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Kids are intuitively aware of what's hot and happening. Whether its younger watching older, or older watching TV---they hone in on tech and trends.

Result: there's a decline in traditional toys---terms of sales and interest.

Kids more interested in electronics.

NPD figures first 6 months of 2007
Console hardware sales up 98%
Portable game hardware up 27%
Console software up 21%
Portable software up 35%
Video game accessories up 56%

PUT IN PERSPECTIVE:

All of 2006, toy industry retail sales growth was up only **.34%** over 2005.

*10 years ago, Barbie went to the office. ..Now she's on line.

*Teddy bears were once a favorite furry friend... Now every pet's an avatar.

*And who needs a musical instrument... when you have guitar hero?

**One thing that's not changing:
KIDS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN.**

Play is the work of kids.

From Galileo to Gates, and Piaget to Penelope Leach---open-ended, imaginative play is key to raising happy, creative kids and productive, free-thinking adults.

Toys are kids' tools.

They inspire creativity
Teach kids how to play together---and alone,
Introduce math and reading skills,
Help develop motor skills---both fine and gross

So how, with this onslaught of media that compels kids to push buttons for immediate gratification, vie against a machine to play a game or puzzle
or talk to a screen to have a friendly conversation,
can we ensure that play is creative and constructive?

In the digital world of kids, how can we tell if a toy is good?

My background---

13 years, evaluating toys for magazines—Parents and Nick Jr. Family Magazine.

22 year old daughter, 16 year old twins---they have grown up being my lab partners.

(Story about Zak) "That's not really a good incentive to be a tester."
At that point, I realized two things:

#1 never underestimate a child's intelligence and intuition

#2 I had to expand my testing circle. From then on, I began testing in nursery and elementary schools as well as age-appropriate play groups.

Take you thru my thinking as I look at toys. I'm using the term TOYS loosely here, because today a lot of media, such as gaming or interactive TV is designed for play.

Goal is the help you look at your own areas through a new lens.

I begin evaluating toys every year at Toy Fair in February-- the beginning of the toy cycle. **It's after Xmas**, so the winners are already unwrapped, and it's when so many new products get introduced.

In one week **at Toy Fair**

I see over 2000 toys, usually 300-400 a day. I take meticulous notes .
At the end of every day---when I'm essentially brain dead---I go back thru my notebook and highlight the toys I remember. This is my secret system---if a toy stands out from all the others after a day of seeing

hundreds, then this toy has something going for it. After a week of this, I start calling in toys....and let other experts weigh in...be it parents, editors, child care professionals, or teachers. That narrows the list down. Then I start testing.

Every toy needs to be played with by a kid. While I may think something is super, **just like an ice cream cone**, in a kid's hand, it could bomb. Here's what I look for:

AGE APPROPRIATE. If a toy says it's for 3 year olds, can a 3 year old manipulate it? Will they outgrow it by the time they're 3 ½. Is it sized for their hands, do they have the strength to push buttons, and the skills to play

OPEN ENDED. Can you play it in myriad ways? LEGO—gold standard here. But can apply to Sesame Street TV, books without words, art projects.

VALUE/PRICE A \$120 playhouse may seem pricey, but if it's built to last thru 3 kids, that's a bargain. On the other hand, a \$250 mechanical pony is pricey no matter what, unless you figure it's cheaper than owning a real one. Basically, I look at price/value in context.

QUALITY—Wood blocks will last forever. Games, hand helds, books--- are they well made? Will they stand up to kid-use and abuse? Can you drop a Fisher-Price camera (yes).

SKILLS---What is being taught? Every toy has a lesson. Sometimes the lesson is consumerism. Not saying that's all bad. Look at it in context. My kids spend money as fast as I make it---I'd like them to learn about the ratio between earning and spending.

As more and more tech and media seeps into the play arena, I also consider how the tech is used:

NEW USE OF TECHNOLOGY:

SEAMLESS INTEGRATION: Did they add a Bell and whistle because they could...or does it enhance the play/

SOLITARY VS. GROUP OR FAMILY PLAY.

(Again, while family play is wonderful and group play teaches social skills, if you've ever traveled a long distance with a six year old in the back seat, solitary play is a good lesson to learn.

SAFETY. CHINA.---parent filter?

LAST, and most important:

FUN---Will a child like this? Will they play it again and again. Or is it a passing fancy?

EXAMPLES:

FLY FUSION

When you write on special paper using tiny little computerized pen, you create your own smart board. It does math, art, has a language tutor, digitizes notes, has set games and quizzes---and whatever you do can be emailed right to your computer files.

Even has an MP3 player inside the pen to upload a few songs, and using FLY TONES, you can make your own music using a drawn keyboard.

Why do I---and more importantly, tweens (it's for 10-16) love this product?

Speaks the digital language of kids. And it's got a WOW factor.

Research shows that middle schoolers respond to lessons that engage them. Sticking with them longer. And hopefully learning them better.

The FLY took technology and presented it in a new, imaginative, easy-to-use way that's age appropriate and impressive. Kids want to use this again and again. (\$80.)

Not perfect. Filter: bad words. This little pen is...bleeped it out.

Here's another toy with just as impressive technology: Robosapien V2 model. Biomorphic robot, programmed with words and movements, and controlled by an infrared remote or a personal computer.

Infrared vision sensors for obstacle avoidance.

Basic color recognition sensor for detecting either primary color object or skintones.

Sonic sensors for detecting loud sounds.

Grip sensors in both hands for detecting when an object has been picked up

Individually controllable feet, hands, arms and shoulders.

He utters phrases relevant to his behaviors. For example if you take an object he was tracking out of his view he'll say, "Where did it go?"

Free roam mode (open ended play)

Reacts to noises in a room.

Impressive pedigree. but as a toy---thumbs down. Picked up a bottle, spun it around ...so what. Three minutes and we're done.

So how is this relevant to kids and media:

According to the Kaiser Family research, kids on average spend 4 hours a day watching TV, DVDs and videos.

It is our responsibility to make sure that the choices we offer are good ones for children.

We need to empower parents to know how to make good choices.

Let's take a few examples.

CLUB PENGUIN 12 million members Tripled growth in the last year--- doesn't require a purchase to join. Target 6-14, year olds, sweet spot tweens.

Perfect place for this age---As kids become more independent at ages 7 or 8, they want to branch out and meet other kids, so these sites are their intro. to social networking. Explore identities and hang out with friends In a safe way.

I played club penguin with an 11 year old who was a paying member, so she had access to better stuff which she could buy in the virtual store. Then I joined it myself on the free level.

Advocates: controlled environment. Teach kids typing, communicating, caring for pets and budgeting. Work (or play games) to earn money for the things they want to buy,. Allow kids to play games and even write in things like writing contest and community newspapers. Two kinds of chats: safe---type in chat messages with filters. Ultimate (youngest players) prewritten words and phrases. Chatting, creating an avator---creative.

Jane Healy: Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect our Children's Minds---for Better and Worse---teach kids to be a good consuming

member of the consuming culture and to need stuff to be considered successful or good.

End of the day---parents decision: I found it:

AD FREE

Safely filters

No real names used

Anyone registering older than 18---given a cane.

Parents have to activate account

Another tech toy I love:

Guitar Hero

Musical video game using a guitar as the controller. Works on Playstation, Xbox 360 and Wii. As you listen to genres of music, notes scroll across the tv screen and you have to match the controllers colored fret button to the notes, while strumming the strum bar...simulates playing the song. More notes, better score.

Why I like it: I can do it.

Thanksgiving----family game.

Speak kids' language of music--- Stones to Tenacious D

Slow modes

Solo and group play

Not one you'd get tired of

Not violent---battle of the bands against guitar luminaries

See this moving on to other types of music.

On the subject of gaming:

Wii

Gamer Platform, one of my favorites.

Ageless.

I've played Wii with my kids, my 6 year old niece and my mother-in-law.

Wireless.

New technology. New ways

Most popular new platform this season.

Get up and move.

New Use of technology.

Open ended.

Value \$250---backwards compatible with other Nintendo games.

Parental controls---used to prohibit young users from playing games with content encoded for older kids. (Set age level of kids---need a password to override).

Site with reservations: BETA—
Imaginative
Open ended.
Fascinating.

Then I played a game:

Reservations----where is the educational backbone? Where is the age appropriate curriculum?

Opposite end of the spectrum:

Super WHY

New PBS program---so grounded in child development and reading curriculum that it took me several go-arounds to read it all.

SUPER WHY takes an innovative approach to learning by promoting reading as a powerful experience for kids aged 3 to 6 years old. Seamlessly weaves ; preschoolers' level of development, the entertaining features of television and a strong literacy curriculum.

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Interactivity—practice--learning

LOOK at your products, message, medium through a child's eyes

PLAY IS A CHILD'S work.

Our work is to set high standards for tomorrow's learners and leaders.

MEDIA SHOULD ENCOURAGE
FREE THINKING
FORWARD THINKING

FUN

Christine Bielinski

Associate Creative Director, Cartoon Network New Media

These Kids Today!

- Kids still love TV.
 - 98% say they watch TV or movies at home each week
 - 79% say they use the computer for recreation
 - Consider TV the device they can't live without

 - Kids are not early adopters.
 - "New" media isn't new to kids. It's just media.
 - Kids care more about content and who's using it
 - Younger kids most likely to be pointed to sites by someone else

 - Kids are kids.
 - They know technology earlier, but they aren't developing faster
 - New media for "old" brains
- Digital content must speak kids' language

Questions to Ask Ourselves

What Makes Successful Content?

Successful content meets a fundamental need in kids' lives.

- Imagination and Empowerment (Webkinz)
- Mastery and Achievement (Pokemon)
- Socialization and Identity (Club Penguin)

Successful content relies on strong relationships between users and characters. (High School Musical)

Successful content is hard to predict.

It hits organically (YouTube, Facebook)

Who is the first kid? (Runescape)

How do we define a hit? (CrazyMonkeyGames GossipGirl Stardoll)

- **Are we creating this just because it's new, or because it's good?**
- **What fundamental need in a child's life does this content meet?**
- **Are we looking at this content through a child's eyes?**
- **Are we focusing on the "How?" instead of the "Why?"**
- **How do we define success?**