

What Makes a Good Toy?

Developing Teacher Understanding

by Margie Carter

I'm always curious about the language teachers use with regard to the materials they provide for children. Some stay with the general term *toys* for nearly everything in the room, while others make careful distinctions between what are toys and what are *learning materials* or *curriculum supplies*. Similarly, I've heard parents differentiate between *toys* and *educational toys*, no doubt influenced by a coupling of their desire for *bright* children and the clever marketing strategies of toy manufacturers.

These distinctions make me smile. Doesn't every parent have a story of their kid preferring the pans and containers in the kitchen cupboard or the box the gift came in over the expensive, shiny new toy purchased for them? Child care teachers, too, have great accounts of children preferring to play with the masking tape and toilet paper rolls, rather than the costly new puzzles or manipulatives they just saved up to buy. "Should we worry?" they ask me, wanting to make sure the children are really using their time productively and their parents will be satisfied with this definition of curriculum.

Worthwhile toys offer extended possibilities for discovery and complex play. This is the source for learning and sustenance. I stand by the adage that for it to be really valuable the play should be primarily in the child, not in the toy. To convey this idea, and to help teachers spend their limited resources wisely, I've used the following training strategies.

Strategy: Examining Curriculum Boxes

Assemble a selection of curriculum boxes for teachers to explore and discuss. Ask teachers to work in small

groups moving to each box, investigating, discussing and making notes on the following questions.

- How do the items look, feel, smell, taste, move, and respond to you? What is engaging about them? What is unpleasant?
- What can you do with the items? Explore possibilities for sensory experiences, building and inventions, dramatic play, and games.
- How does the organization, display, and condition of the items impact your response and interactions? Do you feel the material limits your interest or invites possibilities?
- What concepts and skills can be learned from playing with these items?

Toy box curriculum. An array of broken toys all thrown together in a box.

Kitchen drawer curriculum box. A collection of utensils with interesting shapes, sizes, and parts.

Mother Nature curriculum box. Items gathered from outdoors, aesthetically arranged.

TV toys curriculum box. Toys related to TV shows and fast food franchises.

Inventor's curriculum box. Collections of recycled materials — all sorted and organized.

Texture curriculum box. An assortment of cloth and textures with a variety of sizes, thicknesses, and weights.

Beginnings

Hardware curriculum box. Small wood or metal hardware.

Teachers really enjoy this activity, and it generates lots of good discussion. From this we can generate lists such as *What makes a toy good for learning?* The concept of a *loose parts curriculum* comes alive and teachers discover the value of open-ended materials. *Loose parts* is an increasingly common phrase used in early childhood programming, originating from Simon Nicholson — it is also aptly considered in Jim Greenman's **Caring Places, Learning Spaces**. In contrast to many commercial toys, loose parts are extremely engaging and promote curiosity, problem solving, and creativity. They provide for a range of cultural and developmental difference, and enable teachers to get beyond the limited topical curriculum theme idea to focusing on providing for the children's developmental themes.

How Much Is Enough?

Most child care teachers long for more classroom materials and, indeed, many classrooms are on the sparse side of being adequately supplied. Because it happens infrequently, teachers given an opportunity to purchase materials often gravitate towards the newest thing in the catalog. They often make appealing selections without considering and conferring on how these choices might impact the overall goals and curriculum philosophy of their program.

In full-day child care programs there is a delicate balance between preventing boredom and offering continual distraction. What's the balance in supplying a classroom with toys? What are the priorities for those precious few dollars?

Early childhood theory reminds us that young children learn best when they invent both the problems and the solutions to them. I've encouraged teachers to consider limiting the variety of materials in their classrooms but expanding the supply and length of time children have to use them.

Strategy: Toys That Sustain Interest

Provide an ample supply of open-ended materials or loose parts — for instance, large boxes or blocks, fabric, and rope; buttons, muffin tins, tweezers, toilet paper rolls; newspaper, tape, and telephone wire; and an extended period of time to play with these toys. Remind teachers to play as adults, not pretend they are children. Those who prefer to be observers,

rather than players, should stay on the sidelines and record observations along the following lines:

- How are the materials specifically being used?
- In what ways are members of the group working together?
- What do they understand and know how to do?
- What are they trying to figure out as they play? What themes are emerging?
- Can you translate any of this play into academic goals?

Initially some adults may be reluctant to play or think the activity is trite or too unclear. Others may have forgotten how to play, seemingly not curious, unable to do much sensory exploration, take risks, or be spontaneous. However, there are always those who jump right in and eventually everyone finds something of interest to engage with. In fact, it's amazing how engaged people become in these play opportunities and what quality play they create. Those who are observers refine their skills and make valuable contributions to the debriefing discussion.

Almost any training with loose parts will help teachers think more expansively about toys. Loose parts will significantly stretch program budgets when making toy purchases for indoor and outdoor learning. For a catalog of exciting whim-wham and flippery, plus a fun conversation on environmentally conscious toys, contact C. C. Leonard of the Creation Station at (206) 775-7959.

References

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