

Why my daughter doesn't need many toys

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Toys are everywhere: building a house from recycled loose parts.

I felt guilty while cleaning out half of my two-year-old daughter's toys. I sorted them into piles to throw away and give away, worrying she would resent me. Parents give toys to enrich their children's lives and demonstrate love. How does taking them away make any sense?

When my daughter entered her sparsely decorated room I was relieved. Instead of noticing what was missing, she became reinterested in what was there. Within minutes she had propped up a long cardboard tube (we like playing with recycled

materials) and was rolling cars down it. Reducing the quantity of her toys increased her innovation.

Children's toys have changed dramatically over the last few generations. My daughter's grandmother says she can't remember having toys. I had a few but most were practical, like musical instruments and bikes.

David Elkind, a professor of child development, says 'mass production has made inexpensive toys available in enormous quantities, and in seemingly unlimited variety. Once given to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays and holidays, toys are now routinely purchased all year long.'

Elkind says toys made from natural materials are preferable over man-made materials, as they provide comfort, warmth and rich sensory experiences. He recommends toys that have 'borne the test of time', like wooden blocks, puzzles, crayons and play dough.

I give my daughter open-ended toys that can be used in multiple ways. Toys without set outcomes are powered by imagination, not batteries. They can grow and change as children do.

Waldorf dolls are compatible with the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, and are open-ended dolls with no facial expressions. Sometimes they have no eyes or mouths at all. Whether you believe these dolls are beautiful or creepy, they are designed to promote imaginative play. The absence of expression allows children to decide how their doll is feeling.

In the 1970s, architect Simon Nicolson developed the Theory of Loose Parts, which proposed a correlation between children's

creative play and the number of 'loose parts' in the environment. A loose part is something for building or making - sticks, sand, water, cardboard, fabric, household items and kitchen utensils.

I decluttered the toys in my daughter's room, knowing she still had loose parts throughout the house and garden. She likes pegs from the washing line, packaging from the recycling bin, seedpods, flowers, and my shoes. Her world offers an abundant supply of toys.

We make our own toys, like our tea set crafted from air-dry clay. And we borrow from toy libraries - even the plastic, noise-making toys I wouldn't ever purchase. My goal is to promote play, and that can be achieved without owning a large number of toys at home.

Few toys makes tidying easy, and an organised environment provides a sense of calm. My daughter plays with each object longer, she is focused, and her games unfold gradually. She is never bored, but parenting experts say some boredom is a good thing.

Vanessa Lapointe, psychologist and author, says 'children need to sit in their own boredom for the world to become quiet enough that they can hear themselves. It is only when we are surrounded by nothing that something comes alive on the inside.'

Elkind says his three-year-old granddaughter seems overwhelmed by her toys, and 'appears to look to toys for amusement and distraction, rather than for imaginative inspiration. It is really hard to help her parents appreciate that when it comes to toys, less is more.'

Limiting the number of toys and choosing toys that support imaginative play is only the first step. Elkind says 'these playthings will only be able to work their magic if children are given the time, and the freedom, to interact with them.'