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FAMILY

# Avoiding the Scourge of a Million Crappy Plastic Toys

My anxious quest to follow the doctrine of “toy limitation.”

By REBECCA ONION  
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My daughter is almost 1. This Christmas, we gifted J. a carefully chosen little group of things: a Schoenhut miniature piano. A set of curved rainbow blocks. A small drum. A carved wooden deer, part of a set you can add to, birthday by Christmas, until it makes a woodland scene. Two beautiful and expensive wool and fleece hats with earflaps. The little pile of mostly German goods radiated hope and made me feel ridiculous.

When you become a parent, people love to tell you that you can't do anything about the number and type of toys that come into your house. (I've heard “They just show up” more times than I can count, as if crappy plastic toys were an infestation akin to stink bugs or cockroaches.) It seems that my friends' helpless experiences with toy proliferation are common. In 2012, researchers looking at the homes of 32 middle-class Americans found that they could spot an average of 139 toys, without digging into closets and toy boxes. When I go to the houses of friends and family with older kids, shoals of toys spread across the floors, gathering in the corners like dust bunnies.

My husband and I are not minimalists, especially when it comes to certain categories of belongings, like books (oh, the books) and kitchen equipment. Like a lot of people, we rent a storage space that we are forever desperately trying to empty. Yet, as my daughter learned to extend her hand and grasp, I found that I prized her natural interest in individual objects more than I'd expected. Her regard seemed so *pure*. At 6 months, she would hold a single sprig of thyme from a garden plant, or a leaf from a tree, for 10 or 15 minutes, testing its properties of smell, taste, and feel. At 8 months, she adopted her shampoo tube, gnawing at its flat, crimped end; we decided there was no need to give her any other bath toys. At 10 months, she began to favor a particular small stuffed tabby cat, crowing with satisfaction whenever she saw it.

It’s been goddamn cute, and I’ve watched it with a pre-emptive sadness, thinking of the inevitable plastic juggernaut my friends have warned me about, rolling toward her. As a child, reading the *Little House on the Prairie* books, I envied Laura and Mary’s joy in the single orange in their Christmas stocking or the doll Laura finally got after years of cuddling a corncob in a handkerchief. I felt that joy was lost to me. I had no fewer than five Cabbage Patch Kids—who had, in turn, too many clothes to count. (Pity my parents, who worked to buy me all those toys I *definitely* wanted.) J.—a person too young to have accumulated layers of forgotten belongings in closets and plastic tubs—still has that old-time joy. More and more, I wanted to honor it by making the physical world around her legible, minimal, and beautiful.

ADVERTISING

The advertisement is split into two panels. The left panel features a collection of tools: a pair of black and grey work gloves, a yellow box of nails, a circular saw, and a hand sander. A blue arrow icon points left. The right panel shows a flashlight with a beam of light, three plastic storage bins in red, yellow, and blue, and two electrical outlets. Both panels include the Zoro.com logo and the slogan 'Every part plays a part.' at the bottom.

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In my rational brain, I know that “toy limitation” is an idea with anti-modern, elitist roots. Historian Gary Cross describes the earnest way some Progressive Era parents and educators fought against the new tin toys then being manufactured in piles by companies like Louis Marx. Experts, Cross found, were warning against novelty and overtoying as soon as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One such expert warned that children with too many toys lost their “precious ability for enjoying the little things of life ... a life of discontent is likely to follow.” Cross has some sympathy for these viewpoints, but his tolerance only extends so far. “The idea that children’s things should be immutable in a world of constant change in all other manufactured goods was extraordinarily naïve,” he writes. “It suggests the desire to impose on children the longing for continuity and stability that adults were unwilling to impose on themselves.” Oof! That hurts.

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These early-20<sup>th</sup>-century parents, Cross argues, imposed toy limitation in part to make sure their kids didn’t harbor a lower-class affection for fantasy and immediate gratification. The experts they took advice from were fixated on the idea that the toy should relate to the real world—that you should give your kids little dustpans and brushes to sweep the floor or let them play city administrator on a sandpile. Play, they thought, was the natural work of development, and the parent should make sure the kids’ play would see results. Keeping tin (and later, plastic) novelties out of the playscape would make sure their little workers didn’t get distracted and invest their thoughts in unproductive directions.

Today’s advocates of toy minimalism are no less anti-modern. But rather than dwell on the development of good working habits, they focus on the cultivation of true attentiveness, “flow,” and, in the end, happiness. I came upon the idea of toy limitation while reading about the RIE, Waldorf, and Montessori schools of thought. Writers in these traditions advocate simple, open-ended toys, and their advice givers propose that children’s toy shelves be kept intentionally sparse to promote focus. Montessori toy reviewer “Montessori Matt” writes, in a sentiment echoed by many: “[I]f you have only a few simple, elegant and natural toys available for the child to enjoy, the effect is similar to being outside at a beautiful park or walking in a pristine forest. You can breathe. You can think. And you can enjoy the spontaneous flow of energy that exists in each moment.”

Perhaps the best-known advocate of this school of thought, and the one whose words I read most fervently, is Kim John Payne, a writer, counselor, and consultant whose book *Simplicity Parenting* undergirds a miniempire of parenting courses, spinoff books, and Simplicity-trained family-life coaches. Payne advocates for a number of steps toward streamlining family life, including the promotion of free time for boredom and the institution of family routines and rituals. He writes that among his many recommendations, the reduction of children’s toys is the step most parents who come to his classes choose to take first—proving how tired many people are of the stink bugs.

ADVERTISING

The image displays two side-by-side advertisements for Zoro.com. Both ads feature a teal background and the slogan "Every part plays a part." with the Zoro.com logo at the bottom. The left advertisement shows a collection of tools including a pair of work gloves, a yellow box of PAKS, a circular saw, and a sander. The right advertisement shows a flashlight, three colorful storage bins (red, yellow, blue), and two electrical components (a light switch and a receptacle).

Payne believes the overtoyed child can become spiritually sick. “Too much stuff leads to too many choices,” he argues. “If you overwhelm a child with stuff—with choices and pseudochoices—before they are ready, they will only know one emotional gesture: *‘More!’*” He also privileges toy quality. Whenever possible, Payne thinks, “what a child touches should be real”—handmade, natural, or well-made, durable, and “working,” as in a pair of garden clippers that actually clips flowers or a kitchen knife that can cut. The effects of de-toying are many. Parents that he’s worked with, Payne claims, have alleviated sibling rivalries by getting rid of most of their toys or dealt with discipline issues by strenuously decluttering areas of the house where transitions (between home and school, between play and bed) seem to become bumpy.

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Followers of the toy-limitation approach among parenting writers include minimalists, people who follow RIE, Waldorf, or Montessori, and people who are into “natural” parenting. For certain parents, there’s something deeply appealing about the idea that kids don’t actually need toys at all. Jonathan H. Liu’s 2011 piece, “The Five Best Toys of All Time,” which (twist!) starts with “Stick” and ends with “Dirt,” still pops up in Facebook feeds and parenting blogs. For her part, New Zealand parenting blogger Lucy AitkenRead describes a trip she took with her two children and one toy box “consisting of 7 small dinosaurs, a doll, a cuddly lamb and a pull along dog, supplemented by rocks, twigs, trees to climb, shells, leaves, and beaches to dig.” The kids loved it, and AitkenRead was converted, puckishly calling toys a “farce” and “a tyranny.” Many bloggers who are into limitation write about their

schemes for toy rotation—a method in which you leave a small portion of a child’s toys out for playing and store the rest in plastic bins elsewhere in the house. Payne, a proponent of rotation, suggests controlling the entry of unwanted toys into the home by putting undesirable toys given by a family member into a box labeled with their name and then producing them only whenever the person comes to visit.

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As is my reaction to a lot of parental advice, I’m left wondering whether toy limitation is actually good for kids or whether it merely fits with my intuition. There is now some scientific support for the idea that fewer toys may be better for play. In a recently published paper, researchers at the University of Toledo found that healthy, typically developing toddlers ages 18–30 months played “better” when they had fewer toys in their environment. (That is to say, the kids engaged for longer periods of time with each toy, and played with each toy in a wider array of ways, when presented with four toys as opposed to 16.) This study built (in part) on work done back in 1979, by a pair of marketing researchers who observed toddlers engaging in longer periods of play when fewer toys were around. While the authors of the 2017 study noted that much more research could be done—future studies could look at how children play with four versus 16 toys over a longer period of time, or when presented with the same toys over and over again, or outside of a research setting—they found the results convincing.

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But isn't all of this limitation a gross imposition on the child's interaction with the world? Gary Cross writes that the Progressive Era toy-limitation advocates made themselves a lovely paradox: They wanted to promote child-driven play by offering open-ended toys and “natural” experiences; in so doing, they became martinets, obsessed with shaping children's lives. Maybe the universe of schlocky plastic toys is really where childhood lives, and by denying my child unlimited access to such objects, I'll be denying her self-expression. In her book *Bossypants*, Tina Fey described the genre of object we gave J. for Christmas as “the kind of beautiful wooden educational toys that kids love (if there are absolutely no other toys around and they have never seen television).” I've had this joke repeated to me a few times as gospel truth, and it gives me an uncomfortable feeling. We think we are pruning J.'s taste carefully in the direction of beauty, helping her figure out how to pay attention deeply and thereby enriching her life—but what if we're just being controlling? (Minimalists are well-known grinches.)

In the 1980s, anthropologist Allison James observed that children in the Northeast of England used the word *ket* to describe the kinds of cheap, off-brand sweets that kids like and adults think are disgusting. (James wrote about ket in Britain, but in the American context, ket might be gobstoppers, wax noses that ooze candy slime, or those supersour gummies that we used to dare each other to eat.) James writes that the kids she observed created a hierarchy of value around ket, trading bits of candy and assigning different varieties a worth discernable only to children. This was a child's culture, and the fact that adults disliked the kety sweets just made the kids like them more. To extend the observation: All that plastic crap that comes in Happy Meals is ket too, and I wonder if J. might love it.



I have my ideals. Parenting educator Christina Vlinder recommends that a premobile child have fewer than four toys available during a given play session, a crawling baby under eight, and a toddler under 12, “depending on the size of the space and number of parts to each toy.” So I keep J.’s toys to the prescribed number. In the mornings, J. pots around in her playspace, scattering wooden rings from her rainbow stacker across the rug and banging them together in glee. For now, I watch, just happy to see her happy, and with so little.

## + One more thing

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