



# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out-of-School Learning

## Toys

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Any item that can be used for play may be considered a toy, including formal toys that are manufactured such as dolls or blocks, as well as everyday items that children transform into informal toys, such as a cardboard box used as a dollhouse. Even a child's fingers can be a toy when he or she silently uses them to represent his or her family members. More recently, the screens of televisions, smartphones, and tablets are functioning as toys for children. The common thread across all of these toy types is their function. From encouraging physical activity (e.g., balls or hula hoops) to fostering social interactions (e.g., when children play with a shared toy), to serving as representations of other objects (e.g., as when a child uses a banana to represent a phone), to allowing for creative expression (e.g., when children build a city from blocks), toys serve a crucial function in supporting play in contexts outside school.

From as early as the Neolithic period, there is evidence that children played with dolls and rattles and that these were staples in children's daily lives. The majority of children had only a few formal toys before the mid-19th century, but the mass production of toys during the Industrial Revolution dramatically increased the number of toys in the average home. With rapidly decreasing prices and the increased prevalence of electronic toys, we are in the midst of another revolution in toy design and use. This entry first looks at the function of toys and types of toy play. It then describes the effects of play on different areas of children's development and reviews research on the classification of toys by gender.

## Function and Types of Toy Play

At their core, toys are important because they play a critical role in supporting and encouraging play. The importance of play cannot be overstated. Preeminent psychologist Jean Piaget argued that the stages of children's play align with other developmental milestones. Similarly, for psychologist Lev Vygotsky, play is a key mechanism for cognitive development: Children learn and develop in the context of play. For both children and adults, play offers physical, social, and cognitive benefits and integrates all three areas of development.

Toys encourage three subtypes of play: (1) pretend play, (2) object play, and (3) physical play. The operative word for defining pretend play is *imagining*. Children disassemble reality implicitly asking "what if?" For example, a group of children may enact a detailed storyline using figurines and vehicles as if they were real. Playing with toys in this way, by creating make-believe, dramatic scenarios, fuels children's imagination and creativity and invites them to alter the rules of reality.

Object play refers to the use of toys as well as everyday materials (e.g., logs, rocks) and objects (e.g., silverware, broom) during play. Young children often approach toys and everyday objects as symbolic representations of other items. For example, a stick morphs into a knight's sword. Although object play may involve instances of make-believe, this type of play entails handling, exploring, and focusing on an object and its features as opposed to using the object only as a story prop, as in dramatic play.

Toys also play a prominent role in physical play. Physical play often requires props (e.g., baseball, basketball). All physical play involves moderate to vigorous physical activity—and fosters interactions where children talk to one another and build cooperation and collaboration.

## Effect of Toys on Development

Through pretend play, object play, and physical play, children's interactions with toys influence their later academic and social outcomes.

### Mathematics and Spatial Skills

Object play with marbles, puzzles, or blocks encourages children's exploration of mathematical and spatial concepts. Free play, such as when children spontaneously count toys or add quantities of objects, supports children's mathematical thinking. If children play games that require counting (as in *Chutes and Ladders*), they can improve their mathematics skills as they play as well as learn from peers. Block play appears to lead to enhanced spatial abilities as well as improved language development; playing with blocks encourages parents to use specific spatial words, such as *over* or *beside*. Jamie Jirout and Nora Newcombe found that in addition to block play, puzzle play might also improve children's spatial skills.

### Language Development

Especially for young children, toys provide an opportunity for parents to support language development. Parents can comment on children's interactions with a toy during object play as well as respond to children's requests for attention. For instance, a child might ask for help in fitting the barn piece in a farm puzzle, and this allows the parent to reinforce the meaning of *barn* and other farm-related words. This type of early parent-child joint engagement is critical for children's later language development. Catherine Tamis-LeMonda and colleagues found that when mothers of 9-month-old infants responded to children's requests for attention, it resulted in children's early attempts at imitating their mother's words. By 13 months of age, mothers' responsiveness to children's attentional bids during toy play was related to the milestone of children's first 50 words.

A growing body of research demonstrates that electronic and traditional toys support differing amounts and types of parent and child language. For example, Anna Sosa found that, for infants, play with electronic toys resulted in less parental talk (as well as parent talk of a poorer quality featuring fewer conversational turns and content-specific vocabulary) than books and traditional toys. Similarly, Jennifer Zosh and colleagues studied electronic and traditional shape sorters with preschool-age children and discovered that traditional toys elicited more parental spatial talk and more varied language than electronic shape toys. These studies demonstrate that some toys are more successful than others in supporting critical parent-child verbal interaction. Extra effort will be required to ensure that electronic toys provide the same type of enriching experience as their traditional counterparts.

### Socioemotional Skills

According to Vygotsky, children learn how to negotiate the feelings of others through engaging in pretend play, both with and without toys. It follows then that such play may enhance children's theory of mind, or the recognition that people have their own unique thoughts that influence their behavior. Research by Lise Youngblade and Judy Dunn suggests that children's participation in pretend play may relate to later theory of mind. When children play with figurines, dolls, or other objects, they learn how to manage and process their emotions. For example, two children playing with figurines must negotiate who gets to lead in certain interactions and who gets to play various household roles. However, Angeline Lillard and colleagues caution that the research in the area of pretend play—including studies

involving toys—is still far from conclusive.

### Executive Function

*Executive function* is an umbrella term that includes self-regulation abilities such as impulse control and the ability to shift attention between tasks. One particular area of concern is that—along with evoking less parental talk—electronic toys may be less effective than traditional toys for promoting these self-regulation abilities. Several studies, including one by Michaela Wooldridge and Jennifer Shapka, found that during object play with electronic toys mothers talked less with children and were less responsive. Instead, the mothers let the toy do the majority of the work to support the interaction. Given the finding that responsive interactions with parents relate to children's executive function skills, it is crucial to examine the potential implications of different kinds of toy use on both children and parent-child interactions.

### Creativity

When toys encourage exploration and discovery, they foster creativity—or the ability to generate new ideas or make new things. Building with blocks allows children to create and explore a variety of structures, while playing instruments such as the xylophone gives children the opportunity to express themselves in new ways. Jeffrey Trawick-Smith and colleagues' TIMPANI Study—Toys That Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture the Imagination—demonstrated that simple, open-ended toys, such as blocks and construction toys, are most effective for fostering creative expression during object play since children can use them in many ways.

### Physical Health

Toy play also has benefits for children's physical health. Physical play, in particular, helps staunch obesity and other health risks. During physical play, children practice motor skills and help compensate for the effects of being sedentary. Toys that encourage physical play include sports equipment—such as balls and racquets—as well as ride-on vehicles and push and pull toys. During team sports, children also get experience with cooperation and negotiating peer interactions.

### Toys and Gender

A major point of contention regarding toys is the role of gender-based labeling and marketing. In 2015, Target removed gender labeling from its toy aisles, prompting a media firestorm and shining a new light on the effects of gender-based labels on toys. Research suggests that applying gender-based attributions to toys matters. From toddlerhood or even earlier, children show a preference for toys that are typed for their own gender. Toys are often labeled as toys for boys or toys for girls, designed in gender-specific colors such as blue or pink or featuring specific elements that are directed at a specific gender (e.g., vehicles for boys, dolls for girls). In fact, Erica Weisgram and colleagues found that preschool-age children preferred new toys when their labels aligned with the children's own gender; boys were more interested in a pink monster truck when it was labeled "for boys." In recent years, GoldieBlox, which are designed to inspire girls' interest in engineering, and similar toys have come onto the market. However, critics claim that by designating building sets as "girl toys," these toys actually reinforce gender stereotypes.

Judith Blakemore and Renee Centers described the different characteristics attributed to toys

that adults were told were either “boy” or “girl” toys. They found that boy toys were more likely to be rated as violent and adventuresome, while girl toys were linked to attractiveness and domesticity. Interestingly, educational toys were more likely to be typed as boy toys. This suggests that gender-based perceptions of toys are deeply ingrained and have significant impacts on how adults view different toys as being appropriate for children’s play.

## Conclusion

Toys have been a constant presence in children’s lives for centuries. Just as a hammer and screwdriver are tools for building and fixing, toys are tools for encouraging different kinds of play. However, they are neither necessary nor sufficient for spurring development, but the play that they encourage might be critical for development. Toys can stimulate parent–child interaction and conversations and play between peers and can support learning in specific content areas, such as mathematics and spatial skills. As the Industrial Revolution changed the course of toy development, so has today’s Digital Revolution with the introduction of electronic toys. While toys may morph into different forms, one thing is almost certainly assured: Toys will always play a role in facilitating children’s play.

**See also** [Active Learning](#); [Digital Media and Learning](#); [Home Environments](#); [Playful Learning](#); [Sociodramatic Play](#)

- toys
- children
- pretending
- parent-child interaction
- play areas
- language development
- theory of mind

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## Further Readings

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