

The Modern Child and Toys



A Symposium- To which have Contributed:

By Margaret Lowenfeld 1938

Toys are to a child what a grown-up is represented by his power of speech, his pen, pencil and typewriter, his motor car, his bicycle, his power of acting, cooking, and carpentering. From his earliest years a healthy child has an immense curiosity about the outside world. He is not aware of himself as a person separate from his own body. He has, as it were, to think with his body. He uses, therefore, those parts of his body with which he is already familiar—that is to say, his mouth and tongue to begin with, then his hands and feet, and any other part of his body that he can move—with which to investigate new aspects of life.

Toys for tiny children should be suckable, should be light in weight, bright in colour, smooth in texture, and capable of many different sorts of manipulation. All these qualities increase a child's range of sensory experience and give him keen pleasure.

The next task that the impulse of growth in a child prompts him to attempt is the acquisition of control over outside objects. It is essential that a child should have material which stimulates his curiosities and desires, but which is just a little too difficult for him to manipulate easily, and which is in itself real and constructive. Mechanical toys have their uses in helping to bridge the gap for the child between the inanimate object and the living moving human being or animal, but the use is a very limited one, and mechanical toys should form only a very small part of a child's toy collection.

Building bricks are essential. For small children they should be large, so as to be held with both hands, and because of their weight, solid bricks are not as good as hollow ones. A child loves to build a house into which his dolls, and, later on, into which he himself can go. A grown-up's aid should be limited to helping him when he is baffled over the mechanical difficulties, and never used in suggestion to the child of goals to be attained. A normal child is full of ideas which he wishes to carry out, and it is wiser to let him discover the unworkability of those that are unpractical by actual experiment, and not to attempt to protect him from occasional experiences of failure.

Quite ordinary things, reels of cotton, sticks, clothes pegs, bone buttons, string, pots and pans, boxes, odds and ends from the grown-up kitchen equipment, old paper weights—almost anything that is part of an ordinary grown-up's working tools, and which

has become old enough to cease to serve its grown-up purpose, is delightful to a child, and is added with joy to his collection of treasures.

It is always better to have too few toys than too many, and the essentials of a toy should be that it is suitable for the child's age and stage of development, that it is well-made, and constructed out of strong material, and that it leaves room for the imagination. Dolls' houses are far better primitive than elaborate, and best of all if they are home-made. Dolls are most beloved when they are quite simple, and furry animals become all the more dear when half their fur has been hugged off them.

Every child wants to try out the things he sees the grown-up doing, and to play his own games of household work. There should be ready to his hand, therefore, real tools for domestic life, real brushes and pans and dusters and soap, small in size but genuine in quality—nothing is so disheartening as a fragile toy tool that comes apart at the first energetic onslaught of the child who wishes to use it really to bring about a change in some part of his world.

In primitive conditions, a child's chief education was concerned with the learning of natural lore, of the behaviour of water and earth and little animals, of the look of the outside world in winter and summer, and of all kinds of things from which the city child of to-day is absolutely divorced. A child's need for water and sand is a need which goes down to the roots of his being. Children have in their own bodies the experience of the production, as it were from nowhere, of substances both liquid and solid, and they are immensely interested in what their bodies can do. "Isn't that nice," said one child recently, stirring with his finger an offensive-looking yellow mess, "it's just like sick. I do think sick's nice, don't you?" Opportunity for experimenting with water and sand, with clay and dough and liquid colours, gives a child an opportunity of expressing for himself his own ideas about the world around him, and of correcting them by reality. "Dirty" is a word that should not be used in the region of a child's play—a little foresight can so easily dress him in an appropriate way for the exploration of this side of his interests—and if a child is once satisfied that opportunity to be really messy and excitingly "dirty" in play time will be given him, then he will not resent having to conform to the ordinary rules of cleanliness and tidiness at other times.

The amount of such opportunities should be graduated according to the child's age and individual needs, as also should be the toys that he is given. Toys are a scaffolding up which a child climbs, and by means of which he helps himself to attain both physical and emotional growth.