

## Phil's Forum 9/06/06 "How Toys Teach Part 2"

Last week we talked about how toys teach important life skills such as Communication, Cooperation, Problem Solving, Planning & Strategy, Logical Thinking, and Cause & Effect.

The **Great Toys** – toys that are *Open-Ended*, *Interactive* and *Creative* – not only keep our children entertained, but also challenge them to think, to use their brains, and explore their imaginations.

In Part 1 I used the examples of Dolls (Role Play Toys) and Lego (Construction Toys) to show how these skills are taught through simple play.

But teaching through toys goes much deeper than that.

I am a strong advocate that parents need to be involved in their children's play at some level. Parental involvement helps you steer the direction of play, helps you understand your child's abilities, and helps you reinforce the learning you hope to achieve.

But even I fully understand that toys are also a means by which we occupy our children so that we can accomplish our own tasks.

"Go play with your toys," is a common phrase in our household.

But when my boys run off with their Role Play Toys (Rescue Heroes, Hot Wheels, or Playmobil) or Construction Toys (Lego or K'Nex) I feel quite comfortable in the "hidden lessons" they are learning, too.

What do I mean? Let's take Rescue Heroes for example. Rescue Heroes are action figures but with one little twist – they have no enemies. All other action figures from Power Rangers to Superman to GI Joe have enemies – bad guys to be defeated.

Now, I'm not saying that bad guys and enemies are no-no's. But think about the lessons taught. To be a good guy you have to "defeat" a bad guy. This can add an element of competitiveness to the play, not to mention the dangerous notion that if you're not with us, you're against us.

Rescue Heroes, on the other hand, help those who are in danger - usually from a natural calamity. The hidden lesson? It is important to help those who need help.

Which of these lessons would you like your youngster to emulate? *Defeat* those against you, or *Help* those in need?

Dolls are another classic example. The two leaders in the category are Barbie and Bratz. Barbie has received a lot of criticism over the years for being too skinny, too well-endowed, or just plain too unattainable in looks. She has been accused of causing eating disorders in children who try to meet her image of beauty.

Although I tend to disagree (I believe our culture in general sets a pretty high bar for beauty, looks and fashion) there are some hidden lessons for girls who idolize such dolls. That is why I have always applauded Mattel for making Barbie more than just a

fashion icon. Despite her "faults" (since when is beauty a fault?) Barbie has also been a Doctor and a Dentist, worked at McDonald's, and even been confined to a wheelchair. Beauty isn't everything to Barbie (although it still plays a major role).

On the other hand, the doll that is trying to supplant Barbie at the top is the very popular Bratz dolls. Their lesson? Fashion *and* attitude! Take the most objectionable part of Barbie and match it with a selfish, me-first, I-get-what-I-want attitude. Then market it to kids who quickly emulate that attitude by *demanding* that their parents buy these dolls.

And yet, each year Bratz dolls gain ground on Barbie dolls.

Of course, some of our smarter customers have turned to the Groovy Girls. Although Groovy Girls do espouse fashion, they do it without the unattainable physical looks of the Barbie dolls and none of the attitude of the Bratz dolls.

And as we always say to customers who came in looking for the Bratz dolls, "Would you rather your daughter grow up to be a Brat or be Groovy?"

Yes, there are "hidden lessons" in toys. As the parent, you owe it to your kids to take control of what your children are learning by looking at how toys teach, both on the surface and below.

Remember – every toy teaches.

What do you want your kids to learn?

Happy Shopping!

**-Phil Wrzesinski**

PS Next week we'll discuss how the quality of the toy teaches a valuable lesson, too.