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Creative Playthings

Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture

Amy F. Ogata

Educational toys, objects intended to teach skill or develop abilities, became a common feature of postwar childhood. With the rise of the American birthrate after World War II, toymakers exploited the newly prosperous middle-class market and promoted educational toys as fundamental equipment for raising baby-boom children. The major American toymakers, including Holgate, Playskool, and Creative Playthings, as well as architects, designers, and even art museums, promised to develop a child's creativity and imagination through the manipulation of specially designed objects. The elevation of creativity in the promotion of toys developed along with discourses on psychology, education, and art.

THE HEIGHTENED FOCUS on children resulting from the “baby boom”—the dramatic rise in the U.S. birthrate from 1946 to 1964—stimulated a national debate over child rearing, encouraged sharp public interest in education, and sparked unprecedented spending on children. In addition to buying new parenting guides and magazines advocating techniques for creating a healthy personality, postwar parents spent record sums on amusements. Toys such as building blocks, beads, wooden trains and cars, and peg boards became standard equipment in the postwar playroom and schoolroom of the young middle-class child. Although seemingly innocent objects, many “educational” toys—toys intended to teach physical skills or develop cognitive abil-

ities—were embedded in changing ideas about education, postwar discussions about national image, and new research on the origins and social significance of creativity. The major American educational toy companies, including the Holgate Brothers Company; Playskool, Inc.; and Creative Playthings, Inc., developed and promoted objects that reflected a growing faith in creativity as an authentic value that could redeem society after the destruction of war and encourage a competitive drive in midcentury America.

Although a broad sector of the middle class adopted good parenting as both a personal and national obligation and looked to playthings as a means of teaching their children, it was the educated upper middle classes who most readily embraced the notion that personal creativity could become a source of societal renewal.¹ As a result many “educational” toys achieved new recognition, not only for their pedagogical qualities but also for their design and promises to stimulate invention. While the word *creativity* has connotations of deception, its literal meaning (forming, making, inventing) is relatively neutral. The term as it was applied to children acquired utopian associations of beginning anew from a pure source. In looking at the ways that the ideal of creativity permeated the language of advice writers and the strategies of toy designers and manufacturers, I want to suggest

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¹ Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 143.

that what was accepted as a natural relationship between creativity and childhood that characterized the years after World War II not only was a construction of the toy industry but also developed along with discourses on psychology, education, and art. In examining educational toy design and promotion, I aim to show how creativity, a long-standing ideal of experimentation, originality, and productivity, became desirable, consumable, and even redemptive for baby-boom parents.

Scholars have examined the historical and social importance of toys; however, most emphasis has been placed on the toys of earlier and later periods and on general histories of toy manufacture and consumption. The merchandising strategies of American toymakers have also garnered significant attention, particularly from scholars of communication and media, who have traced the history and development of a widely shared children's culture. While the material aspects of toys also figure into this work, scholars stress the ways that play, toys, and childhood are constructed by television and advertising. In seeking to understand the ways that goods have underscored rituals, knowledge, and the practice of everyday life, historians of material culture have traced the multiple contexts around the objects of childhood, especially toys, furniture, and utensils. Psychologists and educators have, of course, also examined the history of teaching toys, and especially modes of usage, in the twentieth century. Birgitta Almqvist, for example, has explored the relationship between educational theory and practice and the rise of creativity as an international ideal, suggesting that the pairing of the terms *educational* and *creative* to describe toys dates from the 1960s. Yet her interest in how children view their playthings puts the emphasis on an individual's perception and only to a lesser degree maps historical change.² Many agree that the baby-

boom generation experienced unique and complicated childhoods, yet few have looked at how material goods produced for children—so abundant and politicized at the time—have contributed to the image of the baby-boom child as the idealized citizen of a new world of peace, freedom, and democracy.

Educational Toys

Objects have always played a role in educating children, but the concept of an educational device or toy to instill specific lessons is only about three hundred years old. While there is evidence of toys from antiquity and the Middle Ages, the changing use of the word *toy* has been used as evidence that the modern idea of a child's plaything emerged only in the early modern period. Before the mid-eighteenth century, *toy* meant a trifle or petty commodity. One of the most celebrated examples of a deliberately educational toy is the set of alphabet blocks that English philosopher John Locke developed for teaching literacy in the late seventeenth century. Locke's blocks show how teaching objects are historically linked to a specific set of educational ideas and an ambitious, emerging middle class who sought to train—through a solitary, indoor activity—the next generation to preserve or surpass the social standing of the family, society, or country. While the concept of the educational toy has shifted over time to encompass a wide variety of objects and toys, it has maintained an emphasis on early learning as a form of social and societal improvement.³

Like the concept of the toy, notions of play, creativity, and childhood have been knit together as a modern construction. Embedded in historical and philosophical discussions of play, creativity has had

² There is a voluminous bibliography on the history of toys and playthings; see, for example, Antonia Fraser, *A History of Toys* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966); Bernard Mergen, *Play and Playthings: A Reference Guide* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); Karen Hewitt and Louise Roomet, *Educational Toys in America: 1800 to the Present* (Burlington, Vt.: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1979); Cross, *Kids' Stuff*; Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986). On the media's influence, see Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing* (London and New York: Verso, 1993); Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001). For material culture studies, see Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600–1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); Thomas J. Schlereth, "The Material Culture of Childhood: Research Problems and Possibilities,"

Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1990), pp. 86–111. Birgitta Almqvist, "Educational Toys, Creative Toys," in *Toys, Play, and Child Development*, ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 46–66.

³ John Brewer, "Childhood Revisited: The Genesis of the Modern Toy," in Hewitt and Roomet, *Educational Toys in America*, pp. 3–10. Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture*, p. 119; John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996), offers not only lessons on the alphabet but also a complete program for training children. As Hewitt and Roomet indicate, the term *educational* was applied to many different objects, from scientific instruments to miniature kitchens; Hewitt and Roomet, *Educational Toys in America*, pp. 1–2. Almqvist argues that the term *educational toy*, as it was used in the 1960s, indicated a specific agenda of postwar competition; Almqvist, "Educational Toys, Creative Toys," p. 49.

close links with a belief in the positive effects of the human imagination. Since at least the eighteenth century, philosophers and writers have viewed play as liberating and constructive. By 1950 Johan Huizinga in his influential study *Homo Ludens* established that play had an important social and spiritual function in the production of art and culture. Play as a free, experimental activity has, of course, been closely tied to a sentimental image of children and childhood in the modern era. The Romantic trope of the child as an innocent “primitive” endowed with innate creativity has had enduring appeal. Artists especially have perceived children’s creations as models of the authentically pure and vital.⁴ While childhood creativity appears to be a natural phenomenon, it is at the same time bound historically to the somewhat paradoxical belief that certain methods of training can have a liberating effect.

The design of specifically educational playthings has therefore been closely tied to a context of ideas (and ideologies) about enhancing the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development of children. While Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* was offered a branch with leaves and fruit as an edifying amusement, later pedagogues have favored more abstract forms as teaching objects. Throughout the nineteenth century, as theories of education became increasingly codified into teaching systems, the best-known educational toys were instruments of reform and specific programs of learning.

Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori each developed teaching objects as part of a particular, integrated curriculum. Froebel’s program of graduated tasks of arranging spheres, blocks, paper, and other materials was developed from the Enlightenment legacy of understanding the forces of nature through experimentation but was joined to a Romantic quest for spiritual harmony with God, nature, and humanity. His “gifts” and “occupations” (he did not use the term *toys*) were symbolic elements that formed part of a complete system. Although developed in Germany in the 1830s,

Froebel’s *Kindergarten* (literally a children’s garden) had widespread influence in late nineteenth-century America. Reformers such as Elizabeth Peabody advocated the kindergarten model for all children, whether rich or poor, urban or rural, as a means of improving society through the training of both children and their mothers. Although later American educators, such as John Dewey, Anna Bryan, and Patty Smith Hill, criticized Froebel’s theory as limiting creativity and imagination, his designs were produced in large quantities, and some later products outlived his specific kindergarten pedagogy. Moreover, the term *kindergarten* began to be used to sell products, especially toys—even those that had no relevance to the Froebel system.⁵

Objects that might instill lessons for life at an early age have often resembled, in both abstract and literal form, the things of everyday life. For Montessori, objects could teach real skills as well as abstract values. In addition to teaching self-discipline and self-reliance through cooking, washing, and cleaning, the Montessori method included principles of mathematics, writing, and color theory. Child-size furniture and small-scale glasses, ceramic dishes, and real tools (such as knives and scissors) as well as colored rods, counting beads, letters, and sandpaper taught concrete lessons and awakened a child’s sensory faculties. Like Montessori, American educator and philosopher John Dewey linked learning with doing meaningful activities. While Dewey did not rely on specific sets of objects to teach (and rejected the Froebel kindergarten model at his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago), he embraced the idea that toys and play could expand a child’s consciousness and appetite for learning. The strongly practical activities (such as sewing, weaving, cooking, and woodworking) of American progressive schools in the late nineteenth century suited reformers’ goals of ultimately transforming society. Dewey’s emphasis on the importance of experience in learning was taken up by one of his most influential students, William Heard Kilpatrick, who suggested that democratic America required alternative models for educating young children. Moreover, his 1914 critique of Montessori’s program, which rested on, among other things, the designs of her teaching toys, diminished her influence

⁴ On creativity, see Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture*, p. 125. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (New York: Roy, 1950). Jonathan Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye: Children’s Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jonathan Fineberg, ed., *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism, and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Norman Brosterman has argued that Froebel’s system of gifts and occupations reinforced the development of artistic modernism in *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997). In a different approach, Detlef Mertins has looked at how Walter Benjamin theorized toys and play in *Toys and the Modernist Tradition* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1993).

⁵ Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*; Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Rose, *A Mother’s Job: The History of Day Care, 1890–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, p. 101.

on American preschool education until the post-war era.⁶

Whereas nineteenth-century reformers sought to teach through tangible lessons, ambitious twentieth-century parents adopted the idea of the educational toy to provide early opportunities for their children. Like the kindergarten, the nursery school, which was established by middle-class reformers in the 1920s, followed European models. But unlike the kindergarten, which was employed as a means of transforming the lives and habits of poor families, the nursery school in interwar America remained firmly associated with privilege. The importance of play with objects was a central aspect of the early nursery school idea. In the 1920s, Caroline Pratt called her Play School philosophy “creative pedagogy” and considered both children and teachers “artists.” A series of “Do-Withs” that Pratt designed in the first years of the twentieth century were not successful. However, the Unit Blocks (a series of differentiated wooden forms she developed with Harriet Johnson) became the basis of Pratt’s curriculum at the City and Country School in New York City. Moreover, these were widely adapted for use in nursery schools around the country and remained in production throughout the century.⁷

Two of the major American producers of educational toys, Playskool and Holgate, were established during the interwar period when nursery schools first gained social acceptance. Although most nursery schools were private, the model was discussed for all children. One of the pledges of the 1930 Conference on Child Health and Protection was to provide every child with early education, specifically “nursery schools and kindergartens to supplement home care.” Many educational toys were developed specially for schools, but with the onset of the Depression, toymakers also sought a market in the middle-class home. Like the nursery school that emphasized “scientific” approaches for raising children, toymakers employed the advice of the expert to develop and then legitimize their products. Holgate was derived from a manufacturer of brush handles, baskets, and rolling pins that was founded in 1789. In 1929 the company turned its experience with hardwood objects to the making of toys at the suggestion of Mary Frank (wife of Lawrence K. Frank, a prominent advocate of nursery school

programs), who conducted her own research projects in the emerging field of early childhood education.⁸

This close link between the design of teaching toys and the needs of the nursery school was evident in Holgate’s earliest products. A hammering set and a construction block set were each developed by nursery school teachers who sought direct means of developing basic motor skills and hand-eye coordination in young children. By the early 1930s, however, the company had appointed an in-house designer who would work with teachers to develop and test products. Although he had little training in design, Jarvis Rockwell, brother of painter Norman Rockwell, turned to woodworking after a career in finance and became the company’s sole toy designer after the president of Holgate, William T. Henretta, discovered him through a series of designs for dollhouses he had produced for Macy’s. Many of the maple toys that Holgate produced from the 1930s until well after the Second World War were Rockwell’s adaptations of established types. These included pull toys and variations on the peg board, such as the Old Woman of the Lacing Shoe, which was a solid wooden shoe form with holes for colored pegs carved to suggest people that offered the opportunity to practice lacing and tying (fig. 1). The nursery rhyme theme, one of Rockwell’s hallmarks, was not a central part of the nursery school pedagogy and was probably added to give the toys commercial appeal. Yet Holgate products, the company claimed, were developed in consultation with experts on child behavior and were tested in real-life situations. The role of the expert in Holgate’s toy production and in the expansion of child development during the interwar years was exemplified by Lawrence Frank, an administrator at the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Foundation (LSRMF). Frank’s advocacy for the popularization of child development in the 1920s led to the establishment of child study centers at major universities and the growing acceptance of child development as a field of scientific

⁶ William Heard Kilpatrick, *The Montessori System Examined* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1914).

⁷ Rose, *A Mother’s Job*, pp. 100–121. On Pratt, see Beatty, *Preschool Education*, pp. 137–42.

⁸ *The Story of the White House Conferences on Children and Youth* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Children’s Bureau, 1967). “Holgate Brothers: Creators of Toys—Craftsmen in Woodwork,” *Commonwealth: The Magazine for Pennsylvania* 1, no. 2 (December 1946); *The Story of Holgate Toys* (Kane, Pa.: Holgate Toy Co., 1990). According to Donald Wallance, Mary Frank (daughter of the treasurer of Holgate) noticed that nursery schools often had toys made by local craftsmen, and she suggested that the company begin to manufacture objects for nursery schools; Donald Wallance, Case Study 11-A Holgate Brothers Company, box 4, Shaping America’s Products Archive, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

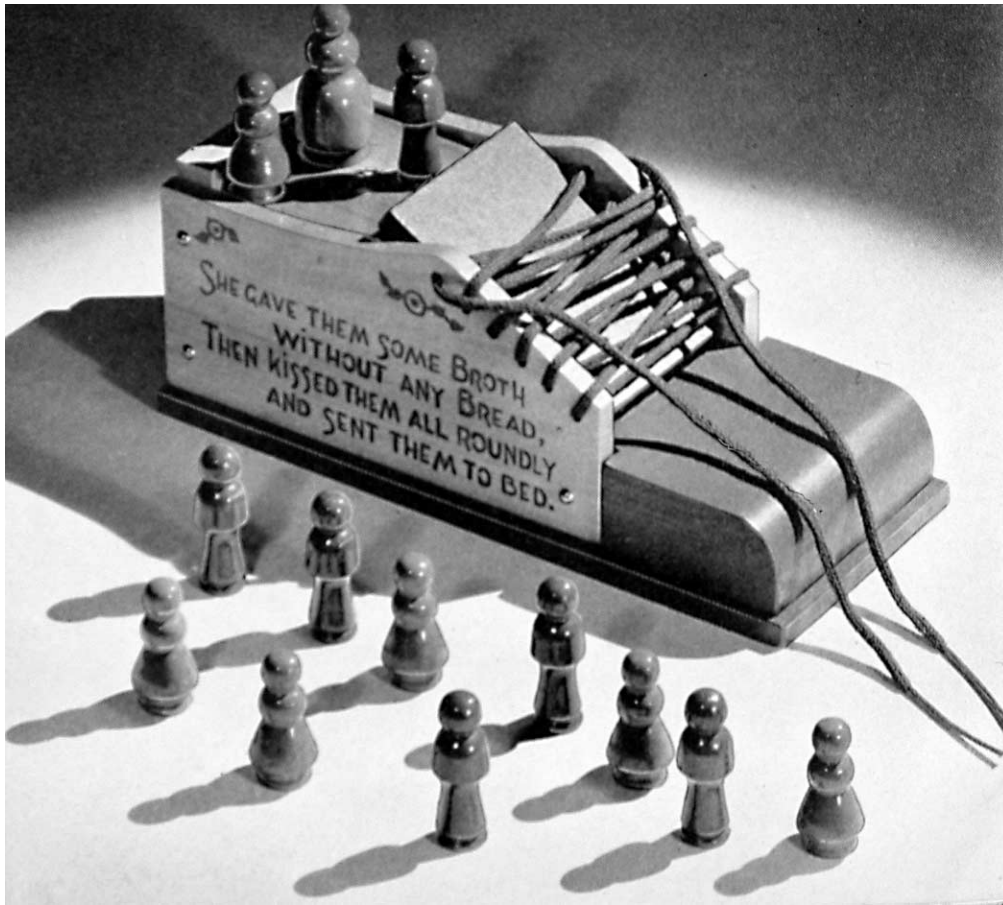


Fig. 1. Holgate Toys, Old Woman of the Lacing Shoe, ca.1945. From Holgate Brothers Co., Holgate Toys, *Catalogue No. 19* (Kane, Pa.: Holgate Brothers Co., 1943), p. 10. (Courtesy of Holgate Toys.)

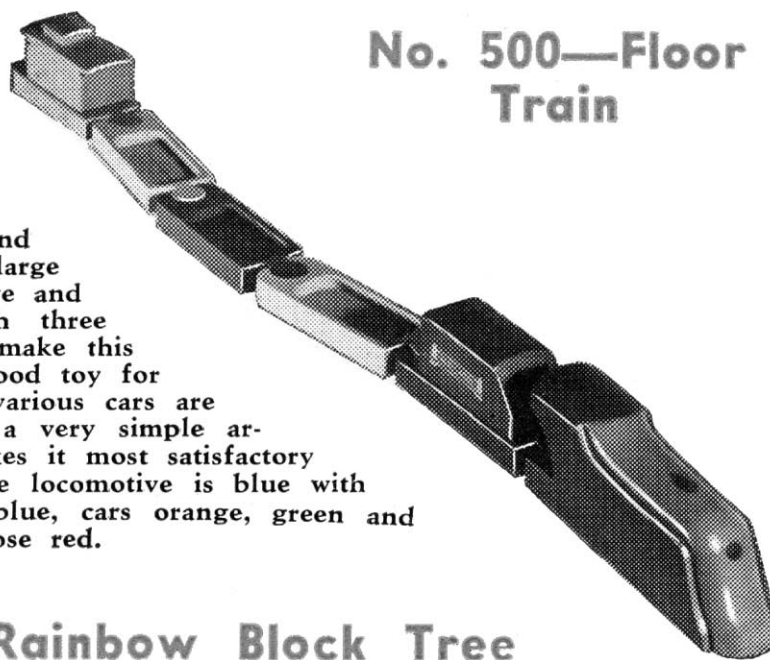
study. Frank promoted the foundation of *Parents' Magazine* in 1926 with grants from the LSRMF. The popular magazine covered topics from education and advice about raising children to architecture, homemaking, food, and fashion. Like the toy companies of the period, it also relied on a roster of esteemed scientists as advisers and editors.⁹

⁹Wallance, Case Study 11-A. Robert Holder, "The Story of Holgate: An American Industrial Saga," *Playthings* 44, no. 12 (December 1946); Hewitt and Roomet, *Educational Toys in America*, p. 100. Steven L. Schlossman, "Philanthropy and the Gospel of Child Development," *Education Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 275–99. Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children* (New York: Knopf, 2003), p. 104; Steven L. Schlossman, "Perils of Popularization: The Founding of *Parents' Magazine*," in Alice Boardman Smuts and John W. Hagen, eds., *History and Research in Child Development: Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, serial no. 211, vol. 50, nos. 4–5 (1986): 65–77; Schlossman, "Philanthropy," pp. 285, 291–94; Joseph M. Hawes, *Children between the Wars: American Childhood, 1920–1940* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), pp. 65–85.

Playskool also claimed to have pioneered the use of experts in developmental psychology and education, and their toys promised improved intelligence, school readiness, and character building. The Playskool Institute, established in 1928, developed objects such as desks, dollhouses, and nail boards to stimulate physical and social development in young children. Like Holgate, Playskool produced toys according to the needs of the nursery school curriculum, including some of the most ubiquitous designs for educational toys such as a pounding bench and a linked train. An early Playskool floor train consists of a bright blue locomotive and tender; three open cars in orange, green, and yellow; and a red caboose—all linked together with oversize tabs (fig. 2). The smooth shapes were designed to be handled by small hands, and the sloping curve of the "streamlined" locomotive deliberately evoked the form of contemporary trains. Toys such as these emphasized manual

A wood Floor Train without wheels is considered an essential toy for the very small child. It satisfies his desire to push and pull objects around on the floor. A large stream-lined locomotive and tender, together with three cars and a caboose, make this train a particularly good toy for the little tot. The various cars are easily assembled by a very simple arrangement which makes it most satisfactory as a floor train. The locomotive is blue with red trim, tender is blue, cars orange, green and yellow, and the caboose red.

No. 500—Floor Train



No. 126—Rainbow Block Tree



An original conception of a colorful

Fig. 2. Playskool Floor Train, ca. 1930. From Playskool Institute, *Playskool Playthings* (New York: Playskool Institute, n.d. [ca. 1930s]). (PLAYSKOOL® & © 2005 Hasbro, Inc. Used with permission. Photo, courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library.)

coordination and encouraged the visual practice of arranging shapes and creating lines. Using colored forms to denote the individual parts of the multicolored whole, these Playskool toys—like those produced by Holgate—were designed both as entertainment and as educational equipment for young children. The headline across the catalogue cover, “Learning while playing, an idea and an ideal,” reinforced the link with progressive theory, but the company’s mottoes, “playthings with a purpose” and “not just toys,” underscored how scientists, manufacturers, and parents viewed the seriousness of children’s play.¹⁰

Educational toys were expensive and appealed to parents who put their faith in the next generation. Yet despite the apparent elitism of the educational toy, a two-page spread in a Butler Brothers wholesale catalogue from 1935 bears the slogan “educational playthings.” Traditional learning toys such as embroidery sets and building toys were joined with nursery school hammer and nail sets and sold to middle- and working-class parents even

during the Great Depression.¹¹ The progressive ideals formed in the 1920s and 1930s would remain central in American education in the early postwar period. Indeed, this pre-World War II context, which emphasized personal improvement and “scientific” methods of raising children, set the tone for the postwar obsession with providing early, correct, and creative stimulation for baby-boom children.

Postwar Parents

In official government rhetoric, in popular visual culture, and in the reflections of private families, having children was vaunted as a personal reward and a civic duty in postwar America. The baby boom, which actually began during the war, resulted from a momentous demographic shift toward young families having children. Along with the population increase, a rise in wages, mass consumption, and expansion of middle-class values

¹⁰ Playskool Institute, *Playskool Playthings* (New York: Playskool Institute, [193?]), Hagley Museum and Library.

¹¹ *Butler Brothers Catalogue for 1935* (Baltimore: Butler Brothers, 1934).

put a new emphasis on raising exceptional children. If children promised personal fulfillment, then they also embodied national interests; correct parenting became a weapon against war, delinquency, and communism. In a 1946 article about the importance of raising a new generation “imbued with a high resolve to work together for everlasting peace,” a writer for *American Home* commented that parenthood was “not a dull, monotonous routine job, but an absorbing, creative profession.” As middle-class families took up this challenge in the prosperous years after the end of the war, they directed their dollars toward children’s “needs.” In the shifting social terrain of postwar America, these included early education such as nursery school, more personal space, increased opportunities for play, and an unprecedented number of personal belongings such as books and toys.¹²

The promises of the educational toy, established during the interwar period, reemerged in new and particularly forceful ways in the postwar era. The changes in American society, especially the swelling birthrate, meant new commercial opportunities for toymakers. As a writer for *Playthings*, the trade journal of the American toy industry, proclaimed in 1945, “Millions of War Babies Should Have Educational Toys.” Toy companies had to adapt to new conditions, materials, and markets. During the early 1940s most toy manufacturers were refitted to suit the needs of the war effort, producing munitions primarily and toys only on a limited basis. Once companies returned to normal production in the mid-1940s, they also returned to competition with foreign imports, largely from Germany and Japan.¹³ With the steady growth in the number of American births and merchants’ desire to sell year-round, toymakers, pediatricians,

and education experts redoubled their efforts to promote domestically produced educational toys as equipment fundamental to a healthy child’s development.

Psychological research reached a wide audience in the postwar period as discussions about raising emotionally healthy children attracted national attention. At the 1950 Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth, delegates agreed that adults should recognize and develop leisure and play for their positive psychological effects on children. As theories of child development became increasingly familiar and acceptable to American parents, they were readily assimilated into the selling and promotion of playthings. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget’s theory of developmental stages and a child’s desire for hands-on experiential learning was known among prewar American nursery school teachers, but it became widely adopted in postwar pedagogy and fit neatly with educational toy manufacturers’ aim to sell toys continuously during infancy and youth. Erik Erikson’s conception of ego development also relied on successive stages. With his 1950 book, *Childhood and Society*, Erikson became one of the most celebrated figures among the many postwar child development experts. His view of the significance of play for children, who were testing and mastering their new world, and its effects on the psyche of the human adult lent new urgency to the importance of successive stages in the making of a healthy personality. For Erikson, play and toys held symbolic meanings for the child that became a lasting heritage in the adult. Playskool and Holgate both divided their catalogues into sections for different ages and advised retail merchants to suggest age-appropriate goods. A 1950 Playskool catalogue offered a short essay, “What Toys Shall I Buy for My Child?” by University of Chicago child development expert Ethel Kawin, who exclaimed, “It is not enough that toys are educational—they must be correctly educational so that they teach the right things at the *right time* in the *right way!*”¹⁴ Adopting a similarly rationalizing approach to selling toys, Holgate produced a wheel-shape “Toy Selector” to aid parents in identifying the most suitable items for the ages of their children (fig. 3).

¹² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 120–21. Louisa Randall Church, “Parents: Architects of Peace,” *American Home* (November 1946): 18–19, as cited in May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 119. Lizabeth Cohen has called this era and its concomitant ideology the Consumers’ Republic; see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Charles E. Strickland and Andrew M. Ambrose, “The Baby Boom, Prosperity, and the Changing Worlds of Children, 1945–1963,” in Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds., *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 533–85.

¹³ Eleanor N. Knowles, “Millions of War Babies Should Have Educational Toys,” *Playthings* 43, no. 6 (June 1945): 120–21. Thornton B. Moore, *The American Toy Industry’s Golden Era* (Washington, D.C.: Business Information Service, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1949).

¹⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (1950; repr., New York: Norton, 1963). Erik H. Erikson, *Toys and Reasons: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience* (New York: Norton, 1977). Ethel Kawin’s essay was adapted from her 1938 book, *The Wise Choice of Toys* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), which was reissued in a seventh impression in 1947.

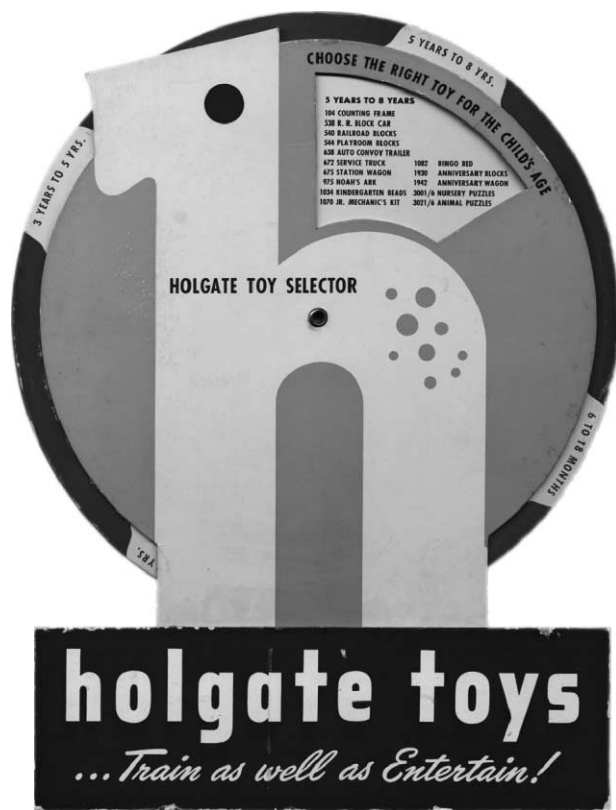


Fig. 3. Holgate Toys, Toy Selector, ca. 1952. (Courtesy of Holgate Toys; photo, courtesy of Jessica Helfand and Winterhouse.)

The shift in attitude toward the toy as an everyday object rather than just a holiday or birthday gift also reflected social changes developing since the Depression. Educational toys were essential equipment in the day cares and nursery schools that became common institutions of twentieth-century childhood. Although the nursery school of the 1920s was the exclusive province of the wealthy, Depression-era programs had reduced the stigma of day care and increased the number of federally funded nursery schools. During wartime, nursery, day care, and play school programs took on increasingly educational missions for the families who used them. Although most mothers with children under six did not seek work outside the home even during the war, many women, especially in the West, did take up factory jobs, and federally subsidized day care centers were established, albeit belatedly, to care for and also to educate children. After the war, as the government money for day care dwindled and many parents returned to more seemingly “traditional” gender roles, the private home again became the primary locus of

middle-class early childhood. Yet even mothers who did not put their children in organized day cares sought opportunities to share child rearing responsibilities. Organizing community playgroups and play spaces was the mission of the Play School Association, which offered recreational diversions such as block building, painting, and construction for part of the day or after school. Begun during World War II, the association stressed the idea that day care was not simply a wartime provision but that the benefits to children and parents would also serve communities during peacetime. Moreover, articles on sharing child care, which abounded in *Parents' Magazine* in the 1940s and into the 1950s, suggested that parents provide activities akin to those of the nursery school. Nursery school and day care programs remained important to postwar families who increasingly believed in their educational benefits. By the early 1960s Congress passed far-reaching federal legislation to establish Head Start programs that would provide nursery school education for the poor.¹⁵

For middle-class families, toys were also an expression of material abundance, and providing developmental aids for young children was often discussed as a parent's responsibility. As parents' incomes rose and pressure to provide “appropriate” stimulation—recommended in the wildly successful parenting magazines and guides—increased, toys were bountiful in the postwar middle-class home. Mothers and fathers were encouraged to provide their children with materials and toys identical to those encountered in the day care, nursery, or play school; blocks, modeling clay, paints, hammering tools, and stringing beads were recommended as basic home equipment. Middle-class parents were unabashed in their aim to provide correct amusements for their young children, and toy companies reinforced the idea that their children would benefit with promises to develop skills

¹⁵ As Elizabeth Rose argues in *A Mother's Job*, this educational mission marked a change from the long history of child care programs as philanthropic enterprises aimed at poor children and their families; see also Beatty, *Preschool Education*, pp. 185–92. For histories of the debate around the appropriation of government money for federal day care centers, see Rose, *A Mother's Job*, pp. 153–80; and William M. Tuttle Jr., “Daddy's Gone to War”: *The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 69–90. Scholars have pointed to the need for rethinking what was “traditional” in postwar gender roles; see Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Clara Lambert, *School's Out: Child Care through Play Schools* (New York: Play School Assoc., 1944). For a discussion of the fraught history and highly debated theory behind the Head Start model, see Beatty, *Preschool Education*, pp. 192–200.

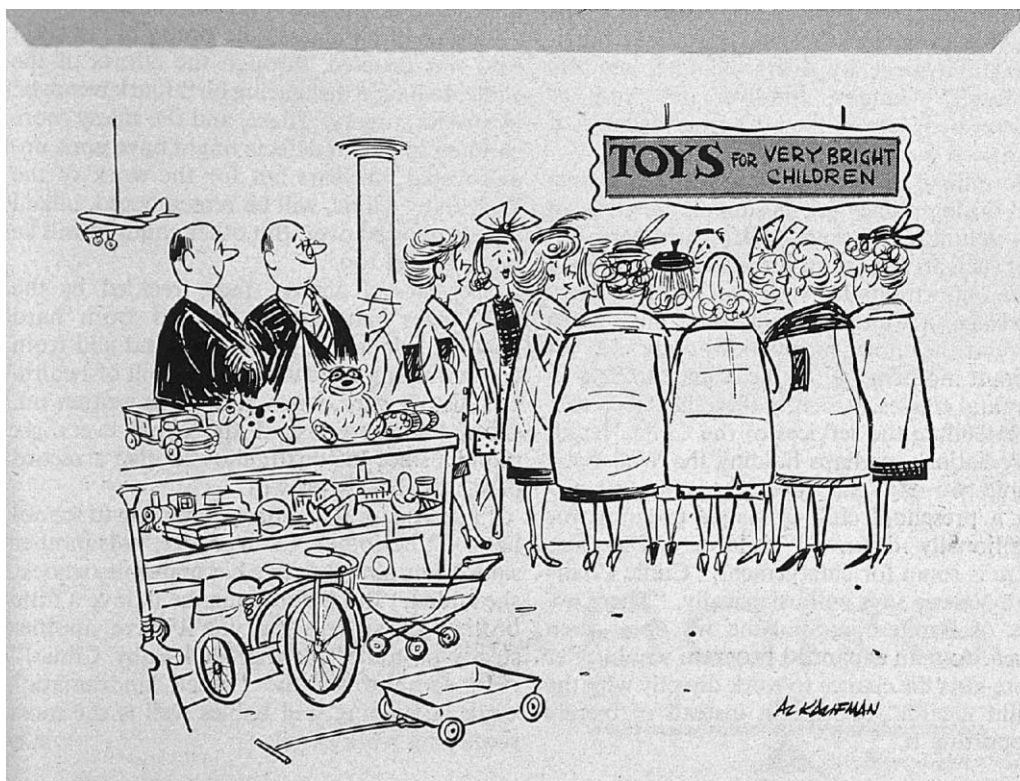


Fig. 4. Al Kaufman, "Toys for Very Bright Children," *Ladies Home Journal* 72 (December 1955): 113.

and raise IQ.¹⁶ A 1955 cartoon by Al Kaufman in the *Ladies Home Journal* depicted a scene of women mobbed around a display of "Toys for Very Bright Children" while the proprietors looked on approvingly from behind a counter of ordinary playthings such as toy cars, stuffed animals, balls, a tricycle, a wagon, and a baby carriage (fig. 4). Playing up the faddishness of educational toys and the effectiveness of retailing strategies, Kaufman poked fun at postwar parents' obsession with achievement.

Consensus about the importance of basic learning toys such as beads and blocks is also evident in children's furniture. From at least the early 1930s and throughout the 1940s and 1950s, mass-market playpens, cribs, and rockers were increasingly embellished with spinning beads or discs that children could manipulate from inside (fig. 5). The brightly colored moveable discs of a collapsible wooden Abbott and Company playpen simultaneously offered amusement to children and a sign of edu-

cational values to adults. The playthings many parents, especially those who perceived themselves as educated, chose for their children represented their desire for wholesome, constructive entertainment. But in addition to achievement, they often opted for objects that evoked a discourse of refinement.

Toy Materials and Types

A wide variety of new materials were used in the production of toys in the postwar years. The availability of pressed, lithographed tin for toy cars and other vehicles was extremely limited during the war years as toy manufacturers shifted to munitions production. When factories were reconverted in the mid-1940s, mechanical toys flooded the American market. Plastic, the quintessential postwar material, had been adapted for the production of toys even before the war. Although early plastic proved to be fragile and useful only for small objects, a sturdier version would become one of the most important materials in postwar toy production. Yet in the educational rhetoric of the era, plain wooden toys were marketed as solid unpretentious

¹⁶ Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, pp. 160–61; Seiter, *Sold Separately*, pp. 70–71; Dorothy Helshand and Frederica Friedman, "Bring the Nursery School HOME," *Parents' Magazine* 16, no. 11 (November 1941): 47, 82–84; William A. Buch, "How to Pick the Right Playthings for Your Child," *Parents' Magazine* 28, no. 11 (November 1953): 47–48, 84.



Fig. 5. Abbott and Co. Playpen, mid-1950s. (Courtesy Strong Museum, Rochester, NY, 2005.)

reminders of simpler times of the past and as seemingly blank objects upon which children's imaginations might be given free rein. Gary Cross has discussed how prewar toys that stressed making and building dovetailed with the ideals of the arts and crafts movement in America. This preference for wood remained laden with vitalist associations of handicraft in the postwar period—even if toys were mass-produced—and was in line with the consumer habits of upper-middle-class American parents who bought Scandinavian furniture for its materials (chiefly teak and oak), evocation of craftsmanship, and sophisticated design. The educated consumer who purchased educational toys probably resembled midcentury *New Yorker* magazine readers who, Louis Menand has noted, valued craftsmanship and eschewed commercialism in domestic goods, even if commerce was a means of making a living. Although many postwar consumers explored the possibilities of a new world of synthetics for domestic goods, among the educated middle and upper middle classes, wood became the material symbol of timelessness, authenticity, and refinement in the modern educational toy. In France in the mid-1950s, Roland Barthes condemned plastic and metal as “graceless” and “chemical in sub-

stance and color” and mused upon his fondness for wooden toys:

A sign which fills one with consternation is the gradual disappearance of wood, in spite of its being an ideal material because of its firmness and its softness, and the natural warmth of its touch. Wood removes, from all forms which it supports, the wounding quality of angles which are too sharp, the chemical coldness of metal. . . . It is a familiar and poetic substance, which does not sever the child from close contact with the tree, the table, the floor. Wood does not wound or break down; it does not shatter, it wears out, it can last a long time, live with the child, alter little by little the relations between the object and the hand.¹⁷

Barthes's emphasis on images of the past, sensuous pleasure, and artistry shows how the symbolic

¹⁷ On fragile plastic, see Ruth E. Hartley and Robert M. Goldenson, *The Complete Book of Children's Play* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1957), p. 6; on plastic adopted for use in toy manufacture, see Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 186–89. Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, pp. 137–38. Louis Menand, “A Friend Writes: The Old *New Yorker*,” in *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), p. 143. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this reference. Roland Barthes, “Toys,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 54–55.

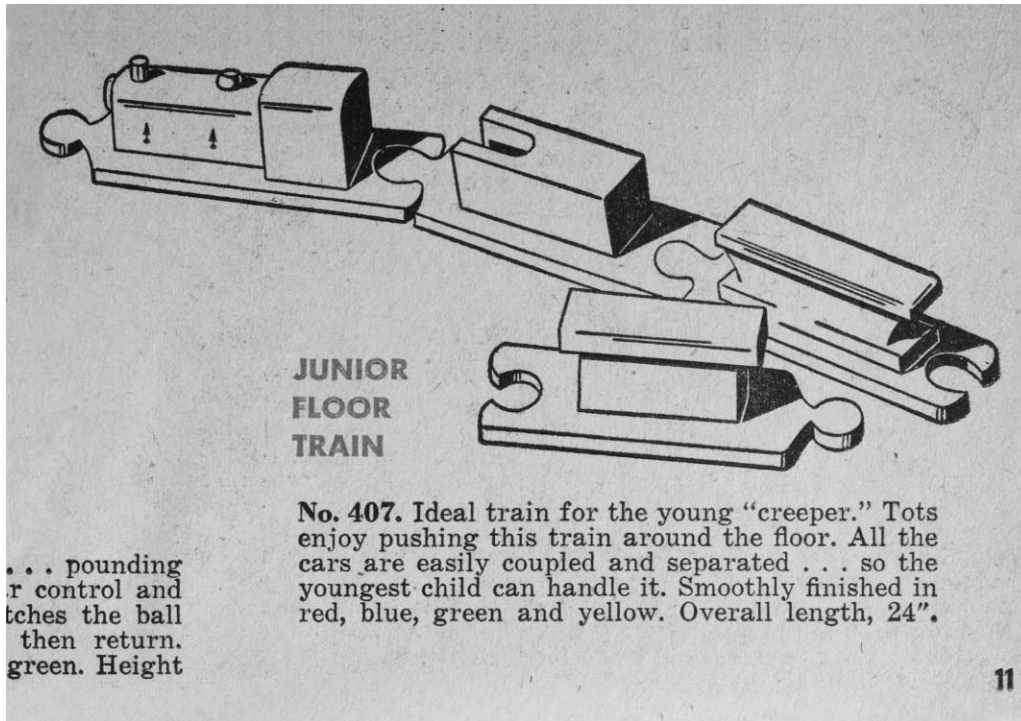


Fig. 6. Junior Floor Train No. 407. From *Playskool Toy Catalog: The Right Toy for Every Age*, 1950. (PLAYSKOOL® & © 2005 Hasbro, Inc. Used with permission. Photo, Donald Wallace Collection, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution; by Matt Flynn.)

qualities of wood were perceived as antithetical to the technological associations of plastic and metal.

While Barthes emphasized the poetic properties of wood, others saw in wood the antithesis to the realistic qualities of metal and plastic. The veneration of wooden playthings was also a comment on the proliferation of mass-market toys, such as Louis Marx’s tin-plated wind-up toys, which aimed to please without carrying an educational program. Many of Marx’s dime-store tin toys and plastic play sets were manufactured in Japan with bright colorful graphics (some based on television and movie characters) and moving parts activated by the turn of a key. Educators and parents dedicated to the progressive notion that children should learn and discover by doing rejected these amusements as hindering development. In 1947, shortly after Frank Caplan founded his company Creative Playthings, Inc., he commented, “There is a huge flood of mechanical toys from abroad for the first time in years. Many of them are devoid of real toy value. Young children don’t need gadgets. Their imaginations are enough.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Hope Johnson, “Toys Should Hold Interest Year ’Round,” *New York World-Telegram*, November 13, 1947.

Sturdy hardwood toys in abstract shapes, such as the Playskool floor train, became the dominant aesthetic for postwar educational toys. A Playskool catalogue from about 1950 shows how the design was adjusted to reflect reigning theories. Instead of the streamlined curves of the earlier 1930s locomotive, which mimicked contemporary industrial design, the 1950 train is reduced to its most cubic elements (fig. 6). The cars are still brightly colored, but the forms themselves have been made deliberately abstract. Suggesting visually the form of the child’s block, the train’s geometry declares not only its manipulative ease but also a growing belief that the young child’s own imagination could—and should be allowed to—provide the details. The venerable Dr. Spock commented at length on the importance of abstract form and also on toy materials in his best-selling postwar manual, *Baby and Child Care*:

There are two very different kinds of toy trains. One is made of metal painted to look real . . . the other is made of plain, flat wooden blocks that link together easily. All the young child can do with the realistic train is push one car along the floor. It’s too hard to put the cars on the track or hitch them together. . . . The wooden block cars are different. He can link a string of them together and admire his long train. Two make a trailer truck. He

can pile small blocks on top, call it a freight train. . . . when he is bored with dry land, the blocks become separate boats or a string of barges with a tug. He can go on like this forever.¹⁹

While Spock is ostensibly discussing the suitability of forms for manipulation, he suggests that the versatility of this wooden train enhances a child's experimentation and inventiveness. In Spock's scenario, the easy transformation of train into truck and boat suggests that the representational forms and imagery of the "real" adult world are unnecessary and perhaps even inhibiting. To the equation of wooden and wholesome was added the emphasis on plainness as a means of fostering a child's imagination.

Despite the growth of the market, the design of many postwar toys did not differ markedly from earlier models. Holgate and Playskool, for example, continued to produce prewar designs. Even nineteenth-century educational toys, which had come to define progressive educational values in their own time, lingered in postwar playthings. For example, the parquetry sets that Froebel had popularized were manufactured and sold throughout the mid-twentieth century by Playskool. The Montessori system, once deemed by Kilpatrick as inappropriate for democratic American children, was revived in the United States in the 1960s thanks to the efforts of Nancy Rambusch, who promoted Montessori ideas and founded the American Montessori Society. American toymakers produced objects for use in Montessori schools, but also sold variations to parents. For instance, a system of "tangible arithmetic" that the company Creative Playthings produced in the late 1950s was directly based on the Montessori counting beads. Moreover, Caroline Pratt's hardwood Unit Blocks remained a fixture in nursery schools but also entered the home. While toy sellers continued to stock embroidery and chemistry sets, the cultivation of imagination, artistic expression, and private fantasy was becoming a consistent theme in the selling of educational toys to schools and parents.

Playskool, which became the largest producer of educational toys in America by the late 1950s, had always relied on the promises of raising "better" children, but the tone of these assurances changed from practical manipulation in the 1920s to a new emphasis on personality, intelligence, and creativity in the years after World War II. Advertise-

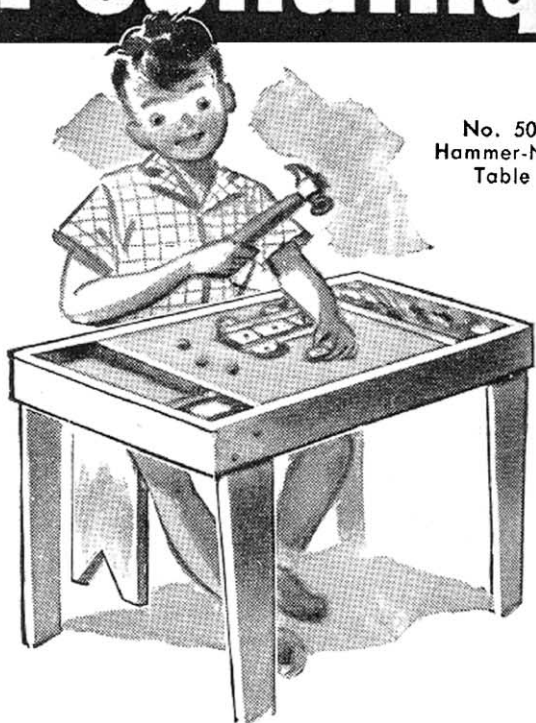
ments from the 1950s stressed a parent's responsibility to provide for the future: "Today—you make their tomorrow! You can help build a better, happier future for your children—by the wise selection of educational toys. The right kind of educational toys must teach the right thing at the right time—in the right way. For your children's best *tomorrow*—insist on genuine Playskool Toys *today!*" In addition to promoting early intellectual and social development, and a "better, happier future," Playskool also sponsored advertisements promising "creative play," and even offered a hammer and nail set with the slogan "Creative Pounding" (fig. 7). Playskool's announcement for the unpainted Skaneateles wooden trains and blocks, advertised in *Playthings* (the magazine of the toy industry), proclaimed that "when a toy is designed to make the most of a child's natural creativeness . . . you gain an unlimited selling market." While emphasizing the commercial viability of "creativity," the pitch to retail toy sellers incorporated new ideas about children's play. Unlike the brightly colored floor trains for young children, the natural finished maple Skaneateles train set promised to "put no adult limits on a child's imagination" (fig. 8). Holgate, too, claimed that their toys were "scientifically designed to put the 'create' in recreation."²⁰

Developing creativity in children was an ideal of nineteenth-century educational theory. An important aspect of Froebel's kindergarten was the aim of fostering the "impulse to creative activity" to achieve a comprehensive expression of love and humanity. But the Froebel kindergarten was criticized in America as overly dominated by the figure of the teacher and the rigid system of the "gifts" and "occupations." While the ideal of an unfettered children's creativity proliferated among educators and parents during the interwar period, Cold War tensions reinforced associations between the idea of creativity and the values that seemed to embody democracy. Many scholars have suggested how postwar artistic and popular culture was used to serve an American political project, especially in Europe. Although the debate on the actual role of the U.S. government in making and promoting culture continues, the image of the creative

¹⁹ Benjamin Spock, *Dr. Spock's Book of Baby and Child Care*, rev. ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), pp. 304–5.

²⁰ Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, p. 160. Ellen Seiter has suggested how toy advertising in *Parents' Magazine* bore the stamp of prosperous middle-class values and concerns, especially education and creativity; see Seiter, *Sold Separately*, pp. 64–71. Playskool advertisement in *Parents' Magazine* 27, no. 10 (October 1952). Playskool advertisement in *Playthings* 54, no. 4 (April 1956): 76. Holgate advertisement in *Parents' Magazine* 27, no. 11 (November 1952).

Creative Pounding



No. 507
Hammer-Nail
Table

Learning while Playing with

PLAYSKOOL Hammer-Nail Sets

No collection of modern toys is complete without one of these sets. Child psychologists and teachers everywhere have made it "standard" equipment. Contains large variety of colored wooden shapes such as trees, barns, flowers, houses, wheels and boards of different lengths to be used in constructing buildings, landscapes, boats, trains, etc. All pieces are drilled for easy nailing into soft fibre board. Complete with hammer, nails, design sheet and stool . . . Ask to see Playskool Hammer-Nail and Peg Tables at your nearest dealer.

PLAYSKOOL MANUFACTURING COMPANY
1776 North Lawndale Ave., Chicago 47, Illinois

Fig. 7. "Creative Pounding," Playskool advertisement in *Parents' Magazine* 24, no. 10 (October 1949): 152. (PLAYSKOOL® & © 2005 Hasbro, Inc. Used with permission.)

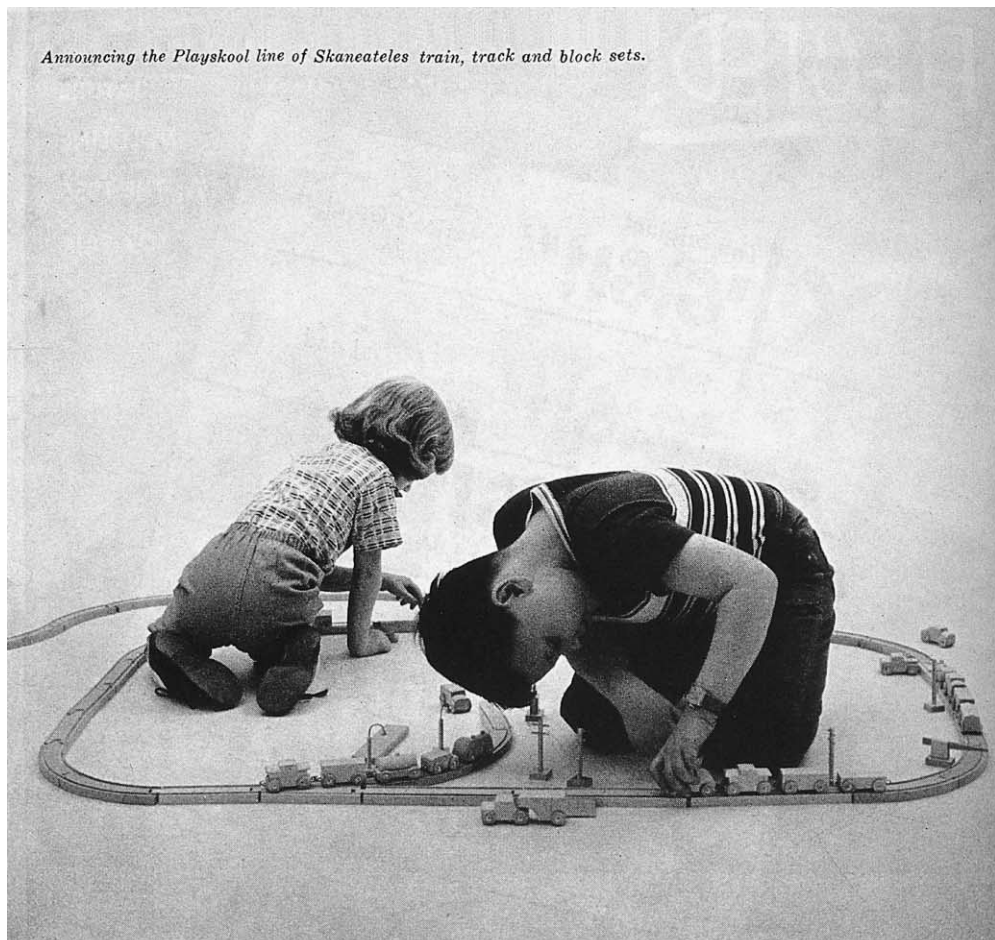
American child, who owned numerous playthings, was a central theme in the international exhibitions of the period. Robert Haddow has shown how the Museum of Modern Art's Children's Creative Center, mounted for the American pavilion at

the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, used unorthodox methods to provoke an aesthetic response in children.²¹ The Islands of Living, a section of the American pavilion devoted to consumables for the home, showed a large selection of children's toys, including a wind-up robot, wooden trucks, and an abstracted geodesic climbing structure. While exhibition propaganda put a new emphasis on children's goods and theories of artmaking in selling a wholesome image of America abroad, political tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union enhanced the worries of parents at home.

Postwar toy companies therefore relied not only on the ambitions of middle-class parents but also on their anxieties. In a 1962 Creative Playthings catalogue, under the heading "a parent's responsibility," the directors exhorted: "Parents and teachers everywhere face an unusual challenge. They are being called upon to prepare children for a world so radically new that we dare not forecast its direction, its technology and its social organization. Certainly rote text book learning or preconceived ideas cannot suffice for children facing such complexities. A bold approach to education in the home and in the school is indicated!" After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, many felt that traditional methods of teaching and learning—such as rote memorization—had failed to keep the United States sufficiently creative and therefore competitive with other countries.²² Others, however, pointed to progressive ideas that, they charged, had neglected "the basics" in favor of character and interpersonal skills. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the clash between these views was played out

²¹ Friedrich Froebel, *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten; or, His Ideas Concerning the Play and Playthings of the Child*, trans. Josephine Jarvis (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), p. 9. Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999); David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Saunders and Cauter both discuss, though from different perspectives, the Museum of Modern Art. Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), pp. 112–34.

²² *Creative Playthings Holiday Catalogue* (Cranbury, N.J.: Creative Playthings, 1961). There was great debate on this subject that polarized parents, teachers, administrators, and government; see, for example, Arthur Bestor, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1953); and Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955).



What does a child's imagination mean for you?

When a toy is designed to make the most of a child's natural creativeness... you gain an unlimited selling market.

The new Playskool-Skaneateles train, track and block sets put no adult limits on a child's imagination.

No more durable toy has ever been made. Each piece is cut square and exact from Northern Vermont hard maple, then smoothly sanded and waxed to a natural finish that's completely scrubbable and safe. Wheels and couplings stand

up even under the heaviest use they might receive.

And consider how perfectly these train sets meet the needs of the 2-to-8 year old... how many hours of fun they provide for boys and girls. The precision-cut tracks can be fitted firmly together in any number of ways, rearranged countless times without showing signs of wear.

There are extra profits waiting when customers come back for accessories and advanced sets. Write for illustrated catalog of sets and accessories, Playskool Mfg. Co., 1750 No. Lawndale Ave., Chicago 47, Ill.



Skaneateles train, track and block sets... now in the famous blue and white Playskool box

Playskool
educational toys

in the press, in popular books, and in academic studies.

Creativity and the Critique of American Culture

Self-consciousness about living in an age of new values and responsibilities preoccupied sociologists, educators, and critics who dissected the social habits of America. David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *Organization Man* (1956) were two sociological portraits of the postwar era that achieved popular success. In these works the authors condemned the conformity of middle-class business culture. For Whyte, the "Organization Man" was a figure who stood for the transience and mindlessness of the American corporate employee in all aspects of work, family, and social life. Even research scientists, Whyte suggested, were steered toward the application of existing ideas rather than the development of new ones.²³ If the culture of conformity stifled the creative instincts of individualism, then it was to children and their education that researchers looked to find both the source of the problem and its remedy.

In his best-selling book, *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman argued that although school walls decorated with children's art appeared to honor creativity, the school was a singular agent in the destruction of imagination. Riesman singled out children's play for its unpredictability, but, he noted, play itself had been taken over by instructors. He claimed that "play, which in the earlier epoch is often an extracurricular and private hobby, shared at most with a small group, now becomes part of the school enterprise itself, serving a 'realistic' purpose."²⁴ While sociologists pointed to the increasing pressure on children to learn the social skills that would make them useful and dutiful employees someday, educational researchers suggested that success and contentment in later life might derive from creativity rather than from a high IQ.

From the 1930s, researchers in the field of educational psychology had begun to address the role of creative thinking and imagination, but it was not until midcentury that creativity became a widely researched area of investigation. In 1950 J. P. Guilford, president of the American Psycho-

logical Association, established the path that many others would soon follow. Creativity, he argued, not only was difficult to measure and predict but it seemed not to correlate with intelligence. Moreover, he suggested that creativity, although neglected by psychologists, was quickly becoming a highly desirable economic value and a government interest. Studies on creativity flourished in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and conferences, including three sponsored at the University of Utah between 1957 and 1959, gained the attention of university researchers, the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Air Force, and major industrial enterprises.²⁵

In 1962 two University of Chicago professors, Jacob W. Getzels and Philip W. Jackson, published an important study on the relationship between creativity and intelligence. Working with students at what was originally Dewey's Laboratory School, they argued that students who scored poorly on IQ tests were often successful in school and in life. Children with typically high IQ scores, however, were not concomitantly judged to be highly creative. Beyond suggesting that giftedness was not limited to performing well on IQ tests, these researchers stressed the value of creativity in learning and in later life and asked, "Why are not our children more intellectually venturesome and creative?"²⁶

The professional discussions on creativity became part of a larger vision for children of the baby-boom era. Delegates at the 1950 Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth emerged with a pledge to American children: "We will help you develop initiative and imagination, so that you may have the opportunity freely to create." Guiding children's imaginations toward creative activity was both their teachers' and parents' new responsibility in the making of a healthy child. Developing creativity in children was a consistent theme of *Parents' Magazine* from the 1930s on, reaching a peak in the postwar era. The magazine promised both practical and psychological benefits as a result of "creative" play. In 1950 the magazine suggested that "parents eventually gain freedom from the constant need to amuse and entertain their youngsters. The children gain a precious ability to be happy even in solitude. They

²³ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 137.

²⁴ Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, pp. 62, 63.

²⁵ J. P. Guilford, "Creativity," *American Psychologist* 5, no. 9 (September 1950): 444-54. Thea Petchler, "Postwar American Research into the Nature of Creativity: Whose Investment, Whose Benefits?" (paper presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, New York, 2003).

²⁶ Jacob W. Getzels and Philip W. Jackson, *Creativity and Intelligence: Explorations with Gifted Students* (London and New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), p. 120.

develop initiative and ingenuity, and become popular because they can think of things to do ‘for fun.’” Even in 1968 critics were still suggesting that by allowing children’s creativity unfettered expression, “there is every good assurance that they will become skilled and happy people.”²⁷

Both official and general interest in the idea of creativity stimulated the commission of a government-issued pamphlet, *A Creative Life for Your Children*, by Margaret Mead, anthropologist and curator at the American Museum of Natural History. Appearing the same year as Getzels and Jackson’s study, Mead’s was directed at the curious parent rather than an academic audience. While toymakers saw creativity as a merchandising strategy, Mead interpreted the word as a child’s way of understanding and contributing to society. She suggested that creativity is “a chance for every child, as he grows and comes to understand the world, to make a part of the world he sees. It means giving children a chance to do in play, as they grow, the kind of thing that is done by poets and landscape architects, scientists and statesmen to such a superb degree.” Rather than defining the concept of creativity as the act of making in general, or as artistic experimentation, Mead saw creativity as both personal and social. The application of creativity toward explicit types of future gains was not addressed by Mead, although she implied it was a national concern. Katherine B. Oettinger, head of the U.S. Children’s Bureau, invested the idea of creativity with more visionary qualities. In her introduction to Mead’s text, she claimed that a child’s potential for creativity “makes each day we live with children of such vast importance to us, to them, to our country, and to the world of tomorrow, so dimly seen by us, but so close and vital to our children.” Mead herself was careful to state that the American child was recognized as an individual (with his or her own clothes, playthings, and belongings), but that the whole community “industry, government, the services—can unite in providing space and time and situations in which young people can experiment with an as-if world before they settle down to dignity and freedom in a real world.”²⁸ The notion that the imaginative experiences of childhood could affect the personality

or fortunes of the adult—and the country—held implications for the satisfaction, ingenuity, and productivity of future generations. Play and playthings, therefore, gained wide attention for how they might enhance the development of creativity.

Getzels and Jackson, like Riesman and Whyte, pointed to the heavy emphasis on what they called “factualism and usefulness” at the expense of play and imagination, particularly in the early years of childhood. Among the various factors that might affect the roots of creativity, the child’s toy box was identified by Getzels and Jackson as critical in the formation of a child’s thinking. They suggested, moreover, that the promises of the “educational toy” bore some of the blame for encouraging lessons at the expense of imagination:

Even that last bastion of the child’s private world—his box of toys—is being taken over by the press of practicality. Here too the key adjectives are “realistic” and “educational” or at the very least “readiness-producing,” instead of “imaginative” or “exciting” or even just plain “enjoyable.” The floppy rag doll that did nothing and yet everything as the malleable companion of the child’s dreams has given way to the true-to-life human replica that leaves nothing to the imagination—it “really talks” and takes in and oozes at all the appropriate orifices. The ancient lead soldier in his frozen posture, which the child could transmute into anything his play required, is no match for the modern Transparent Man whose removable vital organs form an educational jigsaw puzzle for mother’s little, successful doctor-to-be. . . . Even the preverbal child’s toys are now sold not just as playthings but as Play-School, the pitch being that these toys are not “just toys” but carefully designed to train the infant in “appropriate” motor, intellectual, and problem-solving skills, presumably appropriate for gaining early admission to pre-nursery school.²⁹

From educators’ perspectives, therefore, the “educational” toys that proliferated on the postwar market (which included science kits, construction toys, anatomical forms, and encyclopedias as well as pounding benches, peg boards, and plain blocks) had become mindlessly didactic tools of social competition rather than open-ended objects that might stimulate original thinking.

Educators seeking to train parents in the importance of play and advertising copywriters for educational toymakers often emphasized that play should be considered a child’s work. *Parents’ Magazine* published numerous articles on the educational and developmental value of play. Although parents apparently accepted the advice to allow

²⁷ *Story of the White House Conferences*, p. 20. Mary C. Jane, “Are You Raising an Idea Man?” *Parents’ Magazine* 25, no. 7 (July 1950): 80. Suzanne Newton, “How to Encourage Your Child’s Natural Creativity,” *Parents’ Magazine* 43, no. 7 (July 1968): 83.

²⁸ Margaret Mead, *A Creative Life for Your Children* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1962), pp. 4, 41.

²⁹ Getzels and Jackson, *Creativity and Intelligence*, pp. 121–22.



Fig. 9. Carradan Associates, Magnet Master, 1948. (Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal © The Estate of Arthur Carrara.)

children more playtime and more toys, the connection to work set up an enduring critique of the educational toy—that it was inappropriately serious and unimaginative. Rival toy manufacturers who made inexpensive character toys as well as education specialists who challenged the notion of single-minded training through play both rejected the simple equation of work and play. Lawrence K. Frank addressed this problem in his introduction to a 1957 handbook of children's play: "Some people have been so impressed by the importance of play that they want all the child's playthings to be 'educational,' that is, to be limited to those toys and games which are designed to teach some specific skill or to convey some definite meaning." Frank continued, "but if we do this we deprive the child of a large area of experience equally essential to his development as a well-rounded personality. It is as if we say that everything in life must be usable and practicable and reject everything that is esthetically desirable, that gives tone, color, and richness to living." The vogue for creativity among child development experts along with the critique of the didactic educational toy and the growing faith in abstract art are some of the reasons that a

genre of aesthetically sophisticated toys flourished in the two decades after World War II. Birgitta Almquist has suggested that the educational toy was reborn as an open-ended creative toy in the late 1960s. I am arguing that this genre was established earlier in postwar America and promoted not only by psychologists and educators but also by more unlikely sources—designers, architects, and art museums.³⁰

In 1948 the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis developed and distributed a toy called the Magnet Master, which was designed by Arthur A. Carrara, a young Chicago architect, along with Daniel S. Defenbacher, then the director of the museum (fig. 9). Carradan Associates, the firm created to produce the toy, consisted of Defenbacher, Carrara, and his brothers Reno and Alfonso Carrara. While both Defenbacher and Arthur Carrara were trained in architecture, Carrara was the designer of Magnet Master. Before the war, he had experimented with the use of magnets for the design of structural

³⁰ Lawrence K. Frank, introduction to Hartley and Goldenson, *Complete Book of Children's Play*, p. viii. Almquist, "Educational Toys, Creative Toys," p. 50.

joints, but because of the limited power and aesthetics of magnets then available, he had little success. After the war, he found that the “Alnico” magnets could accomplish the task. Carrara approached several manufacturers about producing a magnetic toy and, after meeting William Friedman, assistant director of the Walker Art Center, secured the center’s participation. The Magnet Master first appeared at the Walker’s Children’s Fair in May 1948. The design was refined and national distribution began in February 1949 with the participation of several American museums. The Magnet Master was given a retail price of \$9.95, and a junior size for children under six was priced at \$4.95. Amid growing interest in Magnet Master, but with increasing expenses and limited income, the Carradan Associates partnership was liquidated in 1950.³¹

The Magnet Master, a kit of brightly colored steel parts secured with Alnico magnets offered easy construction of what the Walker Art Center called “objects or arrangements having either a utilitarian or abstract ‘work of art’ appearance.” Pairing uprights, planes, and geometric forms, the Magnet Master allowed for free compositions as well as the creation of realistic objects. The kit came in two sizes for different ages and was directed at children age four and older. Museum officials even conducted test studies on children at a local elementary school to adapt the product for use in a museum program of art education.³²

Magnet Master was advertised as a “playtool” and a “new creative toy” to emphasize the ideal of artistic play with arrangement and balance. The Walker Art Center noted that there were no diagrams for children to follow because “children are naturally imaginative and will derive greater pleasure and benefit when left to their own images and devices” and urged parents to allow the child to experiment by him- or herself. An article in *Look* magazine showed painter Max Weber play-

ing alongside an eleven-year-old named Johnny, suggesting how both the professional artist and the creative youth could find aesthetic pleasure in the manipulation of toys.³³

Although Magnet Master was initially offered by the Walker Art Center and at select design shops, it was advertised widely and ultimately distributed nationally with a cardboard counter display that featured the *Look* profile as well as the properties of magnetism (fig. 10). Despite initial success, the kit was relatively expensive and remained popular within the circle of art education specialists who prized sophisticated methods of teaching the principles of art and design. Magnet Master was promoted as a constructive toy and, according to a list of suggested sales techniques, salespeople were encouraged to stress that “Magnet Master is a piece of playroom equipment. It is not merely a short lived toy.” As well-designed equipment for the home, Magnet Master grew out of the Walker Art Center’s commitment to a program of good design in “everyday art,” which they mounted in a series of exhibitions and publications in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³⁴

At about the same time, designers Charles and Ray Eames developed a number of paper toys—The Toy (1950) and the Little Toy (1951), the House of Cards (1952), and the Coloring Toy (1955)—which were simple kits that allowed a child to experiment with construction and building. Sold through the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, The Toy was a set of wires and panels that could be transformed into many different forms. While The Toy was intended for all ages, the Little Toy was clearly intended for children and was scaled accordingly (fig. 11). The designers of Magnet Master had eschewed examples for children to follow,

³³ “Magnet Master,” p. 3. This toy was selected for the “Shopping Scout” column of *Parents’ Magazine*, which suggested that children could manipulate it into “endless designs” (*Parents’ Magazine* 24 [April 1949]: 14). “New Toy: Unique Magnet Sponsored by Walker Art Center of Minneapolis Develops Sense of Design in Children,” *Look* (February 15, 1949): 96–97.

³⁴ As of September 1950, Magnet Master was offered by the major department stores with toy departments as well as by specialty toy shops and design stores such as Baldwin Kingery in Chicago and New Design in New York, which had had a “test sale” of 200 sets in November 1948; General Correspondence, folder 3, box 21, Walker Art Center Archives, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. A traveling exhibition of toys included Magnet Master as well as Playskool, Holgate, and Tigrett toys; see Hilde Reiss, *Toys: A Group of American Toys Selected for Their Educational Value* (San Francisco: American Federation of Arts, 1960). In the early 1950s, Don Wallance researched several case studies of toy manufacturers for a Walker Art Center exhibition that included Playskool, Holgate, and Magnet Master. His papers are located at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum Archives.

³¹ “Magnet Master,” *Everyday Art Quarterly* 8 (Summer 1948); Daniel S. Defenbacher Correspondence, folder 1, and Carradan Associates, 1950, folder 3, box 21, Walker Art Center Archives, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Arthur A. Carrara Papers, box FF 6.12, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Donald Wallance, Case Study 5-A Carradan Associates, 1948–49, box 4, Shaping America’s Products Archive, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

³² “Magnet Master,” p. 2. Carrara had also invented a series of cardboard structures in animal forms to which the Magnet Master could be adapted; see a typescript to Evelyn Peterson of an unidentified article, Arthur A. Carrara Papers, box FF 6.12, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Wallance, Case Study 5-A.

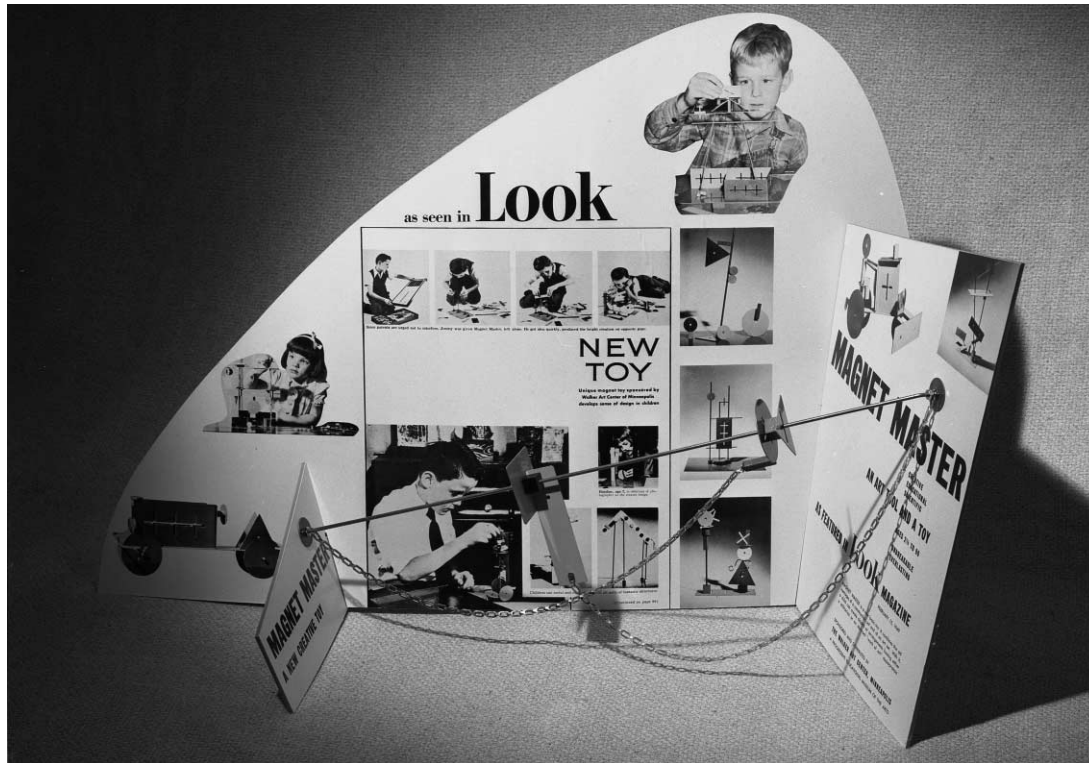


Fig. 10. Magnet Master counter display, ca. 1949. (Courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.)

but the Eames's toys included explicit and complicated instructions for building tents, airplanes, tunnels, towers, and other forms. Yet they also implied that they saw children as designers: "We know you can create your own objects with the Little Toy." The Eames's toys married design and modernist aesthetics to what they considered the child's own play instincts. The Coloring Toy included cutout cards and shapes as well as crayons and directions to parents: "The Coloring Toy does not presume to make artists out of children or to teach them how to play (children are far ahead of us on both counts). But we do hope that the contents of this box and the clues it offers will stimulate the use of these and other materials in an ever expanding variety of ways."³⁵ The Eames's toys

privileged design and aesthetic experimentation over educational theory, but their toys found commercial outlets among several mail-order catalogues and stores that served both a broad public and those interested in educational materials.

Creative Playthings, Inc.

In contrast to Holgate and Playskool, Creative Playthings, Inc., was founded in the mid-1940s and perhaps best embodies how creativity was applied to educational toy design in the years after World War II. Begun by Frank and Theresa Caplan as a small enterprise in the 1940s, Creative Playthings was expanded in the 1950s with Bernard Barenholtz. Frank Caplan, who had degrees from the College of the City of New York and Teacher's College, had originally begun a company called Creative Toy Makers with a Pik-a-Part clown toy. He met Barenholtz, who also had a degree from Teacher's College, at the annual New York Toy Fair in 1946. In 1950 Caplan and Barenholtz entered into a partnership to supply educational toys and equipment to schools. With Caplan as president and Barenholtz as vice president, the company went

³⁵ The Eames's toys were produced by Tigrett Enterprises until 1961; see Pat Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); and John Neuhart, Marilyn Neuhart, and Ray Eames, *Eames Design: The Work of the Office of Charles and Ray Eames* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989). Tamar Zinguer has suggested the close relationship between the Eames's Toy, kite design, and their architectural ideas; see Tamar Zinguer, "The Toy," in Beatriz Colomina, AnnMarie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim, eds., *Cold War Hothouses: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004). Michael Haber, "Designed for Play," *Graphics* 14 (March 1958): 126–30.



Fig. 11. Charles and Ray Eames, *The Little Toy*, 1952. (© 2004 EAMES OFFICE LLC [www.eamesoffice.com].)

public in 1961 and established offices in Cranbury, New Jersey, with a factory in Herndon, Pennsylvania. In 1966 the company was acquired by Columbia Broadcasting Systems (CBS).³⁶ The project of educators who saw in well-designed toys the potential for teaching young children, Creative Playthings packaged and sold progressive educational theory in the form of toys.

In a 1946 prospectus for manufacturers at the New York Toy Fair, Frank Caplan announced that the firm was established to promote the ideas of pioneering educators to parents, retailers, manufacturers, and designers through a central buying service. With the advice of experts (including Lawrence Frank) in psychology, education, and art education, Creative Playthings developed and sold carefully selected objects. Through “approved play centers” Caplan proposed places where parents could “shop ‘with confidence’ in the knowledge that their selections contribute to the wholesome development and happiness of their children.” From this beginning, Creative Playthings continually sold the designs of other manufacturers, in-

cluding Holgate and Playskool (which merged in 1958) and Tigrett Enterprises, and aligned itself with earlier progressive values, adapting designs such as Caroline Pratt’s Unit Blocks and Montessori counting beads, which it sold through catalogues to schools and parents. In February 1950, shortly before Magnet Master was liquidated, Caplan indicated that Creative Playthings was interested in collaborating for the school market.³⁷ Creative Playthings’ early designs were indebted to these earlier nursery school models, but in addition to furthering a progressive educational mission, its toys quickly acquired the cast of artistic modernism.

In the late 1940s, the company developed hardwood building forms designed by Caplan and Martha New called Hollow Block (fig. 12). Plain maple cubes that were open on one side, Hollow Block seemed little more than a sturdier version of a wooden crate or a larger, hollow version of nursery school blocks. The regularity of the square form when paired or stacked enhanced the flexibility of these large “blocks,” which were light enough for a three-year-old child to arrange. With

³⁶ Theresa Caplan, *Frank Caplan: Champion of Child’s Play* (New York: Vantage, 1999).

³⁷ Press release, Caplan Archive (private), Princeton, N.J. General Correspondence, Walker Art Center Archives.

maple hollow blocks



Fig. 12. Creative Playthings, Hollow Block, ca. 1950. From School Interiors Co., Inc., and Creative Playthings, Inc., *A Guide to Equipment and Materials for Early Childhood* (New York: Creative Playthings, Inc., 1957), p. 7. (Courtesy of Creative Playthings, Inc.)

the addition of colored cushions or casters, the forms could be transformed into practical furniture (such as desks or storage units). While Hollow Block met the aims of nursery school activities, it also answered the postwar architectural demand for prefabricated building materials. Other Creative Playthings objects also embodied current notions of “unstructured play,” in which the games, objects, or fantasy were left to the child instead of being determined by the manufacturer. The company’s lacquered birch planes, boats, cars, and trains were deliberately uncolored and freely defined, and some were large enough to ride on. A three-legged magnifying glass offered opportunities to investigate the scientific properties of unusually large objects and also doubled as a stool. And later, a rocking toy formed from two pieces of bent plywood eliminated suggestions of an animal form. Caplan and Barenholtz, following recommendations of psychologists and pediatricians of the era, believed that providing unpainted and vague forms would stimulate a child’s imagina-

tion.³⁸ Therefore, these representational objects emphasized shape and natural textures and colors rather than realistic detail.

With creativity emphasized in their name, Creative Playthings soon became linked with sophisticated taste and modern aesthetics through a series of collaborations with the premier institution for contemporary art and art education, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. The company’s connection with the museum was first established through the dynamic art education program. With the appointment of Victor D’Amico in

³⁸ In a case study of Holgate Brothers, Don Wallace notes the similarity between the Hollow Block and a Holgate design from 1931; Wallace, Case Study 5-A. The Rocking Beauty, now an iconic form in the collection of the Vitra Design Museum has been continually misdated to ca. 1952; it appears in Creative Playthings’ catalogues only after 1969. “Creative Playthings: An Object Lesson with an Academic Approach,” *Interiors* 113, no. 7 (1954): 88–93; “Ph.D.s in Toyland,” *Newsweek*, May 29, 1967. Creative Playthings also relied on experts; among those listed on official letterhead and in their catalogues were Lawrence K. Frank, Gerald S. Craig, Clara Lambert, and Craig Muriel Logan.



Fig. 13. Marcel Breuer, Children's Playroom, House in the Museum Garden, Museum of Modern Art, 1949. (Ezra Stoller © ESTO.)

1937 as director of the Educational Project, the importance of teaching young children to approach materials and artmaking without preconceived notions of "art" became a primary concern for MoMA. By 1951 the education department occupied two floors of the museum's new building, expanding its offerings of art classes for children, mounting an annual Holiday Art Carnival that was adapted for use abroad, producing nationally televised programs such as *The Enchanted Gate*, and mounting traveling exhibitions and organizing slide talks that were circulated in cities and small towns across the country. D'Amico pioneered the method of "creative art education," which encouraged children to explore materials, textures, and their own imaginations rather than copy existing models. Caplan was a member of the Educators' Committee of Better Playthings along with Jane Cooper Bland, an important member of D'Amico's staff. Bland was also listed in early publicity as a consultant for Creative Playthings. In the years during and after World War II, the museum sponsored several exhibitions of designs for children's art, toys, and amusements

and displayed artwork by European, Soviet, and Japanese children in the Young People's Gallery on the second floor of the museum.³⁹ The importance of children to the museum's vision of the future was also evident in exhibitions that addressed one of the greatest concerns of the postwar period—housing.

For Marcel Breuer's 1949 project, House in the Museum Garden, which was erected in a lot adjacent to MoMA's courtyard, Creative Playthings contributed objects for the children's room and playroom (fig. 13). Designed for commuters with about an

³⁹ Carol Morgan, "From Modernist Utopia to Cold War Reality: A Critical Moment in Museum Education," in John Elderfield, *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: Continuity and Change*, Studies in Modern Art 5 (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1996), pp. 151–73; Nancy Alison Shaw, "Modern Art, Media Pedagogy and Cultural Citizenship: The Museum of Modern Art's Television Project, 1952–1955" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2000); Robert H. Haddow, "Victor D'Amico's Creative Center," pp. 112–34. Victor D'Amico, "What Is Creative Teaching?" *School Arts* 54 (January 1955): 3–8; Victor D'Amico, *Experiments in Creative Art Teaching: A Progress Report on the Department of Education at the Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1960).

acre of land and priced at about \$27,000, the three-bedroom dwelling was “fitted to the requirements of a typical American family.” This idealistic model of middle-class living was furnished with examples of “good design” such as Charles Eames’s plywood chairs, Eero Saarinen’s fiberglass womb chair, and Breuer’s own Isokon furniture. At the center of the house was the kitchen, which allowed for the surveillance of other areas, especially the children’s playroom and adjoining bedroom. Through the playroom windows, the viewer could see Creative Playthings’ Hollow Block furniture arranged as a desk and shelves and as seating and storage with foam cushions, exemplifying the flexibility of Breuer’s open plan. Among the other toys included in this room were a child-size loom, a carpentry set mounted on the wall, plain unpainted wooden trains, and a Magnet Master set assembled on the playroom table. All of the amusements in this model playroom, provided by Creative Playthings and New Design, reinforced the idea that children should be given toys that could enhance their creative instincts. The House in the Museum Garden received unprecedented publicity and nearly 100,000 visitors in the six months that it was open. A questionnaire survey conducted at the time revealed that visitors’ favorite rooms were the central kitchen and children’s playroom, which both received an 84 percent approval. Of those polled, 76 percent showed interest in the furniture in the children’s rooms. Even Eleanor Roosevelt approved of the flexibility of the children’s furniture: “I particularly like the children’s playroom with nothing but those hollow blocks which could be made into furniture and still remain toys.”⁴⁰ While the practicality of the children’s furnishings was central to the concept of a middle-class house, the aesthetics of the cubes and brightly colored cushions also reinforced the idea that this was a modernist project.

The publicity the exhibition generated brought attention to the designs on view at MoMA by Creative Playthings and items in the company’s shop on Madison Avenue. An article in the *New Yorker*, for example, praised the abstract and practical qualities of the Hollow Block as a refreshing change from commercial design. Indeed, the writer jestingly linked the aesthetics of children’s furniture to broader social effects: “If the present kinder-

garten generation develops, when it has grown up, some rather horrid mass psychosis, I shall certainly be the first to blame it on the general vulgarity of the nursery decoration that our young are exposed to. Parents who share my mistrust of cloying pink or blue color schemes, of the ubiquitous Donald Duck motif, and of the sort of furniture that looks like stunted examples of humdrum pieces should by all means investigate the nursery paraphernalia to be found at Creative Playthings.”⁴¹ The image of modern domesticity on view in the garden at MoMA showed how art and practicality could be considered synonymous. Moreover, it stressed that spaces and things designed for children were central to the postwar discourse on housing and family life.

After the success of the Breuer house, the museum immediately began to plan another dwelling in the garden and for it they chose Los Angeles architect Gregory Ain. In an attempt to increase publicity, address an even larger market, and offset costs, the Ain House was cosponsored by *Women’s Home Companion Magazine*, which had a decidedly middle-class readership. The Ain House opened in 1950 and, unlike Breuer’s building, offered a glimpse into a more affordable model, although the interior retained the modernist stamp of “good design.” Again the children’s rooms featured Creative Playthings’ unpainted wooden toys and Hollow Block in addition to an Eames storage unit. To reinforce the role of art in the domestic interior, and especially in children’s spaces, the museum hung paintings and prints along with several children’s works that belonged to the Education Department.

In addition to making household toys and furniture for schools, Creative Playthings also furnished the outdoor environment of the playground. In 1953 the company added Play Sculptures as a division. Play Sculptures were playground equipment designed by artists and industrial designers in an effort to expand and refresh ideas about playground planning. Long interested in urbanistic questions and the place of the child in the city, Creative Playthings’ directors launched the Play Sculptures idea to redefine the conventional jungle gym through art. Swedish sculptor Egøen Moeller-Nielsen’s fiberglass helical slide, which Creative Playthings sold in America, was held up as a model for modern playground equipment that

⁴⁰ “Kitchen Is Most Popular Room in Museum’s House,” Department of Public Information Records [I, 12; 2], Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Eleanor Roosevelt, “Museum Model Home Is New but Expensive,” *New York World-Telegram*, June 24, 1949, PI I [12; 2], Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

⁴¹ S. H., “On and Off the Avenue, About the House,” *The New Yorker*, May 21, 1949, PI I [12; 2], Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.



Fig. 14. Egøn Moeller-Nielsen, Slide, ca. 1950. From Play Sculptures, Inc., *Play Sculptures: A New World of Play* (New York: Play Sculptures, Inc., 1957), p. 10. (Courtesy of Creative Playthings, Inc.)

allowed for exercise and stimulated aesthetic fantasy (fig. 14). Unlike conventional playground slides, the round mountainlike structure with an internal ladder and a molded ridge for sliding was a large-scale evocation of the free forms and enhanced safety that the company championed. At once plainly utilitarian and daringly sculptural, Moeller-Nielsen's design became a signature of the company's aspirations to reform children's playgrounds. To promote their new project, Creative Playthings cosponsored, again with MoMA and also with *Parents' Magazine*, a competition for new playground structures in the fall of 1953. The Play Sculpture competition emphasized inventive sculptural designs that promised not only to enliven the conventional playground but also to stimulate children's imagination, exercise the body, and adhere to safety requirements. Of the 360 submissions, the jury chose three designs that Creative Playthings produced in full-size models, exhibited at MoMA, and sold through catalogues.⁴²

The first-prize winner, Virginia Dortch Dorazio, a twenty-eight-year-old painter, created Fantastic Village—four concrete playhouses with pierced pan-

⁴² The jury included Caplan and Philip Johnson, curator of Architecture and Design, as well as Greta Daniel (who chaired the committee) and Victor D'Amico from the Museum of Modern Art. Other members were: Edith Mitchell, Delaware State Director of Art; Penelope Pinson from *Parents' Magazine*; George D. Butler, director of the Department of Research at the National Recreation Association; see "Play Sculpture," *Arts and Architecture* 71, no. 8 (August 1954): 12–13.

els and a trellis of metal rods (fig. 15). Robert J. Gargiule's second-place design, Stalagmite Cave, used spool-shaped upright forms that could serve as low tables or provide narrow hiding places. Sidney Gordin, a sculptor, created Tunnel Maze, which consisted of five bridgelike forms that could be staggered in an undulating landscape and offered places to crawl under or hide beneath (fig. 16). The museum exhibited the models and full-size reproductions and allowed child visitors to test the designs. All the winning entries relied on a single unit that could be repeated to create a striking visual environment, and all emphasized how children could explore shapes and textures while creating their own fantasy scenarios in the recessed and hidden spaces. Just as plain wooden toys might free a child's imagination, so too the Play Sculpture designs suggested that a child's imagination might achieve new freedom when exercised in concert with the child's body and the wider context of the city, school, or park. Behind the theory that abstraction could enhance creativity was the example of American modern art and design, which was achieving new heights of prestige at home and abroad. In addition to claims of educational soundness, the company advertised that in Play Sculpture "there emerges a play environment which is a spot of good design—harmonious with today's architecture."⁴³

The creative playground became a widely discussed issue in the 1960s and 1970s as cities and suburban towns sought new ways to deal with both children's play needs and perceived crises of American life such as juvenile delinquency and diminished physical capability. David Aaron, a former designer of Creative Playthings' Play Sculpture, commented ominously in 1965 that "child's play should continually stimulate and strengthen creative inclinations until they are capable of adult direction. Yet something in our environment, in the climate of play in this country, seems to inhibit creativity and to destroy the potential for inventiveness with which most children are born. Our problem, then, is not so much how many creative people we can give birth to, but how many of the creative people who are born we can keep." Since

⁴³ On the ideological uses of postwar modernism, see, for example, Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 15, no. 10 (1974): 39–41; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). *Play Sculptures: A New World of Play* (New York and Herndon, Pa.: Play Sculptures, Inc., A Subsidiary of Creative Playthings, Inc., 1957).

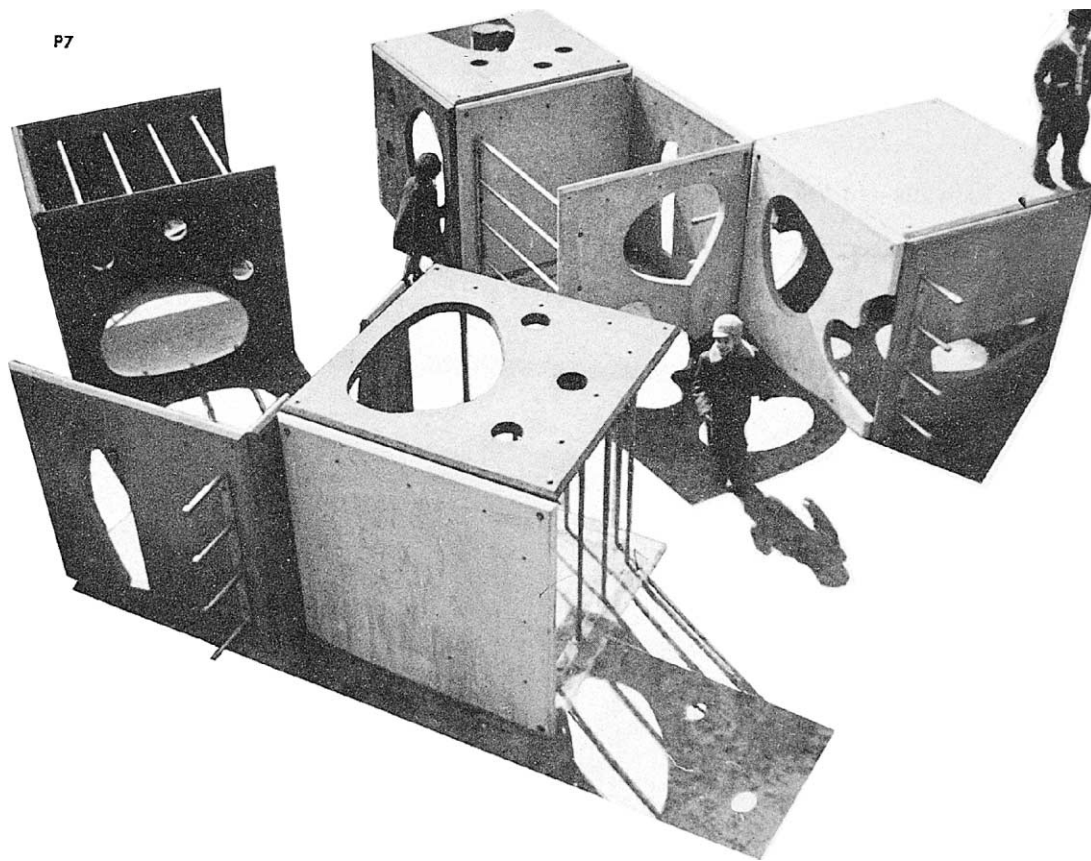


Fig. 15. Virginia Dortch Dorazio, *Fantastic Village*, 1953–54. From Play Sculptures, Inc., *Play Sculptures: A New World of Play* (New York: Play Sculptures, Inc., 1957), p. 17. (Courtesy of Creative Playthings, Inc.)

“sculptured” playgrounds allowed for many children to play simultaneously (rather than waiting for turns), they were sold as a practical, aesthetic, and social improvement. The most pointed ideological comment on the link between modern art, children’s creative expression, and political democracy came in 1959 when Creative Playthings provided a playground adjacent to the free Pepsi-Cola stand and the Model Home at the American National Exhibition in Sokolniki Park in Moscow. The juxtaposition of abstract design for children and apparent consumer freedom reinforced the impression that future Americans would perpetuate this vision of invention and abundance. Although the number of Play Sculpture designs actually installed was limited, the desire to erase the distinction between equipment and fine art sculpture was taken further in a new line of toys launched the following year.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See, for example, Alfred Ledermann and Alfred Trachsel, *Creative Playgrounds and Recreation Centers*, rev. ed. (1959; repr., New

York: Praeger, 1968); Richard Dattner, *Design for Play* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974); Peggy L. Miller, *Creative Outdoor Play Areas* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972). David Aaron with Bonnie P. Winawer, *Child’s Play: A Creative Approach to Playspaces for Today’s Children* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 37. “The U.S. in Moscow: Russia Comes to the Fair,” *Time Magazine*, August 3, 1959, p. 14. On the discourse of competition and consumption at the Moscow exhibition, see Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). One of the most thorough realizations of the Play Sculpture idea was installed in Philadelphia at 18th Street and Bigler; see “Up, Down, and Over: Philadelphia’s Children Get Exciting Set of Playgrounds,” *Life Magazine*, September 13, 1954.

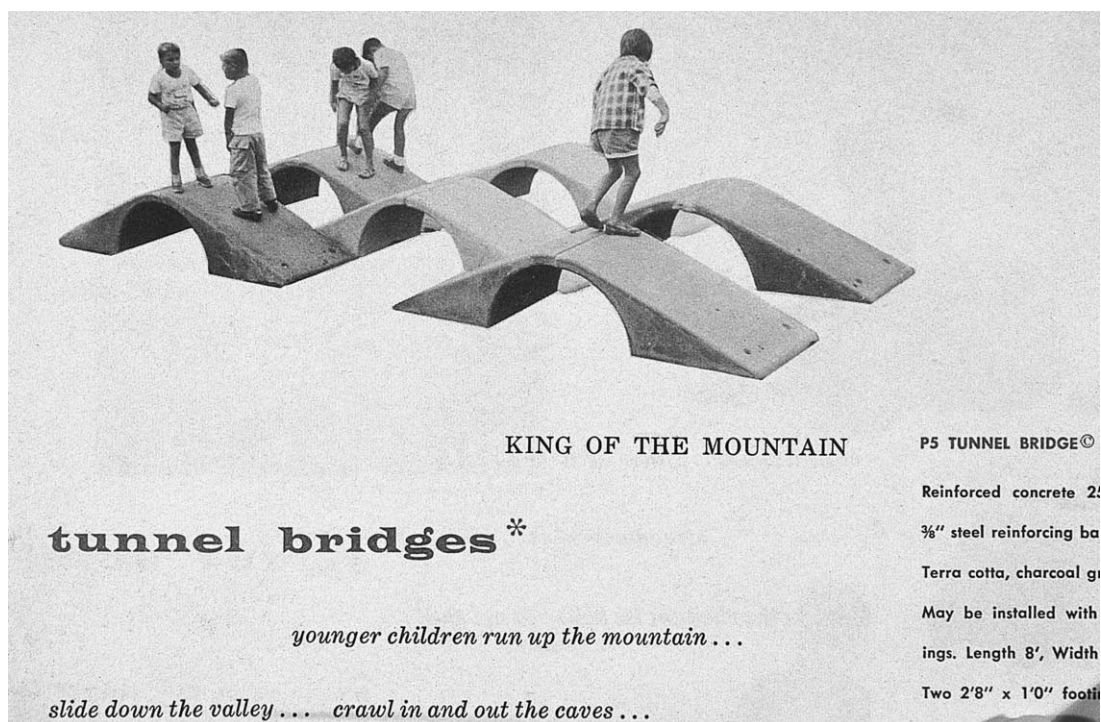


Fig. 16. Sidney Gordin, Tunnel Maze, 1953–54. From Play Sculptures, Inc., *Play Sculptures: A New World of Play* (New York: Play Sculptures, Inc., 1957), p. 6. (Courtesy of Creative Playthings, Inc.)

and sculptures to a specially designed mechanical lathe that could produce the small animals, vehicles, and figures in sufficient quantities (fig. 17). Featuring smooth, undulating, unpainted surfaces that formed to a child's hand, Vitali's toys reinforced the association between visual abstraction, tactile appeal, and imaginative development. By eliminating details, such as facial features, doors, or separate parts, Vitali's designs put the visual and intellectual emphasis on the form and the natural grain of the wood, reinforcing the company's ideal of freeing the child's imagination through abstraction. Creative Playthings was one of several postwar toy companies to emphasize natural materials and form, but the sculptural qualities of the Vitali designs gained the attention of professional designers who embraced both the artistic qualities and the theory behind them. Art and design periodicals, such as *Interiors* and *Arts and Architecture*, promoted the Vitali toys (paraphrasing the company literature) as a "bold experiment in art education. These toys embody good design, sturdiness, and play value."⁴⁵

The role of design in stimulating creativity, while ostensibly aimed at children, was always intended for adults. The prevailing belief among postwar scientists and educators that parents controlled and determined the process of development was instilled through guides and magazines. Designers, artists, and corporations embraced the notion of play as a means of sharpening ingenuity. In 1966 a writer for *Progressive Architecture* theorized that toys might affect the next generation of professionals and clients, asking, "Is creativity in these matters being sufficiently developed in the important and impressionable years, no matter what the future occupation of the child? Is sensitivity to material, form, structure, connection, and modularity a byproduct of these toys?" In answer to his own question, the author claimed emphatically that "too many toys are designed as if for adults, with directions to match: too restrained, too tidy, too down-to-earth for a child's imagination. Too many toys are the product of a designer whose reined-in imagination is harnessed to the pursuit of a literalness that will always outrun him. The last thing a child

⁴⁵ On the Kahn-Noguchi playground for Riverside Park in New York, see Susan G. Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England,

forthcoming). Antonio Vitali, *Spielzeugdesigner, Creator of Toys* (Weingarten: Kunstverlag Weingarten, 1994). "The Contemporary Object," *Arts and Architecture* 71, no. 11 (November 1954): 37.



Fig. 17. Antonio Vitali, Play Sculpture Family, Creative Playthings, Inc., ca. 1954. (© The Children's Museum of Indianapolis.)

needs in a toy is utter realism. But the highly competitive market makes a manufacturer aim for a first-impression exterior, often to the neglect of long-term delight and creative growth."⁴⁶

Yet broader shifts within the toy industry affected the aesthetics and fortunes of the postwar educational toy. Mergers with Lincoln Logs and Holgate Toys made Playskool the major producer of educational toys until it was absorbed into Milton Bradley and later into Hasbro, which continues to manufacture educational toys under the Playskool name. Similarly, CBS acquired Creative Playthings in 1966 along with Wonder, Gym Dandy, and Ideal Toys toy companies and educational publishing concerns including Holt, Reinhart, and Winston. CBS's interest in consolidating a foothold in the educational materials and media market points to the large audience they anticipated among middle-class parents. Caplan and Barenholtz remained at CBS as consulting directors and took on other educational projects for a period, but they eventually resigned. The growth in distribution—from a small shop and a mail-order business to specially designed stores and seasonal holiday shops

⁴⁶ E. P., "The Child at Play in the World of Form: A Catalogue of Architectural Toys," *Progressive Architecture* 47 (April 1966): 191–98.

in upscale department stores—was evident when the company included an eight-page catalogue insert and a two-page advertisement listing the 1,300 local baby shops carrying Creative Playthings in a 1971 issue of *Life* magazine devoted to children. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Creative Playthings offered even more toys by European designers, such as Patrick Rylands, Kurt Naef, Pekka Korpjaakko, and Jorma Vennola, and produced more lavish catalogues that expounded upon the company's philosophy. As mass-market toy manufacturers began to rely on television advertising to appeal to a children's culture of action, fantasy, and novelty, Creative Playthings went in the opposite direction, suggesting to parents that children actually needed fewer toys of higher quality and better design. In the late 1970s, however, Creative Playthings joined the prevailing trend and manufactured many of its toys out of plastic, even producing some using popular cartoon characters, which would have been anathema to the company's founders. Frank and Teresa Caplan continued to advocate for child development and creative play through their foundation and the numerous publications of the Princeton Center for Infancy and Early Childhood. Barenholtz established the Pyne Press and continued as an avid toy collector. By

the mid-1980s, CBS had sold Creative Playthings, along with its other interests in the toy market. The Creative Playthings name is now owned by a maker of backyard play equipment, located in Framingham, Massachusetts.⁴⁷

Playskool, Holgate, and Creative Playthings always relied on a striving middle- and solidly upper-middle-class clientele who shopped from mail-order catalogues, read *Parents' Magazine*, and attended museums. The educational toy as it had been historically conceived has often seemed elitist and even irrelevant in contrast to the commercial toy market and a children's culture constructed around popular media, especially television. While wholly dependent on an adult culture that valorized achievement and competition, educational toys can teach us broader lessons about the significance of material culture to the perceptions of national identity and about the inherent contradictions of postwar life. Although white middle-class parents seemingly longed for freethinking and creative children, many lived in the new, deliberately homogeneous, suburbs. If in theory well-designed toys promised a neutral training in the ways of democracy, then in practice they were available only to an elite group. Moreover, an ethos of parental responsibility in raising a generation that would value peace and freedom seemed to require early training in experimental ways of thinking, but this was at odds with a political era strongly suspicious of originality.

The deliberately artful, "creative" toy was a specific genre of the postwar educational toy industry. Educational toys never dominated the toy market, but they reveal how the culture of ambition in postwar America took a material form that affected the broader toy market and other industries (such as juvenile furniture) and had widespread reach into areas such as elementary

education that affected a large segment of the postwar population. Moreover, the discourse of the educational toy in the postwar period has had lasting effects. Faith in objects to teach lessons is a continuing motivator of today's toy market. Creativity and imagination are the ubiquitous promises of a large number of toys on the market today. Yet, as Brian Sutton-Smith comments, "we have little compelling evidence of a connection between toys, all by themselves, and achievement. . . . what is more obvious is that, since the appearance of toys in the seventeenth century, we have steadily and progressively developed a belief that there is a connection between toys and achievement." At a time when the reigning business cliché is "Thinking outside the box" and a so-called Creative Class has been identified as the leaders of the future, it would seem that the baby-boom generation has thoroughly assimilated its early lessons.⁴⁸

The objects that Holgate, Playskool, and Creative Playthings produced show how toy design reflects not only a long history of teaching objects but also specifically twentieth-century American concerns. The construction of creativity as a transcendent force of personal liberation was indebted to earlier periods, but the specific social circumstances of the postwar period gave the idea of creativity new appeal, as well as a newly material expression. Yet the ubiquitous call for creativity suggests that it was also seen as a means of assuring a more general, and sustainable, national rebirth. As researchers, toymakers, and parenting experts encouraged the idea that a generation raised to think creatively could ensure American interests in the future, an innate creativity that could be fostered through consumables was projected onto a developing generation that promised, if only because of its sheer size, to renew the nation. These early object lessons in thinking, building, and making thus transcended the playroom, the toy store, and the nursery school to reveal larger preoccupations about culture, art, and the image of America itself.

⁴⁷ "Designing for the Real Customer," *Progressive Architecture* 71 (November 1970): 71-74; and "Child's Play: Creative Playthings' New Store," *Industrial Design* 17 (April 1970): 38-39. *Creative Playthings, Inc.* 68/69 (Princeton: Creative Playthings, Inc., 1968); *Creative Playthings, 1970-71* (New York: Creative Playthings, a Division of Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc., 1970). Thomas Meehan, "Creative (and Mostly Upper-Middle Class) Playthings," *Saturday Review* 55 (December 1972): 42-47.

⁴⁸ Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture*, p. 125; Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).