

Phil's Forum 2/27/07 "KGOY"

(Note: this is a long forum. Put it aside for a quiet moment when you can give it proper attention and find the nuggets of useful information it contains.)

The Toy Industry is in peril! Sales are stagnant at best, slumping in many categories and toy stores and toy manufacturers are dropping like flies.

That was the "buzz" from the International Toy Fair held in New York in mid-February. Or at least that was what the AP reporter who covered Toy Fair wrote. And once the wires all picked up the story, there it was in black and white - the impending death of the toy industry.

And who's to blame? KGOY. Kids Getting Older Younger. Kids are growing older at younger ages and getting out of toys and into electronics, clothes and other non-toy items at earlier ages, thus shrinking the toy industry into a never-ending death spiral.

In other words "society" will be the downfall of the toy industry.

I hate when people blame "society". It's too convenient. It takes responsibility away from the individual.

Here is what I believe about the concept of KGOY. In 1599 Romeo & Juliet by William Shakespeare was published. Romeo was 16 and Juliet was 13. As recently as the 19th century, the "age of consent" in the US was as young as 9. It certainly was not uncommon in the middle parts of the 20th century for children 15 and 16 to get married and start a life together.

Our kids today are not getting "older" at younger ages. They may be getting more "sophisticated", but that is different than older.

All kids of all ages tend to want to emulate adults. This has been true forever. You can easily see this in the driving force behind Role Play toys. Dolls and dollhouses encourage this behavior. Action figures, themed playsets, and trains also work within this simple reality of childhood. Dress-up clothes are probably the penultimate manifestation of this concept in toys.

So the first place some want to lay the blame for KGOY is in the toys. The higher level of sophistication of our children comes from the level of sophistication in the toys children use for play. Simple concepts of right and wrong give way for more sophisticated concepts of *degrees* of right and wrong. Attractive becomes Sexy. Celebrity becomes Attitude. Simulation becomes Reality.

Which leads us to the chicken and egg question. Which came first, the more sophisticated toys or the demand from parents & children for such toys? Many are quick to blame the toy industry.

The complaints about the sexiness and attitude of the Bratz[®] dolls are not so different from the complaints made 48 years ago about Barbie[®]. Yet, girls today demand these dolls just as strongly as the girls of 1959 did for Barbie[®].

Some might see this as living proof of the KGOY syndrome and quickly jump on MGA, the makers of Bratz[®] dolls as the culprit. But didn't Madonna and Britney show up on the scene long before Bratz[®] dolls? Are Bratz[®] dolls in demand because of MGA's marketing or did the celebrity world that these dolls emulate create such a demand?

Electronics, especially handheld video games, cell phones and mp3 players have certainly changed the landscape of the toy industry as children are getting such items at earlier and earlier ages. Some blame this shift for the demise of the toy industry. But wait; just because Sony, Apple and Motorola make these items, are they not considered "toys"? Don't they count as toy sales? I certainly saw my fair share of electronics companies at Toy Fair.

In reality, electronics are just a natural evolution of toys. A century ago all toys were made of wood or metal. Then came mechanical actions, followed by plastics, electronics and computer chips. All of these "advances" are not necessarily bad, as long as the toys stay true to what makes a great toy - interactive, open-ended and creative play. Unfortunately, many of the most recent advances have moved away from

these concepts. Most electronics are used for entertainment purposes, not for interaction and creativity. Electronics, themselves, are not the culprit. But how electronics are used is certainly worth discussion.

The Real Toy Story, a book by Eric Clark, hit bookstores recently. In it Mr. Clark explores the underside of the toy industry including the working conditions in toy factories in China, the ruthlessness of the major toy manufacturers and toy retailers, and the calculated marketing designed to make your child demand that you buy the latest and greatest offerings by these manufacturers.

The lengths to which manufacturers will go to market to your kids is certainly greater and more sophisticated than ever. Mr. Clark, in his book, wonders how parents can survive the onslaught of marketing and advertising, especially in a society where parents spend less time with their kids and substitute "things" for "time". Many believe that this sophistication in marketing is the cause of KGOY.

Then again, the demand for Barbie® in the less sophisticated and less marketed world of 1959 is not much different than the demand for Bratz® today. And nothing has ever compared to the Cabbage Patch® craze of the mid 1980's when marketing was far less calculated and orchestrated than it is now.

So, what (or who) is really to blame for this KGOY concept?

Let us look at who really has the control. We all know that kids want to play. We all know that kids want toys to help facilitate that play. We all know that kids want to emulate adults in their play. Consider these the "givens".

So the blame for kids getting sophisticated earlier must rest with the adults - with us.

Kids want to emulate us, they want to copy us, behave like us. Therefore, much of their behavior comes from the behavior we role model for them. When we "worship" celebrities like Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie, we tell our children that this is the kind of behavior we like. Even when we are just watching for the "train wreck" that these celebrities' lives' seems to be, we still are putting forth the message that this kind of behavior is important.

When we allow electronics to control our lives, when we become slaves to our cell phones, Blackberries, and iPods, we show our children that electronics are the "toys" to have. Kids want to copy us so they want electronics, too.

When we substitute toys for time, or buy whatever our children demand out of feelings of guilt, we teach children that "things" are more important than "people". So children naturally assume that the more sophisticated the thing, the more sophisticated the person who owns such things. This leads to children demanding even more sophisticated things in their desire to "play grown-up", thus creating a vicious cycle.

Yes, kids are getting more sophisticated at earlier ages, but only because we, as parents, are allowing it to happen.

You CAN slow it down if you remember this one simple thing... YOU are in control.

You control what **behaviors** you role model for your child to copy. When children are present they are watching and taking mental notes. So only show them that which is appropriate for their world. Show respect and love to all in your life and your children will want to copy that.

You control what **values** you deem important through where you put your focus. If you want your children to mimic responsibility, give your attention to people who are responsible. Put the volunteers who help the needy on a pedestal. Praise those who do hard work for rewards other than money, such as teachers, emergency workers, and clergy. Ignore those who do not set the examples you want for your children. When an athlete dominates the sports world with his or her bad behavior, instead talk to your children about the athletes who do good in this world.

You control how soon your children get **exposed** to the different levels of sophistication found in society. Kids have always wanted whatever adults have. Years ago it was a horse, then a car. Now it is a cell phone. But did we give our 6-year-old a car? No, we waited until he was older. The same is true about

today's electronics. Unless circumstances dictate it, your child does not need the latest advances in electronics. And, you will never convince me that "keeping up with the Joneses" is a valid argument. Your child's self-esteem should *NEVER* come from the "things" he has.

Finally, you control what **toys** your children have for play. Unless your child is making more money than you, the decision on what toy to buy is still yours. Yes, your child will want to influence the purchase, but you still hold the purse strings. The beauty is, no matter what level of sophistication may force its way into a child's life, children still want the same three things in their toys that they wanted one hundred years ago - interaction & involvement, creativity, and an endless opportunity to play.

And regardless of what that AP writer thought, there were plenty of toys at Toy Fair (and now at Toy House) to help kids be kids and keep the KGOY syndrome at bay. In fact, in many ways the Toy Industry is as strong as ever with more great toys than at any time in history. And Toy House is committed to doing whatever we can to help you find those great toys.

Even as life seems to be flying by, remember that you are still in control! Enjoy it! They'll be teenagers soon enough.

Happy Shopping!

-Phil Wrzesinski