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How Do Today's Children Play and with Which Toys?

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Abstract

A toy is a material basis for children's play. It shapes children's experience, stimulates imagination, and directs their behavior, conveying the values of a certain historical period. In highly developed societies, younger and younger children are left to solitary play with things and gadgets that favor copying models of the global consumer society, glorifying various stereotypes and the use of force. The question is which toys are the most common ones in children's play in our environment? This paper presents an overview of different studies examining the criteria for the selection of toys, parents' exposure to media pressure, and children's wishes emerging from the influence of commercials. Readiness of parents to get engaged in mutual play with their children is also examined, and their developmental importance is emphasized.

Key words: *children's play; mutual play of children and parents; stereotypes; toy selection.*

Introduction

In the contemporary society, children's play and toys apparently have a great importance. Special attention is given to them in the family environment that strongly affects children during the period of their early development. Today's parents spend most of their time performing their professional roles, while they dedicate less and less time to leisure and communication with their family members, especially children. In order to compensate for that time and express their love and affection for the little ones, adults give toys to children (Sutton-Smith, 1989). At the same time, parents choose things that will occupy children's attention for some time, enabling them to gain valuable knowledge and master valuable activities. Having in mind that both parents are often absent from home due to their work, most children between the toddler age and pre-school age spend considerable time in various educational

institutions which care for children. Into this new context children bring their own habits and models of behavior rooted in the values of their family life. The expression of those habits is most directly reflected when playing with their peers, when children spontaneously express their personality, test the limits, explore opportunities, develop social skills, and try out different problem-solving strategies.

Starting from the definition of the core concepts, this paper reviews the conditions for children's play in the family environment with reference to parents' attitudes toward mutual play with children, and the role of toys in such interactions. The findings of various studies carried out in pre-school institutions are presented here, and they focus on play and toys of contemporary childhood, while especially analyzing the criteria by which parents select toys for their children. The paper examines the impact of the mass media on the selection of toys within the family, the time children spend interacting with them, and parental awareness of the effects of aggressive contents, as well as gender stereotypes on children's play and their overall development. The impact of ideology on educational toys is also observed and how parents see their own role in this, as well as to what extent their decisions affect development in the toy market and industry.

Play and Toys as a Framework of Social Interaction and Cultural Communication

The fact is that people from different cultures understand play and toys in different ways. What is considered to be play in some surroundings may not be considered as such somewhere else. In the communities that separate work from free time and the world of adults from the world of children, most objects for playing are strictly divided. Various objects used by children for playing fall into the category of toys, regardless of their educational character, and as such, they are not related to the activities and games for adults in any way. On the other hand, in the rural areas of some cultures there are still games in which children and adults create common objects used for playing during joint activities (Shannan & Frances, 1992). What also varies in different communities is the degree of integration of children's play into everyday family life. Children who do not have a lot of family responsibilities usually prefer pretend games that copy real life, compensating for their exclusion. On the other hand, children who get specific duties in the family at an early age and grow up helping out at home and taking on responsibilities, have neither a wish to play in such a way nor the need for toys which are smaller versions of real life objects. In such circumstances, children more often play with each other than with various objects for playing.

The foundation of these hypotheses was confirmed in the research on psychology of children's games, based on the theory of socio-cultural development. It was shown that the content, design, material and technology of objects which children use in their games is in line with the changes in spiritual and material values of a community. The general tendency in the development and production of toys is closely related to the

changes in the lifestyles of people, and the specifics of their work (Artemova, 2001). Hence the hypothesis of B. Sutton-Smith is justified, stating that the toys are “objects of cultural significance that represent the heritage of the civilization, and contribute to its continuity by modeling a specific “form of human communication” – play. As forms of cultural communication, games and toys are “words” which give meanings to things, and which could be observed through the rules and meanings that fall within a broader framework of customs and beliefs in a particular society (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. 21).

Most authors agree that play is a free act beyond the process of satisfying one’s needs. It is spontaneous and related to positive emotions manifested through a variety of activities, the purpose of which is neither beyond them nor directed to the production of goods. It is fictional in relation to the real life and limited in space and time. It develops according to voluntarily accepted rules that are strictly observed. Nevertheless, it is unique and uncertain by its course and outcome, being tense for these very reasons. Since the means prevail over objectives, play does not cause frustrations and fear of failure (Kamenov, 2009). Also, play is a “primitive communication system” by which it is possible to express and communicate all the wishes, hidden desires, dreams, fears and anxieties (Sutton-Smith, 1989). It is internally motivated, and it allows spontaneous engagement of the total human resources. This feature makes it a leading developmental childhood activity that provides physical, emotional, social, moral and intellectual development of a child.

Play is the primary method of children’s communication, and the sphere of direct expression of their personality. In this activity, they become the main actors, they fulfill their needs, realize their abilities, improve their skills, make decisions and act independently - children become released from the inferiority complex in relation to adults, and experience their own true value (Kamenov, 2009). Children bring all their previous experience into the game, upgrading it with the new one that is being acquired during the play itself, by researching and exploring. Hence, play represents a form of learning about the life itself, a universal phenomenon that can be found in all societies, irrespective of their national and cultural boundaries, which makes it the crucial element of human development (Guddemi, 1992). Although play could be classified in various ways, the remainder of this paper focuses on the activities emerging from the interaction of children with objects used for playing and different technical devices for playing, or, in other words - toys.

Whether they are actually present in play in a particular situation or present in one’s consciousness, memory, imagination, or children’s reflections, the objects used for playing (toys) are inevitable companions in play. In general, toys include all the means which children use when playing. However, toys are more often considered to be adult-made objects, either industrially or hand crafted, in order for children to play with them (Shannan & Francis, 1992). Unlike in the old times when toys were made in the form of reduced-size tools, and given to children in order to train them,

today's manipulation with toys "reflects a response to novelty" (Eljkonjin, 1990, p. 34). Playing with such toys has developed from an activity for acquiring certain, almost professional, skills into a game that forms some general motor and visual-motor functioning systems (Eljkonjin, 1990, p. 36), without which human existence is not possible in a highly technological society. Toys represent "real and specific cultural items that shape the daily life of a child"¹ (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. 90). They bring order into children's thoughts and words, facilitate their gaining insight into the center of the modern civilization based on individual work and focus on tasks and persistence (Sutton-Smith, 1989, pp. 93-95). Thus toys become "childhood tools", technical devices which conquer the symbolic and logical thoughts of the complex world, in which a child gradually grows. If a toy with its features enables activities that contribute to the child's development and learning, at the same time corresponding to the child's authentic needs, then it has a distinct educational value (Kamenov, 2009, p. 161).

However, in order to teach children to interpret, i.e. to "read" objects they play with, it is necessary to train them to use toys. Adults start with that training in the first months of a child's life, because "knowledge of objects is the outcome of other people's behavior towards us, and towards these objects" (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. 102). Parental encouragement and treatment of children are extremely important for the overall child's development and his/her willingness to get acquainted with toys and spend time playing with them. Some toys succeed in keeping children's curiosity and dispersing boredom, some of them reinforce the excitement caused by action, while some of them cause delight only as tools. However, toys mostly represent just a part of the general way in which parents transmit their own life values to the children. According to Brian Sutton-Smith, "The first toys build new worlds in a child in relation to the tools and toys" (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. 121). In that sense, a toy from the outside world is seen as "the key to the inner character" (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. 122). The selection of the toy, given to a child by adults, shapes the children's overall development. However, the impact of the toy itself is not always certain, since its use and purpose is determined by children themselves.

Mutual Play of Parents and Children, and the Role of a Toy

While in underdeveloped societies children have no time to play, in developed societies there is a widespread ignorance of the developmental potential of children's games and toys. On the other hand, parents, who generally have fewer children, show readiness to invest more in toys which serve as partners in solitary activities of children. According to the statistics for the most developed countries in the world, a half of today's parents spend more on toys on an annual basis, than on saving

¹ The quotes in this article are translations of the Serbian original made for the purpose of this paper, unless otherwise indicated

money for the future and education of their children (Mitrović, 2005). The findings of the latest researches are especially alarming, since they reveal the temptations and challenges of children's play in the family setting. It turns out that many adults perceive playing with children as something completely frivolous. They are not convinced that play and toys contribute to the development of children in any way, considering their involvement in this field a waste of time (Roopnarine & Krishnakumar, 2006). For example, mothers from Mexico and Italy share the perception that play is worthless, believing that it is inappropriate for adults to engage in such activities (Haight, 2006). Parents are particularly suspicious of the role-play and imagination games. Adults worry about "as" in games with pretending, acting, taking over other roles, replacing items, due to a close relation of all these concepts with lying. In addition, parents think that their participation in games of any kind will undermine their authority. They express fears that later on they will have problems to discipline their children (Kuchner, 2010). Play is significantly and negatively affected by the perceptions of parents about the importance of children's success at school. Recognizing potentials that education can provide in terms of opportunities for life prosperity, parents feel that it is more important for their children to study than to play (Guddemi, 1992). Therefore, the play is almost completely suppressed from the contemporary childhood quite early on, during the pre-school period.

Although adults often see children's play as a kind of entertainment that serves to engage the children while they perform other important tasks or rest, the relevant studies show the potential of mutual play activities. Recent systematic observing of mutual play of parents and children has shown how different types of games and toys can enrich family daily life and improve the quality of interaction between older and younger family members. According to the research by Lin (2010), the construction games and toys used in these games enable parents to get to know their children while playing together, to show understanding and respect for them. Constructor games help parents to monitor children's behavior, explore their emotions, identify their actual needs, and understand their current level of mental development. In addition, playing together in the construction type of games enables many skills and abilities to be developed due to mutual communication and interaction with objects, such as planning, taking over responsibility, correcting and shared decision making (Kuchner, 2010). Games of imagination and role-play have plenty room for inclusion of adults. The level of complexity of those games depends on the age of the child and his or her social experience. A study (Thyssen, 2003) has shown that adults are important creative potential for role-play for children under the age of three. Older children involve adults in this kind of games in a different, new way. Children develop their own ideas related to the game, assigning a role to an adult, enjoying the changed positions that the game brings. Hence, the games of imagination and role-play allow children to get to know their parents and vice-versa, to understand each other's perspectives, and

develop empathy (Kuchner, 2010). Also, playing with children in a relaxed atmosphere accompanied by laughing greatly reduces stress and provides positive interaction.

The findings of particular studies (Caldera, Huston, & Obreien, 1989) show that objects used for playing significantly model the behavior of participants in an interaction, where the differences are most evident when a mutual parent-child play includes the toys of gender stereotypes. A significant correlation is established between the type of toys ("male", "female", "neutral") and parental verbal reactions when playing with their children. "Male" toys, such as a truck, turned out to be related to a reduced number of questions and instructions, and with an increasing distance between the parents and children. When playing with these toys, especially with small transportation models, many parents pronounce a lot of animated sounds, or they encourage the child to do so. They often correct children by using negative comments and remarks. The assumption is that the increased activity and distinct changes in physical proximity caused by boy toys lead to the need for an increased control over children's behavior and more verbal interaction.

In contrast, when children play with female toys (dolls, miniature dishes) it causes greater physical proximity and more verbal interaction in the form of comments, questions and teaching. Significantly, the largest number of positive information and verbal reactions of parents, in the form of praising and teaching, are caused by the so called neutral toys - puzzles, cubes, etc. Parents show subtle tendencies to respond more positively verbally, and to be more involved when it comes to playing together with children by using the toys that are stereotypes of their own gender. They also express more excitement when they discover the toys appropriate for their gender, showing significant willingness to model the mutual play, rather than when using the other two types of toys, but without direct stimulation or inhibition. Stereotyped toys for both genders are more likely to cause fantasy games and general discussion between parents and children, while jigsaw puzzles cause more questions and teaching, i.e. a greater focus on the cognitive development (colors, shapes, etc.).

Hence it could be said that the differences in the behavior of young children during play are the result of the interaction with various objects for playing and strategies for handling them, which children spontaneously master when playing together with adults. At older ages, the interaction of a child with a toy includes a higher level of creativity and imagination. This allows children to revive the toy and transform it in their imagination, which gives them a sense of power and release of frustration. As children get older, they more often choose the objects for playing which can extend or supplement their imagination. In recent times, the mass media have wholeheartedly "helped" them, thus suppressing the time-proven methods of development of children's imagination - storytelling and joint reading of children's books. Nevertheless, the results of some experiments (Cugmas, 2010, p. 137) show that books are still a significant preoccupation in children aged 2 to 5, while the selection of other toys is under a strong influence of gender stereotypes (Cugmas, 2010, p. 142).

Influence of Industry and Marketing on Children's Play and Toys

Although it is not necessary to emphasize the difference between handcrafted toys, toys made by manufacturing and industrially made toys in this globalization era, it should be noted that serious changes have occurred in the toy industry in the second half of the previous century. Just as a reminder, in the middle of the previous century, the industrial production of toys moved from Europe (Germany, Scandinavian countries) to America. In the seventies, manufacturing plants gradually began to move across the Asian continent - first to Japan, then to South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and nowadays to China. Up to 80 percent of the world production of toys functions in the following way: what American corporations design, Chinese manufacturers produce, mainly in the period of a few months prior to Christmas (Zagorac, 2005). Hence it could be said that, if nobody else, today's manufacturers of toys take children and children's play seriously. They continually lure children with new sophisticated toys. Parents, who have fewer children than in the past, are ready to buy much more than in the past (Mitrović, 2005).

The variety of toys becomes bigger on a daily basis. There are hundreds of toy models that can talk, move, sing, tell stories, answer questions, and even address a child by his/her own name. This is the era when a toy as a machine, which consists of miniature electric motors and chips, is an integral part of growing up process. Electric trains have been replaced by the drone cars, helicopters and planes. In recent years, these scaled-down replicas have been surpassed by transformers with their design and ingenuity, since transformers can turn from a car into a robot. For younger children there are toy or doll pets, small robots actually, which are programmed either directly or through a personal computer in order to introduce children into communication with computers. In addition, it is possible to buy, even for the youngest children, computers which are colorful, with special service operating systems, with keyboards where large buttons are adjusted to children's small hands, and a mouse that reflects the particular way in which children click. This enables children to already step into the world of information technologies early on, in the second year of their life. In this way, the computer becomes a toy that a child can master very early, continuing to acquire and improve a variety of skills and abilities by playing more and more complex computer games. However, the analysis of the content and strategy, which are the basis of these games, shows (Cassell & Henry, 1998) that they generally glorify various types of stereotypes, especially the gender one, and promote violence as a legitimate way for solving problems (Jackson, 2001).

Gender stereotypes and children's toys acquire a completely new dimension when considered from the standpoint of the market. Although many people tend to regard it as the main culprit, the fact is that children do not show flexibility in the selection of toys, and that the preferences of boys and girls are strongly determined by gender and age differences. These toys, the so-called "stereotypes of a certain age and gender",

are intended for encouraging role play and socialization (Sutton-Smith, 1989), and therefore they should be observed as a reflection of the complex situation in the society. On the other hand, the globalization processes and mass media have brought into every home the contents which promote the consumer way of life, additionally creating passive relationships in the family, whose members often spend time together watching television. Certain studies show that an early exposure of children to pure entertainment, especially to media violence, negatively affects their cognitive abilities and later academic achievement (Kirkorian, Wartel & Anderson, 2008, pp. 44, 53). In addition, instead of enjoying playing together with parents, today's kids often spend their time in front of television, absorbing the behavior models of supernatural heroes, and chanting slogans of advertising messages, where advertisers teach them that "the most important relationships are not with people, but with products" as cited in Kilburn by Jackson (2001).

The Lithuanian study (Glebuviene & Tarasoniene, 2007) has monitored how specialized contents of television programs, games and children's publications affect the game of imagination in pre-school children, and to what extent the roles in the games reflect positive and negative aspects of modern living conditions in which children grow up. The results show that after watching a television program, no matter if the content is intended for children or adults, preschool children often imitate the characters acting as agents, models, fighters, Spiderman, Ninja Turtles, robots, monsters, Digimon, Pokemon, etc. Children who imitate heroes of the modern cartoons, TV series and publications get immersed in their roles by imitating the movements of robots, uttering specific sounds, traveling spaceships, firing laser guns, climbing walls or trees, demonstrating the strength and skills of good warriors, etc. Games of force and demonstrations of skills are generally typical contents for role-playing, in which boys test themselves, and where girls rarely get invited. A statistically significant correlation has been determined between the choice of roles influenced by heroes of TV programs, and those arising under the influence of examples from the social environment in which they grow up. It showed that five-year old boys more often choose traditional roles in the games of imagination (care for family members, household chores, doctor visits, shopping, going to the hairdresser, etc), in comparison with older preschoolers (45.3% vs. 35.6%), who prefer more modern roles (making pizzas, serving guests in a coffee shop, writing invoices, showing clothing, playing in the NBA, using cards for shopping, visiting concerts, controlling traffic, punishing drivers, buying and selling stocks, running a company, visiting a solarium, going to the swimming pool, communicating with foreigners, etc.). In doing so, older children are more likely to criticize unreal actions performed by those who imitate heroes either from the real world, or from the unrealistic context. Boys more often choose non-traditional heroes who demonstrate power and use of violence (29% vs. 6.2%), in comparison with girls, who prefer heroines from the traditional context. Also, children from urban areas tend to assume roles under the influence of TV programs, films

and publications, in comparison with children from smaller towns (11% vs. 4%), and they are also more likely to imitate negative phenomena (a drunkard, a drug addict, a gambler, a thief) from the social environment.

Reliance on television throughout the day could be described as a cultural trend. Studies show that children who watch a lot of television have more themes based on the TV content in their play, than themes from the family life or their life experience. In addition, it has been found that children who are passionate television spectators generally less frequently initiate games with the real-life content, and in general, they spend less time in games of imagination or role-play games (Guddemi & Jambor, 1993). Watching television replaces activities related to children's play, and therefore, television becomes a new children's toy. In most homes the television is turned on throughout the entire day. Children wake up with the television on, eat, play, and go to sleep with the TV. Hence it could be said that watching television has a double negative impact on children's play. Not only are children often exposed to negative influence of what they watch, but the time spent watching television is the time that could have been spent in play (Milenković, 2008). Although the analyses of the impact of television are mostly negatively labeled, slightly different views of the role of television programs can be found. Such insights (Seiter, 1993) point out that television offers the elements for establishing the concepts of the common culture to contemporary children who live in social isolation (Jackson, 2001). Namely, when children are together, they comment with each other on what they have seen on TV, retell scenes from cartoons, sing songs from the popular shows, or play actions from a movie (Milenković, 2008).

Therefore, throughout the history of play, the focus from playing with others shifted to playing with objects and machines. In the contemporary society, television has contributed to the growing importance of toys, creating the forced market of products guaranteed by advertisers, with the great help of commercials (Sutton-Smith, 1989). The mass toy market and a huge competition require constant advertising. Commercial television reduces children to the "market for advertising products" (Lemiš, 2008, p. 132). Even a few months old babies represent a target group in a way that advertisements lure their parents to buy them different things, including toys. One of the most important target groups of today's marketing experts are children. Calvert (2008) points out that it was determined that children up to the age of eight or nine do not understand that the toy cannot do everything they see in the commercial, and that children actors are not "real" children. Some countries try to protect children from advertising abuse. Thus, in Sweden, it is forbidden for the children under the age of 12 to be a target group of any advertisers. On the other hand, in America, the most aggressive advertising campaigns focus on this population (Vuksanović, 2008).

How the modern civilization, which rests on the powerful modern technology, affects the selection of toys is illustrated by the aforementioned Lithuanian study (Glebuviene & Tarasoniene, 2007) which was carried out in 26 pre-school institutions,

with 400 children aged 5 to 7. It shows that children spend most of their time playing with modern dolls and figures from cartoon series and TV movies (Pokémon, Barbie dolls, robots, etc.), reflecting the content of those programs. They are followed by the toy replicas of modern technical devices (mobile phones, computers, microphones, scale models of home appliances) and computer and video games. Different designer toys (cubes, designers) and sports toys (balls, bowling, billiards, etc.) are next on the list, while the bottom of the list of favorite toys is reserved for educational toys and children's books. Statistically significant differences have been found in the longer play of five-year olds with male and female dolls in comparison with the older children, and in the time which girls and older pre-school children spend reading through the pages of children's books, in comparison with boys and younger children. In addition, it appears that children's books are more frequently used by children from urban areas, who also play computer and video games little longer than the children from smaller towns, who prefer to play with replicas of technical devices. Boys more often choose didactic games and toys than girls. It is found that boys have more pronounced orientation in games of skills, and that they use toys with technical devices, while girls prefer popular media-exposed toys. Also, it has been determined that the children whose parents have a higher level of education more often play with educational toys, while children with parents of lower level of education more often play with replicas of technical devices and use children's books more. Parents' financial situation proves to have a significant influence on the selection of children's games and toys. Children from the families with higher incomes are more likely to play with educational toys, replicas of technical devices, and children's books, in comparison with their peers whose families have lower incomes.

There is an open question whether the children, while playing with their peers in kindergartens, play with toys which they often use at home, or with toys which they lack in their family environment? Also, the question is what the parents' criteria are when choosing toys for their children? How much are they exposed to the media pressure and the children's wishes created under the influence of commercials? Are parents aware of the age and gender stereotypes among the objects for play? Do parents have a clear idea and a message when choosing a toy for their child? The remainder of the paper presents three U.S. studies that represent different parental criteria, which determine the selection and purchase of toys. The results of studies with similar topics, and which have been recently conducted in the preschool institutions in Serbia will also be presented.

Testing Parents' and Children's Criteria for the Selection of Toys

The first formal study on the criteria according to which parents select toys was done in the mid-fifties of the previous century by the Opinion Research Corporation in the United States (Opinion Research Corporation, 1955). It showed that the selection

of toys and their purchase was mostly affected by durability (31%), affordable price (25%), parental perception of a toy being in accordance with the child's wishes (24%), as well as educational and playful potential of a toy (23%). The latter, educational potential, was mostly related to the age of the child (Christensen & Stockdale, 1991).

Two decades later, a similar question was posed by Sutton-Smith, who tried to identify the criteria of parents (n= 88) in New York when buying toys for their children. The author observed to what extent the ideology of educational purpose of games and toys was preserved considering the market and media impact. The research findings (Sutton-Smith, 1979) showed that parents believed in the educational character of toys. A vast majority of parents thought that toys were educational (84.09%) and that they encouraged the development of children's imagination (75%). Parents insisted on security (72.72%), expressing a high distrust concerning the status of contemporary toys. Slightly more than a half of the parents (57%) indicated that the toys promoted gender stereotypes, while a significant number of respondents stated that they personally did not approve of it (76.14%). The author of the study associated these findings with a strong feminist orientation that was widespread in the United States at that time. A significant number of parents (69.32%) expressed disagreement with the toys in the form of weapons, while there were three and a half times fewer parents who approved of them (19.32%), which might have been the influence of the Vietnam War pressure. Contrary to all expectations, the impact of the media on the selection of toys was confirmed only by one eighth of parents who approved of toy advertising on television (12.5%), three and a half times more of them disapproved of it (43.18%), and the same number of them did not know or they had no opinion about it. In addition, the New York study found that the majority of parents (72.73%) decided which toy to buy together with the child. There were four times fewer of them who made independent decisions about it (17.05%), and only 3.41% of parents left the toy selection up to the child (Sutton-Smith, 1989).

A step further in the study of parental criteria for the selection of children's toys was made by the American authors Christensen and Stockdale (1991), correlating them with the demographic features of parents (gender, age, education level, family size, income, circumstances in which they grew up), and their educational competences (the ability to assess the child's competence, and understand their own role in learning and teaching children). 230 parents, whose children were between 2 and 5 years old, were asked by the researchers to list the top 10 and the least desirable 10 characteristics of the toy which they would buy for their children, i.e. to describe the toy as it should look like. There was a list of 45 different criteria obtained from the parents. It turned out that the most important characteristic of the toy was safety (I), and that this implied compliance with different security, technical and aesthetic criteria, such as the following: the toy should be well constructed (V), without sharp edges (VI), of a stylish design (VII) and durable (IX). In addition to safety, the parents referred to different educational aspects, such as the following: a toy should be fun for the child

(II), it should stimulate imagination (III), develop creativity (IV), be appropriate for children's abilities (VIII), be consistent with the developmental level of the child (X), be instructive for the child (XI) and be in accordance with the child's wishes (XVIII). The price of the toy, as a criterion for selection, was the fifteenth on the list. At the top of the list of the least desirable criteria were the following criteria: a toy was advertised on television (I), it was new in the shop (II), and it was intended for particular gender of the children (III).

Although testing the influence of the parents' gender on the selection criteria did not appear as statistically significant, there was a difference noticed between fathers and mothers. The fathers expressed the criteria in more general terms, and, unlike mothers, they did not accentuate the criteria which specified how the toys were made, how flexible they could be, and whether they contained a warning to parents. Instead of that, the fathers specified a common group criterion. It turned out that mothers specified the educational criteria more often if they were younger, came from a smaller family and had a poorer financial situation. This last factor proved to be relevant for fathers as well, who accentuated educational criteria for the selection of toys to a great extent. The mentioned criteria proved typical of the young families, which were raising one or two small children. Also, the educational value of a toy was accentuated as a statistically significant criterion by mothers who were more sensitive to initiative and learning initiated by the child itself (which explains 17% of the variance). According to the authors (Christensen & Stockdale, 1991), the criteria that guide parents in choosing toys for their children are closely related to the fact how parents perceive their role in the learning and teaching of their child, and, to a lesser extent, in relation to their ability to assess children's competences.

Recently, a similar research was carried out in kindergartens in Novi Sad, in order to determine the attitudes of parents in our environment in relation to children's play and to learn about the criteria by which they usually select toys for their children (Vuković, 2012). It turned out that the parents ($n=73$), regardless of their gender, age, education level and monthly income, were willing to spend their free time ("whenever I can" - 46.58%, "often" - 35.62%) in mutual play with their children and that they considered their participation in the games to be important (72.6%). It was found that they had a high opinion of children's play and toys, which was not significantly different from the New York study of four decades ago. Almost three quarters of parents from the sample considered toys as instructive (73.97%) and highly valued their contribution to sociability (72.6%). Almost all of them agreed in their assessment that the toys encouraged children's imagination (94.52%) and the role-playing games. Referring to the properties of a good toy, every second parent who participated in the study singled out as the most important the fact that the toy must not jeopardize the safety of the children, and that it must contribute to children's learning. Every third parent said that it was important for the toy to develop imagination and provide an opportunity for having fun. The next group of characteristics, which was emphasized only by

every ninth or tenth parent, was related to the contribution of a toy in expression of children's creativity, its aesthetic properties, suitability to the age of the child, and enabling several children to play with it. One out of 25 or 30 parents stated that the common properties of good toys were the following: enabling a child to play alone, not contributing to aggressive behavior, being complex and requiring reasoning and more complex motor actions, being affordable in price, not being intended for a specific gender, i.e. being gender neutral.

It is interesting that a half of the surveyed parents thought that toys promote gender stereotypes, and more than a half of them (61.64%) chose to buy a toy according to the child's gender. In addition, it was not found that the differences in the attitudes of the respondents might be related to differences in age, education level and the level of monthly income, while the gender of the respondents is singled out as statistically significant. Fathers express gender stereotypes more than mothers (76.47% vs. 21.74%), agreeing with the division of toys by gender ($\chi^2=17.25$; $df=3$; $p<0.01$), and expressing assurance (64.71% vs. 32.61%) that 'dolls are toys for girls' ($\chi^2=9.03$; $df=3$; $p<0.05$). It was shown that the majority of parents decide on which toy to buy together with their children (87.67%), while there are an insignificant number of parents who make that decision by themselves (4.11%), or entirely leave the choice up to the child (8.22%). In addition, the research shows that the majority of parents think (89.09%) that television has a great impact on the time spent in playing. Thereby, a very low percentage of them (5.5%) evaluate the impact as positive, while more than a half of the respondents (60.25%) negatively assess the influence of television programs on children's play. Although one third of parents could not assess the impact of the media with certainty, most of them state that commercials do not affect their choices when buying toys (47.95%).

However, these findings are challenged by the results of an earlier research (Jocić et al., 2011; Bakić, 2007) that was carried out by preschool teachers in Subotica encompassing a large number of parents (230 parents whose children were between 2 and 7 years old), and in Belgrade (1,080 parents whose children are between 3 and 7 years old). According to the statements of the parents, the preschoolers' favorite toy is the one with the image of a hero from the popular series and cartoons for kids (Ben 10, Superman, SpongeBob, Noddy, Spiderman, Action Man, Ninja Turtles, Bidamon, Pokemon, and others - for boys; Winx, Bratz dolls, Barbie, Totally Spies, Snow White and others - for girls). According to the parents from Subotica, preschool children spend on average about 2 hours and 25 minutes watching their heroes on television or playing with them on the computer, on a daily basis.

However, for more than a quarter of children (26.83%) that is more than 3 hours per day, and for 10% of the children that time is 4 hours or more. One of the parents participating in the study stated that his child spent in total up to 8 hours a day in front of different types of media (TV, DVD player, PC) (Jocić et al., 2011). According to the statements of many parents from the Belgrade research (Bakić, 2007), the toys

“are selected according to the age, theme, advertising and price”. Only subsequently do they pay attention to whether the toy is educational and if it is safe to play with it. It is assumed that the scandals related to cancerous substances in toys, and toxic paints, led to the attitude change on the importance of safety when selecting toys.

When it comes to computer games, they are selected by parents, or parents make the choice together with their children. Parents emphasize that they pay attention, when selecting the computer games, to the age of the child, educational value of the game and that it does not promote violence; all of that is in conflict with the wishes and interests of their children. They point (Bakić, 2007) out that playing computer games impairs physical health of the children, and seriously jeopardizes their psyche since children lose touch with reality, become alienated, aggressive, and full of fears (e.g. Babić, Irović & Romstein, 2007). Similar findings were obtained in the sample of parents from Novi Sad (Dragić, 2011), who rated the impact of computers on the socio-emotional and physical development of children most negatively on the attitude scale, while they positively valued the contribution of computers to the intellectual development.

An insight into the individual interviews (Savičić, 2012) conducted with children (n= 30) between the ages of 4 and 6 contributed to an in-depth understanding of the criteria based on which today's children chose toys and games. Among the children's responses, the answer that draws most attention is that the children selected twice as often the option 'playing on the computer' (67.3%) than 'playing with a favorite toy' (32.7%). The four-year olds (60%) do not differ significantly from the six-year olds (72.2%), while the preferences of children by gender differ significantly. More girl respondents (53.8%) expressed preference for the 'play with a favorite toy', in comparison with boys (23.5%), who prefer much more to play on the computer, and spend more time in these kinds of games, whereby the boys from smaller towns spend less time playing on a computer. However, they play on a computer on a daily basis, unlike their peers from big cities who do not play on a computer every day, but when they do, they rarely have a time limit (Savičić, 2012). The boys mostly choose to play action games (shooting, skills) and adventure games (exploration, identification with imaginary characters), then the simulation games (driving, sports, military) and thinking games (puzzles, riddles). The girls have a different selection of computer games which belong to simulation of services, then the games of identifying with fantasy characters (adventure games), and games that engage their creative potentials (creating clothes, preparing desserts, and similar). When it comes to computer games, children like the feeling of satisfaction when they reach the goal after overcoming many obstacles and avoiding various pitfalls. They like to win points, medals, and obtain scores for the invested efforts, as well as the ability to perform highly specialized operations and activities from the world of adults.

One third of the surveyed children, especially the six-year olds, love to play on the computer alone, while younger children prefer to play games together with their

brothers or sisters or friends, which can be confirmed by the findings in some other studies as well (e.g. Babić, Irović, & Romstein, 2007). It is noted that in most cases parents do not actively participate in the computer games of their children, although in more than a half of the cases the parents were the ones to introduce children to these activities. Certainly the most interesting finding of this study is the fact that almost all the children (93.3%) stated that the computer is not a toy, explaining their view by arguments based on the physical characteristics of the computer (*"because it's big and heavy"*, *"because it is not made of plastic or wool"*, *"because you cannot take it in your hand and move it since it will break"*, *"because you cannot sleep with it"*, *"because there is a motor in it"*, *"because it has electricity"*, *"because it is a device that costs a lot"*), and by the fact that it is in the ownership of adults who do important work on it (*"because the computer is for doing something important"*, *"because it's real"*, *"because the computer is used by adults"*, *"because the computer is used for something else"*; *"because we do not play with it, but we play games on it"*, *"because mom and dad decided for it to be a regular computer and not a toy"*) (Savičić, 2012).

Conclusion

The findings of the presented studies clearly show that parents in our environment highly value the children's play and toys, show their willingness to participate in the mutual play with children, and consider their involvement in these activities as important. They rarely see toys as the means for seclusion of the child. However, they see in it an opportunity to improve children's social skills, which represents a significant difference in comparison with the findings of other studies (e.g. Christensen & Stockdale, 1991; Sutton-Smith, 1979). A part of the explanation lies in the fact that the last two decades, full of great uncertainties and strong social transformation of our country, have rehabilitated the traditional values of the family life (Milić et al., 2010, p. 29). The other explanation takes into consideration that the parents whose children attend institutions of preschool education have the opportunity to exchange views on these issues with teachers and other experts. This is proven by a number of activities for improving parental competencies and the segment of the research into them has just been discussed here (e.g. Jocić et al., 2011). Parents are instructed that whenever they listen to their child, support his/her ideas, talk to him/her, help him/her to expand and enrich his/her playing activities, they are given the opportunity to better understand and get to know their child, but also to support and encourage his/her development.

Parents, especially fathers, mostly make decisions on buying toys together with their children respecting their wishes and needs, whereby they take into account that the toy is safe, educational, that it stimulates imagination and role play, and contributes to the socialization in accordance with gender roles. When selecting the toy, it is impossible to avoid the influence of commercials, since the children of early preschool age spend several (2-4) hours a day in front of the television watching different contents.

However, it could be said that the impact of commercials on the purchase of toys has a more pervasive than decisive influence, since parents tend to avoid marketing tricks. Nevertheless, it is important to remind parents that children are extremely susceptible to manipulation in commercials, and that, according to experts (Calvert, 2008), they do not understand the essence of commercials until the age of eight or nine. There are a growing number of authors who critically discuss the immediate and delayed effects of media manipulation to which children are exposed today. There are a growing number of countries that impose limitations when dealing with children as a target group of advertisers (Vuksanović, 2008). Also, along with the globalization of toy markets, there is a need for a better control of their safety and security, which raises the question of their standardized labeling in order to prevent the distribution of products intended for small children, which do not meet certain criteria.

The studies show (Jocić et al., 2011; Bakić, 2007; Vuković, 2012) that the most favorite objects for playing among small children and girls of all ages are stuffed toys and female and male dolls with characters of popular heroes from the cartoons and series for children. Older preschoolers prefer equipment and accessories of surreal heroes, as well as devices for playing computer and video games (Dragić, 2011; Savičić, 2012). Playing on the computer is almost a regular phenomenon among children who are exposed to it on a daily basis, from the age of four. Only one fifth of children between the age 3 and 7 have no access to a computer (Bakić, 2007). The regular fans of these toys are both children from urban areas and children from small towns, whereby the children from the cities more often play on the computer without any time limits. Children especially love these games because of the experience of competency generated by performing activities successfully (from the world of adults), which are otherwise unavailable in the real life. A part of the attraction lies in the fact that the computer is a valuable property of adults, whereby playing on a computer has an additional satisfaction. Most parents negatively assess children's playing computer games. They believe that these activities adversely affect both physical and emotional development of children. However, they are willing to compromise on the benefits in the field of intellectual development and contribution to IT literacy.

It is necessary to introduce parents to the fact that after the first wave of enthusiasm, entering of the information technology into the world of children's games has less true supporters today. Increasingly, experts warn that the effects of technology on the child development have not been sufficiently examined (Elkind, 2003; Harris, 2001; Haugland, 2000), and many manufacturers have a limited sense of understanding the ways how children learn (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2002; Elkind, 1998; Healy, 1998). A long-time supported positive impact on the intellectual development of children is brought into question, since it appears (Attewell et al., 2003; Gentile, 2003) that the intensive interaction with technology limits brain development (Downey, Hayes, & O'Neill, 2004, p. 9). The contents of computer games are also criticized (Cassell & Henry, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999), since, in principle, they contribute to the reinforcement

of various kinds of stereotypes (gender, racial, ethnic, etc.) and to the spreading of violence (Jackson, 2001).

Therefore, it could be said that the toys of contemporary childhood fail to avoid controversies of modern civilization. They are strongly influenced by the modern technologies, reflecting the numerous unresolved social issues. Accordingly, some authors (Fleming, 1999) suggest that children have the capacity to avoid the stereotypes of gender and power that the toys sometimes apparently produce, and that they have the power (Dyson, 1997) to deal with the contradictory pressures of growing up in a multicultural society (Downey, Hayes, O'Neill, 2004, p. 9). A special meaning in strengthening the children's resilience to various forms of pressure is provided by the free play in unstructured natural environment that engages children's motor skills and reduces stress through positive interaction with nature, on which there is extensive data (Charles & Senauer, 2010; Charles & Wheeler, 2012). On the other hand, the benefits of inter-generational exchange and cultural communication are offered by the traditional games to which people have started to return in the last decades (Duran, 2003) in order to reduce the alienation of children and the instrumentalization of the children's play.

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Čime se i kako igraju današnja djeca?

Sažetak

Igračka predstavlja materijalni temelj igre, oblikuje iskustvo djeteta, budi imaginaciju i usmjerava ponašanje prenoseći vrijednosti određenog doba. U visokorazvijenim društvima sve mlađa djeca bivaju prepuštena usamljeničkoj igri s predmetima i strojevima koji favoriziraju kopiranje obrazaca globalnog potrošačkog društva, veličaju razne stereotipe i primjenu sile. Postavlja se pitanje koje su igračke najzastupljenije u igrama djece iz našeg okruženja? Rad predstavlja pregled različitih istraživanja koja ispituju kriterije za izbor igračaka i izloženost roditelja medijskom pritisku i željama djeteta stvorenih utjecajem reklama. Ispituje se i spremnost roditelja za uključivanje u zajedničke igre s djecom i ukazuje na njihov razvojni značaj.

Ključne riječi: dječja igra; izbor igračke; stereotipi; zajednička igra roditelja i djece.