

‘They Want Toys to Get Their Children Into Harvard’: Have We Been Getting Playthings All Wrong?

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The week my eldest son finished nursery, I decided to clear out the playroom where he had spent much of his young life forming bonds with inanimate objects. [Toys](#) had kept him company whenever other duties or distractions had occupied his mother and me, and over the years we had amassed a truly crass number of them. As I sifted through pile after pile, I felt as though I was in the pit of an immense archaeological dig. I had not considered us to be particularly pushy or indulgent parents; mostly, I wanted my children to grow up to be financially independent and live lives of nothing worse than common unhappiness. But the artefacts in our playroom midden told another tale.

Here is a partial inventory of what I found: 13 floor puzzles, including several meant to teach the alphabet. Two sets of magnetic tiles, along with dozens of figurines and matchbox cars, for constructive and imaginary play. Xylophones and tambourines to foster musical ability, and a smattering of finger paints to inspire artistic creativity. Four logic games and a set of dice for practising maths. A speaker box that could play Mozart or children’s versions of the Iliad and Odyssey. Endless Duplo. And, to teach our kids how to unwind after the vigorously pedagogical afternoon those other things were meant to facilitate, the [Fisher-Price Meditation Mouse™](#), an electronic plush toy offering guided stretching and relaxation exercises (advertising copy: “help your little one learn how to nama-stay relaxed”).

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