

Taking Toys Seriously (Yes, Really)

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 6 August, 2003 - 20:51

Suzanna Slack

I once offered help to a teenager who had a huge room and lots of things in it. Her parents didn't like her throwing stuff out – there was always a sentimental value attached to something or other, or it could be fixed, blah blah blah. She was held back, literally, by all the junk that had accumulated in her room. This isn't going to be a pseudo feng-shui commentary, by the way.

So I offered to be ruthless and to take the blame, and together we chucked tons of it out when her parents were away. They never knew the difference, never missed one single chipped china poodle that might have been great aunt Winifred's, or whatever. Some of it went to car boot sales, and what she kept was now so streamlined that she was inspired to demand new furniture ... and another consequence was that now, her room and her life were taken more seriously.

Toys are really important to young children. They help them learn. The first way we can take toys seriously is by being interested in what's around. I used to hate the TV, especially advertising, but I've come to realise that watching a lot of adverts and embracing the consumer world has greatly *reduced* its power over me and my family. Talking about products in programmes and in adverts demystifies it all massively. Then it's good to go to shops and to investigate it more thoroughly. We have a Woolworths at the end of our road and I know a lot of people who would be shocked at the amount of time we spend in there, comparing products, talking about what we think is a waste of money, what looks over-packaged, what looks like good value, ad infinitum. Toys are constantly being updated so it's good to keep calling in and to keep looking. We also go to a much posher toy shop (lots of 'educational' toys, lots of wooden stuff) and talk about what's good and what's not in there. We don't go there for a treat. Browsing around toy shops is part of our everyday life: we do it as often as we buy – say – bread. Looking this much means we want to buy very much less. It means we are much less in the grip of thoughtless consumption than we were when I used to fear spending, and stuff.

We spend a lot of time in pound shops (discount shops) and in charity shops and this way we work out what's worth having and what's not. By the way, arithmetic tends to come up just because prices are being compared constantly. Plus, consumerism is part of life. If I go on holiday somewhere remote and gorgeous, and avoid the shops for as long as possible, I notice that new things take on a whole new exotic dimension to children, and they start to have that power all over again. So I see it as something that benefits me as much as my kids, all this window-shopping and actual-shopping. There's no way to avoid new toys and wanting more things, even if I moved to the Australian bush and gave them a stick to play with. The stuff is out there, so if you find better ways of getting 'it', then you don't let 'it' get *you*.

I've noticed that children don't feel they are taken that seriously if their stuff isn't, as well. You don't necessarily have to buy children expensive things, but you can make all the difference in the world to their capacity to have fun and learn more about the world by simply helping them to take care of what they already have. A fun thing to do with younger children who perhaps aren't too territorial (although some obviously are) is to offer to clean all the toys. We keep our real kitchens clean, so if a toy kitchen is cleaned it takes on a whole new resonance. It shows we haven't bought that toy

kitchen just to shut the kids up, to keep them quiet, but because we love it too, and we love the pleasure that it brings. Ditto the plastic diggers and the metal cars and the wooden dolls house furniture and all the Playmobil and whatever else.

Offer your children a whole packet of baby wipes and offer to clean some stuff with them. Or you can fill up a bowl or a sink with soapy water and do it the old fashioned way, or both. Clean, shiny toys look beautiful. They look like they did when we first got them. When you first get a toy, if it's new or clean then it's beautiful. Toys that get sticky from juice or loving breath, and then accumulate dust which sticks to the sticky stuff...urrrggh. Those toys just get left to lie around, or played with in an offhand way. Or even attacked. Well-wiped toys with their colours gleaming are just gorgeous. And if they're still not wanted, take them to the charity shop and let them make someone else happy. Which they will, because they will be clean and shiny! Wooden toys can be literally polished with beeswax. It's not something I do regularly, but I did it once or twice, and it felt quite sacred. Playing with toys which smell fragrant can make children feel really special. For a moment, while you clean them, you are almost worshipping the items which give so much pleasure and growth.

Another way of loving the stuff our kids have is by organising it, or by offering to. It can be a lot of fun to sort things into different places so that all the magnets are together, all the scissors are together, all the hairclips, and so on. It often makes everyone feel good – pretty much a 'win-win' situation. It's also a way of finding out why everything is now boring, or crap, or not fun any more. If you take children seriously you might assume you shouldn't interfere and the stuff should just be stored any old way. This is OK too, but I think kids can benefit from help in finding out ways to make the most of what they have. Just like we do.

Suggest buying a nice piece of furniture, or some nice storage boxes or other storage solutions – like good shelves – instead of the next batch of stuff that comes up. Offer to help them have a clearout. Keeping felt-tip pens that have run out or almost run out is insulting, for example. Maybe you should be the one to chuck them out, and to top them up with new ones as often as you do with, say, toilet paper. Don't expect them to be sentimental about crap stuff that came as a present only last month from Granny. Maybe it can be sold second-hand and exchanged for a nice cupboard, or some good lighting to show off an arrangement of china frogs. Whatever. I think we can do a lot of harm with our attitude to stuff – it's just stuff. Having less of it is sometimes great, but having loads of some things which make us happy is often great too. How do they feel about their books? Would they prefer someone else to keep the books in another room? Maybe books make them feel fed-up. Maybe they'd prefer to keep their own CD collection in their room. Maybe they'd like some help sorting through all the stuffed animals, donating some to charity shops, and getting some more. Maybe they want to enlarge their stuffed panda collection, and get rid of all the bunnies.

I reckon it's not enough to just leave them to get on with it, and to leave them to accumulate a whole load of old, dusty, broken gear in the name of 'autonomy'. Autonomy is often about improving our lives, and it's the same for our children. If a child plays almost entirely with Lego Technics, and spends the remainder of his or her time on the computer, except when s/he is outside on his or her bike, then it might make his or her life just dandy to box everything else up and label it clearly ready for when his or her priorities change. If someone could do that for me right now, I could get on with achieving so much more. I'd love to focus on, oooh - dance, and certain French and American novels. I need my laptop. I don't need to cook or to be doing any cleaning. I'm fine with laundry and I like wearing only black at the moment, and I have a whole beatnik gypsy thing going on with my clothes until the weather changes, and I'm quite focused on these things. Suppose someone changed my personal space into somewhere I could prance around, a good floor and a mirror and a good music system, and they've just left out the clothes I like wearing, and organised all the rest for later, and put them away. The books I want to concentrate on are arranged, together with my laptop, and apart from a washing basket of laundry I have nothing else to think about because there's no food in the kitchen to cook, no dishes to deal with, no cleaning. No kitchen actually. That makes it easier.

Hmm. That would be hard to arrange. Thinking about it now, though, it's feasible. I could make some modifications to my home to facilitate those things. I could work out a way of doing less cooking and less cleaning, and have days on end when I do none at all.

So maybe it's harder, but not impossible, to make it happen for adults, for ourselves. It's not hard at all to facilitate the same kind of liberation from crap, junk, stuff, expectation, dirt and all the rest for our children. We can pay attention to

what they like, how they like to do it; we can talk about it. We don't assume that their things, their toys, their world is trivial. We don't just give them what they ask for, as much as we can, dump it all in their rooms and leave them to get on with it, leave them to battle with the pressure that stuff often brings with it. That's coercive. That's an assumption that because we've had to work out what we want to do with the world around us, how we want to arrange it, then so do our kids. Learn the hard way. We can help them to manage their environments so as to get the most out of them. That's it. Nothing deeply philosophical about it at all. I don't think TCS is much about who can use the cleverest jargon in philosophical debate, I think it is about ways to live our lives with our families so that we have a nice time.

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Comments

In what are toys better helpi

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 25 October, 2004 - 14:35

In what are toys better helping children learn about the real world than real things? For instance, what does a toy phone with four keys that go inside at the same time when you press them and bark or do some other stupid noise help a baby learn about phones better than a real phone?

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In what way...

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 16 November, 2004 - 21:08

'In what are toys better helping children learn about the real world than real things? For instance, what does a toy phone with four keys that go inside at the same time when you press them and bark or do some other stupid noise help a baby learn about phones better than a real phone?'

Well, the problem is that your assertion that real things are better for helping people learn about the real world doesn't make much sense because we don't understand the real world all that well. As such, being able to figure out how a "fake" object works and what it is possible to do with them is often educational. The child can perform some experiments with the fake phone, such as throwing it, that you wouldn't be too keen on him doing with a real phone. Or he might figure out how to get inside to find out what makes the funny noise when he presses the keys - again doing this with a real phone may not be desirable. Or he could learn something about geometry by looking at it from lots of different angles. And so on and so forth. Lots of this learning would be implicit rather than explicit but it would still be learning.

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consumerism

Submitted by denise (not verified) on 29 July, 2005 - 22:04

I really appreciate your article and perspective. I would like to add one thing to your list of things you look at, which is the social cost of the toy.

You brush on the environmental cost regarding the packaging, however, there is a great deal more to this. I find it deeply troubling, for instance, that a woman who made a toy or clothes for my little boy might not be able to eat since her pay is only adequate to feed her own children.

For another example, many families and communities are ripped apart by the mining industry, which produces highly acidic and toxic waste products.

It seems that we as a culture are so enamoured with available products that we forget - and now are not even able to even come by - the stories of their manufacture.

I think that it makes a great deal of sense to examine the toys carefully - both in regard to their end-use as well as in regard to their creation and ultimate disposal.

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toys and violence

Submitted by M.Kabilan (not verified) on 29 January, 2006 - 14:36

While choosing toys for their kids, one must be careful. The toys like guns and daggers should not be gifted to a kid, who may later consider that using weapons is a fun and thrill. This may give them a psychological liberty to consider killing by firing is just for the sport of it. The excitement they offer in kids may result in love for violence and unwarranted action.

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Consumerism

Submitted by lyeping2607 (not verified) on 7 November, 2006 - 19:59

How right you are about window shopping at Woolworth! I never knew that there might be a 'label' to what I've been practicing with my son till I stumble across TCS. I have always been very proud of how I'm able to entertain my son by bringing him into Woolworth or Toy's 'Arus for some window shopping, without having to buy him anything most of the time. For the next 20 mins and half hour, he's allowed to touch or play if the toy's not boxed up, to his heart content. Then we'll leave without buying anything most of the times. Should he want something, 'he'll have to really really want it enough to remember to buy it later'. Normally I'll suggest leaving it till when we're ready to go. If he still really wants it, then he can have it only if it's within his pocket money budget, whatever that is.

By teaching a kid to save up his pocket money, he'll have the pleasure of buying something of his choice, without any objection from a parent unless it is something the parent really disagrees with like toy guns.

Sometimes, I find that my child will totally forget about whatever it was that he wanted to buy in the first place. To me, that means that toy was not significant enough! Because I believe that when a child desires a toy, this means that there's must be something in that toy that's appealing to his inner curious mind that needs feeding. So it's not just a toy to play with, it's a gadget to learn with. Which explains why it's been known to say young children always prefer the box that the toy came in rather than the toy!

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As I always say, choosing

Submitted by gordman (not verified) on 22 August, 2007 - 15:08

As I always say, choosing right toys for your children is not that easy as it seems. We have to consider: "What toys", "how many", "when", "what for". It also depends on the age. I am not a parent yet but I don't want to make mistakes that others do, like buying dangerous, bad educational toys for their kids just for the sake of fun. We can find plenty options for fun toys but also necessity toys like **toddler ride on toys** (<http://www.child.net/toy-store-online.html>) for young kids, writing games, toys that help kids socialize and so on.

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