

# Children and Their Toys: What happened to Connection?

The Holiday Season is upon us, and we are inundated with lights, trees, decorations, and toys. No matter what you choose to celebrate or not celebrate, if you go out of your house you will be faced with a sensory dose of color, light, sound, taste, and movement. Everywhere you look you will see something a child “must have”.



As a play therapist, I know children speak through toys and play objects and toys are essential tools in the work I do. Toys offer increased cognitive abilities by enhancing creative thinking, problem-solving, and support language and communication skills. Physical ability is developed through games and physical movement objects, and social-emotional and moral development is enhanced through pretend play including role play, projective play and narrative activities such as storytelling. Play has always been important, but let's take a retrospective look and journey back in time. This will of course, age me, but I grew up in a generation without a credit card. Yes, shocking as that is to those who never knew a time without a credit card, computer and a cellular phone, it's true. As a child I looked through catalogues, hoping to spot the one or two things my parents might be able to save enough money to buy at a special occasion. I would first circle the most intriguing things and then make a list and cut the pictures out and place them under my pillow so I could dream about these things, maybe even dream them into reality.



I wished upon as many stars as I could find in the hope that at celebration time, I might get the toy(s) I wished for. I would have to wait and hope. I learned patience and delayed gratification. If I was lucky enough to receive a gift that I knew was expensive, I was grateful that my parents worked so hard to buy the gift for me. When my toys arrived, I loved them. I mean, I really loved them. My toys were not many, but they were special. I remembered them and, most of their characteristics.



Fast forward to today... I spent many decades working with children and families and watched my own family “grow up” – stepchild, nieces and nephews and hundreds of children through my practice as a play therapist. I noticed that as the generations passed from one to the next, it was harder and harder to find children who could speak about their toys as meaningful things to which they felt connected. Even the play therapy room was often a place where children would be looking for the “new” things. It was the way the world had changed.

From a place where toys were special, yearned for to a place where toys were plentiful and easily added to, thrown out and replaced You can only imagine my happiness when Toy Story first came out! Toy Story, based on the Oscar-winning animated short Tin Toy, was about a toy named Tinny who reluctantly allowed a baby to play with him so he wouldn't cry. Toy Story brought the characters Woody and Buzz Lightyear to life who challenged the power of toys. This amazing animation series brought relationship back into the story of toys. The toys were alive, and they had thoughts and feelings! Children moved into the inner world of the toys. It was a resurgence towards the importance of the care and love of toys. It brought back how careful you must be around toys and that they could be good companions and friends. It allowed me to help children know where the toys lived in the play therapy room and that it was important that they got to stay with their other toy friends and be there for when the children returned.

## **The Value of Creating Connection with Toys**

I wonder if increasing a child's connection with their toys would actually increase a general sense of empathy and relational care? Does connection to toys help in moral development (what is the right way to be with the things you love)? Can caregivers find a way to increase the meaningful value in the toys they provide for their children? Can an electronic toy also be valuable? Is there one toy that can facilitate an attachment relationship? Increasing how things matter to children can decrease an endless empty feeling of needing more and more and more.



## The following ideas are offered:

- Ask your child to make a list of the things they would like for a gift-giving/receiving occasion.
- Explore the list with your child – what characteristics of the toy/game/ item is important to them?
- What features of the toy do they like the best?
- If they had their top wish, how would they care for their toy? Where would it live?
- If the toy could have a name – what would they name it?
- Before possibly receiving the toy, what part of the toy does the child think they will remember the most?
- What has been your child’s favorite toy so far?
- What toy has been the best to bring a happy feeling to your child?
- What toy has helped your child feel competent- maybe a challenging toy?
- What toy has your child used to feel comfort and security?
- If one of your child’s toys could talk, what might that toy say to your child? To you?
- What toy does your child want to keep until they are an adult?
- What toy do you still have from your childhood? Can you share the qualities of that toy with your child?

In the name of connection in a world that moves too fast with too little meaning, during this holiday season, consider helping your child to connect with their toys. Perhaps buy less and teach to extend the meaning and longevity of your child’s toys and as Buzz Lightyear would say... “To Infinity and Beyond!”

Lorri Yassenik PhD, RPT-S, CPT-S