



# Toys, Play, and Playrooms

## Creating and Maintaining a Healthy Play Environment for Your Young Child

BY PEGGY ALESSANDRI WITH RONALD KOETZSCH

**R**udolf Steiner said, "Play is the work of the small child." While in today's educational world, academic work is being inserted earlier and earlier into the lives of children, educators at the same time are learning that play is essential to the healthy physical and mental development of children. [Please see the accompanying sidebar about the new policy of the American Association for Pediatrics regarding play. Ed.]



In Waldorf kindergartens and lower grade classes, much attention is devoted to creating a healthy play environment for the children. But children play also at home, and what we as parents do there can greatly help them have positive play experiences.

Young children should have a special playroom or designated area of the living room or family room that is for their use. Ideally, there should be a safe and quiet outside play area, as well.

### What Kinds of Toys?

There are several main types of play materials and toys that should be in the play environment. "Toys" include not just manufactured and purchased objects but also items and materials that children use in their play. These include:

- Toys that inspire free play and creativity, including building blocks, pieces of silk and other cloth, old clothing for costumes and dress-up, beads, and also crayons, paper, clay, and beeswax
- Toys for quieter moments, such as dolls, stuffed animals, puzzles, a simple game that can be played by parent and child, storybooks to be read together
- Toys for “work.” Small children love to imitate what adults do. So child-size versions of the tools and objects you use around the house and yard are important: brooms, mops, waterbuckets, rakes, shovels, dusters, spray bottles, a toy telephone, play scissors
- Toys that encourage varied larger body movements, such as a wagon, wheelbarrow, or ride-on tractor; crates and boxes for building and for climbing on, sheets and blankets for building a house, play stands, large balls, swings, jump ropes
  - Toys for the experience of nature, such as a sandbox, a little garden, a wading pool, a pile of dirt with shovels and buckets, a wind chime, kites



When parents choose toys, quality not quantity should be their guide. A single well-made toy that will last a long time, perhaps into another generation, is worth a host of cheap playthings. For example, one sturdy dump truck made from natural, unpainted hardwood is better than a fleet of plastic cars that will lose their wheels in a short time.

When parents go toy shopping, good questions to ask are:

- **Is the toy beautiful?** When I look at it, what feelings and mental images rise up within me? This will give a sense of how the toy will affect the child.
- **Does the toy feel good to hold and to touch?** Here, typically, toys made from natural materials—such as wood or natural fibers—will be more satisfying than those made from plastic, particle board, and other synthetic materials.
- **How finished and detailed is this toy?** Toys that leave something to the imagination—a doll with minimal facial features or a simple block-shaped car or truck—nurture the child’s own creativity and image-forming ability.
- **Does the toy smell?** A toy with a plastic or perfumed smell should be avoided. Our modern environment overstimulates all the senses, including the sense of smell.



## Maintaining Order

The playroom or play area should be clean, organized, and beautiful. Children derive—as adults do—a sense of security, peace, and well-being from a well-organized environment. Each toy should have its place to “live” when not in use. Smaller items can be arranged on shelves or in a bookcase or in drawers where they are easily accessible. Dollies should have beds or baskets in which to sleep. Stuffed animals also should have their proper place—on the back of the sofa or in a quiet corner with their own pillows. Helping to maintain order in the playroom gives children practice in caring for and respecting things in their immediate environment. Naked dollies left strewn on the floor after play, stuffed animals crammed into a basket, or a “toy basket” full of random items do not help the child develop a sense of order and organization.



Of course, for many younger children, boxes and baskets, drawers and bags are targets for dumping, and shelves and cupboards invite emptying. But when the children are done exploring and playing, we as parents can help them put things back where they belong and restore order. The older the child, the more he can help.

Children don’t need a huge number of toys. While it is important that they have items of the various types noted above, two or three from each category may be enough. Children, like adults, can be overwhelmed by an excess of choices in a complicated environment.

Toy collections have a tendency to grow, and hence it is necessary periodically to examine and cull what a child has. If it takes more than ten minutes to clean up the playroom or play area, it means that there are too many toys. This is the time for a good “toy purge” or cleaning out.

One evening after your child has gone to bed, get some large grocery-size shopping bags and label them “Trash,” “Charity,” “Keepsake,” and “Rainy Day.” Then go through everything. Begin with larger items—dealing with them first gives one a sense of accomplishment early on. Later, you can go through those baskets of little things.

**Trash:** These are toys that are broken or are missing enough pieces that they are not usable; worthless items such as the “Happy Meal” gifts; and all the other trinkets that your child doesn’t play with and probably has forgotten about entirely. Be ruthless! You will be amazed at the amount of stuff that goes into this bag. You may need a couple of bags!

**Charity:** Children lose interest in toys or simply outgrow them. Or they may just have an oversupply of cars, action figures, or stuffed animals. Culling and giving away toys may actually help children in their play. One or two dolls will more likely inspire a child to play than a whole basketful. In any case, charity organizations and thrift stores are happy to take these items and pass them on to other children.

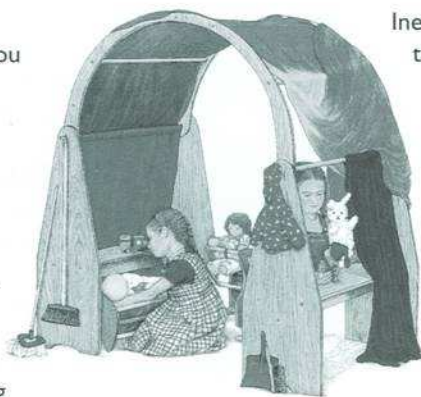
**Rainy Day Toys:** These are toys that can drive you crazy if they are used every day, but are fine for occasional use. That expensive fire truck with its sirens and whistles, that pair of rather loud cymbals, the complicated toy with so many parts that it confounds you, or a too-simple game just for two persons all fall into this category. These are best stored out of sight until they are needed.

**Keepsake Toys:** These are toys that the child has outgrown or lost interest in but that have a strong meaning for you and may also have meaning for the child in later years. These are typically items of high quality and/or sentimental value—the child's first wooden rattle, the music box received at baptism, the game that you played during the cross-country trip. These should be stored in a safe place.

### Dealing with Gift Toys

Parents who are particular about the toys they want for their children often have to deal with family members and friends who have other or, perhaps, no standards about toys. This can be a problem. You might prefer a toy that is simple, made from natural materials, and that engages the imagination of your child. Grandma and Grandpa, however, might want to show their love by buying the largest, bells-and-whistles-rich, electronic plaything out on the market. What should you do?

You can be preemptive. As gift-giving time approaches, send out a list of specific suggestions, saying that both you and your child would really love to have, for example, a play stove or other kitchen items, or something toward a Brio wooden train set, or outdoor equipment—a swing set, ride-on toy, or balls. People are often happy to get a wish list; it makes gift shopping easier.



Inevitably, less-than-ideal toys will slip through your defense lines. Uncle Joe will insist on buying something that he is sure will delight your child but that makes you cringe in horror. Relax. It's really okay for a few outrageous toys to be part of a child's life for a time. At first, the child may play a lot with the new and unusual item. But the interest will probably soon wane. Typically, a young child

plays with many different toys in succession, so the offending item will be the object of attention only for a few minutes in the course of the day. It's unlikely to harm a child's development irreparably.

After a time, a particularly obnoxious toy can go "live" at the home of the giver, to be used during visits. That way, Grandma can enjoy that birthday gift she bought for Jimmy—the fluorescent-green, plastic tugboat with the foghorn so loud it rattles the fillings in your teeth. And sometimes a toy just has to disappear. One day it seems to have gotten lost or run away, or it has gone to sleep until we are older.

Providing our children with a healthy play environment is one of the most important things we as parents can do. It is worth the attention, time, and money we devote to it.

## The American Academy of Pediatrics Supports Play for the Young Child

In October 2006, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the official association of medical doctors specializing in children's health, issued a report on the subject of play. The report stresses the importance for children of unstructured, imaginative play. Also it decries, as a threat to health, the dominating role television and computers play in the lives of today's children.

The report, whose lead writer is Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, a pediatrician at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, draws on a number of research studies. It concludes that spontaneous, free play—such as playing with dolls or chasing butterflies in a garden—helps children develop imagination, problem-solving capacities, and self-direction. In addition, it keeps them physically active and fit. In contrast, watching television and using computers can, for children (as for parents), lead to stress, obesity, and depression.

The report also counsels parents not to feel pressure to be "superparents," preparing their children for success in the much-later college admissions process. Such parental anxiety can lead to overscheduling and overemphasis on achievement in academics, sports, and other activities.

PEGGY ALESSANDRI *has been a kindergarten teacher in California for the past thirty-five years, working at both the Sacramento Waldorf School and the Camellia Waldorf School. For the past eight years, she has also been involved in the education of kindergarten teachers in the Early Childhood Program at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California. Peggy was born and raised in the Bay Area and has four grown children and five grandchildren.*

CREDIT: *Illustrations courtesy of Magic Cabin, Inc. Their on-line store can be seen at [www.magiccabin.com](http://www.magiccabin.com)*