

# How Toys Teach

Former FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson once said, "All television is educational television. The question is what is it teaching?"



The same could be said about toys. All toys teach. Every single one of them. Without exception. The question is what are they teaching

## Important Life Skills

The Great Toys teach important life skills such as Communication, Cooperation, Problem Solving, Planning & Strategy, Logical Thinking, and Cause & Effect.

Don't believe it? Let's take an easy example – Dolls.

When your daughter plays with a doll, what does she do? She talks to the doll and gives the doll a voice with which to reply (*communication*). She invites other friends & their dolls to play with her (*communication & cooperation*). She sets up tea parties, setting tables, figuring out who sits where and what the schedule of events will be (*planning & strategy*). She plays out scenes where her doll is sick and needs her help (*problem solving*). She mimics roles of responsibility by being "responsible" for her baby and has to think through her actions and how they affect her doll (*logical thinking*). If she has a doll that cries she's also learning *cause & effect*.



Dolls are just one example of what we call **Role Play Toys** that includes action figures, wooden trains, kitchens, dress-up clothes, puppets, and themed playsets like Imaginext & Playmobil.

Along with encouraging children to use their *imagination*, **Role Play Toys** are great teachers of Communication, Cooperation, and Planning & Strategy - skills we use in our everyday lives.

Here's another example – Lego.

When your child opens his first Lego set he immediately builds the model that the set is designed to make (*following directions = logical thinking*). If he screws up along the way he has to figure out how to get back on track (*problem solving*). Eventually he decides to build something new with the pieces he has (*planning & strategy*), making changes along the way (*problem solving again*). When he is done, he often has a model that moves or has other actions (*cause & effect*), or a Role Play Toy that incorporates all the skills discussed previously.



Lego is just one of the many **Construction Toys** on the market including K'Nex, Erector Sets, Gears, Marble Mazes, Lincoln Logs, Tinker Toys, Wooden Blocks and Magnets.

Along with encouraging children to use their *imagination*, **Construction Toys** are great teachers of Planning & Strategy, Problem Solving, Logical Thinking, Math Skills, and Cause & Effect.



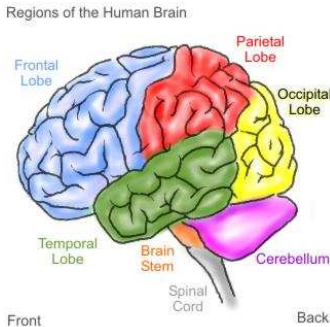
Is it any wonder that seven of **Phil's Top Ten Toys** are either Role Play Toys or Construction Toys? (Wooden Blocks, Dolls, Puppets, Dress-up Clothes, Lego, Playmobil, and Wooden Trains.)

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Toys teach important life skills such as Communication, Cooperation, Problem Solving, Planning & Strategy, Logical Thinking, and Cause & Effect.

## Expanding the Brain

The Great Toys – toys that are *Open-Ended*, *Interactive* and *Creative* – not only keep our children entertained, but also challenge them to think, to use their brains, and explore their imaginations. Previously, you saw the examples of Dolls (Role Play Toys) and Lego (Construction Toys) showing how these skills are taught through simple play.



But teaching through toys goes much deeper than that.

Parents need to be involved in their children's play at some level. Parental involvement helps you steer the direction of play, helps you understand your child's abilities, and helps you reinforce the learning you hope to achieve.

But toys are also a means by which we occupy our children so that we can accomplish our own tasks. "Go play with your toys," is a common phrase in many households.

## Hidden Lessons

But when children run off with their Role Play Toys like Rescue Heroes, Hot Wheels, or Playmobil or Construction Toys like Lego or K'Nex, there are "hidden lessons" they are learning, too.

Let's take Rescue Heroes for example. Rescue Heroes are action figures but with one little twist – they have no enemies. All other action figures from Power Rangers to Superman to GI Joe have enemies – bad guys to be defeated.



That is not saying that bad guys and enemies are no-no's. But think about the lessons taught. To be a good guy you have to "defeat" a bad guy. This can add an element of competitiveness to the play, not to mention the dangerous notion that if you're not with us, you're against us.

Rescue Heroes, on the other hand, help those who are in danger – usually from a natural calamity. The hidden lesson? It is important to help those who need help.

Which of these lessons would you like your youngster to emulate? *Defeat* those against you, or *Help* those in need?

## Barbie and Bratz

Dolls are another classic example. The two leaders in the category are Barbie and Bratz. Barbie has received a lot of criticism over the years for being too skinny, too well-endowed, or just plain too unattainable in looks. She has been accused of causing eating disorders in children who try to meet her image of beauty.



Whether you agree or disagree with the criticism, there are some hidden lessons

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for girls who idolize such dolls. At least Mattel has made Barbie more than just a fashion icon. Despite her "faults" (since when is beauty a fault?) Barbie has also been a Doctor and a Dentist, worked at McDonald's, and even been confined to a wheelchair. Beauty isn't everything to Barbie (although it still plays a major role).

On the other hand, the doll that is trying to supplant Barbie at the top is the very popular Bratz dolls. Their lesson? Fashion *and* attitude! Take the most objectionable part of Barbie and match it with a selfish, me-first, I-get-what-I-want attitude. Then market it to kids who quickly emulate that attitude by *demanding* that their parents buy these dolls.

And yet, each year Bratz dolls gain ground on Barbie dolls.

An alternative is the Groovy Girls. Although Groovy Girls do espouse fashion, they do it without the unattainable physical looks of the Barbie dolls and none of the attitude of the Bratz dolls. To customers who are looking for the Bratz dolls, ask yourself, "Would you rather your daughter grow up to be a Brat or be Groovy?"



Yes, there are "hidden lessons" in toys. As the parent, you owe it to your kids to take control of what your children are learning by looking at how toys teach, both on the surface and below.

Remember – every toy teaches. What do you want your kids to learn?

## Quality

Quality DOES matter. And the quality of the toys you buy teaches your children a very important lesson.



We live in an "everything must be cheaper, cheaper is better" world. Over 90% of the advertisements you see on TV, read in the paper, or hear on the radio talk about "low prices", "free giveaways", "special discounts" and "huge savings".

Here's a little clue for you. Those special savings you might get are not coming out of the profit of the company. It's coming out of the quality of the product.

In an effort to have the lowest possible prices, companies like Wal-Mart, Target and K-Mart are forcing manufacturers to cut more and more corners to keep their own prices down. End result? Cheaper, lower quality products.

But consumers are eating up those sales, discounts and savings encouraging the companies to continue this practice.

And so the prices drop lower and lower and the quality goes down and down and down. Eventually, everything becomes disposable. If it breaks, throw it out and buy a new one. Hey, at these prices, you can afford it.

Or can you?

## Priorities

There is an underlying lesson we are teaching our kids when price becomes





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the end-all, be-all decision maker in the items we buy – that there is no value in quality. No value in craftsmanship, no value in workmanship, no value in making products that last.



And when there is no value placed on quality *products*, how do we teach kids the value of quality *work*? How can we ask our kids to do quality schoolwork when we show by our actions that quality doesn't count? How can we expect them to put forth their best effort in the classroom when we aren't willing to pay for effort in the manufacturing world? When we accept the notion that "cheaper is better" we are saying that hard work is not necessary, that attention to detail is not important, that putting in a little more effort is not worth it. Our children learn value by watching where we put our priorities.

## Attitude

When price becomes king and cheaper is better, we also sacrifice service. Having helpful, knowledgeable people who want to take care of our needs is no longer important. It's okay to be rude and inconsiderate, just have the lowest price.

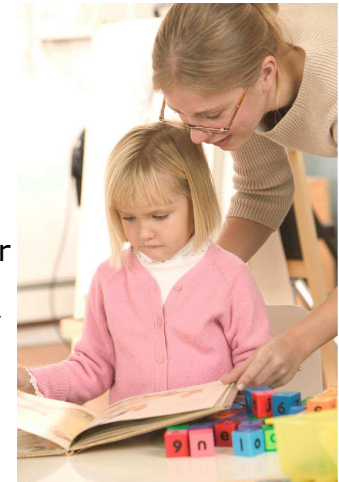
These lessons are being taught every day. Wal-Mart doesn't build hundreds of new stores each year because you want better-built products and more knowledgeable staffs. They continue to grow because consumers continue to demand lower prices (and, therefore, cheaper products).



## Value Counts.

You should get the most for your money. But, as with everything in life, there are consequences for our actions. And our actions teach our children what is important and what is not.

For children, it starts with toys. When you buy high-quality toys built to last, you teach your children that there is value in hard work and in doing things the right way. You teach your children that it is okay to expect the best. When you buy cheap toys that break easily and are replaced often you teach your children that "enough to get by" is "good enough" and that sloppy work is okay. You can just move on and do something else when what you're doing isn't good enough.



When you shop where price is king at the expense of any kind of real service, you teach that friendliness and helpfulness are not important in life. When you shop where customer service is more than a red-vested greeter at the front door, then you teach that there is value in how we treat each other, and that it is okay to ask for help.

These are real lessons, and one more proof that toys really do teach. Your kids learn from watching you. What do you want them to value?

**All toys teach, the question is... What are you learning?**