



# Nurturing the Playful Mind

*by Peter Emmenegger*

In a world full of battery-operated, loud, media-branded, one-dimensional, plastic toys with no imagination, toys that are well-made, simple, natural and conducive to independent, unstructured play are critical to stimulating children, accelerating their development and enhancing their well-being.

**Children** learn about themselves and their world through their play with toys. It is through toys that children acquire personal and social skills, attitudes and values. And yet, for the last century we have been endorsing large quantities of mass-produced, low quality, automated, plastic, inexpensive toys. It is of no surprise that an increasing number of parents are seeking natural toys – toys that convey warmth of wood, texture of natural fabrics such as cotton or wool, and solidity of metal...natural toys that our grandparents could relate to.

## The Importance Of Natural Play

Remember sitting on the grass watching ants scurry about, rounding up friends for a pick-up game of kickball, curling up with a book, collecting and trading marbles and stamps, testing out a new paper airplane design?

To adults, it may seem that these activities were not particularly important. But child development specialists say they were crucial in cultivating your creativity and imagination, as well as in expanding your intellectual, emotional and social skills.

In other words, unstructured child's play – the kind with no rules, few gizmos and little or no adult direction – packs a powerful developmental wallop.

And yet, too many parents don't understand the importance of play in children's development. Otherwise:

Instead of pumping their legs to send a swing soaring toward the sky, millions of children would not spend afternoons sitting passively in front of a screen watching TV or playing a video or computer game created by someone else.

Instead of using their imaginations to build something from a set of wooden blocks, children would not be pushing buttons to activate an electronic toy programmed by an adult.

Instead of kicking around a ball just for fun, young children – some only two years old – would not be signed up for weekly lessons in soccer, tennis and other sports. Parents need to remember that their role is not one of camp director.

Due to our society's increased emphasis on academics, many families are much too focused on trying to teach children concrete memory-based concepts. Learning the multiplication tables and the alphabet are very important. But memorizing does not teach you to think. Those skills need to reside inside a mind that has been expanded by the imaginative and joyous exploration of our environment.

For young children, developing imagination is an important way to gain knowledge. In our adult lives, we rely on our ability to create stories we tell ourselves about possible futures and ways of attaining our goals. Children need to get an early start with storytelling and men-

tally manipulating various situations.

Through play, children express the world inside themselves and order the world outside. Children's minds are amazing when at work, especially those minds that do not know the "right way to play." Those children find paths to discovery and understanding, marching to the beat of their own drummers. And along the way, they open the door to independence, self-confidence and unlimited potential.

Open-ended play encourages this highly individual experience and is fueled by imagination. Toys that leave room for a child's input and creative imagination are the ones that they return to over and over again – they are toys that are captivating, enduring.

In fact, recent research shows children who are encouraged in imaginative play prove to be more creative a few years later, have a richer vocabulary, are less impulsive and aggressive and often become leaders with their playmates.

## Too Many Toys

Many of today's children do not value their toys because they have so

many of them. They go from toy to toy without spending time on any one of them. They look to toys for amusement and distraction, not imaginative inspiration. Many parents do not realize this but, when it comes to toys, less is more.

Having too many toys, children find it difficult to become attached to them. In many families, toys are given all year round – purchased in supermarkets, pharmacies, zoos, museums – so that toys are no longer as special as they once were. A child who is given a toy at Christmas and who knows that another one is not coming until the next birthday will invest emotionally in that toy.

Many parents purchase toys that do not relate to one another. Upon receipt of a new toy, the old one is forgotten and left in a corner. Why not look for continuity where the new toy supplements the old one and rejuvenates its use? In my own experience, as a father of two girls, I can recall a situation where one doll had not been played with for quite a while. As a birthday present, the doll received a set of clothes. All of a sudden, the doll itself seemed to have become important again. Why not look for toys that one can add to and supplement as time goes on?

*"Play is a basic human drive. It is simply a shorthand for imagination, curiosity and fantasy – our creative dispositions."*

David Elkind



*“Play, from toddler toys to adult gaming, has become such a serious activity that the idea of free play – play for the pure fun of it – has gone the way of stickball and paper dolls. In an honest attempt to make our kids smarter, faster, earlier, parents, educators, toy manufacturers and legislators are unwittingly squeezing the fun out of childhood. Our kids are becoming like the virtual pets they carry in their pockets: predictably responding to preset stimuli. Independent, creative thinking has no place in their time-pressed, goal-oriented world. We believe that free play is a critical component in raising open-minded thinkers.”*

Parents' Choice Foundation



Toys that compliment one another? Toys that have varied uses? Toys that can be used over and over? Building blocks that become a castle one day, a farmhouse the next?

Ironically, we are surrounded by an overwhelming abundance of toys and yet fewer and fewer encourage fantasy and imagination. Who is to blame? It seems that childhood has become commercialized as children are viewed as a niche market. Toy manufacturers spend millions each year on advertising, targeting children directly and encouraging them to pester their parents to buy what they see promoted. Advertisers create a need and parents give in to ensure that their children do not feel different or left out. Unfortunately, using toys to promote social acceptance and positive self-esteem encourages conformity.

How can we overcome this dilemma? For one, stand firm and try not to give in. David Elkind, author and professor of child development, tells the following story: “I recall pestering my mother to buy a certain cereal so I could collect the box tops. But my mother did not buy us that cereal. I kept pestering her and complaining about not having what my friends had. Finally, exasperated with my nagging and having housework and other children to deal with, my mother

said firmly and conclusively, ‘Who cares what you want?’ My mother cared about what we *needed* but didn’t worry about what we *wanted*.”

How can we stop our children from becoming targets of consumerism at an early age? Select toys according to their play merit – natural, imaginative, open-ended, etc. – instead of their brand names.

## Natural Materials

Young children are heavily oriented to the senses. They take comfort and pleasure in the feel of wood, cotton, wool and metal. Plastic toys do not give children the rich sensory experience afforded by natural materials. They lack the comfort and warmth. If children are first exposed to toys made of natural materials, they will have a healthy standard by which to judge synthetics.

Why not let our children experience wooden animals or blocks and cotton and wool dolls or puppets? When machine made toys are in such abundance, hand-crafted toys take on a new value and significance. They reunite us with the real world.

They also teach us environmental responsibility. Unfortunately, most high-tech or plastic toys are not fixable. We

used to be able to prop the toy open, replace a spring or elastic or glue it back together. Voila, the toy was as good as new. Today, we endure toys that have a short lifespan and cannot be fixed; buying a new toy is cheaper than fixing the old one, so we simply toss it away. If we are to help children learn the meaning of sustainability, this must change.

There are a few European toy manufacturers that have been in existence for almost 100 years and still continue to make toys by hand, from natural materials such as mohair and sheep wool, and repair them upon demand. Let us hope they continue this tradition far into the future for our great grandchildren to enjoy.

## Effects of Electronic Toys

Toys containing embedded computer chips have also affected what children learn from toy play. And their numbers are increasing at an astonishing rate. Industry analysts estimate that at least 75 percent of toys introduced this year will have a mini-chip.

Children today are regarded as more sophisticated than children of earlier generations. And toy makers are coming out with high-tech toys that parents can afford. This appropriation and transformation of adult objects into child playthings is nothing new. For example, toy balloons were given to children when French aristocrats, celebrating the first hot air balloon's climb, grew tired of them. Boys have always created their own versions of the tools and weapons used by the men in their society. In colonial times, toys included a looking glass, a spying glass, a drum, a doll and a watch.

Even though there is nothing new about children taking over adult playthings, the high level of technology that is incorporated into child-friendly electronic gadgets is new. The complexity of the technology changes the child's intellectual engagement with these toys. Natural toys are easy to understand; electronic toys, in contrast, work as if by magic and cannot be understood.

We are living in a high-tech world and children must learn to use technology. But there is a time for everything. Children's curiosity should still be en-

couraged and supported through the provision of toys that can satisfy their questions about how things work.

And our children should not be removed from the natural world as a consequence of our increasingly technological, automated society.

## Educational toys

Our work ethic makes us regard play as a waste of time. This attitude has been reinforced by contemporary changes in society. Educational toys are narrowly conceived and designed to teach academic skills. Most contemporary educational toys are created for preschool children, fueled by a widespread belief that education is a race and the earlier you start the better. The fastest-growing software and CDs for children are for infants from six months to two years. This is an indication of how toys have become part of the consumer culture. Parents are encouraged to buy such toys to give their children an educational edge. And there is a subtle message that parents who do not buy these educational toys for their children are really not doing a good job as parents. Whether or not they do the job they set out to do, I find it troubling that they are designed and marketed more for their appeal to parents than for what is really in the best interests of the child.

## Benefits of Doll Play

Some of the toys and games that children enjoy today continue their function of socializing children into the adult world. Like it or not, this socialization is organized along sexist lines. Miniature cars, boats and airplanes are marketed for boys. Dolls, dollhouses and child-sized household appliances are marketed to girls. Fortunately, some traditional unisex games

*Since the late 1970s, children have lost 12 hours per week in free time, including a 25 percent drop in play and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities. Meanwhile, time in structured sports has doubled.*

Survey Research Center,  
University of Michigan





such as checkers, chess and card games, are still with us.

Why not supply boys with boy dolls, dollhouses that can also be converted to farmhouses or fire stations? Can young girls not enjoy boats and trains rather than pink castles and princesses? Can we not find a healthy balance?

Have you ever marveled at how your little girl seems instinctively to cradle her baby doll? Or how even your most rough-and-tumble toddler son switches into his “soft” voice when speaking to his favorite stuffed animal? This amazing capacity for nurturing, which even very young children demonstrate, is brought out during doll play.

Doll play is important in helping children to explore how to grow up and take on the role of the future adult. But by encouraging this capacity in young children, we help develop the ability to give selflessly and to care for others, as children and when they grow into adulthood. We can hope that more and more boys can take advantage of such pretending games.

Dolls have been a part of human imagination since the beginning of civilization but the doll we know today first debuted in 14th century Germany. Perhaps one of the reasons doll play has resonated throughout the ages is that it fosters a great deal of imaginative make-believe play.

Doll play also allows children to deal with their emotions in a safe context. Scolding their baby doll or stuffed animal lets children work out their feelings without involving another child.

## Go Out and Play

Some families believe they can help boost their children’s brainpower with the latest electronic toys or by enrolling them in sport and after-school clubs. But what children really need is more free time to develop their own ways of playing by making up their own games. Regimented play activities can have negative consequences on the social and emotional development of a child because they take away a child’s initiative and freedom of choice. In contrast, freeform play encourages the creative and multi-sensory development of a child because it has no structure.

Games with rules, where the outcome motivates the participation, train a child’s thought patterns, leaving less time for their imagination or creative thought process to establish itself and mature. Pre-programmed electronic toys monopolize the brain and negatively impact children’s creativity when they demand response to a scenario constructed by someone else.

So let’s encourage our children to go out and play, rather than sitting glued to the TV or computer game. Their health, social and intellectual development will benefit.

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## Encouraging Natural Play

- **Limit or eliminate screen time:** Give your children a chance to flex their own imaginative muscles. They may be bored at first. Be prepared with simple playthings and suggestions for make-believe play to inspire their inner creativity.

- **Curtail time spent in adult-organized activities:** Children need time for self-initiated play. Over-scheduled lives leave little time for play.

- **Choose simple toys:** A good toy is 10 percent toy and 90 percent child. The child’s imagination is the engine of healthy play. Simple toys and natural materials, like wood, boxes, balls, dolls, sand and clay invite children to create their own scenes – and then knock them down and start over. Avoid passive toys that require limited imagination.

- **Encourage outdoor adventures:** Reserve time for outdoor play where children can run, climb, find secret hiding places and dream up dramas. Natural materials – sticks, mud, water, rocks – are the raw materials of play. Playing outside helps your child sleep better at night and helps battle the obesity epidemic.

- **Bring back the art of real work:** Believe it or not, adult activity – cooking, raking, cleaning, washing the car – actually inspires children to play. Children like to help for short periods and then engage in their own play.

- **Spend time watching your child play:** This can show children that adults value their play. Fight the urge to control; allow your child to make the decisions, control the flow of the play and assign the roles. Only participate if invited.

## Learn More

*The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally* by David Elkind (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2008)

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv (Algonquin Books, 2005)

Children & Nature Network  
[www.cnaturenet.org](http://www.cnaturenet.org)

Parents’ Choice  
[www.parents-choice.org](http://www.parents-choice.org)

# Contributors



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“Breastfeeding Sisters” Page 18

is an Australian-born, Canadian-based wearer of many hats, including being a mother to a busy two-year-old daughter and a writer inspired by the multitude of experiences life has brought her way.



## Beth Leianne Curtis

“Believe in Birth” Page 15

owns Believe In Birth, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is a Home Birth Midwife completing her Certified Professional Midwife credential, as well as a Certified Childbirth Educator and Certified Birth Doula. She welcomes your emails at [beth@believeinbirth.com](mailto:beth@believeinbirth.com). She is shown here with first born “natural child” Isaiah, who started her on this whole journey. Beth is a regular contributor to Life Media’s other two magazines *Natural Life* and *Life Learning*.



## Peter Emmenegger

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is the father of two young children. He owns an e-store [www.inquisitivekid.ca](http://www.inquisitivekid.ca), which carries natural toys and furniture. He believes that toys that are pure in form and color foster imagination and instill independence and a desire to accomplish, and that we can make the world a better place, one child at a time, by giving kids what they really need.



## Rebecca Holman

“Sleep” Page 6

is the mother of two small boys, Thomas and Daniel. She was born and grew up in the U.K. and has a degree in mathematics and statistics. Her PhD examined whether a mathematical model developed in psychological and educational testing was useful in the clinical measurement of disabilities. She became interested in infant sleep after hearing a lactation consultant say that sleeping through the night was a matter of neurological development, not training. She has come to believe that the way breastfed children and their mothers sleep should be considered normal, and that mothers should not be pressured into “sleep training.”



## Kalpna Solanki

“Pain is Not Normal” Page 22

has a four-year-old daughter who was exclusively breastfed for six months. When she became a mother, Kalpna used her environmental and public health background and her dedication to organics to create age-appropriate, frozen, kosher, organic, free of the top nine allergens, delicious meals for her daughter. She then put her MBA to work and created BOBOBABY, an award-winning B.C. company that manufactures frozen organic baby food and markets it across Canada and the U.S.

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