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Phil's Forum 8/24/05 Seriously Fun Learning

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(Editor's note: this was part of a Back-to-School email that listed toys for every class subject from Math & Science to Geography & Gym Class)

Cute, huh?

Linking the hype of back-to-school shopping with the selling of toys is a great gimmick, right?

And the Toy House Class List, what an imaginative, clever way to promote toys at a time when everyone is thinking about uniforms, supplies, bus schedules, and lunch duty.

I'm sure you can all picture me patting myself on the back for being so clever.

But cleverness is not what I'm selling today. I actually believe in the ability of toys as teaching tools. I honestly think that toys can get kids to learn certain skills faster and more completely than some of the schoolbooks our kids use today.

And in the hands of a trained teacher who knows how to utilize the lessons from toys, I believe that toys can teach some skills so completely that they're never forgotten.

You often hear me quote Fred Rogers who said that, "Play is a child's job." I often add to that phrase that toys are the tools children use to do their job. Toys teach skills like communication, cooperation, problem solving, strategy, and negotiation.

Toys can also teach classroom subjects like math, reading and science. And I'm not just talking about flash cards and other so-called "educational toys".

Years ago there was much debate over why boys tended to be better in math and science than girls. On the other hand, girls usually excelled in language skills. In fact, it has been shown that women typically have larger vocabularies than men.

Some experts say that it is genetics, that boys and girls are wired differently. Others say it is because boys are encouraged to excel in math and science more than girls and girls are more encouraged to read and write.

I say, there is some truth in both statements, but it's actually much simpler than that.

Why do boys do so well in math & science?

By third grade we've already figured out how to calculate the earned run average (ERA) of our favorite baseball pitchers – a calculation involving the multiplication and division of fractions. We can multiply and divide by seven faster than a calculator from watching all those football games. And we know how to calculate averages – average yards per carry, average catches per game, batting average, etc.

We know our math because we use it in our sports, both watching and playing. The backs of our baseball cards are a smorgasbord of statistics and calculations that we can do in our sleep. We're counting "bullets" in our opponents' play guns so that we know when they're

out of ammunition. We understand the concept of scale with every model we build. We're calculating the turning radius of our train sets. Boys know math because we use it every day in the ways we play.

We know science, too. Who's the first kid to slice into that frog in biology class? The same kid who has already cut open fifty other critters, squashed and then examined a million bugs, chased garter snakes through the tall grass, and thought that road kill was kinda cool.

At the same time, the girls have set the table for a tea party and are having pretend conversations with their dolls about fashion, the weather, and those icky boys.

Just as a woman might have four or five versions of a similar shoe because each shoe is uniquely better suited for certain situations, a girl learns four or five words for the same emotion because each word more completely captures the feeling.

Boys (and men) just have tennis shoes.

So here's where I get in trouble (assuming that last analogy hasn't already gotten me in trouble).

I believe that toys can teach children in ways that are every bit as valuable as the standard memorize and recite learning that happens in our schools.

Toys teach kids to think. Plain and simple, toys teach kids to use their brains for making connections, not just storing data. Toys encourage kids to imagine and suppose, to go beyond the real world into the world of the mind where anything is possible.

Toys are a lot smarter than you think. And kids that play with toys are a lot smarter for doing so. And when you put toys into the hands of our teachers, toys can be very effective teaching tools.

So, do your child (and your school) a favor. Buy some toys for home, and also put something in your basket for your child's teacher. With the tight budgets most schools have, it's hard to justify a "toy purchase" no matter how good a teaching tool it can be. And your teacher will be grateful to have another way to engage the children and help them learn while they play.

Toys can teach. No, let me rephrase that. Toys DO teach.

What are you teaching your children?

Happy Learning!

-Phil Wrzesinski