

Oldies But Goodies Retro Toys - A Smart Choice

By Erin Mantz

Toot-toot! Thomas the Tank Engine is right on track when it comes to children's development. Playtime means train time at Benjamin and Nathaniel Strauch's house in Potomac. The two brothers, ages 4 and 1, choose from more than 100 Thomas & Friends trains and books – and older brother Benjamin assembles and reassembles the tracks on their train table. He loves that Thomas is known as a “very helpful engine” and saves the day. Mom Heather loves that Thomas toys require Benjamin to interact and not just passively watch. In this age when kids are bombarded by electronic learning systems and structured games, retro toys like Thomas, Lite-Brite, Legos and blocks are regaining ground. Research is showing again and again how these retro toys can significantly drive children's development.

Developmentally Rich Toys

Experts ranging from play specialists to child psychologists are pointing to developmentally rich toys, like Thomas, that put young children in the driver's seat at playtime. Many agree Thomas the Tank Engine fuels children's cognitive, literacy, social, creative and physical skills all at once. Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a world-renowned author, play specialist, developmental psychologist and professor in the department of psychology at Temple University, puts playtime in the spotlight with her book *Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How children really learn – and why they need to play more and memorize less* (Rodale Press 2003). Today, she considers retro toys “true educational toys” and emphasizes how things like blocks, trains and playdough can do wonders for children's imagination, socialization, spatial skills and more. “Do you ever notice how a young child often likes the box a present came in better than the toy itself? After a few days, there is nothing new he can do with the toy, but he can play with the box in different ways,” she explains.

Find Playthings In Everyday Life

You will find a wide array of retro toys in stores and online (or even in those dusty boxes packed with your childhood toys), like Mr. Potato Head, construction kits, puppets and building blocks, but you don't necessarily have to spend a lot of money. “Look around for playthings in your everyday life,” Hirsh-Pasek urges. Think about having the kids sort laundry or run around with flashlights. “What we, as parents, have to do is take a breath and recognize the very best learning environment is right there all the time. It involves things that let kids create a world within a world.”

Fueling a Child's Imagination

Thomas & Friends certainly fuels a child's imagination to do just that. Experts like how Thomas addresses so many aspects of a child's development. It fosters cognitive skills as toddlers and preschoolers cultivate spatial skills while building tracks and furthers physical development as it requires eye-hand coordination. Because the trains have different facial expressions and model conflict resolution, kids learn about identifying, labeling and managing emotions during Thomas play.

From the moment Patrick Gannon of Bethesda received his first Thomas storybook for his first birthday, he was hooked. Thomas & Friends engaged him in a world where every train had different faces, expressions and character profiles. "By age 2 1/2, he learned who is naughty, who is nice and how the trains can all get along," says mom Lindsay. "I think Thomas stories always teach wonderful lessons about right and wrong and working as a team. And I like that Thomas learns from his mistakes."

The Power of Play

Doctor Kyle Pruett, clinical professor of psychiatry at the Yale University Child Study Center, and author of the book *Me, Myself and I: How Children Build their Sense of Self: 18 to 36 Months* (Goddard Parenting Guides), understands the power of play. He also understands why so many kids love playing with Thomas & Friends. "Kids can connect the tracks, carry the trains around, look at each train's facial expression, consider which trains caused trouble – [the kids are] the boss – and young kids have very few things they're the boss of," he says. At the same time, Pruett says parents are hungry for play toys that are wholesome and interesting. And parents are responding positively to Thomas.

A new study shows that moms hold Thomas products and the brand in very high esteem. Eighty-nine percent of moms surveyed have an "extremely favorable" or "favorable" attitude toward it. Parents who like Thomas also seem to be strong gatekeepers of their kids' television watching and watch less television overall.

Yet, something else is drawing parents to retro toys: a sense of nostalgia. Caroline Hacker of McLean, mom to 3-year-old Owen and 5-year-old Ben, recently relished a break from digital toys. "Packing for a weekend to Florida and thinking how to occupy the kids on the plane, I brought Mad Libs and game books instead of loading up with Leapster stuff," she said. "Even at home, we have fun with things like Tinker Toys and Connect Four. It feels good to go back to basics, and they are less expensive than most new or digital toys on the market today. Plus, these remind me of my own childhood!"

Hirsh-Pasek may be on to something with her point about the box. In fall 2005, the Strong Museum in Rochester, N.Y., inducted the cardboard box into its National Toy Hall of Fame, along with alphabet blocks, Etch-a-Sketch, Erector sets and others.

Parents who've recently bought the wildly popular Wii, take heart: Hirsh-Pasek told me she gives the product a thumbs up because kids get active and they can play it with others.

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Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek's Toy Tips for Parents

Based on considerable child development research, Hirsh-Pasek likes toys that:

- Are 10 percent toy and 90 percent child. Many toys are very directive and don't enable kids to think and shape their play experience.
- Do more than one thing. This will encourage kids to think creatively and stay interested in the product.
- Kids can take apart and put back together in new ways.
- Encourage social action.