

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF TOYS & PLAY



Play is so essential to children's health and well-being—and so endangered—that the United Nations lists it as a guaranteed right in its Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹

Play promotes intellectual growth and critical thinking by providing children with the opportunity to explore, experiment, and acquire problem-solving skills.² Children play to express their fantasies and feelings, to gain a sense of competence, and to make meaning of their experience.³ Play comes naturally to children yet, as a society, we actually prevent them from playing.

A media-saturated, commercialized culture undermines children's play

- “Play thrives in environments that provide children with safe boundaries but do not impinge on ability to think or act spontaneously. It is nurtured with opportunities for silence. For children who are flooded continually with stimuli and commands to react, the cost is high. They have fewer opportunities to initiate action or to influence the world they inhabit, and less chance to exercise the essential human trait of creativity.”⁴
- Children six and under spend about two hours a day with screen media, about three times as much time as they spend reading or being read to; heavy television watchers spend less time playing than other children.⁵
- The more time babies and toddlers spend with screens, the less time they spend in hands on creative play.⁶
- Two-thirds of zero-to-six year-olds live in a home where the TV is on at least half the time, even if no one is watching, thus depriving them of a home environment where play thrives.⁷ Children who play while a television is on nearby have more difficulty concentrating; this in turn may affect a child's cognitive development.⁸



The best-selling toys are often antithetical to creative play

- The proliferation of computer chips that enable toys to move or make sounds on their own renders children passive observers rather than active participants in play.⁹ Toys embedded with screens and marketed as educational can actually undermine creative play.¹⁰
- With the deregulation of children's television in 1984, it became possible to market toys and other products to children directly through TV programs. Since then, the toy market has been dominated by media licensed products.¹¹ In 2009, brand licensed toys accounted for \$5.4 billion in sales.¹²
- Today's best selling toys often promote gender-stereotyped play.¹³ Toys based on media programs come with established characters and storylines making it unlikely that children will use the toy to create their own world. When children play with a toy based on a television character, they play less creatively, especially right after they have watched a program.¹⁴



Photo by Nat Ward

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- Toys like Lego and Play-Doh that once inspired creative play are now marketed primarily in kits, many them designed in partnership with companies interested in selling other products.¹⁵
- The more play is predetermined by a toy, the more likely that creative and imaginative play and its benefits will be jeopardized—children will be bored when they aren't told what to do and be unable to think for themselves or identify and solve problems.¹⁶

Children spend less time than ever in creative play

- On average, American 9- to 12-year-olds are spending only one minute a day in creative play, a striking contrast to 15 minutes in 1997—which was already well after David Elkind and Neil Postman began writing about a diminishing childhood. The amount of time 6- to 8-year-olds spend in creative play has decreased from 25 minutes to 16 minutes.¹⁷



For more information visit www.commercialfreechildhood.org.

Other Resources

- **Alliance for Childhood** is a partnership of individuals and organizations committed to fostering and respecting each child's inherent right to a healthy, developmentally appropriate childhood. (www.allianceforchildhood.org)
- **TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment)** produces and provides an annual guide for teachers and parents to help them in selecting toys that are educationally and developmentally appropriate for young children. (www.truceteachers.org)

¹Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1989, November 20). Convention on the Rights of the Child: General Assembly Resolution 44/25. Retrieved April 11, 2007, from www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm.

²Levin, D. (1998). *Remote Control Childhood?: Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young People.

³Linn, S. (2008). *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World*. New York: The New Press. p.2.

⁴Linn, S. (2004). *Consuming Kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: The New Press.

⁵Kaiser Family Foundation. (2003). *Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*. Menlo Park, CA. Retrieved February 12, 2008, from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia102803pkg.cfm>.

⁶Vandewater, E.A., Bickham, D.S. & Lee, J.H. (2006, February). Time well spent? Relating television use to children's free-time activities. *Pediatrics*, 117(2): e181-191.

⁷Kaiser Family Foundation. (2003). *Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*. Menlo Park, CA. Retrieved February 12, 2008, from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia102803pkg.cfm>.

⁸Healy, M. (2004, May 24) Young TV watchers may be at risk for later attention problems. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from <http://www.childrennow.org/newsroom/news-04/cam-ra-05-24-04.cfm>.

⁹Linn, S. (2004). *Consuming Kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: The New Press.

¹⁰Gregory-Thomas, S. (2007). *Buy Buy Baby*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

¹¹Greenfield, P.M et al. (1993). The program-length commercial. *Children and Television: Images in a Changing Sociocultural World*, eds. Gordon Berry and Joy Keiko Asamen. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 53-72.

¹²Szlai, G. (February 11, 2010). Toys based on sequels take center stage. *BrandWeek*, p. 1.

¹³Linn, S. (2008) *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World*. New York: The New Press. P. 159-191.

¹⁴Greenfield, P.M. et al. (1993). The program-length commercial. *Children and Television: Images in a Changing Sociocultural World*, eds. Gordon Berry and Joy Keiko Asamen. Newbury Park, CA, p. 53-72.

¹⁵Linn, S. (2004). *Consuming Kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: The New Press.

¹⁶Levin, D. (2004). Toying with Children's Health: How the Business of Play Harms Children. *Third Consuming Kids Summit*. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/articles/3rds Summit/levin.htm>.

¹⁷Unpublished data from two Child Development Supplements to the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics, courtesy S, Hofferth (2007).