The Blanket: PLAY FOR SOCIAL AND CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

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November 10, 2012
Many thanks to:

David Morgan for his guidance throughout this whole process and for making me think about design in a completely different way.

Stan Rickel whose clever look on design made me challenge myself everyday.

Kirsten Condry whose knowledge and dedication added great value to my thesis.

My colleagues for their companionship and for two great years.

My family for their love and support.

My husband whose unconditional love and support helped me finish this thesis even when I thought it would be impossible.
Seeing that many educational toys available today are focusing too much on the toy itself and not the play possibilities it generates, this thesis attempts to put the importance back on the *activity* of play. It proposes to bring play back to the basics by focusing mainly on face to face interactions.

This thesis discusses toys or playthings that help develop creative and social skills in children through parent-child oriented play. This is done through the encouragement of pretend play and storytelling as the basic activities.

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**Key Words**

Play, Toys, Creativity, Imagination, Social Development, Creative Development, Parent-Child Relationships, Scaffolding, Lev Vygotsky, Constructivism, Pretend play, Storytelling, Blanket
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The idea for this thesis came about when thinking about play when I was young. I remember that my father and younger sister (she is 5 years younger than me) used to play in a very particular way. They covered themselves with a blanket and played games; all you could hear was laughter. One game they played under the blanket was “the cold monster,” an imaginary character our dog had to save them from. I remember my sister’s laughs and how fun this was since I was invited to play several times. It was their own space and the blanket isolated them from everything around them. They had that special time and place for themselves.
Many of the toys available today have no significant educational value; they just follow trends, are greatly influenced by the media and therefore rapidly replaced. Play has shifted from being about the activity to being about the object, which negatively affects a child’s creative development. Howard P. Chudacoff, a university professor and author states:

It’s interesting to me that when we talk about play today, the first thing that comes to mind are toys, whereas when I would think of play in the 19th century, I would think of activity rather than an object. (Chudacoff 2007,10)

Studies show that creative, spontaneous, open-ended play contributes to a child’s cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. It also helps them to develop thinking, problem solving and social skills much faster and develop a better understanding of the world; yet most contemporary toys come with very specific instructions and stories that do not leave much room for the imagination. Carleton Kendrick, author and family therapist argues that:

Play that is child-initiated, child-controlled, and open-ended allows and encourages children to process information and to make sense of their world. (Life.familyeducation.com 2011)

For example, many of the toys available at popular retail stores are recreations of TV characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants, Dora the Explorer, and many others. When kids play with these types of toys, there is no creative incentive. Other toys, targeted specifically towards girls, are increasingly focusing on their fashion awareness, like Bratz-Passion for Fashion and Barbie-Top Model. These toys are promoting a sense of the world that has more to do with fashion and do not have educational significance. The toy itself and not the type of play it generates is the center of attention and the reason for buying. As play theorist and author Sutton-Smith has stated:

It is not so much what the toy does by itself, but in what way it gives the child an instrument with which to express and manipulate the cultural forces that bear upon him or her. (Sutton-Smith 1986, 247)

I agree with Sutton-Smith when he states that many toys today focus too much on the object and its appearance and not so much on the type of play it generates and in what ways the child can play with it. This approach often leads to poorly designed toys that lack any educational value.
However, not all toys are meant to promote educational development in children, many are simply meant to be fun and entertaining which is perfectly fine. In my opinion, the real problem lies when parents replace valuable face to face interactions with their children with toys that claim to be more educational. Parents can be easily misled by false advertisements and by the tremendous amounts of educational toys out there today, each claiming to develop skills better and faster than what parents can do by themselves.

The objective of this thesis is to create a plaything that generates the type of play that is “not for sale,” or play that does not focus on material consumption and dependence but play that focuses on relationships between people, instead of people and objects. It focuses on the quality of play instead of quantity. Economist Jack Manno writes that this type of play has the potential to create “greater human satisfaction with less material and energy.”

At the far end of the commodity-potential range are things not for sale such as making angels in the snow, play with found objects, group play, sing-a-longs, and all the goods of interpersonal contact. (Manno 1999, Chapter 3, Section 2)

Electronic devices, especially those targeted to children, seem to be isolating people more and more and distracting them at times from having meaningful interactions with other people. I think it is crucial to remind people, children in particular, of the importance of interpersonal contact and how valuable and fun it is. This thesis aims to bring parent and child closer together through play.

My design will not be a standardized toy that will end up in a landfill after only a couple months of use, but a tool for creating the type of play and skill-building experiences mentioned above, seeing that this is a quality that many toys these days are lacking. The toy itself will only become an instrument to facilitate these types of activities. These types of playthings have the potential of being the means or instigators of creative play. As educator Kate Douglas Wiggins states:

The more you give to the child the less chance he has to develop his own resources. (Chudacoff 2007, 84)
Target Audience

The target audience for this thesis are parents that are interested in going a step beyond in the types of toys they buy for their children. They are concerned about the lack of toys that encourage social and creative skills and are concerned with the amount of time children today spend in front of a screen.
The Blanket is exactly as the name says; a blanket, whose main objective is to help develop creative and social skills in children by focusing on parent-child relationships through means of creative and proactive play. Storytelling and pretend play are the basic activities encouraged because they have great potential in helping to develop creative and social skills.

The Blanket creates and defines a space for the parent and child to interact where face to face contact and a certain amount of physical closeness is required. It designates a place where the activities will happen and uses a simple, ordinary object (blanket) as a symbol of creativity, imagination and open-ended play.

With The Blanket, two spaces are created, a physical space and a social-emotional space. By physical space I mean that The Blanket itself creates certain visible boundaries that can make the interactions between parent/caregiver and child a little more intimate and personal. When The Blanket is put on the floor as a mat or used as a fort or tent, it immediately creates a personal space isolated from any outside distractions that might interrupt the ongoing activities. The space now becomes the child’s world and a place where imagination and make-believe are possible and completely accepted. It somehow forces the communication between parent and child to be more focused.

The other type of space that is created is a social-emotional space. By having a physical space created by The Blanket and designated as a place for imagination and make-believe, a social-emotional space starts to develop with it. The Blanket serves as a platform where the parent and child can talk, play and hopefully in some way it allows the child to feel free to explore their imagination with the help of the parent.

The idea behind The Blanket is that it creates endless possibilities of play; it is completely transformable into whatever the child wants it to be. It is like a blank sheet of paper or a cardboard box. It lets the child express him or herself by giving enough tools to spark creativity but not too many to interfere with it.
The Blanket has four tabs on the corners with buttons and slits all around the edge which make it very easy to attach to furniture to create 3D spaces like forts and tents, as well as to attach to itself to create costumes, backpacks, boats and anything else the child wants to create.

Aside from the many possibilities of play The Blanket offers, its most important quality is that the focus is on the activities it generates which allows for creativity and imagination to emerge and not on the object itself. The Blanket designates a space and serves as a tool for playful activities to develop around it, but it is never the focus of attention. It is this particular quality that makes the potential activities that it creates the important and special part about it. The Blanket without anyone using it is just a blanket; it doesn’t move, jump, light up, make noises or have any special effects that would make it special on its own. It is only meant to be an instrument that helps develop a child’s creativity and foster make-believe play.

Many of the popular educational toys available today lack this quality. The focus of too many of them is the actual object and the activities that revolve around what it can do, which in turn limits the child’s imagination.
I developed five principles that helped me take all the research I had done and summarize it into a form I could apply directly to my design. Below is this list of principles, which will be followed by an in depth explanation of each.

1. Focuses on Parent-Child Relationships
2. Encourages Proactive Play
3. The Activity is the Focus and not the Object
4. Less Material Equals More Satisfaction
5. Uses the Constructivist Approach Towards Learning
Principle 1: Focuses on Parent-Child Relationships

Social and creative development in children thrive in environments where responsive interactions can take place and where the children’s needs are met and questions are answered. Parents can serve as tutors and scaffold children’s play to help strengthen the educational experience.

Mother and daughter playing with string phone
Principle 1: Parent-Child Relationships

The Importance of Responsive Interaction for Social and Creative Development

By looking at the types of educational toys available today at popular stores, it seems to me that toys are focusing too much on trying to develop children's intellectual growth and are leaving behind social and creative development. Every day there are more and more toys and products focused on developing specific intellectual skills in children, but very few are focused on promoting social interactions and creative thinking. Some examples of these types of educational toys that flood popular store shelves are handheld electronic devices from Leap Frog, V-Tech and Fisher Price among others. These toys are labeled as educational toys but lack the capacity to develop creative and social skills. They are very attractive for children and parents and can very easily end up replacing valuable interactions between children and other people.

Some people believe that social development simply takes care of itself, but research shows that this is not true (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Eyer, 182). Social development needs to be learned as any other skill and the way of learning it is simply by doing it and interacting with other people. This is why it is very important that children, especially these days when screen technology seems to take most of their free time, engage in more social interaction.

Responsive interactions are key for social development in children. Children thrive in social interaction when it responds to their needs, concerns and behaviors. It should be adaptive to each child and follow their momentary needs. This is why educational toys that focus only on developing intellectual skills and that do not promote any social development fail. As mentioned before, children learn most when they can engage in the activity fully and when they can learn in context and have a real learning experience, not a superficial one. This is impossible to accomplish with an electronic device.

Real learning takes place when children can apply what they have learned beyond the original situation and when they can make sense of it in their daily lives; this ability is called transfer (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Eyer, p250). When children can transfer knowledge into different scenarios, aside from the original situation, the learning can be considered successful.

On the other hand, superficial or “boxed” learning is when learning is limited to the context in which it is learned and when children cannot make sense of it and bring it to their own lives. An example of this can be learning with flashcards; a child can recognize and memorize shapes on cards but probably cannot transfer and apply that knowledge to their own lives.
Aside from parent-child relationships promoting social development, it has been studied that children need the help of adults in order to be able to fully engage in certain play activities such as make-believe. According to Lev Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist, make-believe is a social activity where children learn appropriate communicative conventions, social skills and representational capabilities from interactions with more experienced adults that later allow them to do this on their own and with other children (Berk and Winsler 1995, 63).

Haight and Miller also believe that make-believe requires a specialized set of communicative conventions that must be learned through the interaction with more experienced players (unlike the Piagetian view that pretense is individually generated and later becomes social). For example, players must agree on role assignments, transformations of objects and locations and tell each other about changes in the scene and so on. Also helpful is when parents integrate play props into the make-believe activities because they are reinforcing that this is a valued activity and encourage the child to do it (Berk and Winsler 1995, 63).

Singer and Singer also agree with this. They argue that:

> For creativity to develop at its best, important people in the child’s life must establish a climate for make-believe, encouraging and accepting the child’s imaginings with enthusiasm and respect. (Berk and Winsler 1995, 65)

Even though adult participation in play can be beneficial as mentioned above, adults should be careful not to make too obtrusive, overpowering or one-sided contributions and should set clear limits on their degree of control because this may cause the opposite effect.

There are many questions that arise when talking about adult intervention in play, one of them is: What is appropriate adult intervention?

Goncu and Klein have answered this question by stating that:

> Adult participation is most helpful when it responds to, guides, and elaborates on the child’s behavior with demonstrations and suggestions. (Berk and Winsler 1995, 68)
This means the adults should first pay attention to what the child is doing and then respond and elaborate on it. There has been a great deal of research done about adult intervention on play but for this thesis I focused on a scaffolding model called the “Tutorial Model” which outlines what is considered appropriate adult intervention and gives techniques that can help with make-believe play.

**Tutorial Model:** *(based on the work of Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976)*

According to the Tutorial Model, there are six functions of the tutor in the scaffolding process:

1. **Recruitment: Getting the child interested**
   - Adult must not interrupt an ongoing activity, but should try to participate
   - Intervention is child-centered and non-obtrusive
   - Adult should not impose his/her ideas
   - Encourage “Mirror or Echo Communication” which is repeating the play statement marking the emotional quality.

2. **Marking Critical Features: Underlining relevant features of the task**
   - Adult should legitimize symbolic transformation
   - Adult should accept the terms of play (for example: attributing living qualities to objects and role adoption)
   - Adult can make rules that could help the play scenario

3. **Direction Maintenance: Keeping the child in pursuit of a particular goal**
   - Instead of directing the activity, the adult must try to help children develop their own ideas and integrate them. There are two strategies:
     - a. The “Open Question” - Helps children express ideas not fully developed
     - b. The “Introduction of Thematic Enrichment” - suggests new cues to enrich or complete their play
• Adult should approach with an attitude of curiosity and tolerance for uncertainty
• Adult pays attention to what happens, when it happens and stimulates children to develop scripts or themes by themselves.

4. Reduction on degrees of Freedom

• Adult simplifies the task and fills in the blanks when needed
• Adult helps with the development of a narrative plot if needed
• Adult helps with consideration of new ideas

5. Frustration Control

• Adult should always show support
• Adult should identify with emotional meanings children express

6. Demonstration/Modeling: Modeling or imitating the solution to a task

• Adult outlines a narrative script (Ex: “If we are pursued by a shark, we must seek refuge”)
• Adult asks children to find a solution to the problem (Ex: “We need a boat! Where is the boat?”)

The most important quality of this model is that it clearly emphasizes that the adult’s role is to guide the child through play and not direct or control the play activities. The adult helps the child get to a higher level of play by responding to the child’s individual personality, needs and interests. The principles in this model were used to create the guidelines for proper adult intervention because they outline clear and easy strategies parents can use to help children express themselves during play, like the “Open Question” and the “Introduction of Thematic Enrichment”.

Beizer and Howes offer three models that help answer another question, which is how to create a bridge between the child's existing play abilities and those proposed by the adult, these are the Zone of Proximal Development Model, the Smorgasbord Model and the Scaffolding Model. All of the models support Vygotsky's claim that more experienced play partners guide the development of children's pretend play (Goncu and Klein 2001, Ch. 5).

For the development of this thesis, I used the Tutorial Model (mentioned in the previous page) and the Scaffolding Model to help me determine what would be proper adult intervention in play. In the Scaffolding Model, adults modify their input depending on the changing capacities of the child and provide structure for interactions and support for the efforts. Both models offer characteristics that are extremely important for understanding what proper adult intervention is.

Very important was not make the adult's role a complicated task that would not be appealing to parents, on the other hand, I wanted to provide simple guidelines for adults to follow that could enrich the play activities for both the parent and the child. This is the reason why I decided not to use the Zone of Proximal Development Model even though this was the initial idea. In the Zone of Proximal Development Model, adults verbally suggest and model pretend play at levels higher than the child's current play capabilities, therefore promoting levels higher than what they are able to do on their own. To be able to do this, they first need to figure out the child's ZPD or Zone of Proximal Development with the use of the Rating Scale of Children's Ludic-Symbolic Skills or SVALSI. This would complicate a simple, fun activity contradicting the whole idea of this thesis.
After thorough research on adult intervention in play, I created a list of guidelines that summarize what the adult should and should not do to make this intervention beneficial and productive for both the parent and the child. These are:

1. Adult should establish a climate of make-believe, encouraging and accepting the child’s creativity with enthusiasm and respect.

2. By integrating play props into the make-believe activities parents are reinforcing that this is a valued activity and encouraging the child to do it.

3. Adults have to be careful not to make too obtrusive, overpowering or one-sided contributions and should set clear limits on their degree of control.

4. Adult participation is most helpful when it responds to, guides, and elaborates on the child’s behavior with demonstrations and suggestions.

5. Adults should modify their input depending on the changing capacities of the child and provide structure for interactions and support for their efforts.

6. Use Tutorial Model: The functions of a tutor in scaffolding process (based on the work of Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) are:

   a. Adult must not interrupt an ongoing activity, but try to participate.
   b. Adult should not impose his/her ideas.
   c. Use “Mirror or Echo Communication” - Repeating the play statement which marks the emotional quality
   d. Legitimize symbolic transformation (hair clip= shark= scared)
   e. Accept terms of play (attributing living qualities to objects and role adoption)
   f. Adult must try to help children develop their own ideas and integrate them.

7. Adults should use two strategies:

   a. The “Open Question” - Helps children express ideas that are not fully developed
   b. The “Introduction of Thematic Enrichment” - Suggest new clues to enrich or complete their play
8. Adult should approach with attitude of curiosity and tolerance for uncertainty.

9. Adult should pay attention to what happens, when it happens, and stimulate children to develop script or themes by themselves.

10. Adult should have consideration of new ideas

11. Adult has to identify with emotional meanings the child expresses

12. Adult should outline narrative scripts (For example: If we are pursued by a shark, we must seek refuge!)

13. Adult should ask children to find a solution to the problem (For example: “We need a boat! Where is the boat?”)
Principle 2: Encourage Proactive Play

Proactive play allows children to use their imagination and express their creativity without any limitations because the child does not have to follow any predetermined scripts or guidelines; he/she is in control of the activity.
What is Play?

Throughout all the research I have done for this thesis, I realized that every single person I have read about or have talked to has a different opinion about what play is and what it should and should not be about.

There seems to be a lot of discussion on whether play should have a purposeless, unproductive quality to it or whether it should be a useful, productive activity. In some cases, these two contradicting statements somehow work together. For example, Howard P. Chudacoff describes child’s play as:

...a spontaneous, joyous activity that has a purposeless quality, where an individual can acquire social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills. (Chudacoff 2007,1)

As much as I agree with what Howard P. Chudacoff describes as play, I find it a little confusing. On the one hand he believes that play “has a purposeless quality” but then says that individuals can “acquire” certain skills through it, so it really is not that purposeless after all.

Others, like Plato, “…see the model of true playfulness in the need of all young creatures, animal or human, to leap. They need to use the ground as a springboard but land resiliently and safely. He states, ‘…wherever playfulness prevails, there is always a surprising element, surpassing mere repetition or habituation.’ " (Erikson 1977, 17). I really like this definition because I believe Plato gives play a meaning that goes beyond everything material and suggests that real play takes place in a different world; he believes we should use tools in our surroundings to help us get to a different level of play. He also suggests that this type of play cannot be attained through activities that revolve around repetition or habituation, meaning they should arise and feed off instinct and imagination.

On the other hand, for Lev Vygotsky, play was mostly about an individual’s cognitive development:

He argued that during play children were able to think in more complex ways than in their everyday lives, and could make up rules, use symbols and create narratives. (Berk and Winsler 1995, 68).
Vygotsky believed that during play children behaved above their average age, he stated:

In play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself. (Berk and Winsler 1995, 68)

Some people believe that play should have a purposeless quality to it and should be left alone by adults who try turn it into something it is not. Others, like Vygotsky, believe that when children play, there is an opportunity for development that should not be ignored. For other people, play equals toys. When you ask them about play when they were young, they immediately think about their favorite toys. Others, on the other hand, think about how they “loved to look for bugs in their grandmother’s back yard” (Yen Wei Lee, video interview with author, 2009).
In my opinion, there is a time and place for all types of play, and no child should be deprived of any of them. There is a time to play to learn specific skills, but also a time to play for the sake of playing, with no rules, boundaries, scrips or limitations. I believe both are crucial for a child’s development and are equally important. I think adults need to respect and understand that the time to play spontaneously is as important and valuable for a child’s development as skill oriented play. It turns out that through this type of “purposeless” play, children actually develop valuable social and creative skills. During “free play” children learn to take initiative, learn creativity and problem solving. They also feel a sense of power that is very important because it lets them feel in charge of a situation, something that children rarely feel since they are always told what to do.

Another very important element that people rarely consider is that children need breaks; they need breaks to assimilate everything they are learning. Free play is where this usually happens. Another key ingredient that many never think of is silence; children need time and space to think when they play. In environments where children are constantly bombarded with stimuli it is hard for them to exercise their creativity.

I believe the problem lies in the fact that the idea of “playing to learn” has been exploited by adults who think that if there is no measurable learning involved or no specific skills are being developed during play, it is a waste of time. For some reason, people have been led to believe that every minute of their day has to be productive, and that this productivity should be measurable in some sort of way. Sadly enough, I believe this state of mind is being translated into children’s play.

Something certain is that through play children learn; they develop cognitive, physical, social, creative and language skills among others. Even through what some call purposeless play, children are developing skills. So, the problem with many educational toys today is that they are forcing kids to play in ways that only help develop certain skills. They structure play in such a way that social and creative skills are being left behind.
When talking about play, certain things have to be considered such as where the activity takes place, with who and how we play. Howard P. Chudacoff states that play has four contexts: (Chudacoff 2007,3)

1. Environment: Where the activity takes place
2. Materials: What instruments are used to facilitate play
3. Dramatis Personae: How many, who plays and their relationships
4. Freedom: How much control the children have over the play activity and the risks that this autonomy has

1. Environment

Although play can happen anywhere, there are three main play settings: nature, public spaces and home. Whether children live in rural or urban environments they have always found a way to manipulate their environments to accommodate their play activities and the other way around. Depending on their surroundings, children develop their particular play activities. They want to create their own spaces to play and many times just want to keep adults away.
2. Materials

Today, whenever people talk about play, the word toy is immediately associated. Before the 16th century, play occurred not with toys but with other children. What we think of as children’s toys today (dolls and miniatures) were actually decorative objects for adults.

Many people consider any other things that children play with that are not mass produced toys as “junk,” like improvised toys they build themselves. These playthings are most of the time much more valuable than toys and can reveal a lot more about children’s culture than mass produced toys. This is because these types of “formal toys” are mainly purchased by adults and therefore reveal adult tastes and not the children’s. Research has shown that children play with commercial toys only for a short period of time and afterwards rebel towards the intentions of the adult by manipulating them into their own style (changing the rules of the games, mixing parts of toys with others, etc…). So, why don’t we give children tools that they can use to express themselves from the beginning?

As Sutton-Smith has written:

...toys are meant for the empowerment of play rather than as teaching machines that can replace what parents want children to learn. (Chudacoff 2007, 8)
3. Dramatis Personae

It is known that children learn social skills by interacting with other children. When children play in groups, they create their own rules and follow a system of unwritten conventions regarding the sharing of toys, boundaries and qualifications for memberships, making it a universal language. Many current popular toys (like video games) promote solitary play and can therefore affect social development.

4. Freedom

Adults have always tried to supervise children's play and tell them the right and wrong ways to play. Television, educators and advertisements have a great influence on this as well. Jean Piaget, a developmental psychologist and philosopher, once suggested that children's interactions only with adults could inhibit emotional growth. Piaget believed that the freer forms of peer interaction could encourage children to assume more varied roles and use more varied language that would in turn help them adjust better to society. On the other hand, Lev Vygotsky believed that adult and child interactions were essential in the development of a child. Adults could help a child solve problems that seem out of their reach and acquire important skills.

Applying these contexts to The Blanket:

1. Environment: Anywhere, The Blanket is completely transportable to any space.

2. Materials: Blanket and activity cards

3. Dramatis Personae: A minimum of two players is required

4. Freedom: Children have complete control of the activity, the adult only guides the play
Types of Play

Play can be categorized in many different ways; children play in certain ways depending on the stage of development they are in, how much they participate in the activity and what types of tasks are being solved.

Howard P. Chudacoff states that there are three kinds of play: (Chudacoff 2007, 2)

1. **Play with adult supervision**: Play is formal and bound by rules, takes place in predetermined environments (for example sports).

2. **Interactive Experiments**: Play is semi-formal; adults facilitate but don’t participate or control it.

3. **"Childish" Play**: Are the biological impulses of children to explore and engage in unstructured ways.

Another way of looking at play is according to the child’s stage of development. It is broken down more specifically into five types of play:

1. **Independent Play**
2. **Onlooker Play**
3. **Parallel Play**
4. **Associative Play**
5. **Collaborative Play**

1. **Independent Play**

Before they turn two, children just like to play with themselves. They do not pay attention to children playing around them.

2. **Onlooker Play**

The child takes interest in play activities of other children but does not join in, he might ask questions or talk but the activity is only to observe.
4. Parallel Play

Children mimic other children but do not actively engage with them. It may seem like the two children are just sitting next to each other not paying attention to each other, but in reality, they are observing each others’ behaviors.

5. Associative Play

During ages 3 and 4, children start playing in groups but not exactly with one another. They may all be in the sandbox, but each building his own castle.

6. Collaborative Play

At this stage, play now has some goal and children often adopt roles. Children start to learn very important social skills such as sharing, taking turns, obeying rules and negotiating.

There are two other types of play that develop differently in children, these are:

1. Symbolic Play

Children start to use objects to represent other things, a wooden block can become a truck or a bar of soap a fish.

2. Imaginary Play

Starting at around age 3, children start engaging in pretend play. This type of play helps develop their imagination and lets them look at life through another perspective.
Another way of categorizing play is in two broad categories: Reactive and Proactive play.

**Reactive Play**

Reactive play is when the child responds to the activity but does not take charge or have any say in what is going to happen next. They simply follow along with a predetermined script and react to the situation presented to them. It is hard for a child to exercise their imagination in this scenario.
On the other hand, proactive play is when the child actively engages in the activity and determines what is going to happen next. In this scenario children inherently exercise their imagination.
There are two types of problem solving play: Convergent and Divergent Play.

Convergent problems have one possible solution, while divergent problems can have many. When asked to play with divergent materials (like blocks) and solve problems, children tend to use more creativity and imagination because there is no right answer, they use trial and error a lot.

On the other hand, when asked to play with convergent materials (like puzzles) children look for a single right answer which can limit their imagination. Convergent types of problems are linked to successful standard classroom tests, where there is one possible right answer.

While it is important for kids to learn that some problems do require one correct answer, it is also very important to teach kids to think outside the box and know that sometimes problems can have many possible right answers. When it comes to applying this idea to playthings, many educational toys available in the market today are convergent in nature and look for a single right answer because their target is to develop a particular skill. As mentioned before, this can limit a child’s creativity. It is important for children to develop fully and learn all the important academic and intellectual skills they will need to become productive adults, but at the same time it is equally important they develop their creativity and imagination.
As I have mentioned before, play is essential for a child’s development. Play allows children to use creativity and spontaneous behavior while developing their imagination, dexterity and emotional strength. It is through play that children engage with the world around them and learn about it. Likewise, play allows children to conquer their fears and succeed at new tasks that lead to more confidence. When play is child-directed, children learn leadership and group skills.

There is a now classic study which serves as a great example to show the importance and the connection between play and learning. For this experiment, children between the ages of four and five were paired with another child and then the couples were divided into three major groups. The groups were asked to solve the same task but each group was placed in a different scenario beforehand. In one group, Felix (age four) and Minerva (age five) were asked to choose what they thought were cool toys (they chose a marble and a chalk). The task they were asked to perform was to retrieve the toys out of a see-through box that was placed in front of them but out of their reach, without getting out of their seats. The way to do this was to use connecting sticks that were in the room and use them to retrieve the toys and rake them in.

Felix and Minerva were in the group of kids that were given the sticks before they were given the task and were allowed to play freely with them for ten minutes. They made soldiers out of them, connected them and figured out that some sticks fit inside others and so on. When asked to solve the problem, they hesitated for a little bit but then turned to the sticks they had played with and solved the task successfully. Other pairs of children were not given the sticks to play with before and were just given the answer right away. The kids watched as the researcher showed them how to solve the problem and then left the room. Some kids were able to solve the problem and repeat what the researcher had done, but others did not and gave up right away. A third group of kids were given no time to play with the sticks and never saw the researcher solve the problem; nearly all of those kids failed at the task. This experiment shows that children are very creative and use their imaginations when they play which is immediately transferred to problem solving (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Eyer 2004, 207).
Following this idea, Lev Vygotsky stated that play was mostly about an individual’s cognitive development:

During play children were able to think in more complex ways than in their everyday lives, and could make up rules, use symbols and create narratives. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior. In play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. (Berk and Winsler 1995, 68)

For Vygotsky, play serves three functions, the first is that it creates a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which means that a child can go a little further than what he can achieve by himself if he is guided by an adult. The second is that it helps the child separate thought from action. This is what symbolic representation does in pretend play, a child sees a block but acts as if it was a car. The third is that it facilitates the development of self regulation which is very important for the healthy development of a child; in play a child has to solve problems and direct their own behavior which helps them learn how to manage their feelings.

As much as I agree with Vygotsky that through play children can learn more easily and that not taking advantage of this would be a waste, it is important not to forget that play for children means having fun and for them that is the only objective. Parents should know that their intervention on play can be very successful as long as they do not take away what makes it fun and enjoyable for children in the first place, that is, having fun.
The Blanket: Play for Social and Creative Development

Children playing with homemade stilts
**Principle 3:** The activity is the focus and not the object

It is important to look at educational toys not by what the actual toy can do but what the child can do with the toy and what activity it generates.

This principle is divided into two parts; the activity and the object.

I. The Activity

The types of activities encouraged are storytelling and pretend play where open-ended play and real learning can take place.

II. The Object

The toy will follow certain characteristics which will help maintain the focus on the activity. These are:

a. The toy will be versatile and moldable into the child’s specific needs
b. The child will be able to express him/herself with the toy
c. The plaything will not be standardized or gender specific
Unlike many toys available today that follow Scenario A, this thesis is aimed to create an educational toy that follows Scenario B, where the object itself falls into a second degree of importance and the activity is the focus.
The two major activities encouraged with this thesis are pretend play and storytelling because of the great potential they have for helping to develop creative and social skills.

Pretend Play

When a child engages in pretend play, he/she is actively experimenting with the world around them and by doing this he/she is developing an incredible amount of skills. In pretend play children require the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically and this, as stated by Professor Loraine McCune at Rutgers University, and following Piaget, “is an important achievement that is related to children’s language abilities.” For example, if the word “car” is a symbol and a child used a block to represent a “car,” then he is using symbolic representation which is the basis of language. Likewise, when children hear speech followed by actions and linked to objects that are talked about at the moment, they can understand and remember them better.

A great deal of research has been done and is still being done about the contribution that pretend play has on children’s cognitive development in their early years. What is certain is that pretend play engages many areas of the brain because it involves emotion, cognition, language and sensorimotor actions and may promote the development of dense synaptic connections (Bergen & Coscia, 2011).

When play objects are used in novel ways, they encourage the discovery of new relationships and may enhance children’s ability to think flexibly and inventively. (Berk and Winsler 1995, 58)

Furthermore, in pretend play children engage in social behaviors such as social dialogue and many strategies such as joint planning, negotiation, problem solving and goal seeking. Not only does pretense encourage cognitive development but it also promotes social, emotional and creative skills. Through cooperative pretend play, children learn how to take turns, share responsibility and see the world through somebody else’s eyes which can ultimately help develop empathy and understanding of other’s feelings. Pretend play also helps children overcome difficult emotional events because they can express their emotions freely and act out different outcomes.
Principle 3: The Activity is the Focus and not the Object
Evidence also shows that fantasy play strengthens children’s memory. An example of this can be seen in a study done by L.S. Newman in 1990 called Intentional versus Unintentional Memory in Young Children: Remembering versus Playing. Newman instructed one group of four to five year old children to play with a set of toys and another group to remember them. The group that was asked to play with the toys remembered the toys effortlessly because they gave the toys meaning through play and not simply tried to memorize them (Newman 1990, 243).

When a child has the freedom to improvise, has the right tools and can be spontaneous, creativity emerges. In pretend play children do not rely on actual objects but can transform objects into anything they want which is creative thinking at its best. Children can also reason without real life facts that can limit their thinking.

A child also learns about self restraint and controlling impulsive actions through pretense because even though a child can be spontaneous during pretend play, he also needs to learn and follow the rules of the pretend scenario or game that is being played.

Children are capable of engaging in pretend play at different stages of their development so it is important that parents are aware of this because pretend play can be hard for children if they are too young. Before the age of three, children can have a hard time thinking of something in two different ways. For example, it can be hard for them to picture a bar of soap being a boat, so at this stage it is better to use a plain block that has no meaning already attached to it. At around age two, children can start to use less realistic toys in pretend situations or use objects that already have meaning attached to them and give a new meaning to them. For example, they can use a shoe to represent a car. At around age three, children can start imagining objects and events without direct support from real world objects.
Importance of Storytelling

Our society does not seem to value storytelling that much. Sadly, it is an experience that is slowly fading away. We have access to unlimited information in the form of data, but not as stories. Interestingly enough, research shows that people learn and organize information more easily when the data is presented in the form of a story, as Roger Shank concludes in his research about Artificial Intelligence: "Human memory is story based" (Haugen 1996-2003, 1).

Throughout time, storytelling has been vanishing; in ancient times before writing emerged as a means of documenting experiences, oral storytelling was the way history was passed down from generation to generation. It was a central activity in a culture; a priceless social experience shared by a group of people. Today people still tell stories among themselves and parents still tell stories to their children at bedtime, but it seems that people really do not understand the value of it or seem to treasure it as much. Parents should be aware of the educational value of having story time with their children.

It is very unfortunate that storytelling is not encouraged as much, not even through toys, since it has so many benefits for a child’s development specifically in learning how to read. Storytelling is considered to be the bridge between language and reading (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Eyer 2004, 102) and for this very reason this thesis encourages storytelling as a way of learning.

Children also need stories for their emotional development. For example, in fairy tales where good prevails over evil and the hero saves the princess, children see how others overcome their fears and it helps them feel more secure and confident to overcome their own obstacles. It stimulates emotional development and helps them share their own emotions. Aside from the fact that children love stories, they are actually good for them. Stories help children develop social skills and linguistic abilities because storytelling teaches language skills that go beyond conversation and that are critical for reading such as vocabulary and phonological awareness. The best way to teach a child new words is through talk:

There is no need for parents to consciously introduce big words when they talk to their child...this happens automatically when they converse with their children. (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Eyer 2004).

Stories also teach children values, behaviors and attitudes towards life situations and help them understand the world around them. This is why it is important that children hear stories that follow good values and morals. Children hear stories everyday in school,
movies, TV ads, and all other media, but it may not always be stories that teach them valuable information. It seems that the visuals in the story are more important than the story itself, “show, rather than substance,” so many of the stories children are exposed to today may not be the most educational.

Storytelling involves responsive interactions, proactive play and learning in context which is the best way for children to learn. An example of the benefits of storytelling can be seen in The Zimmerman Study (2007) at the University of Washington, where 1000 families of infants and toddlers were interviewed on the phone about media habits (educational, non-educational, adult TV and infant DVD’s). They filled out a language inventory about how many words the baby knew and also measured other factors like parent education, parental involvement (reading to the child) and income. The results showed that “high parental involvement (reading or telling stories to child) was associated with higher vocabulary scores” (Condry 2008) and the high viewing of “smart Baby” DVD’s was associated with lower vocabulary scores.

However, this study shows only a correlation between baby videos and babies’ vocabularies. It does not mean that the baby videos stunted babies’ vocabularies because other interpretations can be made, such as parents that notice that their child is delayed in language buy videos to try to help them or parents who are less involved with their children are the ones that are more likely to buy brainy baby videos.

In conclusion, storytelling is not only fun for children but it has great educational value. This thesis focuses on storytelling as a way of teaching children language and social skills because as stated above, it is the bridge between language and reading.
Principle 3: The Activity is the Focus and not the Object
Part II: The Object

The object, or plaything developed in this thesis will have the following characteristics:

1. Versatile: The toy will have the possibility of transforming into different things. This means that the novelty of the toy does not wear out and therefore the lifespan increases.

2. Moldable: Children’s play tools should be moldable into the child’s specific needs; every child is unique and the tools he/she uses should reflect that.

3. The child has to be able to express him/herself with his playthings. If the playthings have specific meanings and stories behind them, the child will not be able to use them as tools but will only follow their particular dialogues.

4. The toy will not be standardized, gender specific or achievement oriented. It will not follow any specific cultural characteristics or be gender specific. It will be a platform any child can build upon depending on their particular situation.
When talking about toys today, it is very important to mention licensed toys. These toys flood the aisles at major popular stores. They have a great appeal towards children because the child can immediately associate with the toy if they are familiar with the characters. They recognize the character, what they do and how they act. In some way it is magical for a child to be able to own and play with a character they have looked up to on a movie, TV show or video game. Licensed toys are a huge success and a billion dollar industry.

The downside of these types of toys is that most of the time the reason for buying them is for the actual toy and not because of the type of activity it generates. These toys usually have a short lifespan and there is no creative incentive when children play with them. The child has already in his head who the toy represents and what it is supposed to do, so after they have done it for a few times, the novelty wears out and they get bored of the toy. They have the scripts engraved in their heads and it is really hard to break away from them. It is hard to think outside the box with a toy that has written all over it how to play with it. Many children end up transforming their toys into other things when they get bored which is great, but many others just look for the next new toy to play with.

On the other hand, and the complete opposite of licensed toys, are improvised toys. These are toys which kids make or modify in some way. They may be characters or ideas children come up with or modifications of existing ones. With these toys, kids have a say in who they are, how they are going to look like and how they are going to play with them. This type of play in return gives them a huge sense of achievement satisfaction, a bigger emotional connection with the toy and lets them express themselves creatively. It also becomes a toy that is specific to their own culture and tends to have a greater lifespan.

One big problem faced today is that competing against licensed toys on the shelves is a really hard task. It is safe to assume that children will likely tend to gravitate towards familiar and fun characters they can create an instant bond with at toy stores than to a no name box, unless the other toy has something extra to offer that can grab their attention as well.

I believe that many toys today do not give children enough room to improvise with them. I am not saying that kids should start making their own toys, but I do feel that licensed toys are not the best toys for kids because they do not leave much room for children to express their individual creativity.
Dora the Explorer toys
The Toy Industry Association, Inc and TOTY Awards 2011

The Toy Industry Association™, Inc (TIA) is the not-for-profit trade association for producers and importers of toys and youth entertainment products sold in North America. The TIA has more than 550 toy manufacturers and importers who account for approximately 85% of the annual U.S domestic toy market, which is estimated to be USD $80 billion. Founded in 1916, the TIA encourages the growth of the toy industry by promoting toys in trade shows, events and in the media, and also helps bring toys to children in need with the Toy Industry Foundation.

One of its most important events is the American International Toy Fair, held in New York City every year, which is considered to be “the largest toy and youth product marketplace in the Western Hemisphere.” More than 1,100 exhibiting manufacturers, distributors, importers and sales agents from around the world showcase their products.

The TOTY (Toy of the Year) Awards is another TIA event where the most innovative and most outstanding toys are recognized. Nominations for toys can be done by any toy manufacturer or toy related company for specific award categories. The winners are selected by Nomination Committees comprised of knowledgeable experts in each category. Each committee must be comprised of 10-15 members selected from categories such as retail buyers, journalists and toy specialists and professionals.

Below is a list of some of the 2011 TOTY Winners: (TIA | Past TOTY Winners. www.toyassociation.org)

Toy of the Year: The Sing-a-ma-jigs!™ – Mattel, Inc.

Chatter, Sing a Song, and Harmonize.
Squeeze their left hands to change modes then squeeze their tummies to see their mouths open and hear them sing and chatter! But the Sing-a-ma-jigs’ favorite thing to do is harmonize! (www.thesingamajigs.com)
Infant/Toddler Toy of the Year: My Own Leaptop – LeapFrog

Choose and download songs for a custom play lists, choose from 8 e-mail messages and personalize for your child to enjoy (Internet connection required). Explore the alphabet, pretend play, music, animals and computer literacy with 6 learning activity stations. (www.leapfrog.com)

Preschool Toy of the Year: The Sing-a-ma-jigs!™ – Mattel, Inc.

Girl Toy of the Year: Squinkies™ Cupcake Surprize! Bake Shop – Blip® Toys

Place the coin in the slot, turn the dial and the fun begins. Open the cupcake to find the bake shop within. Bake up smiles with pies and cakes. Your squishy friends are all it takes. Squinkies go back in their bubbles when play time is done. Refill the cupcake for lots more fun! (www.bliptoys.com)

Boy Toy of the Year: NERF N-Strike Stampede ECS Blaster – Hasbro, Inc.

Unleash a storm of darts from the extended 18-dart clip and reload in a hurry with the three spares. This high-capacity blaster even includes a blast shield to deflect an incoming “fire” and a pop-out bipod for stability! (www.hasbro.com)
Innovative Toy of the Year: The Sing-a-ma-jigs™ – Mattel, Inc.

Outdoor Toy of the Year: NERF Super Soaker Shot Blast – Hasbro, Inc.

Slide this air-powered water blaster’s pump handle forward to load and then slide it backward to blast a stream of water that goes up to 25 feet. Adjust the shoulder stock to your reach and use the tactical rail to line up your best shots. (www.hasbro.com)

Educational Toy of the Year: Leapster Explorer™, Leapfrog

An extraordinary new learning experience that encourages children to discover something new every day with endless ways to play and learn—from games, e-Books, videos, and online play to customizable learning skills and more. (www.leapfrog.com)

Activity Toy of the Year: Crayola Color Wonder Sound Studio™ – Crayola, LLC

This interactive coloring pad lets you choose from 60 sound effects and place them anywhere on any Color Wonder coloring page! Create endless sound combinations that play back when you color your picture! (www.crayola.com)
It is difficult for me to understand how some of these toys are considered the best of the industry in their corresponding categories. For example, the Boy TOTY and Outdoor TOTY winners are toy guns and the Girl TOTY is a plastic cupcake. Not only do these toys not have any educational value but completely fail to develop or encourage two critical skills children need for healthy development, these are social and creative skills. Not one of these toys encourages social interaction in a positive way. The Crayola Color Wonder Studio™ is a very impressive toy and does encourage creativity and the Leapfrog Leapster Explorer is a good way to introduce children to computers, but I don’t think that it is the best educational or activity toy.

I am not against toys for entertainment but I do not understand how these toys are considered to be the best of the best by the leading toy association when they lack the capacity to develop skills critical for healthy development and encourage superficial values. Laura Berk writes in her book *Awakening Children’s Minds* that there are three useful questions that parents/caregivers should ask themselves when buying new toys for their kids. These are: “What activities does this toy inspire? What values will the activities teach? What social rules will my children learn to follow? (Berk 2001)

If someone were to ask these questions about these toys, most of them would fail miserably. What activity do Mattel’s Singamajigs inspire aside from harmonizing and making music with other toys? Not many other, aside from the whole idea (which is very clever) of having to buy more than one toy at a time because having just one toy is not very fun, the fun starts when you have more than one and can harmonize. They are very cute to watch but in my opinion not even close to being considered toy of the year. What activities do toy guns inspire aside from the obvious? It is very concerning to think that these toys are being given awards.
Principle 3: The Activity is the Focus and not the Object

Below are some examples of educational toys available today at popular stores:

Pictures taken at Toys ‘R Us and Target. January 2012
Unfortunately, the problem with the types of educational toys found today at popular stores is that they:

- Make misleading claims about the skills they can develop
- There are no responsive interactions which are crucial for social and language development
- Encourage “Reactive” play instead of “Proactive,” where the child follows the machine
- The toy is the center of attention and what it can do and not the activity it generates
- Involves “Superficial” or “boxed learning"
- They limit the imagination with predetermined stories and scripts
- Have a short life span
Child marketing is a very important factor that greatly affects the toy industry today. Marketing to children became increasingly popular since the deregulation of children’s TV in 1984, where it became possible to market directly to kids through TV programs. This has only become more and more alarming throughout the years.

Marketers realized the great influence children have on their parents’ buying habits, the amount of money they spend today and the amount of money they will spend in the future. This is very worrisome considering that experts say that kids do not understand the persuasive intent in advertisements until they are eight or nine years old, so they are taking advantage of the fact that kids have a lot of power and can be very easily persuaded.

James McNeal, consultant and author of *Kids as Consumers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, says that kids influenced $1.12 trillion in overall family spending in 2010, and that: “Up to age 16, kids are determining most expenditures in the household. This is very attractive to marketers” (McNeal 2010).

The most significant and alarming strategy that marketers use is that they know that brand loyalty and consumer habits that are created at a young age are likely to be carried out to adulthood, so they target kids now, to get their money in the future. Marketers have two sources for new consumers; those who they can persuade to leave their competitors and come to them now, or consumers who have not yet entered the market, which are considered to be much more loyal. According to McNeal: “They aren’t children so much as what I like to call ‘evolving consumers.’”

Child marketing is considered to be unethical at many levels. It not only engraves in children’s minds that the more you have, the better off you are, but it is grabbing them at a very vulnerable age when they do not really understand advertising and reality in ads. Their vision of the world and values can easily become blurred.

Parents are worried that marketers are finding new ways to advertise to children without them even knowing about it; one way, is online. One clear example is the web page “Webkinz”. The whole idea behind Webkinz is that you buy a plush toy at a toy store that comes with a code, you enter it online and are able to adopt your pet online. You are given a
virtual room with a few basic things and some money. You can buy things, play games and chat with users among other things. The alarming part is that occasionally advertisements pop-up and if kids click on them, they earn more things for their virtual rooms. The whole idea of the web site revolves around consumerism. It is impossible for parents to be aware of everything their child watches and does online, especially if marketers are placing their ads in supposedly kid friendly environments.

Screen Technology

Screen technology toys are becoming more and more popular everyday. They are extremely appealing to children (and adults) but can have a negative impact on creative play. Children that are constantly allowed to play with electronic toys miss out on very important experiences they would have had if they were engaged in creative play, such as active exploration, discovery and creative problem solving. They miss out on chances to practice delay of gratification and to generate play with their own surroundings. They expect to be entertained all the time, instead of entertaining themselves. They also spend less time interacting with other people, all of which negatively affects their creative and social development. Another factor that affects creative play is that when children have unlimited access to screen technology, they watch programs and relate to the same characters repeatedly which can cause them to get locked into a specific set of characters and scripts,
limiting their imaginations. Screen technology also makes sustained attention harder for children which can be a problem in classroom settings.

However, not exposing children to screen technology toys would be depriving them of technological advances and fun experiences that are also extremely important for their development and social acceptance. It is not a matter of not giving a child an electronic toy or video game but giving it to them for a controlled period of time and not letting the toy replace interactions with other people. For example, I personally believe it is a terrible idea for parents to give a portable DVD player or video game to their kids when they are misbehaving at a social gathering. I have seen this many times and even though it does help calm the situation instantly (in some cases), and I can understand the parents’ frustration, I do not think it is the right approach. This attitude reflects the general view towards video games today and the potential danger it can have. This type of behavior from parents could create social problems for children in the future and it is literally rewarding a bad behavior.

Therefore, there needs to be a balance and an awareness from parents about the potential harm excessive screen technology can have on children. For instance, not exposing children to screen technology can lead to the child not fitting in with other children and generate feelings of distress as well as the child not developing certain motor skills as fast as other children, leaving him behind. However, if you rely on screen technology as a way of entertaining and rewarding your child and do not control it, it might replace social interactions your child needs to be having and affect their social development.

Smart Baby Toys

In 2006, the child-advocacy group, The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, filed a Federal Trade Commission complaint against some of the biggest baby video companies, (Baby Einstein, Brainy Baby, and Baby First TV ) for claiming that their products inspire “logical thinking” and “foster the development of your toddler’s speech and language skills” or “give your child a jump start on learning.” The fact is that there is no evidence that shows that these types of products do what they claim, so their advertisements and packaging are false and deceptive. They should not lead parents to believe that their products help with babies’s development.
As a result, Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby significantly modified their marketing strategy and eliminated many of the claims cited in CCFCs complaint. They never acknowledged their deception but at least are now more careful with their marketing. Nevertheless, Baby First TV still claims to be an educational tool for infants and toddlers.

Their website, www.babyeinstein.com, claims the following about Infants and Media:

The Baby Einstein Company believes, along with the child development experts with whom we have consulted, that parent-child interaction is one of the most critical elements to the development of a healthy and happy baby during the first three years of life. Baby Einstein products are not designed to make babies smarter. Rather, Baby Einstein products are specifically designed to engage babies and provide parents with tools to help expose their little ones to the world around them in playful and engaging ways — inspiring a baby’s natural curiosity.

In a way it is good that Baby Einstein now has this information on their website for parents to read. They are now very careful how they explain what their products do and do not claim their videos are educational. Also, they emphasize the importance of parent-child interactions.

Many (like the CCFC) say that watching educational videos or TV in general before the age of two is not educational but can actually be harmful for infants and toddlers:

Research shows that television viewing is potentially harmful for infants and toddlers because it could adversely affect cognitive development if it replaces creative play and interaction with a child’s parents and surrounding.

The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends that children under two years of age should not watch any television at all:

Although certain television programs may be promoted to this age group, research on early brain development shows that babies and toddlers have a critical need for direct interactions with parents and other significant care givers . . . for healthy brain growth and the development of appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive skills.
These companies are taking advantage of a parent’s desire to do what they think is best for their children. Why is this information not being communicated to parents? The answer is simple, because this industry makes a lot of money. But the alarming statistic is that 56% of parents believe that baby videos are actually good for child development, when in reality, for babies 8-16 months, watching baby videos is associated with slower language development (Zimmerman, F.J., Cristakis, D.A., and Meltzoff, August, 2007).

It is understandable why parents buy these types of toys; in some cases they might feel pressured to buy them due to the tremendous amounts of toys and advertisements out there that claim they are “essential” for a child’s healthy development. They lead parents to believe they can do a better job at teaching their child than what the parent can do by themselves or it might be simply because parents need time away from their babies to relax. For whatever reason, it important that parents become aware that these types of activities cannot possibly replace what face to face interaction with their child can do.

What parent’s should know is that a big portion of a baby’s one hundred billion brain cells are pre-wired at birth (the ones connected to breathing, heartbeat, and other physiological survival functions) but it is during the first five years of a baby’s life that brain development is crucial. Experts agree that:

Talking to your baby, playing with your baby, paying attention to what interests your baby, and using those interests to foster curiosity lays down the wiring that ultimately stimulates your baby's brain to grow and develop. (Webmd.com 2011).

In conclusion, baby videos and TV shows are not necessarily bad for children if they are used in combination with and not replacing face to face interaction between parent and child. Nina Sazer O’Donnell, director of National Strategies for Success by 6, a United Way of American learning initiative, states that babies learn the best when they have experiences that have emotional content, human interaction and that are pleasurable for babies. She states: “They act like glue for their memory, helping them to retain what they are picking up and learning.”
Many experts agree that one of the best ways of doing this is by reading with your child, not reading to them. Engaging the child in the reading by asking them questions, asking them to identify colors, shapes and animals, is the best way to engage them in the experience.
Principle 4: Less Material = More Satisfaction

Jack Manno, a university professor and economist believes that there are certain commodities in life that cannot be bought or sold and that these commodities, since they use less material and energy in order to satisfy the need, create greater human satisfaction.
Jack Manno, university professor and economist, has a very interesting approach to sustainable development and the challenge for ecological economies. He asks the question:

How do we create and sustain ways of livelihoods, communities, nations and worlds where people prosper without undermining the life support systems upon which all prosperity ultimately depends? (Manno 1999)

The economic key to solving this problem, according to Jack Manno, is increasing Consumption Efficiency. This means taking into consideration the amount of welfare produced (or the satisfaction of the human need) as well as the energy and material resource consumed in order to satisfy it. For example, when we think about children’s toys, we should consider the human need being satisfied (in this case the need for children to have something to play with) in relation to all the energy and material it took to satisfy it (from concept design to product development to manufacturing to shipping to purchasing, to playing with it and disposing of it). In other words, a lot of energy and material resource was consumed in order to satisfy the need.

He believes that the way to improve consumption efficiency is to look at nature (biomimicry), ecoefficiency, design and learn from nature and have the appropriate technology. Also very important is to involve relationships between people and the land.

Manno demonstrates this idea with his Commoditization Theory, where he portrays the range of commoditization potential from high to low. To understand this, it is important to distinguish commodities from non-commodities. He believes that the fundamental difference between the two is whether or not you can alienate the value from the relationship. Adding to this, the basic idea of a commodity is that its principal character can be bought. Non-market values are values that exist in relationships between people or groups of people. The result of societies constantly favoring commodities, according to Manno, is unsustainable development.

The idea for this thesis emerged by taking a piece of Jack Manno’s idea of Low Commoditization Potential and designing a tool that focuses on creating relationships between people and experiences that cannot be bought or sold. I agree with him when he states that these types of relationships create greater human satisfaction.
Even though the whole concept of making a commercial good (toy) seems to completely contradict Jack Manno’s Commoditization Theory, it would have been impossible not to do so as a designer. I did take into consideration the amount of energy and resources used, and as much as I agree with Jack Manno’s theory, a proper balance between the two is a more realistic approach.

An example of this Commoditization Theory can be seen in the chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>High Commoditization Potential (Commercial goods)</th>
<th>Medium Commoditization Potential (Exchanged goods and services)</th>
<th>Low Commoditization Potential (Relationships)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Play</td>
<td>Barbie dolls, Action Figures, packaged entertainment</td>
<td>Handicrafts, childcare, live entertainment</td>
<td>Direct child-led interaction with natural surroundings, group play, interpersonal goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Production</td>
<td>Commercial fertilizers, pesticides, engineered seeds, mechanization tools, genetic material</td>
<td>Commercial manure, stored seeds, farm animals, tools for small farms, agricultural extension and research services</td>
<td>Knowledge of soil, locally coevolved skills and techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>Mass-marketed drugs, diagnosis equipment, hospital supplies, insurance</td>
<td>Doctor-provided services, hands-on therapies and treatments</td>
<td>Knowledge of healing, personal health maintenance and illness prevention, lifestyle adaptations, sense of well being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Principle 5: Constructivist Approach Towards Learning

The Constructivist Theory of Knowledge argues that individuals acquire knowledge through an interaction between their ideas and their experiences. The learning process is experiential learning through real life experience to construct knowledge.
The Constructivist Theory of Learning was very influential in the development of this thesis and I applied some of its basic principles to my design. These are:

1. Activity is initiated and directed by the learner

When the learner is actively involved in the initiation and direction of the idea, this activity consequently follows his interests and therefore the learner is engaged.

2. Each learner is unique

Each person has his own background and culture and it is important to take this into account in the learning process so that the learner can arrive at their own version of the truth.

3. Learning is an active and social process

Learners should learn to discover concepts for themselves, guesswork and intuitive thinking is critical for this to happen. Individuals make meaning of their world through the interaction with others and their environment, it is “learning by doing” and a hands-on approach.

4. There has to be motivation for learning

Sustaining motivation in learning is greatly associated with the level of confidence in potential learning an individual has. The feelings of competence have to be present and they come from experiencing success in problem solving in the past and are much more powerful than external motivation.

5. Instructors as Facilitators

Instructors have to take the role of facilitator and not teachers “…teacher tells, facilitator asks”. A teacher gives a lecture that covers the subject while a facilitator helps the learner get to his or her understanding of the content.
6. Learning is a social process

Vygotsky (1978) stated that the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development occurs when speech and practical activity converge. Through practical activity a child constructs meaning at an intrapersonal level and speech connects this meaning to his culture at an interpersonal level.

7. Learning in context

The individual learns best when he/she is able to apply his understanding to his own world and learns things that he can relate to in real life.

8. Zone of Proximal Development

In Vygotsky’s ZPD, learners are constantly being challenged within close proximity to, but slightly above their current level of development. By experiencing the successful completion of these challenging tasks they gain more confidence and move on to more challenging tasks.

9. Inquiry based

A scenario where questions are welcomed and taken into account is extremely important.

10. Scaffolding

The adult guides the child with focused questions and interactions which leads the child to go beyond what he could have done by himself.
Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget was a Swiss developmental psychologist and philosopher known for his theory of cognitive development in children. His work has been very influential especially in the area of education and his is the first complete theory of cognitive development.

Piaget believed that as children grow, they construct their own knowledge. They are only able to perform certain tasks or understand certain concepts when they have reached the corresponding stage of development, no matter how bright the child is. He states that a child’s cognitive development is not a continuous transition but it consists of rapid changes with long periods of stability between.

Piaget’s theory of development is a stage theory that has a constructivist approach which means that children create knowledge from an interaction between their ideas and their experiences. Constructivist ideas were not widely accepted in past centuries; play was perceived as unimportant and aimless, but Piaget did not agree with this, he believed play was a necessary part of a child’s cognitive development.

Piaget’s theory is based on the foundation that individuals acquire new knowledge through experiences by the processes of accommodation and assimilation. Assimilation is taking new information from our environment and fitting it into our pre-existing cognitive schemas to be able to make sense of it. Accommodation is when we have to alter our pre-existing ideas to be able to fit new information.

His Theory of Development has four stages: Sensorimotor Stage (from birth to age 2), Preoperational Stage (from ages 2 to 7), Concrete Operational Stage (from ages 7-11) and Formal Operational Stage (from age 11-16 and onwards).

In the Sensorimotor Stage children experience the world through their senses and their actions. In the Preoperational Stage, children are now able to perform symbolic representation. This means that they can use an object to represent another one that is not present, a key concept in pretend play. Another important skill begins to develop in this stage and that is intuitive thought; kids become very curious and want to understand their surroundings, there is an interest in reasoning and wanting to know why things are
The way they are. Memory and imagination are also developed, as well as concentration, the ability to focus on one characteristic compared to the others. One big limitation in this stage according to Piaget is egocentrism; children at this stage cannot distinguish between their own perspective and that of another person.

The next stage is the Concrete Operational Stage and it is characterized by the ability to use logical reasoning and make rational judgements but only in concrete situations. During this stage they also lose their egocentric view. The last stage is the Formal Operational Stage, where individuals have the ability to do hypothetical thinking and logical reasoning. They can also perform systematic experiments and observations.

Piaget’s theories have been acclaimed by many but also greatly criticized. Some critics state that children’s thinking is not consistently in one stage or another, also, that he didn’t take into consideration many influences on development like social factors and that he mainly based his theories on observations on his own three children, which is not a significant amount of children. Nevertheless, his observations on children’s cognitive development are excellent and his tasks (experiments) show children’s limitations very clearly.
Design Process
Developing the Principles

In order to develop the set of principles mentioned throughout this thesis, I developed several charts like the one shown below and started combining and categorizing information into smaller groups.
**Constructivism:**

1. Initiated & directed by learner.
2. Negotiation - accommodation = learn from assimilation & accommodation.
3. Each learner is unique = (try or test should also be).
4. Learner = actively involved in the learning process.
5. Learning by doing = hands on approach.
6. Motivation for learning is fun.
7. Facilitators = not teachers.
   - "Teacher tells, facilitator asks.
8. Discover things for themselves.
9. Learning is a social process (not only inside our mind).

- Vygotsky = "speech & practical activity = learning" (not new)
- Practical activity = interpersonal level
- Speech = connects this meaning with culture.

10. Collaboration between learners instead of competition.
11. Video games.
12. Learning in context = things they can relate to more easily.

**Educational Toys on Market**

1. Focus on what toy can do.
2. Child = screen = no interaction.
4. Some = gender specific.

[Incude static - exercise equipment for children!!!]

- 4 - 1
- 11 - 3
- 16 - 4
- 1 - 2, 5

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The Blanket: Play for Social and Creative Development
First Iteration: Interactive Storytelling Blanket

- Personal space for parent and child
- Private space isolated from distractions
- Sitting down, face-to-face contact
- Designating a place for interactions to happen
- Physical boundaries - closeness
- Uses a simple, ordinary object as a symbol
- It can be different every time
Characteristics of the Interactive Storytelling Blanket:

1. The Blanket creates a space for parent and child to sit down

2. Transformable with fasteners: buttons, velcro, zippers, straps, etc...

3. The Blanket generates two types of stories:
   - Fantasy, make-believe storytelling
   - Conversational (what was the best part of your day, the funniest, why?...)

4. It would include prompts:
   - Cards with characters, plots, scenarios, questions
   - Shapes or characters they can play with
   - Packets to put things into (like drawings)

5. Customizable- Kids can draw on the Blanket, add patches, pockets for drawings

6. How to hold the “tools and prompts”??
   - Pockets on the Blanket
   - Blanket comes in a box with other components (kit)

7. How to document activities to make it an ongoing project?
   - Stories can go on The Blanket (be drawn directly on The Blanket, or stored/displayed in The Blanket)
   - Can be transferred into drawings/book

8. What can Preschool children do (skills) and what type of storytelling is fun for them?
   - They love scripts
   - Like immediate satisfaction
   - Like being the hero of the story

9. What is the parent’s role?
   - Need to understand their role in the activity, scaffolding
   - Need to be motivated to engage in the activity, make it easier for parents who are not so good at these types of activities and have the tools available for them to make the activities more fun and educational
   - Activity needs to happen in a short amount of time
Concept Sketches:

- Detachable side for drawing with washable markers.
- Side for storing cards and tools.
- Holes on each corner.
- Big drawing space for scripts and pockets for tools.
- Small zippers can make windows.
- Big zippers move play space.
Blanket comes in box w/ cards and tools = Kit.
Design Process: Concept Sketches

* Front of Blanket.
I made three models at different stages of development to test various aspects of The Blanket.

Stage 1:
With this model I wanted to determine and organize the spaces on The Blanket.

Stage 2:
With this full scale model I wanted to test the size, the idea of the pockets for the drawings and the fasteners.

During this stage, product testing was done

Stage 3:
After testing the previous model and realizing it was too big, I made this model to finalize the size and the fasteners.
Product Testing:

During Stage 2 of the development of the Blanket models, I decided it would be a good time to test The Blanket.

The testing was done with a 4 year old girl. Observations were made while she played with The Blanket.

The results of the testing are listed below:

Successful:

• Tabs
• Activity Cards
• Transforming Blanket into different things- (she transformed it into a tent, a car and a princess dress)

Not Successful:

• Size- was difficult for her to carry the Blanket and move it around
• Folding and zipper- Noticed it would be too complicated for a child at that age to handle because of size
• Heavy
• The pockets for the drawings made the Blanket hard to pay with, made weird crinkly noises that were distracting

Other Observations:

• There were a lot of changing activities, it was hard to focus on one activity for long time
• Environment had distractions- it was her play room so she wanted to show and play with all her toys as well.
Design Process: Concept Sketches

Turning the Blanket into a costume: Add pockets to the corners

* Back side of Blanket

Transformability: Add attachments to the corners
Different ways of attaching the Blanket to furniture to make 3D structures were studied:

Idea 1: Using two straps to make a bow tie

Idea 2: Creating an opening in the Blanket

Idea 3: Creating an opening with velcro for easier usability

Idea 4: Tucking the Blanket through an opening and pulling it through
Designing the graphics of The Blanket:
Final Concept
Final Concept: The Blanket

Front

Back
The Blanket generates the type of play that is “not for sale.” Economist Jack Manno writes that this type of play has the potential to create “greater human satisfaction with less material and energy.”

At the far end of the commodity-potential range are things not for sale such as making angels in the snow, play with found objects, group play, sing-a-longs, and all the goods of interpersonal contact. (Manno 1999)
Examples of the possibilities of play The Blanket has:

You can sit on it and play games,

make a superhero costume,

or make a boat.
You can make a princess dress, a backpack, or make a fort.
Final Concept: The Blanket

Front of Blanket

Tabs with button on all four corners

Slits for buttons all around edge of Blanket
Back of Blanket

Pocket for head to wear as costume

Straps to hold binder
The Blanket has five components:

I. Blanket: The Blanket itself has tabs on its four corners that make it easy to attach to furniture and to itself to create 3D structures such as forts and tents.

II. Activity Cards: The Blanket comes with three types of Activity Cards that give the parent ideas and suggestions for starting and maintaining pretend play and storytelling. The cards are there to help parents when they need new ideas, are easily available, and are full of helpful and fun activities.

III. Tools: Four tools are also included; binoculars, steering wheel, magic wand and flashlight. These objects are meant to enhance the play activities by serving as tools that can create further possibilities of play.

IV. Play shapes: These are flat cut-out pieces that can be used to play with the tree design on the Blanket.

V. Binder: The binder simply makes it easy to store everything and take it with you.
I. The Blanket

The Blanket has four tabs with buttons on each of its corners that can attach to furniture or to itself. The idea is that these tabs will make it easier for children to transform the Blanket into different things and will take their mind off little things, such as how to make the Blanket attach to the chair to make a tent, and will let them focus on what the tent will be for and how they will play with it. However, I am aware that building the tent is as much part of the game as actually pretending to go camping with it, but for preschool children it can become too much of a challenge to figure out these details. It is right around this age when children are learning how to use buttons so it should not be too complicated for them and could actually help.
II. The Activity Cards

The activity cards are meant to give parents ideas and suggestions when they need a little help with pretend play and storytelling. The cards are there for when parents feel they need a little push on how to start or maintain pretend play or when coming up with new activities becomes difficult. Some parents may feel that they do not need any help but others could use it.

There are three types of Activity Cards:

a. Pretend Play Cards: Give prompts for starting and maintaining pretend play
b. Problem Solving Cards: Give scenarios that require solving a problem
c. Storytelling Cards: Give ideas and various storytelling methods

Each card explains an activity and is divided into 6 sections:

i. The “Remember to” section gives suggestions on how to make pretend play more meaningful and educational by stating certain specific techniques and methods that can be helpful to parents and also explaining things they should and should not do in specific situations. Some examples are given to make it easier and faster for parents to understand and be able to apply.

ii. The “Lets Play” section simply gives the name of the game

iii. “The Game” section gives a little explanation of the activity

iv. The “Prompts” section gives suggestions on what the game could be like depending on the interests of each parent and child.

v. The “Ideas” section gives additional suggestions on how to make the activity more interesting for the child and also gives hints on how to incorporate the Blanket or the tools into the play scenario.

vi. The “Parent Q’s” section gives examples of questions that could be asked by the parent to expand pretend play or to maintain it if needed.
**The Blanket: Play for Social and Creative Development**

**Pretend Play**

(These are prompts for starting and maintaining pretend play)

- **The “Remember to” section on these cards is meant to give ideas on how to make pretend play more meaningful and educational.**

  **Accept and respect child’s creativity:** When parents accept and encourage the child’s imagination with respect and enthusiasm, it is the perfect scenario for creativity to develop at its best.

  **Legitimize symbolic transformations:** It is important for parents to communicate the emotional value of a pretend situation. For example: Anna is playing with a hairclip and pretends it is a shark.

    Anna: Look, a shark! It has big teeth!
    Parent: Oh no! It is very dangerous!

  **Echo communication:** Repeating the play statement which marks the emotional quality. For example: Tom is playing with a bar of soap pretending it is an airplane.

    Tom: Look this is an airplane!
    Parent: An airplane! It is very fast, where is it going?

- **Don’t make overpowering contributions:** “Adult participation is most helpful when it responds to, guides ad elaborates on the child’s behavior with demonstrations and suggestions.” (Goncu, Klein, 2001)

- **Ask open questions:** Open questions help children express ideas that are not fully developed.

- **The “Ideas” section on these cards is meant to enhance, extend and develop pretend play.**

- **The “Parent Q’s” section on these cards is meant to maintain and extend pretend play.**

**Problem Solving**

(These are given in the request to solve a problem)

- **The “Remember to” section on these cards is meant to give ideas on how to make pretend play more meaningful and educational.**

  **Help develop their ideas:** Adults should help develop the child’s ideas with open questions.

  **Don’t make overpowering contributions:** “Adult participation is most helpful when it responds to, guides ad elaborates on the child’s behavior with demonstrations and suggestions.” (Goncu, Klein, 2001)

- **Let the child lead:** Adults should follow the child’s creativity here this is respected.

**Story Telling**

(These are some ideas and methods)

These cards offer some ideas for when it’s story time. They have some suggestions on ways of making reading to your child more interactive and fun.

Actively involving the child in the reading process can make the activity more memorable and enjoyable.
a. Pretend Play Cards

The Pretend Play Cards give ideas or prompts for starting and maintaining pretend play. Some of the activities included are games such as “Pretend you are...” where children have to pretend they are something (animal, person, monster, etc…) and then have to act like it and describe what they would do all day, what they would eat, where they would live, etc. Another example of a game would be “Camping Trip” where children have to pretend they are going on a camping trip and would have to build a tent and pretend they are outdoors and use their imaginations to create the environment around them.

- The “Remember to” section on these cards is meant to give ideas on how to make pretend play more meaningful and educational.

  **Accept and respect child’s creativity:** When parents accept and encourage the child’s imagination with respect and enthusiasm, it is the perfect scenario for creativity to develop at its best.

  **Legitimize symbolic transformations:** It is important for parents to communicate the emotional value of a pretend situation. For example: Anna is playing with a hairclip and pretends it is a shark.

  *Anna: Look, a shark! It has big teeth!*
  *Parent: Oh no! It is very dangerous!*

  **Echo communication:** Repeating the play statement which marks the emotional quality. For example: Tom is playing with a bar of soap pretending it is an airplane.

  *Tom: Look this is an airplane!*
  *Parent: An airplane! It is very fast, where is it going?*

  **Don’t make overpowering contributions:** “Adult participation is most helpful when it responds to, guides ad elaborates on the child’s behavior with demonstrations and suggestions.” (Gonou, Klein, 2001)

  **Ask open questions:** Open questions help children express ideas that are not fully developed.

  - The “Ideas” section gives suggestions on props you can use to enhance, extend and make the activities a little different every time.

  - The “Parent Q’s” section gives examples of questions that can be asked to maintain and expand pretend play.
Examples of activities of Pretend Play Cards

**Pretend Play**

(These are prompts for starting and maintaining pretend play)

**REMEMBER TO**
- Accept and respect child’s creativity
- Legitimize symbolic transformations
- Echo communication
- Don’t make overpowering contributions
- Ask open questions

**LETS PLAY**

**THE GAME**

Pretend you are...
Pretend you are a (make-up an animal, person...).
Some ideas:
- frog
- super hero
- eagle
- octopus
- giant
- monkey
- dinosaur
- princess

**PROMPTS**
- What would you do all day?
- How would you walk?
- What noises would you make?
- Who would be your best friend?
- What would be your favorite food?

**IDEAS**
- Try acting things out
- The blanket can be used as a costume
- Do you know where (____) lives and what they eat?
- Where do you think we could find (____)?

**PARENT Q’S**

- Accept and respect child’s creativity
- Legitimize symbolic transformations
- Echo communication
- Don’t make overpowering contributions
- Ask open questions

**LETS PLAY**

**THE GAME**

Camping tent
Build a tent using the blanket, chairs, tables etc...

**PROMPTS**
- You might want to gather some food and water supply.
- You can turn off the lights and use the flashlight.
- Can you hear the animals outside? The waterfall?
- Pretend to make a fire and roast marshmallows.

**IDEAS**
- Try using the tools like the binoculars to look for adventure.
- You can also build a house, cave, hotel, castle...

**PARENT Q’S**
- Where do you think we could go camping?
- Which place would be the most fun?
b. Problem Solving Cards

The Problem Solving Cards give ideas of scenarios where solving a problem is required. There are many different scenarios that can be chosen at random or picked individually to follow your child’s interests making them want to be more involved. Some examples of games would be “Rescue Mission,” and “Mountain Top,” where you have to prepare a trip to the top of the mountain to look for a hidden treasure.

- The “Remember to” section on these cards is meant to give ideas on how to make pretend play more meaningful and educational.

  Help develop their ideas: Adults should help develop the child’s ideas with open questions.

  Don’t make over-powering contributions: “Adult participation is most helpful when it responds to, guides and elaborates on the child’s behavior with demonstrations and suggestions.” (Goncu, Klein, 2001)

  Let the child lead: Adults should follow the child’s creativity and establish a climate of respect.

  Ask open questions: Open questions help children express ideas that are not fully developed.

  Echo communication: Repeating the play statement which marks the emotional quality. For example: Tom is playing with a bar of soap pretending it is an airplane.

  Tom: Look this is an airplane!
  Parent: An airplane! It is very fast, where is it going?

- The “Ideas” section gives suggestions on props you can use to enhance, extend and make the activities a little different every time.

- The “Parent Q’s” section gives examples of questions that can be asked to maintain and expand pretend play.
Examples of activities of Problem Solving Cards

**Rescue Mission**

**The Problem:** We need to get to (make up a place) and rescue (make up someone), but we need to go in disguise because nobody can recognize us.

**Prompts:**
- Can we make a disguise with the blanket?
- We need to find a way to get there and come back.

**Ideas:**
- Try using the blanket as a prop, you can make: costume, transportation device (car, boat, airplane...), suitcase.
- The binoculars and the magic wand can also help.

**Parent Qs:**
- How can we make a really good disguise?

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**Mountain Top**

**The Problem:** We need to climb to the top of the mountain to look for the hidden treasure. We need to pack many things because it is a long trip.

**Prompts:**
- What should the treasure be?
- What should we pack? Food? Sleeping bags? Flashlight?
- Can we use blanket as a suitcase?

**Ideas:**
- Try using the blanket as a prop.
- The binoculars and the magic wand can also help.

**Parent Qs:**
- You can go to the bottom of the ocean, a castle, jungle...
c. Storytelling Cards

The Story Telling Cards are meant to encourage storytelling by giving ideas and proposing scenarios and characters that can help jump-start a story. They also give methods and tips that can help the stories be fun and memorable for children and the parent as well.

These cards offer some ideas for when it’s story time. They have some suggestions on ways of making reading to your child more interactive and fun.

Actively involving the child in the reading process can make the activity more memorable and enjoyable.
Examples of activities of Storytelling Cards

**STORY TELLING**

(These are some ideas and methods)

**IDEAS FOR PARENTS**

1. **Keep stories familiar.** Choose topics they know (ex. Mom, Dad, siblings, grandpa, local store and park).

2. **Put your child at the center of the story** or someone they can easily identify with (ex. boy/girl of their same age).

3. **Silly voices and expressions** make stories more interesting.

4. **The value of repetition.** It gives the child a chance to memorize what comes next (words or phrases), gain self-confidence and the sense of control by knowing what comes next.

5. **Let the child pick the characters, places...**

6. **Continue a favorite book.**

7. **Act out** parts of the story.

8. **Pick subjects your kids like.** Like sports, animals, tv characters, family members etc...

9. **Incorporate their suggestions.**

10. **Make each character distinctive.** Give them a special trait (ex. something funny or weird they do or like).

**STORY TELLING**

(Here are some ideas and methods)

**DIALOGIC READING**

An interactive method for reading to children where they become actively involved in the reading process.

How we read to children is as important as how frequently we read to them.

Three steps for dialogic reading:

1. **Ask “What” questions.** Point to something on a book and say: “What’s this? What’s this called?” Repeat what they say (Mirror communication: “Yes, that’s a snake!”)

2. **Expand what your child says.** Keep the expansions short and simple. Build on the child’s phrases just a little.

3. **Asking open-ended questions** allows children to say what they are thinking.

**Other questions can be:** “What else do you see?”, “Tell me about...”, “What if...?”, “How did that happen?”, “What do you think?”

If the child doesn’t know what to answer, you can say something like “I think he may be...”

Alternating this type of reading with reading a book all the way through (where they understand the continuity of the story) is good.
III. The Tools

There are four tools included with The Blanket, these are binoculars, steering wheel, magic wand and flashlight. These tools are abstract representations of familiar objects where it is really not about the toy but the activity they generate. With binoculars, we can see things we couldn’t see before, it symbolizes adventure or looking for new adventures and it lets us see things in a different perspective. The steering wheel is all about going places, taking a trip and the excitement of being in control of the situation. It can become the steering wheel of a car, truck, boat, submarine or magic carpet. The magic wand adds the magical element kids love. It makes impossible things possible. Lastly, the flashlight represents adventure and discovering things.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Generated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Binoculars</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing things, looking for adventure, looking at things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>through a different perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Steering Wheel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolizes going places, taking a trip, freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flashlight</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovering hidden things, adventure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Magic Wand</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adds magical element, makes impossible things possible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Blanket: Play for Social and Creative Development
IV. The Play Shapes

The play shapes are flat, easy to carry cut-out pieces of the characters in the activity cards. They are meant to create more possibilities of play using the tree design on The Blanket. They somehow bring out the characters into a new scenario where kids can play with them.
V. Binder

The Blanket has straps on the back to hold the binder, which holds all the other components in place.
Animation

I developed an animation to help explain the idea of The Blanket. If you would like to see the animation please go to the link below:

https://vimeo.com/39739625
Password: theBlanketrit
Final Thoughts

One of the most important aspects of The Blanket is that it generates creative, open-ended play and lets the child be creative and imaginative with it. It is very different from most educational toys out on the market today, and this is what makes it special. It is such a simple toy and yet it can create infinite possibilities of play. It does not structure play in any particular way or engraves in children’s minds any type of character or dialogue, letting the child set their own rules and guidelines. It is not gender specific or achievement oriented and lets play develop spontaneously and be different with each child.

The Blanket is a plaything that focuses on relationships between parent and child. It tries to bring the parent and child closer together through play, unlike many of the popular electronic educational toys available today that isolate children and glues them to a screen.

It seems that children’s play has been compromised by adults, even though only with the intention of taking advantage of all its benefits. The Blanket tries to give children back a little bit of this free play they need and love so much. It represents the idea of going back to the basics and removing all unnecessary aspects of a toy and leaving toys as instruments that enhance creativity and imagination.

Howard P. Chudacoff summarizes this idea in a perfect way when he states that, “Children do not need toys to imagine.”
Further Development: Making the Blanket Marketable

After I finished developing my thesis I showed it to people in the toy industry to get their feedback, thinking I might try to develop it. The comments I got were good but the major issue shared by many was that The Blanket in its current state is not very marketable. It has too many pieces and would be too expensive to manufacture and sell at a competitive price. I decided to work on the following aspects to make it more marketable:

1. Fewer pieces
2. More play value
3. More practical to carry and handle
4. Different graphics

1. Fewer pieces:

Thinking about the play value the play shapes currently have in comparison to the price of manufacturing them, I decided to eliminate them. They really do not add a lot of value to the design or functionality of The Blanket and actually add more unnecessary stuff to the design.

I figured out a different way of carrying and holding all the pieces instead of the binder, which would also be expensive. The Blanket could have a pocket that could hold all the pieces within itself.

2. More play value

I decided to add more play value by making The Blanket be transformable into things more easily by making the tabs on the corners swivel and rotate, letting The Blanket be positioned in different angles easier. These circular, rotating pieces would be made out of a soft foam, like EVA.

3. More practical to carry, handle and attach to furniture

I reworked the way The Blanket folds within itself and made it a compact, easy to carry product.

4. Different Graphics

I eliminated the tree graphics on The Blanket because they contradicted the whole idea of The Blanket, which is to give kids a toy with no meaning attached to it.
The Blanket: Play for Social and Creative Development

Swiveling pieces

Buttons

Pocket to put tools and cards

Backpack straps

Tools

Cards come in a ring

Folds into a backpack (side view)
Any images not mentioned above are the creation of the author.
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The Blanket: Play for Social and Creative Development


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