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Toys and Games

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The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Toys and Games

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Toys are tools of play that most often connote the pleasures of childhood. Games are structures for play that usually involve socially agreed upon rules and goals. Some form of toys and games are evident across historical epochs and cultural communities, suggesting their deep significance as part of human development. At the same time, the particular types of toys and games most central to development vary significantly by age, gender, and other sociocultural contexts, suggesting the importance of understanding their meanings in context. In other words, toy use and game play simultaneously reflect and refract developmental trajectories. In the study of life-span development, toys and games have most often been studied as part of the broader phenomenon of children's play, and the role of toys and games in childhood is primary in this entry. This entry does also discuss examples of how toys and games continue to serve developmental functions in adulthood and old age, although that research is significantly sparser. It is also worth noting that whereas *gaming* now often refers to electronic games, and whereas there is a large and growing body of humanities and design research on what is sometimes called *game studies*, in the study of life-span development, electronic gaming research is often distinct from traditional considerations of toys and games as play.

Toys and Games in Childhood and Adolescence

The importance of toys and games across contexts of childhood is perhaps best represented in the famous 1560 painting by Flemish renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder *Children's Games*—which shows some 200 children playfully inhabiting a town square engaging in nearly 80 games, many of which are still recognizable in the 21st century. Girls play with dolls, boys play with balls (made of an inflated pig bladder), indistinct groups play marbles and tiddlywinks, and others play hide-and-seek and engage in verbal banter. In the modern schoolyard, chase games, ball games, and verbal games are still the most common types of play. Bruegel's scene is, however, lacking one element familiar to more contemporary such scenes: adults. The idea that parents, teachers, game designers, or other professionals need to direct the use of toys and organize children's games toward explicitly developmental ends seems to be of relatively modern origin. This modern practice also sets up perhaps the key tension in understanding toys and games as part of life-span development: To what extent are they simply fun ways to pass the time and to what extent are they pedagogical tools actively shaping developmental outcomes? Most of the children in Bruegel's famous painting have serious looks on their faces, but the question of how seriously to take toys and games is likely more pressing now than it was in 1560.

In classical developmental theories such as those of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, toys and games are critical to development because of the ways that children actively explore the physical and social world when engaged with toys and in games. Piaget, in one famous example, offered descriptions of how children use marbles to document developmental changes from early to middle childhood. In early childhood, children usually treat marbles as toys that can be used for imaginative scenes or for individual physical actions—as imaginary food to cook, or as fun objects to throw across a room. Through to the age of 5 or 6, Piaget saw children start to use marbles for rule-bound games, although they still played in largely individual ways. Then, around the ages of 7 or 8 years, children become able to engage with the marbles in group games that require cooperation, competition, and social norming. Similarly, for Vygotsky, children's toys and games represented increasingly complex ways of understanding concepts as distinct from objects—toy dolls, for example, might help a child to internalize the different socially ascribed characteristics of males and females.

Most classical developmental theory assumed that toys and games were relatively organic components of childhood, and historically many toys were found objects. Contemporary considerations of toys and games, however, focus on ways of imbuing toys and games with explicit developmental value. This focus is particularly evident in *educational* toys and games whereby the developmental value of play lies in design features related to goals such as literacy and numeracy. Thus, adults give children toys such as puzzles and blocks with the intention of developing engineering skills, or teachers encourage children to play letter and number games to facilitate the learning of reading and math. This pedagogical emphasis is facilitated by the toy-making industry, which expanded broadly through the 20th century to make mass-produced toys easily accessible. The predominance of cheap manufactured toys is historically distinct and raises questions about whether the creative act of making toys was itself part of the developmental value for previous generations of children.

The mass production of consumer toys, and the highly organized nature of much contemporary game play, raises important developmental questions about how social norms are internalized. Gendered play has perhaps been most intensively researched, and there is some evidence that toy preferences have some innate roots, with girls preferring dolls and toys symbolizing people and boys preferring active toys such as balls and trucks. This research is complicated, however, by the fact that cultural expectation and marketing efforts for toys are highly gendered and present nearly from birth. In addition to many toy stores themselves being highly gender segregated, it may be that social expectations constrain boys and girls from playing with toys typed as feminine or masculine, respectively.

As children develop through middle childhood and adolescence, creative play with toys and games often shifts into more organized sports and extracurricular activities along with electronic gaming. There is a large and growing research literature about organized sports and extracurricular activities that is beyond the scope of this entry, but it is relevant to concerns that physically active game play has become overly structured in ways that detract from the development of creativity and independence. The evidence to support this concern is mixed. There is, however, an overall agreement that opportunities to participate in organized games and activities are an important part of positive youth development in many communities. Likewise, there are concerns that the overwhelming popularity of electronic game play (with estimates suggesting that 91% of U.S. children between ages 2 and 17 play video games) can lead to social isolation and passivity. These concerns, however, are also subject to robust debate in developmental research, with some scholars noting that electronic games also offer potential cognitive and social benefits by challenging people to engage in complex narratives and immersive environments that involve multiple players and virtual communities. Interestingly, as per the trajectory of organized sports, electronic gaming is increasingly undertaken in highly organized competitive settings (such as *eSports*) in ways that mirror broader trends for toy and game play to be increasingly commodified and hierarchically structured.

Toys and Games Through the Life Span

Organized sports and electronic gaming continue to have a significant following through early adulthood. Additionally, more traditional types of game play have some appeal during adulthood for leisure value and for opportunities to socialize. The popularity of playing board games, for example, has actually grown in tandem with the popularity of electronic games—likely at least in part for satisfying adult needs for directly engaging social interactions. Games such as chess also continue to have devoted followings through adulthood, although the popularity of chess itself may be in some decline. Overall, however, there is very little research

about relationships between recreational game play and adult development.

Further, although adults will sometimes refer colloquially to their recreational tools as *toys* (such as adult males talking about boats or bikes) and toy fads sometimes interest adult collectors, traditional toy use is not usually associated with adulthood. When adults do engage with traditional toys, it is often in the service of more professional goals and based on a popular fetishizing of toys and games as associated with the unconstrained creativity of childhood. The Lego Group, for example, has a *serious play* consultancy that uses toy Lego blocks to work with business groups on ways of brainstorming corporate projects and challenges. Ironically then, for many adults, toys and games symbolize the frivolous fun of childhood but are only worth engaging when serving a functionalist purpose.

In old age, recreational games have also been most directly addressed in developmental research from a functionalist perspective. There is, for example, an active debate about the efficacy of *brain training games* that many companies promote as ways for older adults to maintain and improve cognitive function. It is clear that cognitive engagement in old age is an important part of successful aging, but it is not clear that specifically designed games have any advantage over less-technological activities such as crossword puzzles, reading, or social interaction. Regardless, with increasing attention to keeping active during old age, recreational game play does have an important leisure role in later adulthood.

Thus, toys and games have a long and enduring role through the life span from early childhood to old age. Contemporary trends toward commodification, hyperorganization, and virtualization raise important new questions about development. Toys and games are most closely associated with the independence and creativity of childhood, and they continue to both reflect and refract the ways children move from egocentric thought to the internalization of social and cultural norms. But the increasing use of toys and games for *serious play* that has intentional educational or developmental value may unintentionally detract from the adaptive role of toys and games in development. In many contemporary societies, even in adulthood and old age, toys and games are designed to improve group functioning, cognition, and other developmental characteristics that might equally benefit from the more traditional role of toys and games as pleasurable leisure and recreation.

See also [Creativity](#); [Extracurricular Activities](#); [Leisure](#); [Media](#); [Play](#); [Sports](#)

- toys
- games
- video games
- game playing
- marbles
- children's games
- old age

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Further Readings

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