

## THE HOW AND WHY OF HOMEMADE TOYS AND ACTIVITIES

By Joe Obegi

*“I just bought him a new bulldozer, but all he wants to do is play with the aspirin bottle in my purse!”*

There are a number of rationales for providing homemade toys for our children as well as reasons why children become so enthralled by them.

### The “Why” of Homemade Toys

Many parents have had experiences similar to the one above. If it is not an aspirin bottle, it is our keys, our wallets, our tools, our clothes, or our pots and pans. Why are children so attracted to adult materials?

- *Children long to participate in the world of adults.* They want to do things adults do, to use the things adults use. Toys crafted from household materials allow children to do this.
- *Homemade toys feel “real.”* They feel “real” in the sense that their materials are pulled directly from the family’s culture, lifestyle, and daily routines. As such they do not have fabricated or manufactured qualities about them. Often their components are derived from natural materials such as paper and cloth products. As a result, homemade toys can contain rich textures, grains, and weight. From these qualities children acquire a unique sense of ownership that store-bought toys cannot duplicate.
- *Originality and specificity.* Because the location, ethnicity and culture of each home is different, toys derived from each of these homes will be inherently unique rather than manufactured to please a particular subset of the population. And because no one knows the interests of a child better than that child’s
- parent, homemade toys can be crafted with the specific interests of the individual child in mind.
- *Homemade toys and activities are cheaper!* Because they are created from recyclable household materials there is very little to buy. The only investment is your time and love.
- *Homemade toys have a “history.”* For example, an empty ice cream carton brings with it a history: “I ate this with mom last night while we were ... and then we...” Store bought toys have no past, no history. They are lifeless. Children must “breathe life” into them through their play. The history of household items can suggest possible play themes and contribute to feelings of ownership not only of the toy but of the memory and experience associated with it.
- *Homemade toys cultivate a sense of contribution and pride in parents.* It is a very validating feeling

to have your child take pleasure in a toy into which you invested a piece of yourself.

### If Homemade Toys Are So Great, Why Aren’t They More Common?

There are a few myths and misconceptions that prevent parents from creating toys for their children.

- Through aggressive advertising, the media has convinced the public that toy manufacturers have exclusive knowledge of what it takes to educate and entertain children. However, who knows your children better than you? Who else could know their likes, dislikes, current interests and abilities?
- As adults we evaluate toys through our own eyes (would I enjoy playing with this?) and, therein, lies our mistake. In one sense adults have forgotten how to play. We have the world figured out already. Unfortunately, this knowledge can constrict our imagination and affect our judgment of a toy’s entertainment and learning value. Often times objects and experiences adults perceive as mundane, children devour with great gusto (what happens when I drop it, shake it, roll it, throw it?). Look at toys through the eyes of the child, through their limited experience, through their developmental capabilities. In other words, do not underestimate the value of simplicity.
- Parents are concerned that they may not be “providing” for their children if they do not buy the biggest and best commercial toys available; parents can be intimidated by feelings of guilt and inadequacy. We often unfairly compare our children’s material possessions to those of the wealthy Jones next door. Is this comparison an accurate measure of our dedication to and our love for our children? The reality is, as all the above reasons argue, homemade items provide just as much opportunity for growth, if not more, than store bought ones.

### The “How” of Creating Homemade Toys and Activities

- *Even if you are not sure, try it.* You will be surprised by the novel uses for materials your children will dream up.
- *Health and safety.* Make sure all materials are safe to mouth, both in terms of texture and toxicity. Be aware of choking hazards. If you can easily put it through a toilet paper tube, the item should be considered a choking hazard.

- *Before you throw something in the trash* ask yourself how a child might be able to use it.
- *Can this item be used in a way similar to how Mom and Dad use it?* If so, this may increase its attractiveness.
- *Durability vs. time invested.* Resist spending excessive amounts of time investing in a toy's appearance; rather, spend it attempting to increase its durability and usability. Your popular creations will certainly take lots of abuse.
- *Appeal to all the senses.* Have toys which differ in their texture, smell, appearance, weight, and sound.
- *Keep in mind your child's current interests.* Think especially in terms of what adult routine your child has been the most eager to participate in.
- *Designate a place for messiness.* Some of your ideas may require a good deal of clean-up. Find places where you are least concerned about cleanliness and that lend themselves easily to clean-up. For example, your backyard will be better suited to water play than your living room.
- *Refresh older toys with a novel presentation or location.* For example, place some old tennis balls inside your child's favorite pots and pans.
- *Keep in mind your child's developmental capabilities.* Here are some extremely brief descriptions of the more salient features of the early stages of development. The breakdowns are approximate; a great deal of overlap occurs between stages:
  1. Infants (0-12 months) - explore the world through their mouths, therefore, toys/activities must be safe to mouth.
  2. Toddlers (12 months - 3 years) - "hands-on thinkers," experimenters, preoccupied with cause and effect. Objects must be okay to touch, throw, collect, dump, roll, bounce, etc. Mouthing toys is still a common form of exploration.
  3. Preschoolers (3 - 5 years) - imaginative play abounds. Think of toys/activities which appeal to their creativity and imagination. Because toys often need to be more intricate and sophisticated as children grow older, focus on art and drama activities.

## Startup Ideas

### Infants

- Object bottles - plastic water bottles containing one of the following: kernels of corn, uncooked rice, kidney beans oil and water, coins, etc
- Kleenex boxes containing scarves or other material.
- Cardboard box tunnels.
- Checkbook boxes containing "soft sounding" bells.

### Toddlers

- Oatmeal, "Pringles" chip containers, or coffee cans.
- Small photo albums containing pictures of themselves, family, friends and familiar places.
- Old food boxes that have meaning. That is, food boxes related to your child's experience. For example, ice cream containers, cereal boxes, yogurt containers, etc.
- Slotted diaper wipe boxes combined with frozen juice can lids or poker chips.
- Shovels cut out from plastic jugs.
- Milk carton blocks. Cut off the tops of two half-gallon milk cartons. Plug the two containers together.

### Preschoolers

- Masking tape roads.
- Painting with old kitchen utensils or cookie cutters.
- Ice cube art - ice cubes made with a dash of food coloring or tempura paint. Use ice cubes as markers.
- Paper airplanes.
- Toilet paper roll binoculars. Add colored cellophane to the ends for a twist.
- Grocery store set-up.

## Useful Recipes

### *Cooked Playdough:*

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup salt
- 2 tablespoons Cream of Tartar
- 2 cups water
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- food coloring
- mix thoroughly
- blend until gravy-like. No lumps!
- cook over medium-low heat. Stir constantly. Mixture will initially become clumpy then, in about one minute, become cohesive. Do not overcook or the playdough will become too dry.
- Allow to cool then knead for several minutes.
- Place in an airtight container and refrigerate.

*Salt Crystal Paint:* Equal parts flour, water, and salt. Add food coloring. Mix thoroughly.

*Flour Paint:* Mix flour, water, and food coloring until desired consistency is reached.

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*Joe Obegi, BA, is a Head Teacher at the Center for Child and Family Studies, UC Davis: "I would like to thank Jennifer Martin for her generous and valuable input."*

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