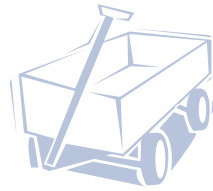


Chapter 1

Becoming Your Own Expert





So, you want to be a toy expert? That's good. Every child needs a toy expert in his or her life. What's better, as a parent you are best suited to be your child's top toy expert. There's no one more qualified for the role.

Of course, that won't stop many others from trying to edge into your spotlight. One of the first lessons you'll learn on your road to personal toy expertise is how many would-be experts out there would love to sell you a shortcut. Perhaps the biggest growth area of the toy business in the last decade has been that of toy advice. From top ten lists to sticker awards on boxes to experts and gurus, the toy expert field is growing larger every year. And to a busy parent, it looks so inviting: a quick, simply packaged shortcut to great toy choices. It's an appealing sight.

Sadly, it's largely a mirage. You are the one suited to be the toy expert for your child. The advice market may offer nuggets and tidbits along the way, but it's up to the parent to make sense of it all. As you begin your quest for toy expertise, you can start by understanding what's wrong with most of the advice already out there and what little gems you might harvest from their offerings to make your own best choices.

The Trouble with Experts

Most of what passes for advice, especially during the holiday season, is mostly marketing, all wrapped up and nicely packaged for parents. Much of it is hopelessly bi-

ased. Some of it is just plain wrong. None of it substitutes for your own judgment of what makes a good toy for your child. The biggest mistake a parent can make during the holidays or any other toy shopping time is to rely on a list or award sticker to make a toy choice for a child. In many cases, these are nothing more than thinly disguised public relations campaigns designed to herd parents toward particular products. They are commercials dressed up in holiday finery.

Why Lists May Be Misleading

Every year, magazines, newspapers, and other media outlets put out stories that claim to have found the hot toys or, even worse, the best toys for the holiday season. These lists set out to highlight certain toys as better than the rest. Very few of them attain that goal.

The problems:

- ***Journalists know journalism.*** Many of the editors and reporters involved are not experts in psychology or education or child development. The opinion of the average journalist—even if that individual is a parent or grandparent—is no better or worse than the opinion of your neighbor.
- ***Magazines want to sell magazines.*** So their “Hot Toys” or “Best Toys” lists are going to reflect that goal. The toys will be chosen for the story with an eye toward what the readership wants to see—and that’s not necessarily the full universe of available toys. Any publication’s toy story will be shaped by the demographics of its readership. They may or may not dovetail with the demographics of your own family.



TOY TIP



What are these magazine and newspaper lists good for? News. If you want to know what is new this year, you want to peruse these lists. They don't have the expertise to tell you whether the toys are good or bad, but they can reliably tell you about new products the major toy makers have to offer.

- ***Publications have advertisers.*** And the advertisers are often toy companies. Some publications will handle their toy stories separately from their advertisers. Others, particularly trade or other industry publications, may be directly influenced to feature toys from their best advertising customers. Many publications offer their own awards based on their own criteria. Take a closer look and you'll see it is most likely an opinion poll from a nondiverse sample of parents or staffers.

What the Kids Don't Know

Contrary to popular belief, children are not toy experts. They are toy consumers. But that doesn't prevent everyone from TV stations to parenting magazines setting up child-centered "toy tests" during the holiday season. They are billed as the best way to find the best toys. Not so.

The problems:

- ***Expertise is by its nature an adult attribute.*** Knowledge of educational value, developmental appro-



TOY TIP



Although lots of toy tests are problematic, every once in a while you can come across a good one that really cuts through the marketing mayhem and analyzes toys. Check the methodology of these child-centered tests. If they are run by qualified educators and the testing population is diverse—that is, not limited geographically, economically, or culturally—you may glean some good information.

priateness, and hidden flaws are complicated concepts best understood by adults. Who would trust a child to look at a toy and determine its safety or educational value? Qualified adults are the best judges of toys, just as they are the best judges of automobiles or consumer products. Just because a child may ultimately be the end user does not mean a child is the best judge of the product.

- ***Where's the science?*** In many cases, child-centered testing is done in a way that is at best unscientific and at worst completely random. Some tests are set up in day-care centers. That already limits the results to children of a certain socioeconomic status—those whose parents can afford day care. Other tests are arranged in an “open play” setting with little in the way of parameters. That may make for good television, but it doesn't get you any closer to knowing which are the best toys.
- ***Who's running the test?*** A true test—one designed to produce accurate and substantive data—should be

administered by an experienced researcher. In the case of toys, you'd want to see someone with a background in education or child psychology to ensure that the adult in the room is not influencing the results. With many child-centered toy tests, that's hardly the case. Tests are run by everyone from day-care teachers to individual families to publicists for toy manufacturers.

Who's Paying Your Expert?

These days, everybody's an expert. We live in a society where expertise is prized. And in every industry, individuals are encouraged to flaunt their expertise and hang out a shingle declaring their willingness to share this inside knowledge with others. For a price. Expertise is a booming industry, and the toy industry is not an exception. The marketplace is full of people with toy knowledge for sale. But the buyer should beware.

The problems:

- ***It's a business.*** It's not uncommon for people interviewed on TV or by the print media to be positioned as "experts" but actually be paid spokespeople. Toy companies make financial arrangements with toy "experts" all the time so that their wares will be mentioned in interviews. Your "expert" may have a conflict of interest in the form of his or her paycheck.
- ***It's show business.*** When was the last time you saw a dull guru on TV? Often, an expert gets airtime based on his or her ability to perform on TV. It's a fact of the business. So the advice you're getting may not necessarily be from the most intelligent or well-informed guru. Instead, you need to understand that what you're



TOY TIP



True toy experts are not necessarily limited to talking about the newest toys on the market. Many will discuss toy choices that include classics as well as newcomers. So by listening to an expert talk about toy choices, you may actually get a broader perspective than you might from other sources.

getting is the most telegenic toy guru. That's the impact television has had on the advice business.

The Reality of Retailing

Toy stores often put out their own lists of top toys. These are generally designed to boost traffic into the retail store. Toy stores may set up their own in-house tests or simply issue press releases with their top picks.

The problems:

- ***Depending on when the toy store list emerges, there may or may not be any real sales data behind it.*** A list that appears early in the season—say, September or October—is probably based on the retail buyer's best guess. Consumers may take a different path.
- ***Toy stores must move inventory.*** Their lists are naturally going to promote the items they hope to sell. When they say “best toy” they really mean “toy we'd most like to see move off our shelves.”



TOY TIP



Stores are the best gauges of actual popularity. Toy experts may say a particular plaything is hot, but the proof comes when the cash register rings. Toy retailer data, especially data based on real retail sales and that appear in the heart of the shopping season—say, November or December—are going to offer you actual insight into what is most popular this year.

- ***Retailers have specific demographics.*** A specialty toy store may issue a list that encompasses the high-end toys that it stocks. A discount chain will feature a completely different set of mass-market toys. Neither embraces the full universe from which a shopper can choose.

Stop the Stickers!

See those award stickers plastered all over the toys in your local store? Ignore them. One of the biggest growth segments of the toy industry in recent years has been toy awards. Although a few toy awards seem prestigious and worthwhile, most are simply another attempt at marketing, and there's little but business interest behind them.

The problems:

- ***What does the sticker really tell you?*** Not much. No entry rules. No judging criteria. No information on whether or not the manufacturer has paid to receive



TOY TIP



Some awards have enough history (over ten years) to be legitimate helpmates in the search for great playthings. If you are able to easily uncover the award criteria and the award isn't paid for or biased, you have a nugget of value.

consideration or placement by the sticker giver. The toy award business is unregulated, so toy award givers can devise any system they like. As a consumer, you have little idea what's behind that sticker. And if you did know, you'd be shocked. Plenty of award programs are cash deals. Many require "submission fees," which biases the results right then and there. Toy makers pay for consideration. What you envision as a detailed judging process may actually be little more than a business transaction.

- ***Just because someone else judged it a great toy doesn't mean you'll agree.*** Don't assume that a toy judge—even a qualified one—knows best. You're the best judge for your child.
- ***Toy makers leverage these award stickers for good shelf placement.*** It's all part of the retail process. You see the stickers because they are part of the marketing program. Consider them tiny sticky commercials.

When the News Isn't News

Every year, the media manage to come up with stories about holiday toys. Often, the story centers around a hot or "must-have" toy. Kids are interviewed asking for the toy.



TOY TIP



When watching the news, pay more attention to stories with statistics or credentials to back up assertions. These will give you a good idea of what's really going on with their reviews and toy tests.

Parents are interviewed in their harried search for the toy. Retailers give quotes about how this toy is hot, hot, hot. Annual coincidence? Nah. These stories are perennials.

The problems:

- ***Is it really news?*** No. It's just the tyranny of the calendar. The holiday season goes into full swing, and media outlets, from national television to local newspapers, dig around for a good holiday toy story.
- ***Does it love the camera?*** A reality of the news business is that it often revolves around what looks good on the page or screen. Toys that photograph well are likely to turn up in these stories.
- ***Is it dramatic?*** News outlets like drama. And if there isn't much, they'll add some. A toy may not really be in short supply nationwide, but that won't stop a local news crew from interviewing a frantic mother unable to find the toy.

Industry Gossip

Unwilling to sit on the sidelines during the crucial toy-selling season, toy industry associations have jumped into the media mix, setting up their own press confer-



TOY TIP



Industry association events are essentially trade shows. As such, they are good for a broad look at the newest wares of the industry.

ences, awards systems, and lists to generate sales for their membership.

The problems:

- ***Often, industry association events are billed as an “inside scoop.”*** In fact they are simply the consolidated message of its members. Look at them as commercials from toy companies.
- ***Associations work for their members, not for consumers.*** You’re unlikely to get any negative spin from an industry event.
- ***Associations are for members only.*** Don’t bother trying to find information about a toy made by a small company that’s not a member of the large association.

Conclusion

It’s hard to say no to so many offers of advice. But keep in mind that lists and awards and experts can offer only guides and suggestions. Ultimately, you’ll need to be the one educated and savvy enough to make toy choices for your child. Resist the urge to follow shortcuts when it comes to finding the best toys. Your best route to toy happiness is not via a guru or top ten list. It’s through your own knowledge of your child and of what the toy industry has to offer.

WORKSHEET

Toy Test Red Flags

Trying to determine if the test or list you're perusing is valid? Ask these key questions:

- Do companies pay an entrance fee to have their toys considered? That's already a conflict. The test is relying on its participants for funds.
- How many toys were tested? Of those, how many were recommended? If everyone in the test gets recommended, that's a red flag.
- If there's an expert panel of judges, what are their credentials? Look for people whose expertise you would trust. Individual opinions from parents and teachers aren't research.
- Are the judges paid for their participation? That's not necessarily a bad thing, but you should know who is writing the check.
- Was the test conducted by an education or research professional? Tests run by journalists and publicity coordinators may be inaccurate.
- How large was the sample of children in the test? A small group will yield less reliable results.
- Was the sample of children demographically diverse? Race and gender are not the only factors. Look also for economic and geographic diversity in a testing sample.



Tales from the Toy Tips Lab

“Do you like this toy?” Ask a small child with a toy in his hand, and chances are excellent that he will say yes. Why? Because he wants to keep playing. That’s the natural reaction of a child and a very good example of why child-centered toy tests are often far off base. Every year I watch with dismay as television stations and magazines set up toy tests. They round up a bunch of children, hand out the toys, and ask them “Do you like these toys?” Sure they do! They all say yes. But the test is meaningless. The TV stations have done nothing more than prove that kids at play want to keep playing and not give the toys back. Over the years, I’ve worked to develop research methods that uncover the value of toys and the reactions children have to specific toys. But I’ve learned that asking a child to express like or dislike for a toy isn’t a useful research methodology. A toy in the hand is a good thing. Kids will nod politely at the questioning adult and then go right back to playing.