

# Psychological and educational evaluation of toys in Moscow Center of Play and Toys

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The author's approach to examination of specific characteristics and functions of play and toys is based on the Vygotskian concept. The divergence of real and imaginary situations, when a child begins to act outside the reality domain in the play, and enters the semantic one, is considered as the main feature of the play. The functions of toys are analyzed, which include, primarily and essentially, an expression of his/her own experience and mastering of the world around. The requirements for toys concerning the material they are made of and the ways in which they can be used are formulated. The trends of the modern toy market development are shown and the relevance of their psychological and educational assessment is outlined. The criteria for psychological assessment of toys used in the Moscow City Center at MSUPE are described. At first the ethical and aesthetic filter is applied, which does not admit for further evaluation the toys that are dangerous in terms of psychological impact on the child. Toys that passed through the first step are analyzed according to the following criteria: attractiveness of a toy for a child that sets the motivational grounds for the play; openness of the landmarks, that provide for the developing potential of the play act; operational features of a toy that promote independence of the child act. Toys that satisfy the examination criteria receive a sign "Child psychologists recommend".

**Keywords:** play, toy, psychological requirements for toys, figurative toys, landmarks of the play act, toy openness, psychological and pedagogical expertise.

The main characteristic of play means according to L. S. Vygotsky is the discrepancy between the real and the imagined situation is the main characteristic of play. In role play or symbolic play a child creates imaginary space – with the help of toys or without them [1]. Objects are

given new names and functions that are not usually associated with them, with the playing child proceeding "from thought rather than from the object" in a thought-up, imagined situation instead of the real one. For preschoolers (between the ages of 3 and 6) this type of play is an impor-

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tant activity, which ensures effective psychological development of the child as a personality [5].

### Functions performed by toys in child play

Anything with which children play, is usually called a toy – from rattle to blocks. All these things are, beyond doubt, useful and make their contribution to child development. However, if we consider toys as a means of playing in the strict sense of the term, that is, of acting in imagined space, the range of objects covered by this term is far narrower. For instance, when the child shakes a rattle, builds something of blocks or plays with a stacker, his external and internal activity has the same direction. The child imagines nothing outside the limits of his main activity. Consequently, there is no discrepancy between the real and the imagined sphere. To my mind, strictly speaking a toy is an object that enables the child to go beyond the existing situation, to “become” somebody else and to act on behalf of the latter by taking on a new image. Primarily, they are imaginative toys, to which characteristics of living beings can be attributed, which are capable of becoming animate and to which children can impart their experience and feelings. Other playthings, such as toy utensils, clothes, furniture and so on, merely serve to realize the wishes and meanings of the “live” personage.

In a developed role-game roles can be assumed without any special material support or else with the use of insignificant attributes (markers or role signs). However, at the initial stages of play-acting development and in cases of inadequate development material support is indispensable as an objective carrier of a new image (imaginative toys). Toy images of human beings are really essential. When playing with a doll, the child identifies himself with it and thus enters the world of human beings [3]. He reflects his experience, especially what is bothering him, and enacts people he knows or fairy-tale characters in play. Two crucial processes centering on the doll take place simultaneously.

On the one side, the child **expresses him/herself** – his (her) knowledge, emotions and events of life and enacts imaginary items. He (she) speaks for the doll, asks questions and gives answers for it, re-enacts past experience

and, in a word, externalizes his experience and his own self. The child attributes his/her own words, thoughts and feelings to the doll, to its essence, which thus becomes an outward expression of the inner world of the child and in a sort of way his/her “mouthpiece”. Such self-expression can be regarded as a form of spontaneous play reflection, through which the child begins to understand himself and events of his life. Children are known to enjoy reliving repeatedly momentous – happy or dramatic – events of their lives. With the help of toys they enact different characters and speak for them. All that, beyond doubt, enables them to place themselves outside a significant situation and, consequently, to take an attitude to it and to comprehend it. By observing how children play one can understand their inner world and what is bothering them.

On the other side, when playing, the child **masters the world** of human relations and ideas, in which he lives. Any toy bears the impress of its time and society, in which it has been made. Toys, made for kids by adults, always reflect the views of those adults, their ideology, tastes, fashion, etc. That is why they help inculcate certain social and everyday notions in the child’s mind and acquaint children with social and family mode of life. They have a certain influence on the child’s socialization, his/her entry into a given society. It is common knowledge that every generation of children has markedly different toys (especially dolls, household utensils and vehicles). While using those toys, children, obviously, master different social models. Dolls set a human image that becomes a model for emulation in children, and it is precisely through dolls that the child gets an idea of humans and relevant ethical and aesthetic categories, such as beauty and ugliness, the good and the bad, and the good and the evil. The doll’s image has got a formative effect on little children because, as the previous observations showed, when playing with dolls children subconsciously take their images on and imitate them. They take on the doll’s appearance and start moving in a characteristic manner and behaving in a certain way in everyday life. Neither adults nor children themselves notice how they absorb the doll’s outward characteristics. Hence there exists the danger of exaggerating the doll’s characteristics, especially in little children. Aggressiveness

or complacency typical for certain toys can with time show up in children. At 7 or 8 years of age, when children already have a more or less stable idea of humans and relevant ethical and aesthetic views, they are capable of understanding and appreciating the exaggerated caricature nature of dolls, without taking on their characteristics. Preschoolers, on the contrary, are unable to distance themselves from what they are playing with, naturally get carried away by play, immerse in it, and therefore take on the nature of their toys.

For the child an imaginative toy is far more than just an object of play: it is a **communication partner**, friend and an important figure in his/her [4]. Many small children are known to have favourite toys, which they never part with: they talk to them, share their joys and thoughts with them, sleep and eat together with them, and take them along for walks or to the kindergarten. A poll conducted recently among grownups about their favourite toys has shown that toys had become engraved in their memory as communication companions. Those polled had diverse answers to the question "What did you do with your favourite toy?" ranging from took along for a walk, slept with it and talked to it, to shared my problems and joys with it, in a word, they did "everything" with them. Few said that they played with them.

People usually communicate with other people. However, preschoolers fairly often communicate with their toys, which serve as support for inner dialogue and as a life companion. In the overwhelming majority of cases dolls, teddy bears or doggies, that is, not imaginative toys become such companions. A close friend like that makes it easier for the little one to face danger or loneliness and gives a feeling of one's usefulness and independence. Such favourite soft toys have a special role to play at moments of trial when children feel lonely and are in want of help and protection. This happens, for instance, when kids have to go to bed, are ill or when they find themselves in an unfamiliar situation or else when they are adjusting to a kindergarten. Teachers and psychologists have noticed that during the early days at child care centres little children never part with their favourite toys. A special study has shown that children, who find it difficult to adjust and are obviously ill at ease, under stress and alarmed in a new situation, are especially in need

of a soft toy. Such children constantly cling to favourite teddy bears or hares, getting a feeling of being protected and safe in the physical presence of a soft toy. Children find it easier to fall asleep, eat better, willingly get dressed and in general feel more confident in the presence of a favourite toy. As soon as children gain confidence in a new situation, they no longer need to have their favourite toys around.

To sum up, an imaginative toy may become a real communication companion for little children. They fairly often communicate with their favourite toys and ask them questions, which they themselves answer. They attribute their own feelings and worries to them. "The kitty is crying because it's waiting for mommy to come and mommy is late," a little girl kept saying, stroking her favourite toy. The child seems to, transfers him/herself to the toy, which becomes his/her *alter ego*. At the same time the toy is not a mirror and the child is not immediately reflected in it.

It is the child's *alter ego* because any imaginative toy always has **its own** image. A conversation with a toy is thus a conversation of one ego with another one embodied in a material object.

A "dialogue" with a toy is an important phase of the development of inner dialogue, which will subsequently transform into inner speech, a chief means of human thought and consciousness. It is a sort of a transition stage between the social (separated between the child and the adult) and the psychological (inner) form of action, when the child shares his life and feelings with something he himself animated. An imaginative toy may become a pillar of the child's emergent inner world and a subject of his mental life. Animated by the child, the toy appeals to the child, turning its requests, observations and emotions to him, and thus enabling the preschooler to become cognizant of himself and his behaviour and to transform both himself and his behaviour. In this sense imaginative toy is, beyond doubt, a psychological tool for the child.

But the possibility to become a psychological tool depends on qualities of a toy itself.

### Qualities of a toy as a tool of play

The discussion about toy's qualities is quite important now when new generation of toys ap-

pears. A lot of new toys are not suitable for child play. Toys are increasingly becoming self-sufficient things meant to evoke surprise, admiration or curiosity instead of becoming a media.

The child gets an idea of human relationships through play activity which is conventional for this process. The more detailed is an action in practice, the more compressed and subconscious is the role relations plan. In child play the conventional or detailed nature of a practical action largely depends on whether the toy is simple or complex, realistic or not. For this reason objects used in role-game should not be actual copies of real things. They are not to monopolize the child's attention but to stick instead to the conventional designation of things. The fact that play actions are generalized and contracted (i.e., made conventional) shows that the inner game plan, that is, relations between people and their emotional experience, has become important to the child.

A good toy should primarily **be open to the different actions and emotions of the child**. Toys should make it possible for children to impart their own activity – their voices and movements – to it. To remain a media, toys should neither impose themselves nor suggest concrete actions. It is only in this way that the toy can attain the function of a psychological media in contrast to being a mere object of manipulations.

Meanwhile, the toy market develops along the lines offering no chances for toys to become both a plaything and a psychological tool. Kids no longer have to animate dolls that can talk, sing, dance and so on. A toy flat iron can hardly be play tool, if it functions as a real thing. Instead of stimulating children's play, such toys encourage them to consume toy qualities and soon lead to satiety. As a result the very possibility of independent creative play is nipped in the bud. Thus the child becomes a toy accessory guided by the toy instead of guiding it.

Whenever toys have intricate technological equipment and impose certain modes of acting, they **inhibit** not only imagination in children but also **their inner psychological life**. Such toys dictate children what to do with it.

A good toy should leave **room for the child's fantasizing** and enable children to generate their own ideas and to implement them, that is, it should be open to play. By making the task easier

for children and confining their play to monotonous stereotype movements, adults limit their capacities for independent meaningful actions and therefore inhibit their development.

Whereas they become more and more distant from their main designation – infant play.

Parents don't have any toy selection references. Parents simply don't have enough information which would guide them through the peculiarities of child development – what the child needs at this certain age. As a result parents fully rely on producers' offer while producers depend on consumer's demand. As a result, most of toys bought by parents reduce children's play to primitive manipulating activity.

Under the circumstances it is extremely important **to have toys examined by qualified experts from among psychologists and educators** from the point of view of not only possible health hazards but also psychological effects on child development.

To solve these crucial social and educational problems pertaining to child play, the Moscow State University of Psychology & Education (MSUPE) has founded a **Play and Toys** research centre. The main task of the centre is to develop a concept and methods of examining toys by expert psychologists and educationalists and to evaluate the developmental qualities of concrete toys. The given examination by experts is based on the possibility for toys to become a real psychological tool and, consequently, to promote the development of not merely concrete psychological functions and abilities but the child personality as a whole [2].

### The criteria of toy examination

The main task of toys is the activation of age-specific child play. Requirements and criteria of evaluation of toys must correspond to this task. Before the evaluation every toy should pass the **ethical and aesthetic filter**. The unconformity of toys with ethical and aesthetic norms accepted in the culture, cannot go through the psychological and pedagogical examination.

**The attractiveness** of a toy and its correspondence to the child's interests and meanings is a very important requirement that, in fact, makes the toy a matter of the child's independent and initiative activities. In this case, and in this

case alone, the toy stirs a desire to play with it and ensures the motivational component of the play activity.

Attractiveness is associated with different characteristics of the toy per se and with the general sociocultural context in which the child develops. First, this is a *sensorial*, perceptive attractiveness connected with the toys' appearance and physical properties (bright colors, the way it sounds, complex shapes, expressive image, etc.). Second, it should be potentially understandable to be used for meaningful play activities. The application of this criterion depends on the type of a toy under examination. The image-based toys require a vivid image of either a human being or an animal. Easily recognizable images create certain feelings and suggest the character (how he or it walks, talks, what he or it likes, etc.). The attractiveness of a toy is defined by the degree to which it is familiar to the child. Familiar toys are more attractive than absolutely new and unfamiliar objects with no analogies in the child's personal experience. They do not stimulate individual actions and do not breed the desire to play with them. The most attractive and stimulating toys should combine novelty with easily recognizable features.

Third, the degree of the toy's attractiveness is determined by its *place in the hierarchy of children's subculture*. The child wants fashionable toys that other children have and that are shown on TV. Toys contribute, to a certain extent, to the child's socialization and the way it adapts to any specific society. Toys change from generation to generation (this is especially true of dolls, objects of everyday use and transport). They help children master various social models typical of contemporary society. That is why the toy's ability to imbibe the "spirit of time" and convey it to the child should be taken into account. No matter to what extent the tastes of children contradict the ethical and aesthetic ideas of adults any assessment of a toy's attractiveness should take into account its *adequacy to the present-day and its popularity in children's subculture*.

When describing *play activities* we should distinguish between what the child does and what he masters (actions, qualities and abilities) in the process of playing. For example, when stacking rings into a pyramid (playing action) the child masters

a mental operation of matching objects by size. Playing actions are the main meaningful element for the child itself. The psychological task of age-related development is solved in actions (or abilities) mastered through play. Correspondingly, the toy as an intermediary between the child and culture and as a means of its development should help shape new mental actions, psychic ties and personality traits corresponding to the child's age while providing an opportunity to stimulate meaningful play activities performed on the child's own initiative.

To perform its developmental (educational) function a toy should ***suggest adequate and culturally consistent actions***, that is, orientate towards what should be done with it and how and to encourage the child to realize the toy's potentials. In fact, suggestions for independent actions and their obvious nature are two indispensable qualities of all educational (developmental) toys. The toy's cognizing and educating potential can be realized by the child only if the suggestions of playing activities ***correspond to the type of such activity***. The toy should neither reduce playing to stereotype acts nor to detract activities to false and destructive values: it should stimulate comprehensive development of child's activities and his personality.

The suggestions, on the other hand, should not interfere with the child's initiative: playing is a free and independent activity. The toy should ***open horizons*** for the child's creative and meaningful activity, it should offer a wide range of variants. Objects that presuppose useful yet stereotyped and monotonous actions can be used for exercises and training but not for playing. The toys that restrict imagination because of their firmly determined nature narrow down the space for the child's creative activity. Too complicated and too perfect toys predetermine the child's actions and force the child into a groove, making play a monotonous routine work. Simpler and less definite playing material permits a wider range of playing activities. It is highly important for an educational toy to be simple and *open* for varied and flexible actions.

This means that in order to realize educational playing activities it is necessary ***to combine suggestions that will guide the child's activity and the toy's openness to encourage the child's own activity***. These requirements vary

according to age and types of play (and toys): in some cases the suggestions should be more detailed and precise, in others, the toy's degree of its openness is highly important for the child's initiative. It should be said that all toys designed to ensure the educational potential of playing activities require an adequate orientations and a certain degree of openness.

Toys' **operational possibilities** contribute to the realization of the educational potential. The playing material should correspond to practical playing activities because they are realized by the child independently. The feasibility of practice related actions with a toy is also determined by several factors, the toy's durability and its high quality in the first place. These are not purely technical or economic requirements: they are directly related to playing activities and ensure the possibility of playing with a toy. The best of designs and the toy's potential usefulness can be devalued by its low quality; toys should not break easily and should correspond to the child's age.

The toys should be easy to play with: the rings of a pyramid should be easy to stack, puzzles

should be easily collected and as easily scattered, etc. The purely physical descriptions such as the size and weight may also either encourage or discourage the child.

So, the toy examination in the Center MSUPE based on next criterions:

- ethical and aesthetic filter;
- **motivation** of play activity connects to the attractiveness of a toy and its correspondence to the child's interests and meanings;
- the play activity which connects to **development potential of toy**;
- operational characteristics of toy provide the **possibility of self-dependent child activity**.

The given criteria have laid down in a basis of a technique of psihologo-pedagogical examination of toys which is carried out in the Moscow center of examination of toys. Our examination has recommendatory character. The toys corresponding to criteria of examination, children's psychologists receive a sign "Child psychologists recommend".

Toys corresponding to these requirements get the trade mark (the small red hors – symbol of top-quality goods).

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