

The State of Play

WORDS: LAURA MILLER

Boil down the difference between adults and children to two words and you get work and play.

Children are defined by play and they do it not simply to entertain themselves in their copious amounts of free time; but because play is instinctive. Children learn about the world around them through play: that balls roll, that things in the distance look smaller than they actually are and that objects fall. Play uses all their senses, focuses their attention, and helps build self-confidence and self esteem, as well as social skills such as team work and sharing. Play helps develop motor skills, resourcefulness and problem-solving abilities. It also fuels children's imaginations. Play is therefore a crucial part of a child's development into a well-adjusted, perceptive and creatively astute adult.

However, there are fears amongst experts and many parents that this critical development has been retarded in recent years because the basic nature of play has changed. It has changed for some pretty big reasons. For a start, we've entered the technological age which has meant a shift from traditional toys and childhood pastimes to electronic gadgets and TV. The relentless marketing machine that has singled children out as target consumers has also changed play by providing perfectly conceived



characters and stories to populate our children's worlds, making imagination redundant. Child safety is another issue that has affected the way children play. While most adults today can wax lyrical about the freedom they enjoyed as kids — their best memories being of exploring on their bikes or of hidden dens — children today can no longer roam where they will, and all-important outdoor play has been replaced with more structured, more supervised indoor play.

"Times change," you might be thinking, ruefully shrugging your shoulders, but shocking statistics from recent studies, recall after recall of lead-tainted toys (at least 29 since 1998 and 11 since July 2006 alone), plus revelations about the absolute necessity of unstructured play has led to the following questions: How are our children at risk with the current state of play? And what can we do about it?

Today we watch in awe as our kids sit in front of a computer, their tiny fingers mastering the keyboard like classical pianists. They can text at a rate of knots, dextrously navigate their electronic educational devices, and deftly manoeuvre the remote control from dad's hand to watch the

latest Baby Einstein DVD or channel flip until Barney's ubiquitous mug fills the screen. But there is something wrong with this picture. While all these examples demonstrate certain skills, the only 'activity' involved (besides finger gymnastics) is sitting. According to Sue Palmer, author of *Detoxing Childhood*, today's 3-year-olds are as sedentary as office workers. Consider for a moment that today's office workers probably had relatively active childhoods in comparison to our children due to more freedom, less traffic, more space and no Internet. Yet in the USA, eight out of 10 people over the age of 25 are overweight. The mind boggles at the health issues today's sedentary 3-year-olds will face when they reach 25. Already, in the UK, from 1995 to 2005 the proportion of obese children aged two to 10 increased from 9.6% to 16.6% for boys and 10.3% to 16.7% for girls.

There are other problems, possibly even more serious, with children's present addiction to electronic toys and media. According to Baroness Professor Susan Greenfield of Oxford University, the increasingly unavoidable TV culture can encourage not only a much shorter attention span, but also the potential loss of imagination. Imagine (luckily we still can) a world where architects can't look at a piece of open ground and visualise a skyscraper, or where engineers can't look at a gorge and see how to dam or bridge it. This ability to imagine what doesn't yet exist and see the potential and possibilities in the world around us starts with a child imagining that a stick is a light sabre, or a dishcloth a veil. As Einstein so succinctly puts it, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create."

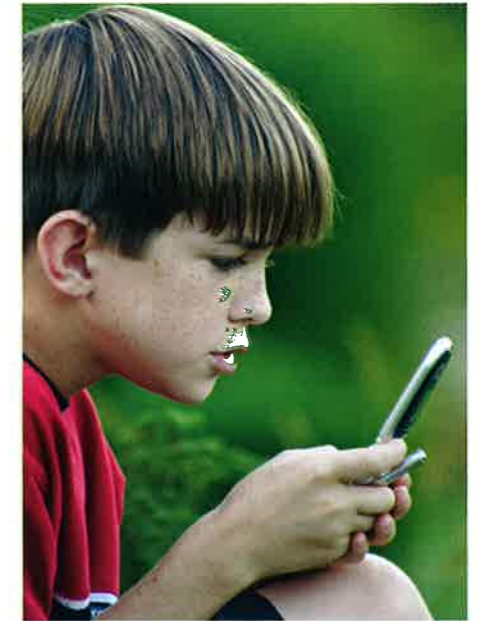
So do we simply switch off the TVs and electronic devices, hand over a bunch of brightly coloured toys and send up a pray that the kids won't now be away from the TV room and under our feet? Unfortunately it's not as simple as that.

The slew of recent toy recalls due to toxicity has put the spotlight on what our children play with and how their toys affect them. This has been a positive development because despite the fear it has engendered,

building block towers could be missing out on more than just the art of construction.

Dr Nik Kapur (a research fellow at the School of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Leeds) finds it ironic that just when parents are keener than ever to give their kids an educational head-start, traditional construction toys are being replaced with educational electronic toys that are supposed to enhance early numeracy and literacy. His view that traditional construction toys are far more educational is backed up by a recent two-year study into the impact of new technology on children by Lydia Plowman, a Professor of Education at the University of Stirling. Preliminary results show that educational electronic toys and game consoles are not harmful, but neither are they beneficial to a child's development. Building blocks on the other hand are hugely beneficial as 'rational toys' that give children an early understanding of engineering, gravity and physics. It is not all science and engineering.

The Lego Learning Institute, an agency dedicated to researching exactly what children gain from playing with construction toys, has proved that such toys automatically develop children's spatial intelligence and their understanding of shapes and forms while also honing their motor and social skills. Children working together with blocks to form an elaborate fantasy city need to cooperate and share ideas. In a world



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the situation has led people to study not only what children's toys are painted and made with but also what they are. Making sure your children are not playing with toys containing bisphenol-A and phthalates (toxins that are proven endocrine disruptors, meaning that they can mimic or block hormones that regulate the body) is the first step to detoxifying their childhoods — to paraphrase the title of Sue Palmer's book. Do this by consulting www.healthytoys.org when considering new playthings and choose unvarnished hardwood toys, cloth toys, stuffed animals, and handmade items from small manufacturers and companies that have kept their production in Europe, which has high safety standards. The next step is to ascertain whether your children's toys are contributing to a state of play that encourages the healthy development of their bodies and minds.

Recent research has shown that an 11-year-old's common-sense understanding of how the world works is two to three years behind that of children 15 years ago. There is also a growing belief among academics and engineers alike that today's students are growing up without hands-on experience of engineering, gained in the past through playing with construction toys in early childhood — whether simple building blocks, Lego and Meccano, or cardboard loo roll tubes and egg boxes. Sales of electronic toys rose 48% in 2004 compared to sales of traditional preschool toys such as building blocks, which rose by just 1%. In addition, children pressing buttons rather than

where children covet well-marketed, one-dimensional, pre-assembled, pre-programmed toys that encourage solitary play, construction toys offer a world of possibilities with no correct answer, also teaching children to become creative problem-solvers. As Kathy Hirsh-Pasek (Professor of Psychology at Temple University and author of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*) says, "We're not training our kids to think [when we give them electronic toys], we're simply training them to press a button and get the right answer."

So if building blocks are so beneficial to our children's development what other traditional toys and childhood pastimes should we dust off and reintroduce to playtime today?

"Children are programmed to play creatively," says Palmer, "so all parents have to do is provide safe environments (inside and outside) and a few inexpensive props." Have you ever noticed a child completely ignoring his fancy Christmas gift with all its bells and whistles, and playing instead with the box it came in? Little boys and girls can quite happily play 'cops and robbers' for hours on end, with just their hands as guns and their voice-boxes providing the sound effects. They don't need, or indeed want (although the marketing gurus make them think they do), toys that do it all for them and giving your children simple toys that can be whatever they want them to be (like building blocks or Lego), is the best way to encourage imaginary play.

Give your child a pretend tea set and cooking equipment or a simple doll's house filled with miniature dolls and furniture, and a host of imaginary situations will be sparked in his or her head. Any mum who's found her little one shuffling along in boat-sized stilettos will know that a dressing-up box is a treasure trove for a child's imagination. Ready-made outfits are not the point — it'll be granny's moth-eaten stole, dad's old cricket cap or a swathe of plum-coloured velvet that will invariably become the favourite item. Make a den — yes, indoors. A blanket over a

table creates a prehistoric cave for your own little dinosaur or a tower-top turret for your modern-day Rapunzel.

Doing puzzles and playing board games are also hugely beneficial to a child's development. They teach patience, and in the case of board games — turn-taking — a skill that many kindergarten teachers find severely lacking in kids today, more used, as they are, to their solitary electronic pursuits. Telling stories to your children that aren't supported with pictures or a soundtrack is also a great way to fuel young imaginations, as is getting your kids to draw pictures and create junk art. An old magazine, egg box or two, paper, glue, scissors, glitter and string are a mine of inspiration for a fertile young mind. And remember to let your kids get on with it. According to Dr Richard House, a senior lecturer in Therapeutic Education at Rochampton University, 'Free play' — that is, play which is autonomous and freely chosen rather than adult-led 'structured' play — is invaluable for development...[and]... your child's imagination can only run riot if his playtime isn't stage-managed, structured or rule-bound."

Then there's the great outdoors. Palmer refers to kids today as 'battery kids' in comparison to the 'free-range' children of days gone by because their freedom to wander and explore the world around them

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has been curtailed by fears for their safety. More's the pity. Here are just some of the things children learn from outdoor play, summarised from Palmer's list: common-sense understanding of the world and how it works (properties of water, mud, wood, sand; the effects of friction), risk assessment (judging distances, testing boundaries, learning who and what to trust), self-reliance and control (getting lost/found, coping with minor injuries/accidents), the pleasure of doing, making, creating, imagining (making dens, forts — pretend play of all kinds). Here in Hong Kong, parents are often distressed to find their toddlers refusing to walk on grass because the sensation is so foreign to their little feet. So how can we turn our battery chicks into free-range tykes?

Hong Kongers are off to a good start in that we live in one of the safest cities in the world. However, that good news is tempered by the abundance of cheap electronic goods available and by space being at such a premium. Each child in the UK has an area of official playground space the size of a kitchen table and Hong Kong children probably have a lot less. However, less than 30% of Hong Kong's almost 1,200 square kilometres is developed, leaving plenty of safe outdoor space for free play. Spend time outdoors with your child in all types of weather — even rain. Ride with him or her on public transport and take the time to help your child become streetwise and safety conscious. Go on outdoor expeditions: to the beach, camping, and on picnics; and let your kids bring friends, and climb trees, and catch tadpoles. According to the Children's Play Council, children benefit most from a variety of everyday nature including access to parks, gardens, farms and rough ground. So source these areas out and take your child along to play until you feel they're mature enough to go alone.

Childhood is supposed to be a time of wonder, a stress-free time of discovering yourself and the world around you through play, without any sense of urgency, competition or fear. It seems clear that simply by introducing a few traditional toys and activities into your child's life you can stop the 'imagi-negation' of his or her creative mind brought about by the unavoidable cultural, technological, and security changes that have made the world a less than ideal place to rear children today. Some might say that to idealise the state of play of years gone by is to wear rose-tinted glasses. If that's the case, then I say — let's give our modern kids a pair. Along with a set of building blocks of course. [pt](#)

Top Tip

Chameleon Workshop: Don't have the energy to get arty at home? Sign up for a six week parent and child course at Chameleon Workshop. The stART Courses (for 3 to 5 year olds and 6 to 9 years olds) are fun and interactive and focus on everything from printing and mask-making to pottery.

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