



“I See! I Want!”

Play is a learning experience for children, a universal process vital to the healthy development of every child. Toys are the basic tools children use to enrich their play, to develop social, physical and intellectual faculties and to discover the world around them. That's why it is important to choose toys carefully. Parents are constantly bombarded with a wide selection of play materials. They hear cries of “Buy Me!”, “I want the one with...” and “All the kids have...” Children often base their choices on the commercials and television programs they see every day.

Advertisements are designed to make toys attractive to children, to capture their attention and their creative imagination. Though children may recognize a phrase or character on television, they may not understand the ad's message. Skilled camera-work and special effects can make a toy look exciting, colourful and easy to handle. That same toy, on closer examination, may allow for only limited creativity, discovery and learning. Television has made many children demanding consumers, teaching them that buying products will make them feel both good and happy. Even schools are not free from advertising and the Internet is a wide-open new venue for advertisers.

“A typical 6- to 9-month-old sits in front of the television for 1½ hours a day. By the time the child reaches his third birthday, this increases to about four hours per day. Statistics Canada reports that children between the ages of 2 and 11 watch an average of 18.5 hours of television weekly. If it weren't for mandatory school attendance, these numbers would be even higher.”¹ Extensive viewing by children of television commercials for toys has helped boost Canadian toy sales to 1.5 billion dollars annually (excluding video games).²

- Television shows have become ads for toys.
- Many shows are simply cartoons based on toy characters. These programs are designed to promote the sale of the product.
- Children's television characters are used to promote toys and various other products including bubble bath soap, lunch boxes and clothing.

How to reduce the effect of the media on toy selection

Parents and children can actively work together in choosing suitable toys for play activities.

1. Set limits on television viewing. Be aware of what shows your children watch and how much time they spend. Try to watch television with your children, and discuss the scenes and advertisements that make you happy or disturb you. If you cannot be with your children while they are watching television, discuss beforehand the kind of shows you both enjoy watching. Help children set their own television viewing limits.
2. Make toy lists. Encourage older children to make a list of toys they would like to have. Discuss which toys you feel are appropriate and those you feel are not. Children will learn about choosing toys and about not getting everything on their wish list.
3. Provide a variety of types of toys. Show children how they can have more fun with the toys they already own, how to invent games and how to make toys from odds and ends around the house. Children will gain from adult involvement in the fun.
4. Evaluate toys on the basis of their play value, not by name brand and/or price. Notice the length of time your child plays with certain types of toys. Do not buy a toy that you do not believe will be of value to your children, even if it is labelled educational. *All* toys that children enjoy playing with over long periods of time have educational value.
5. Set limits on television-related toy buying. You are the person responsible for your children's toy-buying. Do not let them talk you into purchasing a toy you do not feel is appropriate. It is okay to say no!
6. When friends and relatives offer to buy gifts for your children, make recommendations. Encourage them to buy toys that you would like to see them play with and enjoy.

Endnotes

1. Jeffery Derevensky, *Montreal Gazette*, May 1997
2. Canadian Toy Association, 200

Books

- The TV Book: The Kids Guide to Talking Back* by Shelagh Wallace. Toronto: Annick Press, 1996.
- Kid Culture: Children, Adults and Popular Culture* by Kathleen McDonnell. Second Story Press. (Toronto, ON, Canada), 1994.

Websites

- Media Awareness Network at www.media-awareness.ca
 Canadian Toy Testing Council at www.toy-testing.org
 Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs at www.frp.ca