

Significance of Using Indigenous Toys and Games in Early Years: A Child's Way to Learn and Grow

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Abstract

Play-based pedagogy using toys is the most appropriate and preferred pedagogy at the foundational stage. Much of the research endorsed play as fulfilling an important role in early learning. Researchers agree that language, literacy and early numeracy develop in the first six years of a child's life. High-quality play with developmentally appropriate toys and play materials can really help children fully develop their language, literacy and numeracy skills. All kinds of play experiences build the baby's brain. Toys provide pleasure and huge fun to the world of children of all stages, only the complexity level of toys get increased according to the age, development and abilities of the children/student. Unlike the fancy, expensive and electronic toys sold in stores today, traditional Indian toys and games are just simple, easy to develop even by the teachers and take their inspiration from the environment. Without doubt, traditional building toys are excellent for a child's overall development and specifically their language, literacy and early math development. The effect is even greater when teachers and parents are aware of the opportunities for learning which exist in these toys and educational play materials.

INTRODUCTION

Indian toys have a long history as old as the icons and idols themselves. From the realms of divine inspiration and day-to-day recreation, the craftsmen with their innate skills transformed mundane objects as toys into expressions of art. Toys and dolls are an integral part of Indian

culture and one of the best examples is *Chennapatna* of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh where handmade toys and dolls in various shapes and sizes are probably the best play materials for children. Today children are unaware of the beauty of the traditional Indian toys that their parents or grandparents played with. All children love to play as

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playing is natural to them. It is globally acknowledged that the early years of a child's life, i.e., upto 6–8 years are the most critical years of development since the brain develops at a rapid rate and these years are impressionable. Whatever the child learns, for example, whatever they do, listen, play with, will go deeply embedded in the child's life and it becomes extremely difficult to change or repair any damage done in the early years. These young children are active, busy learners who enjoy a wide variety of play activities and love to explore toys and learning materials. All kinds of play experiences build the child's cognitive development.

Toys are the tools for the children that they use to know their immediate world. Toys provide pleasure and huge fun to the world of young children. Toys have a very special place in the lives of young children as it stimulates their thinking and makes them competent at using language to communicate. This newly developed thinking and language skills enable young children to begin solving complex problems, asking questions and using imagination to create and act out stories. Most of the activities done in the early years need toys and learning materials to support young children's play. During the early years, the child begins to coordinate senses and movements and manipulate the objects around her/him in more skilled and complex ways. Children need to be active and we cannot expect them to sit still and silently in one place for a long time.

Children need plenty of experiences for fun play and learning such as swinging, rocking, running about and expressing joy with their bodies.

A child also needs plenty of age and developmentally appropriate material and games which provide them enjoyment. It also helps in habit formation; for instance, children learn to listen, to watch, to follow instructions, ask and answer questions, to wait for their turn, to cooperate and many other social skills. Can we provide such skills in today's scenario where children are just sitting in front of the television, computers or while playing computer games on the mobile phone or other handsets? It is necessary to integrate technology in the early years' curriculum but we cannot snatch the joy of playing with toys from childhood. Simple everyday materials can also be used for playthings as these simple play equipment and toys support children's holistic development. It also helps the adults to get an idea of what and how children are learning as they explore the toys and other play materials. Traditional Indian toys and games have a special place in the child-rearing practices and the early years learning.

Some of the babies' first discoveries about their immediate world will come to them through toys. The exploration helps them understand how to use objects, for example playing with balls and blocks, the child realises that round objects roll, but those with edges do not.

Educational toys and games are among the most significant tools to create the right kind of early learning environment for a child and thereby improve the learning ability.

How Playing with Toys Affects their Holistic Development?

If you observe children's play and pause to reflect on the structure they have created, shapes they have made, patterns they have created, and how they function their playthings, you would be surprised to see how much these young children can learn from the toy world. Every child has a right to play with toys as we cannot deprive them of this right of their childhood. It's not that those children who are deprived of toys do not play, they just find something around their immediate environment, for example, they create a doll's house using a piece of cloth or their mother's saree, they wrap up an old piece of fabric or a rag around an old spoon or stick and call it a beautiful doll.

Children love playing with dolls, drums, push and pull toys, threading beads, interlocking blocks, stuffed animals, puzzles, matching games, shape sorters, and so many others. As the child grows, they will start to use these toys differently, for example, the blocks they once carried around may now be used to build a bridge or a house or they might use the block as a car moving along the road. This pretend play extends children's imagination and develops their thinking skills. Children love

to play with pots, pans, and wooden spoons as drums and sticks and use them as musical instruments.

Research shows that children with good play skills tend to do well in later schooling and develop into well-adjusted people. Playing with toys helps develop thinking skills such as recalling experiences, ordering things, figuring out how to replay them, and solving problems that come up. Play develops social skills as children work together, play with toys, share the toys, and share ideas. Children play longer when suitable toys and objects are provided to them and gain benefits in all developmental areas that play has to offer. Toys are just wonderful teaching-learning aids to help and support children's literacy and numeracy development. Specially chosen toys and materials to enhance literacy and numeracy in early years would be an added asset to the classroom learning basket which ultimately aims to make our children attracted and motivated towards reading and using thinking skills.

Toys and Play Materials for Different Domains or Developmental Areas

Toys and Play Equipment for Physical and Motor Development

Learning basic motor skills such as climbing, walking, running, crawling, jumping, reaching is much easier and joyful during these early years, especially when provided with the age and developmentally appropriate toys and equipment. Adults need to provide

and encourage such activities that help children learn and use new motor skills to build their large muscles as well as their small muscles. Swings, slides, sea-saw are needed for gross motor skills and blocks, puzzles, crayons, stringing beads, picking up objects with tongves, building pieces that snap together, buttoning, lacing, nesting and stacking toys, rattles, etc. are required for small or fine muscle skills. Toys for active play will strengthen the body and toys related to colour, shapes, sound, texture, and pattern will develop their perception.

Toys for Enhancing Thinking Skills

A variety of stimulating toys plays a crucial role in early intellectual growth. The toys that help children's mental capabilities, for example, stringing the beads, fixing a puzzle, using a shape sorter or color sorting boxes. Children learn about ordering, sequence, measurement, like height and depth when they are engaged in block building using interlocking and construction blocks. The blocks are very versatile and keep young children engaged and happily entertained.

Toys for Promoting Language and Early Literacy Skills

The toys fascinate children and encourage them to talk, very commonly you will see that children want to tell you what they have made, and love hearing what you have to say in return. Toy telephones and talking books are

tech-aided toys that simply boost their language and communication skills.

Toys for Extending Creativity and Imagination Skills

The art learning materials also provide rich sensory experiences as the children manipulate objects, squeezes them, pokes the play dough, and moves their fingers through the clay (potter's clay is especially very good) or the finger paint — all such experiences strengthen the connections being made in the brain. Toys such as puppets and dress-up clothing will stretch the imagination while the very trendy electronic and tech-aided toys will stimulate the child's growing memory.

Toys for Building Social-Emotional Skills

Toys provide emotional security. Multipurpose toys invite group play and help children learn about sharing and cooperation. The child explores their inner world through play with toys. They may use a plaything to express their feelings, perhaps many times release their pent-up emotions while playing with the doll or dramatic play such as *ghar-ghar*, or they may use certain toys to act out adult roles, broadening her sense of self.

Finally, toys teach the values of our Indian culture. Dolls represent the different cultures of Indian society, blocks represent the school buildings, the house buildings, bridges, railways, and reflect our modern sense of mobility and confidence that

we can build a world. The child also learns organisation through the world of toys. The selection of toys and the learning materials is very important because the choice of toys will communicate the values and develop interpersonal skills.

Selection of Innovative, Indigenous, Age and Developmentally appropriate Toys

Are the beautiful traditional toys available in the market? The wooden stacking dolls, mobile wooden toys, kitchen utensils with their bright colours and non-toxic material are missing from the market and in turn from the lives of children. A traditional Indian toy is usually wooden, non-electronic and does not use much technology. Today, when we buy these plastic toys, it is because they are cheap in comparison to wooden toys. But these beautiful indigenous wooden toys are actually very important for early years learning, especially the puzzle inset board, wooden blocks, stacking shapes, shape sorters, paper mache stacking dolls, and so on. Children learn about local animals, utensils, colours and shapes through these toys. In India also like in other countries nowadays everywhere, be it a local market, mall or at home, you are more likely to see very young children hooked to their parents' mobiles, rather than holding on to a favourite doll or a toy. Adults must understand that technology does not mean playing games on the mobile phone. It's high time to think about such innovative

ideas and manufacture for a new generation where we can induce technology in these indigenous toys and games.

What to do with the new generation of imported electronic and digital toys flooding in the market? Nowadays, the toymakers and the manufacturers offer such a wealth of playthings the parents often feel overwhelmed, but the selection of the right toy is very important. We adults generally go crazy seeing the imported toys in the market and without knowing the use and benefits we purchase it. Children do get attracted to these because of their lights, colours and movements, but soon get bored and go back to manipulatives. Such battery-operated toys also make children couch potatoes therefore the toys need to be age and developmentally appropriate, fun for the child and at the same time challenging to them. The new generation toys or tech aids are enormously responsive and stimulating to children but care must be taken that it should not make children sit at one place for a longer duration rather it should be engaging, multi-use, and multi-purpose, and according to the child's abilities. It should be such that children can manipulate themselves, can be used in classroom learning, easy to handle, enhance social skills. Care must be taken that such tech aided toys must provide for group play rather than making them play and use in isolation. They should be well-made, sturdy and safe for the children.

These modern toys many times are harmful and hazardous for children since low grade plastics and other harmful metals are used in it. As we cannot deny the use of technology in the toys, at the same time, we must remember that young children need concrete manipulatives and toys that they can actually poke, mold, create construct with.

We need toys that would enhance and provide for STEM/STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths) in the early years. The toys for STEM/STEAM—Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics help children develop skills in these core areas. As most of the parents are actually worried about their children using too much mobile for playing games, STEM and tech-aided toys seem like the perfect balance to keep children engaged with their toys, while at the same time making digital knowledge available to them. The tech aided speaking toys to facilitate children’s speech and vocabulary also help children with special needs. Here it must be noted that technology should not be for show and demonstration like many battery-operated toys, it should add value, purpose and meaning along with fun. Tech aided toys support children with severe other physical impairments for example: ride-on-tricycle, talking telephone, etc.

There is a need to make provision of such toys that stimulate children physically intellectually, and socially.

There have to be such toys that encourage children to play with others, such as building blocks, alphabet blocks, number blocks, doll houses and innovative board games. There have to be toys for all children that cut across gender stereotypes. The selection of toys for young children should be in tune with their skills and temperament. The tech aided toys should be developed in a manner that these would help in learning a skill or skills, make learning joyful and engage the children rather than sitting in isolation or merely watching a battery-operated toy moving.

Time to Question Ourselves

Can we think of producing cuddly cloth dolls with Mahbubani? Can we create the old wooden chess board for older children and make it a part of school indoor play? How many families still have a carrom board in their homes? Is not such games and toys bring bonding and warmth and at the same time teach us the rules and values. The famous wooden spinning Top is still loved by children in rural India, how many urban children know about it? Do we see our girls skipping ropes?

To conclude, our little children have all the right to play with toys and these must be safe, stimulating, eco-friendly, and sustainable toys as toys are the best way to keep our children engaged without the use of the screens. A good toy helps in the holistic development of a child. Play with toys is also of greatest importance in children’s health,

and well-being and help them in becoming responsible citizens. We should support every opportunity for children to play with toys and recognise the value of play. Not only do we provide toys and games to play rather involve them in developing the age-appropriate toys as prosumers and not only become consumers. Entrepreneurship among children needs to be infused at an early age and skill training should be planned at all

levels of education. There needs to be a school and industry partnership and need to manufacture toys developed by students for young children in factory mode and help nurture the creative talents of students in India and promote the philosophy of self-reliant India, (Aatmanirbhar Bharat). Let us join together and promote toy-play pedagogy in schools.

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