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The Toys ‘R’ Us Challenge

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From the time of Ancient Greece and Rome, children were viewed as little adults. The society did not understand the concept that children thought, behaved, acted, learned differently from adults and didn’t understand why. The complexity of the behavior and development of children was not studied until the Renaissance period. Gradually the church and society grew an interest in studying children more theoretically and experimentally. Thus, society realized the importance the biological and environmental factors has on children in the early years of social, motor, perceptual, and cognitive development. Play, in the Renaissance period, was finally perceived as educational and stimulating in many different aspects of development. Realization of the significance of play instigated a tremendous boom in the toy industry and also concern, as caregivers, to provide a nourishing environment for the child to learn and develop in. In this paper, I will compare what makes a toy “good” or “bad” in terms of the positive and negative effects it has on the growth and development of a child.

An example of a “good” toy is Number and Alphabet Puzzles by Small Wonder Toys. It’s a puzzle board with number and alphabet pieces that fit into the board. If you lift the pieces from the board, pictures illustrating the number or letter is revealed underneath. The numbers and letters are in bold, primary colors which can promote the learning of colors as well. Children between the age of three and up are recommended for the appropriate play and learning of this toy. The Number and Alphabet Puzzles was designed for safety, with features like dull edges and large pieces to prevent the possibility of swallowing. The price is an acceptable amount of $8.95, considering its durability and continued usage and learning for many years to come as the child grows. Learning the numbers, alphabets, and new words can become a trying task for young children, but through the use of Number and Alphabet Puzzles, learning becomes more of a fun, play experience. The alphabet and number pieces transform abstract ideas in a child’s thoughts and imaginations into real and tactile objects with dimensions.

The basic goal of the Number and Alphabet Puzzles is to develop alphabet and number skills, which facilitate cognitive development. The best-known organismic theory of development is the cognitive structural theory of Piaget.
He states that the ways in which information is organized depends on the level of cognitive development of the child, and a child of age two to three are more bound to sensory and motor information and less able to think symbolically and abstractly. The *Number and Alphabet Puzzles* would allow the child to acquire new information on a tangible level. At first the child may learn the letters individually, and as her cognitive level increases, she might begin formatting short, object words. The cognitive improvement, utilizing this toy, will better prepare the child for elementary school with larger vocabularies and higher reading skills.

The puzzle, which requires fitting certain pieces into correct locations, enhances motor skills by developing hand-eye coordination that allows them to explore and manipulate objects. Motor development is important for social play with other children, while also these achievements increase the degree of independence the child gains. By learning to play with and communicate new intellectual skills, children initiate social contact with peers and caregivers. Social developments, like turn taking and sharing, are established through linguistic games like the *Number and Alphabet Puzzles* when used in a social situation.

Another view of learning is the behavioristic perspective, in particular, operant conditioning. According to Skinner, an important behavioristic theorist, behavior is modified by the type of rewarding or punishment events that follow the actual event. If a child learning the alphabet is given a friendly smile, praise, or a special treat by the caregiver, the likelihood that the behavior will occur again is increased. On the other hand, neglect or a negative response, like a frown, criticism, or withdrawal of a privilege, will decrease the chance that the behavior will recur. Exposing a child to a toy like the *Number and Alphabet Puzzles* shows the child that the caregiver approves and wants the child to learn and play with the numbers and alphabets, even more so when the child fits the right piece in.

Cognitive, social, and motor developments are critical, maybe more so, for blind children. Limited mobility lessens the blind children the ability to explore on their own and discover new experiences and information. It is essential for a blind child to learn to associate sound and touch to reach an understanding of their external world. The *Number and Alphabet Puzzles* gives the blind child the opportunity to learn numbers and letters in that ‘touch-sound’ association if done with another person. This toy would expedite the learning process for blind children because of its emphasis for motor as well as cognitive development.

An example of a “bad” toy is the *Electronic Mighty Sword* by Royal Candor, SRM Co. Inc. It is a plastic stick of about two feet with a handle for holding the sword. The sword lights up on the blade and a realistic metal sound is produced if you tap the blade against a hard surface. The preferable age range is from three and up. The sword has no safety hazards except if a child used too much force hitting others, or himself. The cost is $9.95, which
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is unreasonably high for a plastic stick, which may promote violence and
danger for the child and his peers. The toy could be made by the caregiver of
the child with materials from home. In this way, the child could materialize
creative ideas he has and see the results.

The *Electronic MightySword* develops motor skills like running, using
your arms, coordination, etc., but at the expense of possibly hindering social
and emotional developments. Freud emphasizes the importance of the
critical role of the preschool years in the development of personality and the
acquiring of governing unconscious drives, such as aggression. He theorized
that the ego, the rational controlling part of personality, emerges around the
preschool years. The *Electronic Mighty Sword*, given to a child going through
this development, would counteract the ego and seek pleasure in demonstrat­ing
aggression and anger guided by the id. The sword would not be an
appropriate socially, constructive mechanism that would facilitate the de­
velopment of control of aggression and social interaction with others.

Children learn by observing and imitating others: peers, caregivers,
teachers, or television characters. The social learning theory states that
merely observing the behavior of others can significantly expand the behavioral
repertoire of the child. A child given this *Electronic Mighty Sword*, is exposed
to the violence that the toy may impose, and the child forms cognitive
representations of the purpose of the toy and translates this into motor
movements of similar type. Furthermore, television viewing, like G.I.Joe,
PowerRangers, etc., can produce potentially harmful effects on the child. It is
proven that children's aggressive behavior could be increased by exposure of
another person's aggressive behavior, as exemplified in the study where an
adult kicks, punches an inflated Bobo doll and child imitates the exact
movements of the adult.

The *Electric Mighty Sword* has a strong tendency to be sex-typed and
designed for males. The packaging design has a boy playing with this toy,
displaying aggressiveness and fighting. With this view of gender stereotypes,
children at an early age will slowly grow and develop into their gender roles.
Personal development of identity and creativity, to be who the child wants to
be, might be stifled by these social stereotypes.

Down's syndrome is characterized by physical and mental retardation
and a distinctive physical appearance. Down's syndrome children, in contrast
to their normal peers, have a difficulty attending to, discriminating, and
interpreting complex or subtle information in their environment. These
children tend to imitate and take things literally, because their cognitive
abilities do not allow them to interpret their environment in their own
understandings. Watching violence on television or being exposed to an
*Electric Mighty Sword* would be like giving permission to enact violence or
aggressiveness on others. They might swing the sword at anyone and would
say, "But the PowerRangers do this too!"

Toys are a positive way to improve child development. Motor skills are
enhanced by continuously utilizing their muscles and fine tuning of physical abilities. Cognitive levels are elevated by learning new information or modifying old concepts. Social interactive skills are established as children learn to share, communicate, and appreciate playing together. On the other hand, some toys might hinder the development of a child through suppressing creativity to supporting stereotypes or even to repressing motor skills. Many of the toys have at least one positive aspect, but to reach the highest possible level of stimulation for the child, toys should be designed to enhance all aspects of development.