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## Phil's Forum – 11/8/05 Saving Money Part 2 – Observation & Expandability

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*(This is Part 2 in a three-part series on how to save money while shopping for toys.)*

Last week we talked about the **True Cost** of toys measured as the *cost per hour of use*. Remember...

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

We also discussed how to evaluate toys using the criteria of **Interactive**, **Open-Ended**, and **Creative**. (If you missed that discussion, you can read it online at <http://www.toyhouseonline.com/forum.asp>.)

But now you're in the store seeing the thousands of Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative toys that we sell. How do you choose that one toy that will most interest your child?

Having them watch hours of TV to see the toy ads won't work. Television is the Holy Land for toy companies to advertise their latest versions of Tickle Me Elmo and other non-interactive toys with really high true costs.

In fact, you're better off keeping the kids away from the TV. The creative teams behind those toy ads can make *anything* look fun and exciting for thirty seconds.

The BEST way to know what toys to get your children is for YOU to watch THEM. That's right. Do something you're already doing. Observe your children in play. Watch how they interact with other kids, how they interact with the toys and what type of play interests them.

Some children are very active and always play a specific role in whatever they have imagined. They don't just move the characters around; they become one of the characters. Toys like dress-up clothes, kitchens & tea sets, workbenches, sporting goods, and dolls are good for these kids. The girl at the tea party, the boy who becomes a fireman, and the children playing kickball all are *participants* in the play.

Other children like to be what I call the "Director". They don't play a specific role as in the previous example, but they control all the actions of the characters in their play. Toys such as themed playsets from Playmobil and Imaginext, dollhouses, action figures, and wooden trains make great toys for these kids. The child isn't one of the characters, like she would be at a tea party, but is still fully involved directing what the characters do.

Building and construction toys such as Lego, K'Nex, Erector, Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs are also great Interactive, Open-Ended, and Creative toys. Finding the right construction toy is easier when you observe your children in play. Are they quiet, able to stay focused for long stretches of time? Do they get frustrated easily? Can they follow multiple directions? Are they more likely to color within the lines or follow their own path?

Some construction toys like Erector Sets require more careful planning, following of directions, and overall time to build the models. The same holds true for some of the more advanced Lego & K'Nex sets. Other building toys like SuperMag and Duplo are easier and quicker to assemble the finished product. The key is to know your child's skill level and being able to match the right building toy with their ability. If it's too easy, they get bored quickly. If it's too challenging, they get frustrated and walk away. Following age guidelines and knowing your child's abilities helps you pick the right level.

The same can be said about arts & crafts projects. Does your child need a framework to work within, or can they create from a blank canvas? Coloring Books or Sketch Pads? Thin pencils or thick markers? Finger paints or fine point brushes? Create "this" or Create "whatever"? The more you understand your child, the better your choices will be for arts & crafts projects.

Observe your child's play habits and you'll be more likely to find the right toy that they will play with for hours and hours and hours.

One more thing to note: All of the toys listed above are what I call **Expandable** toys. **Expandable** means that there are add-ons to the original toy – rooms of furniture for the dollhouse, small K'Nex sets to go with the bigger K'Nex set, vehicles to go with the action figures, track to go with the wooden trains, buggies for dolls, and on and on.

Expandability in a toy is one of the greatest assets for parents on a tight budget for three reasons.

### **1. You don't have to invest a lot of money up front to gauge a child's interest.**

Even if you have done your homework above and observed your child in play, there is still a chance they might not take to whatever toy you choose. By starting with a small set, you can test the waters to see if the child has any interest, before investing in lots of product. You can even start small with a variety of different expandable toys to see what your child likes best.

### **2. The add-ons make for great gifts from family & friends.**

If you know the toy will be a hit, having other family members buy add-ons means your child can get the "big splash" of a toy without breaking your budget. Although you know that you only bought the "starter set", all your child knows is that he got, "a whole lot of Lego!" Plus, you make shopping easy for grandma & grandpa.

### **3. Add-ons make the original toy (and original investment) new again.**

The best thing about expandable toys is that it doesn't take much to make the whole toy new again. If your child already has a dollhouse, adding a new room of furniture makes the *whole* dollhouse new again, and renews her interest in playing with it. The same holds true for the wooden trains. Add a new building or a few new pieces of track and the *whole* train set becomes a brand new toy. New Playmobil brings the old Playmobil back out of the toy box.

Last week I mentioned how my boys already have Lego, Playmobil, K'Nex, Hot Wheels and Rescue Heroes. Every day our **True Cost** goes down on those toys because the

boys are *still playing with them*. More hours of play equals lower True Cost. Here's where it gets fun.

Since they are all Expandable toys, all my wife and I have to do this Christmas is buy an add-on item for each of those toys and we make *everything* we own "new" again. One new Rescue Hero (\$10) means Ian will keep playing with *all* twelve (thirteen? fourteen?) Rescue Heroes he already owns. One new set of Lego (\$15) combined with the hundreds of pieces he already has and Parker will keep building newer and larger contraptions with *all* of his Lego's through 2006.

We won't have to start over with brand new toys to replace old toys because we started with toys that were expandable in the first place. And now a few dollars in new toys could easily make hundreds of dollars in old toys seem "new" again as the boys get a renewed interest in those items.

Here's a mathematical example. You have thirty dollars to spend on a "big" item. You could spend that on a stand-alone toy that is not expandable, or on an expandable toy. With the non-expandable toy, the following year, you will need to spend another \$30 to replace that item with another "big" item. But if you went with an expandable toy, just a \$15 add-on in year two will actually give you more "new" toys for your child.

For those of you who want to see the actual savings, it goes like this.

<u>\$\$ Spent</u> <u>Year 1</u>	<u>\$\$ Spent</u> <u>Year 2</u>	<u>Total</u> <u>Spent</u>	<u>Total \$\$ of "New"</u> <u>Toys in Year 2</u>
<b>Non-Expandable</b>			
\$30.00	\$30.00	<b>\$60.00</b>	<b>\$30.00</b>
<b>Expandable</b>			
\$30.00	\$15.00	<b>\$45.00</b>	<b>\$45.00</b>

You math wizards have already figured out that with the second example you spend 25% less but get 50% more in play value. That is real savings! That is Expandability!

And imagine how fast the savings add up when you account for the \$30 that grandma & grandpa spent on add-ons that first year. Now your \$15 investment the second year makes \$75 worth of toys "new" again!

Observe your children in play and look for expandable toys - money savings tips guaranteed to work!

Happy Shopping!

-Phil Wrzesinski

PS We all know time equals money. Next week I will show you how that equation holds true in the world of toys.