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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEAL OF HOME MADE
PLAYTHINGS

LOVISA C. WAGONER

Overflowing energy, spontaneous activity, characterize the behavior of young creatures and insure the freedom of response necessary for adequate development. The process of integration and coordination of sensory experiences and movements into more complicated wholes is designated as play. Objects which serve to increase the radius of activity are called playthings.

Since these materials of play are drawn from the environment, they are limited, consciously or unconsciously, by those adults who determine what the surroundings of the child shall be. It is by the use of these materials that the child secures an immediate knowledge of objects, of facts which form a basis for thinking, finds both scope and curb for imagination and develops initiative in seeking further experiences. It is through the use of these materials, also, that the developing individual satisfies certain hungers: for movement, for sensory and perceptive experiences, for mastery of both material and living objects, for change, for repetition until the possibilities of a given experience have been exhausted.

The importance of knowing what materials will best satisfy these hungers of the child is obvious.

Today children's opportunities to gather their play materials from the industrial life of the home or community are limited. A mechanized environment is reflected in a mechanized play, which utilizes toys which are too finished and too perfect to serve adequately as lay figures for the child's activity. Play as well as work has two phases, preparation or construction and the use of the finished article. It is the latter phase which is emphasized by most commercial toys.

Since the purchasing of toys is almost altogether in the hands of adults, toy makers put on the market such toys as will appeal to the adult eye and to the adult imagination. As both purchaser and manufacturer are adult it easily comes about that the "true inwardness" of play is missed in that "stress is laid upon the activity of the toy rather than upon that of the child who is to

use it." Were it recognized that playthings are the instruments of play and the tools of childhood, it would be realized that the test of desirability of a toy is: what can the child do with it, what stimulus will it offer for initiating activity, for encouraging expression of constructive imagination?

Although it is often remarked that children have too many playthings, adults go right on buying toys and giving them to children, forgetting, or failing to realize, that too many toys distract the child's attention and tend to overstimulate him. All these purchased toys, together with those that the child devises and accumulates for himself give too great multiplicity of play materials which serves either to limit the child's activity or else to incite purposeless activity. Ideally, there should be available only enough materials to serve as a stimulus for initiating play. Just how many and what materials would most satisfactorily do this we do not know.

Indeed, there is but little actually and definitely *known* concerning the psychology of playthings but consensus of opinion seems to agree as to the following points:

1. Play materials, playthings, should suggest activity and should permit activity on the part of the child.
2. Play things should lend themselves to the constructive efforts of the children.
3. Playthings should serve as lay figures upon and about which the child can drape his ideas.

Children will play with anything — for the urge to seek and to appropriate materials is so strong that any sort will be adopted and more or less successfully adapted to the child. This element of adaptation is especially evident in homemade toys because to a very large extent they grow out of the child's immediate environment and serve his individual needs. Frequently they are the result of a community of interest and effort between child and adult. When they are the product of the child's own interest, inventiveness, and skill in construction, the product of his own creative thinking they are of infinite value in that they encourage the habit of wholesome busyness and of utilizing whatever materials may be available. The effort of the child to express his own idea requires ingenuity and when successful, brings great satisfaction in achievement. Moreover, the struggle with materials gives insight into the possibilities and limitations of materials for meeting the needs of which he is conscious. They do satisfy the child's desire to do things for himself, that urge toward inde-

pendence which resents having too much done for him and finds reward for a task accomplished in the attempting of a harder task. Even when made by adults these homemade toys frequently are an attempt to satisfy a demand of the child. Often they are known not merely as finished articles but are known throughout the process of making. Homemade toys, moreover, do not belong to the category of "best things" but being simple, and common, can be used. Nor are they so utterly complete that they fail to give scope for creative imagination. Many homemade toys are capable of almost infinite combinations.

The "madeover" toy is, in a very definite sense, a homemade toy, for the finished toy of the shop by being taken apart is broken down into its fundamentals, which, in turn, are made into a new whole. The "parts" of shop toys are often better playthings than were the original finished products. Reconstruction has given the child an opportunity to invent, to adapt materials to his own particular needs.

If "the prime function of a toy is related to the form which play takes at a given time" the homemade toy by virtue of its incompleteness and crudity offers especially apt suggestions for play since it serves as a core about which the play activities can be elaborated and organized.

In order to break ground for a study of playthings, it was thought that information concerning homemade toys might increase understanding of the play demands of children and insight into the play resources of the home; might reveal how such resources could be more fully utilized and might make more clear to the adult the essentials of satisfactory toys.

As a preliminary step in this study of playthings, groups of mothers in pre-school study circles were asked to describe the "best home made toy your child has," to tell who made it and the age of the child. The replies of eighty-eight mothers, some of whom described more than one toy, show that homemade toys are of two sorts; those made by adults, and those made by the child himself. Toys made by adults range in complexity from dolls cut out of paper, to a toy cupboard made by a carpenter and a tractor made by a father. Those made by children ranged in complexity from a box cover turned up to make a slide, to a radio made of boxes, cans and wire. The child was considered as the "maker" in all cases when the toy consisted of such materials as boxes, jar lids, or clothespins, manipulated by the child so as to be transformed into vehicles for play.

Since the returns are from pre-school study groups, it is natural that the reports should largely concern toys made for and by young children. In fact, two-thirds of the children are under five. The age distribution of the eight-three children whose ages are given is:

AGE IN YEARS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN
Under 2	8
2	14
3	16
4	18
5	9
6	7
7	4
8 to 13	7
	Total 83

Both median and mode of this age distribution fall in the fourth year.

Of the ninety-five toys described, about half were made by the child himself. It was a surprise, that so many toys were listed as made by the player himself. This, of course, only serves to emphasize the interest of the child in construction and to stress the inventiveness in manipulation of children and the tendency toward active use of materials. The distribution of "makers" follows:

PERSON	NUMBER OF TOYS
Mother	12
Father	16
Brother or Sister	6
Other relatives	12
Friends	3
Carpenter	2
Playmates	2
The child	42
	Total 95

Several mothers listed more than one toy as, "sled, windmill, kite, made by father." The sixty-three toys made by adults were grouped as follows:

PLAYTHING	NUMBER
Dolls	18
Doll furniture and houses	15
Tools	2
Vehicles	12
Sleds and swings	4
Kite	1
Windmill	1
Sand boxes	4
Picture books	2
Buildings	2
Blocks	1
	63

Thirty-three of the total number of playthings were concerned with dolls, twelve were vehicles such as wagons, autos, eight might be classed as "play ground apparatus."

The playthings made by the children themselves are grouped as follows:

Dolls and doll things	8
Vehicles	4
Buildings	3
Scrapbooks	3
Radio	2
Fiddle	1
Tool chest	1
Pop gun	1
Slide	1
Drum	1
Objects simply manipulated	17
	Total 42

As would be expected the toys made by the children were much simpler, representing far less manipulative skill. They illustrate the play value of little, everyday things. In seventeen of the forty-two cases, these toys resulted from manipulation of play materials with practically no construction involved, e.g., boxes used for containers, to drag about; stringing of spools. The more elaborate constructions of the children range greatly in complexity and include vehicles, dolls, scrapbooks, a drum made from an empty cereal box, a fiddle made from a long and a short ruler, with the music provided by the vocalization of the fiddlers, aged three and five, an automobile made from boxes and engine wheels.

These constructions are interesting in that they indicate the marked capacity of the child to utilize the materials of his environment. It is in this utilization of the opportunities offered by the situation that the great value of self-made playthings lies. Playthings which grow out of the child's everyday experiences, which are the result of his own effort possess an intimacy which is valuable not only because it stimulates inventiveness and ingenuity but also because it offers opportunity for the satisfactions that are inherent in self-assertion, in the mastery of materials. Those toys which are the result of the effort of the adults most concerned tighten the bond between adult and child by increasing the community of interest and strengthening desirable emotional reactions toward each other.

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