will be gone, and we will be gone, and life goes on.
- 2) Do I know who made this toy? This question leads us to search for the hidden folk artist in each of us.
- 3) Is this toy beautiful? Have human hands bestowed an awkward grace, a uniqueness lacking in toys cranked out effortlessly by machine?
- 4) Will this toy capture a child's imagination?"¹⁰

To this list we might add: Does this gift foster my child's natural inclinations? Will it enable him to more fully engage in life? Does it help her reach her goals?

My husband and I have been proactive, perhaps downright annoying, in our efforts to work closely with the gift-givers in our children's lives. We have banned plastics and gifts made in China, and have asked that donations to nonprofit organizations be made in their names. The results have been amazing. Relatives made a hand-painted chair, built an art easel, and offered such practical and well-timed gifts as a backpack for sleepovers. They have knitted miles of handmade sweaters and blankets. Parents who hesitate to speak up for fear of offending rob their friends and family of a chance to participate more deeply in their child's life.

Head them off at the pass. If you don't offer clear choices well before a holiday or birthday, relatives and friends will buy "obligatory" gifts. Dovetail their best intentions with something your child

actually wants or needs. One friend wrote in tiny italics at the bottom of her baby's birth announcement: "Please, no pastel, no plastic." We all got the message. Another suggested that we each bring a cup and saucer to a birthday party to help make her child a new tea set. Every year, my husband and I ask that guests bring a skit or song to my daughter's birthday party in lieu of a gift. It's not difficult to get them to juggle instead of buying her a Barbie, but it doesn't happen by osmosis.

Pay people for their skills, not their stuff. Last October, my daughter decided she wanted to play the violin. Her grandparents agreed to sponsor eight lessons, one for each night of Chanukah. This arrangement satisfied everyone: my parents, who from 3,000 miles away longed to instill in their granddaughter a love of classical music; my daughter, who took lessons on a time-limited, trial basis; and a talented young violin teacher, who is raising her own child and going back to school.

Give away your juiciest ideas. As your child's closest confidante, you are up to date on his or her secret interests. Being close to children gives parents a unique opportunity to clue relatives in about what gifts will have relevance to their children's lives.

The best gift I ever gave my nephew was a cardboard refrigerator box. After opening a dozen molded-plastic toys at his birthday

party, he and his friends went absolutely wild over the giant carton. His mom knew how much he'd enjoyed one at a friend's house, and had passed on the clue to me. It took a bit of moxie to show up at his party with a cardboard box, but the other parents-total strangers to me at the time-congratulated me with hearty slaps on the back.

Be Prepared if it Backfires. When a friend's son was two, her parents asked what they could get him for Christmas. She explained that he liked making music, and that a drum would be nice: "My mom went to Toys-"R"-Us and bought him a battery-packed, plastic, multicolored drum machine with various buttons, high-volume percussion tracks, and multicolored blinking lights. My heart sank when he tore open the paper and I saw what it was. I was actually angry-a little at my Mom for being so clueless, and a lot at our culture, which has turned something as wonderful as a drum into this repellent mechanical thing. Fortunately, my son didn't even understand what it was. We made it 'disappear' that day and went to a fair-trade import store and bought him a handmade tom-tom drum made of wood and hide with a lovely wood drumstick. He still has it, and loves it and uses it three years later."

And if you still can't bring yourself to tell friends and relatives what your child really wants, you can always put it in writing.

NOTES: 1. Curtis Morgan, "Legos and Other Floating Flotsam," Miami Herald, 17 May 1998. 2. Sarah Cox, "The Secret life of Toys," www.maquilasolidarity.org/campaigns/toy/scox.htm. 3. Ibid. 4. Ibid. 5. Gary Ruskin, "Why They Whine," *Mothering* no. 97 (November-December 1999): 40-50. 6. Karen Springer, "Why We Tuned Out," *Newsweek*, 11 November 2002. 7. Daniel McGinn, "Guilt Free TV," *Newsweek*, 11 November 2002. 8. JC Penney, 2002 Christmas catalog: 486. 9. Gisela T. O'Neil, "Gratitude, Love, Responsibility" in *Waldorf Schools, Volume 1: Kindergarten and Early Grades*, Ruth Pusch, ed. (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1996), 24-32.

10. Alicia Daniel, "Checklist for Toys Focuses on Deeper Values," *Burlington Free Press*, 16 December 2001 .

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Organizations: Center for a New American Dream 6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 900 Takoma Park, MD 20912 www.newdream.org Brochure, "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture

Commercial Alert: www.commercialalert.org .

For more information about toys, see the following articles in past issues of *Mothering*: "Homemade Toys: Why Nothing Can Beat a Paper Pinwheel," no. 95; "Top Toys," no. 91; and "Toys That Encourage Imaginative Play," no. 90.

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