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## Phil's Forum – 11/1/05 Saving Money Part 1 – The True Cost of Toys

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(This is Part 1 in a three-part series on how to save money while shopping for toys.)

Budgets are tight. We know the crunch you're facing because we pay the same at the pump that you do. We have houses to heat, and we have children who need and want toys.

So, as you make out your holiday shopping budget, we understand your fears of whether there will be enough for the kids to have the Christmas of their dreams.

Here's the good news. You CAN get the kids Great Toys AND make their Christmas wonderful WITHOUT spending a ton of money... as long as you know how to get the most out of your toy budget.

Sound easy? Actually it is.

If you only remember one thing about toy buying, it is this:

The most affordable toy is the one your child plays with the longest.

Here are some things to remember. First, your child is going to play. They are going to play, and most likely, they are going to play with toys. If they don't have toys, then they'll "make" toys out of whatever they can get their hands on, sticks, rocks, your favorite heirloom vase from your great-great-grandmother.

How much your child plays is dependent on his or her schedule. But rest assured that children **will** fill all the white space in their lives with play.

The second thing to remember is that you want toys for your children to use during play so that they **don't** pick up grandma's vase and start a football game in the living room.

So, kids will play, and they need toys. To save money on toys, you need to find toys that have long play value, toys that your kids will play with for hours on end. The longer they play with a toy, the fewer toys you have to buy to fill those hours of play, and therefore, the less you will have to spend.

So the way to save money becomes very simple. Find how much a toy costs *per hour of use*.

We call that the **True Cost** of a toy. As a formula it is:

Cost of Toy ÷ Hours Played With = Cost per Hour of Play (**True Cost**)

Take, for example, the Thomas the Tank Wooden Railway Figure Eight Set. The set sells for \$40. A typical child will play with this toy for at least forty or more hours before becoming bored with it. Doing the math we get a True Cost of \$40 ÷ 40 hours = \$1/hour.

But what if the toy turns out to be not quite so interesting? A classic example that I have used before is Tickle Me Elmo. Most kids thought it was fun to squeeze five or six times before becoming bored. Average playtime? Thirty minutes. Do the math and $\$25 \div 0.5 \text{ hours} = \$50/\text{hour}$ of use.

Tickle Me Elmo's up front cost may be \$15 less than the train set, but with this example you can see that Tickle Me Elmo won't occupy your child for very long, so you'll be back at the store to find new toys for the other thirty nine hours and thirty minutes of play that the wooden train set would have occupied, but Elmo didn't. In reality Tickle Me Elmo costs fifty times as much as the wooden train!

The only problem is that the boxes don't tell you how long your child will play with each toy. How can you estimate how long a child will play with a toy?

I'm glad you asked.

There are three criteria that make a toy a winner and give it long-lasting play value. You've heard me say them before, but they are worth repeating. The criteria are:

Interactive **Open-Ended** **Creative**

Interactive means that the toy engages the child. The child has to be an *active* participant in the play. The child has to do something more than just turn it on and watch it go. The wooden train is just colorful lumber until someone lays out the track, someone picks up the train, someone pushes it around, someone decides when, where and why it goes the way it goes.

Interactive means that the child is involved in every aspect of the play. We all know that *playing* the game is much more fun than *watching* the game. The same is true with toys. Kids don't want to watch their toys; they want to use them. Tickle Me Elmo's only interaction is to squeeze his belly and then watch. That's as interactive as a light switch (and not nearly as fun.)

The more a child does to make the toy work, the more the child will play with that toy. A classic example of interaction is the doll. We have dolls that walk, talk, cry, eat, wet, and more. But surprisingly enough, it is the doll that does nothing but lay there that becomes the little girl's favorite. Why? Because she has to give the doll life through her own actions. And that giving of life, that creating of the doll's every moves - her personality, her talk, her actions - is what creates the bond between girl and doll.

Open-Ended means there are endless ways to play. Wooden Blocks are the ultimate in open-ended toys. You can stack them, throw them, build with them, lay them out in designs, even decorate them (as my artistic sister did). You can use your blocks with other toys like Hot Wheels (garages & tracks), Barbies (houses & furniture), little green army men (forts, foxholes, and trenches). The list of ways to play goes on and on.

The more ways a child can play with a toy, the more often that toy will be included in play. The more often it is included, the longer the child uses it, and therefore, the lower the cost per hour of use.

Creative means that a child has to use his or her imagination. Just like the example of the doll, the more a little girl must do for the doll, the more she must use her imagination. The more she uses her imagination, the more she “owns” that toy because it came from her own mind. The same holds true with any toy. Once a child engages his or her imagination, they take ownership for having created the way in which the toy was played. They then feel more attached to the toy and are more apt to continue playing with it.

Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative are the three keys to long-lasting play value, more hours of play, and lower **True Costs**. If you can look for these concepts in the toys you buy your children, you will save lots and lots of money in the long run.

Just a few weeks ago my wife and I did our annual fall cleaning of the toy boxes. We were looking for the toys that our boys no longer use, toys that we could donate to charity or throw away to make room for the new toys Santa might bring. *Unfortunately*, we didn't clear out much space in the toy box, because, *fortunately*, the boys are still playing with those toys! So we still have our Lego's, Playmobil, Rescue Heroes, Lincoln Logs, Wooden Trains, Hot Wheels, Dress-up Clothes, and Marble Runs - all Interactive, Open-Ended and Creative toys.

Once last thought on the subject of **True Cost**. Quality does count. Here's a classic example my grandfather used to teach over fifty years ago.

Every boy has owned a cheap balsa airplane at one time or another. Now they're made out of Styrofoam, but the concept remains the same. Slide the wing through the slot in the body and start tossing it into the air. At \$2 apiece, these are pretty cheap toys... until you look at the True Cost. Since most of us were lucky to play with the plane for a mere ten minutes before it was stepped on and broken, stuck in a tree or on the roof, or taken away by a parent because we threw it in the house, the True Cost for this toy measures like this: $\$2 \div \text{one/sixth hour} = \$12/\text{hour of use}$.

The quicker and easier that a toy might break, the fewer hours your child will use it, and the higher the True Cost will be. For that reason, be wary of knock-offs or cheaply made versions of toys. Quality built toys will always be cheaper in the long run.

Look *not* at the price tag, but at the **cost per hour of use** and you will save money on toys. I guarantee it!

Happy Shopping!

-Phil Wrzesinski

PS Next week I will give you some tips and hints on how to gauge your child's interest in toys and how to pick the **right** Interactive, Open-Ended and Creative toys for your child, including how Santa and I will make all of the old toys in our house new again this Christmas without spending a ton of money.