IMAGINATIVE PLAY

A child's imaginary world, encompassing both fantasy and real life play situations, is a rich and stimulating environment in which to develop.

Children love to dress up and to imitate real-life situations. They can embellish this role playing with simple household items (pots and pans, rolling pins and play dough, etc.) and with toys which are child-sized versions of real objects (tea sets, irons, telephones, hard hats, tool boxes, etc.). Toys such as these should be sturdy and washable.

A host of imaginative play situations also exists in the form of sets which usually include play figures and realistic accessories. These sets prompt enquiry and discussion about the settings and the function of the accessories, and an extensive variety of themes is available.

Most children delight in using and watching puppets. Young toddlers readily respond to a puppet manipulated by an older child or adult, which encourages speech and communication, while school age children can create their own roles for puppets. When buying stuffed puppets and toys, look for washing instructions, and check that seams are well-sewn, eyes and noses are firmly attached, and that any clothes or accessories are well finished. Inner and outer materials should be new, clean, flame-retardant, and preferably non-allergenic.

Great advances had been made in the quality and construction of stuffed toys in recent years. Most of today's wonderfully soft synthetic furs can be machine washed, and many can be dried in the dryer. Look for washing instructions before you buy, and check that seams are well-sewn, eyes and noses are firmly attached, and that any clothes or accessories are well finished. Inner and outer materials should be new, clean, flame-retardant, and preferably non-allergenic. For infants, look for small, brightly coloured stuffed toys with pleasing textures, very light weight, and appendages (like long bunny ears) for easy grasping. For toddlers, stuffed toys should be small and light enough to be easily carried about and taken to bed. Stuffed toys for all preschoolers should be fully washable.

Each child's reaction to a stuffed toy is a very individual one. A toy may "speak" to one child and become the object of love and comfort, while leaving the next child unmoved. Some children may reserve all their love for one special friend, while others welcome stuffed toys by the armful. Often stuffed toys are valued as mascots for display. The lucky few take on human characteristics and become extensions of their owners and privileged family members. This problem is further complicated by the advent of "personality plush" - toys usually part of a line of several toys, often featured in a television series, and each with an elaborate story line and prescribed characteristics. These toys are essentially fads, and although they generally are of excellent quality and meet all the customary requirement for acceptability, their popularity among children depends heavily upon the degree of recognition of the line. It is for each parent to judge in these cases whether the "show-and-tell" value is worth the purchase price.

Toys which enhance imaginative play are very important to children's healthy development, as they help them to "play-out" and to resolve daily occurrences in both their own and the adult world.

Posted by: the Canadian Toy Testing Council, September 1996.