

# Closing the toy box

Babies and toddlers don't need playsets and entertainment centres. In fact, an abundance of brightly coloured plastic might actually harm their development, argues **Sarah Ockwell-Smith...**



## about the author

Sarah Ockwell-Smith is a parenting expert and mother of four. She is the author of *BabyCalm: A Guide for Calmer Babies and Happier Parents* and *ToddlerCalm: A Guide for Calmer Toddlers and Happier Parents*. Her third book, *The Gentle Sleep Book*, will be released in 2015. Sarah is also the founder of GentleParenting - visit [gentleparenting.co.uk](http://gentleparenting.co.uk)

**R**ecent research shows that parents spend an average of £300 per child, per year on toys. The childcare industry is a huge consumer of playthings aimed specifically at the under-threes, too. Last year I visited the Toy Fair at London's Olympia and was taken aback by the vast range of products on offer: in the five years since my last child grew out of her baby and toddlerhood, I would estimate that the number of offerings has doubled at least. Quite simply, the toy industry is massive.

Along with the endless new products comes the inevitable advertising and media round-ups of the latest 'must-haves'. It is easy to become overwhelmed at the choice, and pressurised to purchase toys that promise to 'aid cognitive development', 'increase spatial awareness', 'promote the imagination', 'encourage fine motor skills' and even 'speed language acquisition'.

In my work with parents, some of the questions I'm asked most frequently are, "What should I be doing to entertain him?" or "What toys should I buy to aid her development?". Many mothers in particular say to me, "I'm really worried that my baby is bored at home all day with just me." What alarms me is that many of these questions come from those caring for a baby who is only a few weeks old. But those with toddlers aren't immune: I often hear "He has a really short attention span - he won't play alone for more than 10 minutes."

I spend many hours each month reassuring parents and caregivers that they and their everyday environments are enough for their children. Babies learn so much just by being in our arms. They learn about movement, they become strong - particularly when held tummy to tummy - and, perhaps most importantly of all, they learn about the environment around them, from the security of a base of human contact. Think about how fascinating a trip into town must be for a baby, or a walk in the country - so many new sounds, smells and sights. Babies, in particular, really don't need more than the attention and presence of their caregivers and their natural surroundings. I find it such a shame that the toy industry has undermined the beautiful carer-child dyad so much, their adverts subconsciously hinting that 'you alone are not enough, babies need more'.

As babies grow into toddlers their natural curiosity peaks. They become 'little scientists', wanting to touch and explore everything to make sense of the world around them. This curiosity is precisely why they do not need specifically designed toys. The world is full of wonder, and objects we see as uninteresting can enthral a toddler for hours.

## Everyday playthings

Everyday objects are as fascinating to babies and toddlers as any expensive 'developmental' toy. In the early 1980s childcare expert Elinor Goldschmied spoke about young children

exploring objects (and therefore the properties of nature) from the 'real world'. Perhaps Goldschmied's most lasting legacies are the concepts of 'heuristic play' and treasure baskets - baskets containing household objects and objects from nature to entertain babies from the age of sitting onwards. She believed that babies "suck, grasp, touch and feel objects, rehearsing behaviours which foster their earliest learning".

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The treasure basket was by far the most successful baby toy in my house. My daughter's favourite plaything for many months was an old-fashioned whisk, which she would chew, wave and bash loudly on the floor. My sons used to regularly enjoy collecting items on our walks, and at one point my house closely resembled a forest thanks to the sheer assortment of twigs, sticks, pine cones and stones that adorned every surface. These objects garnered far more attention than the loud and bright plastic offerings, or even the beautiful - and very expensive - hand-made wooden toys, the boys also owned.

## The problem with toys

The biggest problem with most toys is that their play appeal is limited. A shape-sorter is just a shape-sorter; put the shapes into the holes and the toy no longer offers interest. An entertainment centre loses its appeal after the buttons have been pushed, the beads moved along and the xylophone chimed. Once their function has been exhausted, such toys cannot be used in other ways; they do not allow children to use their imaginations to 'convert' them into something else.

As children grow, the over provision of toys can actually stifle their imaginations. The overwhelming choice of playthings offered to most children today is perhaps one of the worst curses of modern childhood. Parents may mutter, "You should be grateful that you have so many toys - in my day I didn't have half the amount you had!" but the parents are the lucky ones. Their childhood was likely filled with amazing games of make believe that their own children lack.

Research, conducted in the 1990s by German researchers Strick and Schubert, found that removing toys from children results in them becoming not only more creative but more social too. In their experiment 'Der Spielzeugfreie Kindergarten' ('the nursery without toys'), which took place in a nursery in Munich, all toys were removed from the children for a period of three months. The only items left were chairs and blankets. Initially, they found that the children were bored; however, the children quickly readjusted and were soon building dens and

enjoying the new set-up. By the end of the experimental period not only were the children playing imaginatively and creatively, but they were also more confident and social with each other, with better interpersonal relationships and few incidents of friction and fighting. Strick and Schubert claim that children can be 'suffocated' by the presence of toys and also find it harder to concentrate when surrounded by toys.

While the idea of being a completely toy-free nursery may fill you with horror, there are some salient (less-shocking) points from Strick and Schubert's research that can be implemented in all daycare settings. First is the obvious idea of thinning out the toy supply: removing those items that are barely or rarely played with. Next is the idea of rotating toys. At the end of the Strick and Schubert experiment, toys were reintroduced to the nursery and the children, and staff, were happy to see them return. The saying 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' applies to toys too - rotating the toy supply and putting some away in a cupboard for a month or two, so they remain fresh, is a great idea. Lastly, never underestimate the play value in everyday objects; in this case it was simple chairs and blankets, but there are many other options too.

## OPEN-ENDED ALTERNATIVES

### 10 of the best playthings that aren't toys...

- Cardboard boxes - infinite possibilities!
- Old handbags and purses - great to fill with treasures, and open and close.
- Cornflour and water - a wonderfully intriguing gloopy blend.
- Mud - mud pies, mud modelling, mud kitchens...
- Water - freeze toys in ice, 'paint' with it on pavements, make boats to float and more.
- Den-building - inside with blankets and sheets, outside with sticks and branches.
- Bubble wrap - put it on the floor and watch children squeal with delight as they run, jump and roll on it!
- Plastic cups - great for stacking, pouring and scooping.
- Old phones and remote controls - babies and children love to press buttons!
- Old baby wipes boxes and tissue boxes - ideal for 'posting' things and sorting.