

THE JOYS OF SIMPLE TOYS

by Sarah Baldwin

As a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, one of my favorite “parent evenings” to offer was on the subject of toys and play. Over the years, I don’t think there was a single parent who walked away from such a meeting without a new consciousness about choosing healthy playthings for his or her children.

At the outset of our meeting, I explained how a young child learns about the world through all her senses. Unlike adults, a baby or toddler does not rely solely on her sense of sight, and make quick judgments about things based on a visual perception.

When it comes to toys, a baby will grasp a toy, feel it, smell it and put it in her mouth. Did you know that along with the fingertips, ours lips are full of nerve-endings and one of the most sensitive parts of our body?

Experiencing Toys Blindfolded

Well, I didn’t really blindfold them, but I asked parents to close their eyes and not to peek. Then I would hand each parent a different toy.

I would randomly hand out an assortment of toys from a typical child’s toy box—a Barbie doll, a metal toy car, an action figure, a baby doll with plastic head and limbs, Legos, plush animals, a My Little Pony, toys that make noise, and so forth.

Other parents would be handed toys typically found in a Waldorf early childhood classroom—things like a smooth river stone, a Waldorf doll made of cotton and wool, carved wooden animals, play silks, a wooden toy car, a handmade puppet or a shell.

I asked the parents to feel each toy, smell it, touch it to their cheek, and taste it (as a young child would) if they dared! After the adult had an experience of one toy, he would hold it up and I would place the opposite type of toy in his hands.

Sharing the Experience

At the end of this exercise, parents would share their experiences. Typically, parents would describe feeling tense, repelled or confused when handed one of the plastic or synthetic toys, and to describe the feeling of comfort or relaxation they would feel after being handed a natural toy.

After having the experience, parents made important discoveries and had plenty to share with one another.

I invite you to try it. The element of surprise will be missing, but try experiencing different types of playthings with your eyes closed, and see what you discover.

Make a Story

In the second part of the evening, I asked parents to get down on the floor and play.

In one part of the room, I had laid out a pile of the toys typically found in a child's toy box on the floor—an assortment that might include a Barbie, action figures, plastic dinosaurs, Happy Meal toys, metal cars and so on.

In the other room would be a pile of wool puppets, stones, wooden tree blocks, play silks, wooden animals, pinecones and so forth.

I would give each group of parents 15 minutes to play and come up with a story using their toys. After 15 minutes, I would ask each group to switch places.

The results were almost always the same. Parents described having a hard time coming up with a cohesive story with the plastic toys. Observing them play, I noticed how loud the adults in this group would get. Invariably, the plastic dinosaurs and action figures would become aggressive and start attacking the other toys. (What else can one do with a brawny action figure?)

The stories that evolved from parents playing with the natural toys, on the other hand, were usually more like fairy tales—stories of daily life, family and animals; sometimes adventure and magic. It was always interesting to observe how quiet and absorbed in play this group of adults would become.

Observe Your Own Children

I wish I could give you the same hands-on experience through cyberspace. Words can never be as powerful as direct, experiential learning. But if you have the opportunity, observe your children and how they play with different kinds of toys. Play with them and try to create stories of your own. Observe for yourself the different qualities of play that various toys inspire.

Suspending Judgment

I've tried to stress to parents over the years that choosing toys is not about "good toys" vs. "bad toys." Rather, it's about bringing new consciousness to selecting children's playthings.

- Is it beautiful?
- Does it feel good?

- Does it leave room for the imagination?
- Will it inspire creative play?
- Is it open-ended? (That is, is there more than one way to play with it?)

If you can answer yes to these questions, you will be providing your child with all the tools needed for years of healthy play!

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