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A Study of the Make-up of Children's Toy Collections

Gilles Brougère

This paper is a summary of research into the make-up of toy collections for children under the age of six. The research was conducted by GREC (Group for Research into Educational and Cultural Resources) at the University of Paris-Nord under the direction of Gilles Brougère, and financed by the "Fisher Price Observatoire"

This research combines an analysis of data on toy consumption together with a qualitative study. The data are derived from a panel of consumers assembled by NPD in 1997. The qualitative study was carried out in the spring of 1998, and based on 40 in-depth interviews with mothers of children aged nine months to five years and seven months.

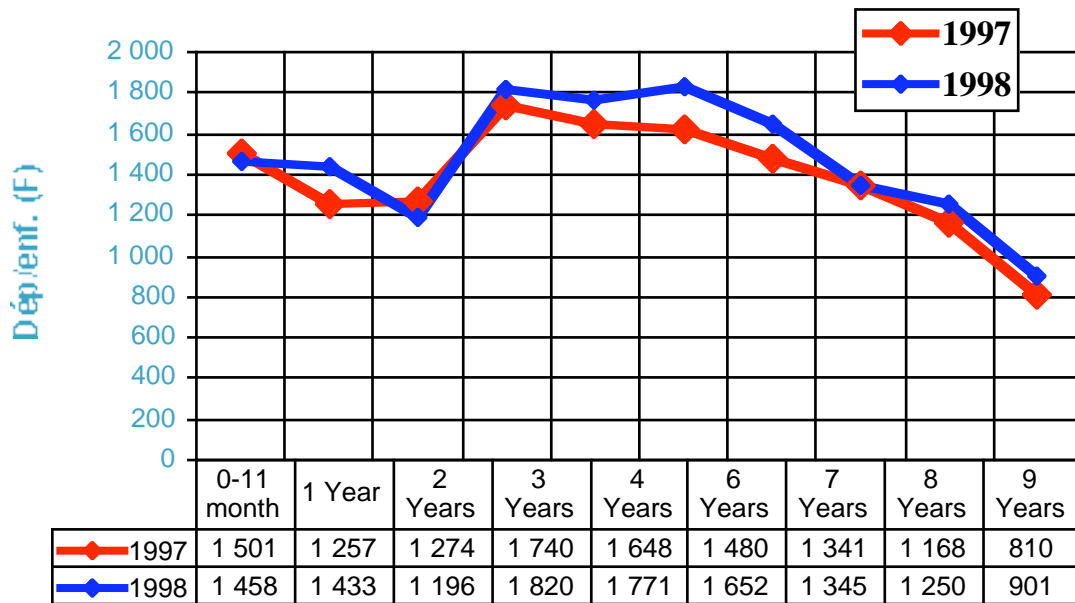
The research is pure and is intended to provide information for French journalists. However, both NPD's data and the interviews' findings contain information about toy consumption among the under-six-year-olds in France that could be used to develop a marketing strategy.

The aim of the research is to understand how a toy collection - ie all the toys available in the child's home - is assembled. Our main findings combine the quantitative data provided by NPD with the qualitative data derived from our in-depth interviews.

1. The toy - an essential object of pleasure in a child's life

Generally parents, and mothers in particular, make a significant investment in their child's toy collection. They see toys as forming an innate part of the life of children under the age of six. This investment, though considerable, varies according to the child's age.

Table I : Breakdown of spending on toys by age of user



While toy purchases during the first year are important, they rise dramatically by the fourth year. The child's active participation in the assembling of their own toy collection stimulates toy purchases. Qualitative data shows that some parents of children aged under three do not know what to buy for a very young child, while others ask themselves whether toys hold any interest to children of that age. When older children are involved in selecting toys, the doubts and difficulties over what to choose disappear.

In our interviews toys come across essentially as a positive force. Certain reservations were expressed concerning their number (considered excessive by some), and their function (certain types of toys judged inappropriate or useless). For some it was educational toys, for others, monsters or characters from cartoon strips, sometimes even electronic games. The general feeling was that toys embody the very characteristics of childhood and are, therefore parts of the child's life as are eating and sleeping, " A childhood is for playing".

Even those mothers with the strongest reservations acknowledged that toys are necessary, if only because they represent an inexorable social norm - "of being like the others". Before performing a psychological function, the toy operates as a social necessity governed by social constraints. It is clear that parents cannot and will not prevent toys being

offered to a child. They may have mixed feelings about toy consumption, but they cannot double-check it.

For the vast majority of interviewees toys are not some obligation thrust on them, but an absolutely vital feature of their children's lives. There are two reasons for this: entertainment (pleasure, amusement, sentiment, escape) and education (learning, toys serve a purpose and develop the imagination). The former is the more predominant reason. For some mothers it is the only reason, accompanied at times by a rejection of the toy's educational purpose on ground that learning should be confined to school or certain objects (books). Toys are primarily for entertainment. While the pleasure and amusement aspect may prevail over the educational aspect, it does not eliminate the latter. In some families, grandmothers emphasise the educational aspect while the mother fights it. Whether this is due to a generation gap – with the generation brought up on the educational value of toys distancing itself from this belief and emphasising of enjoyment - is a question only more research can answer.

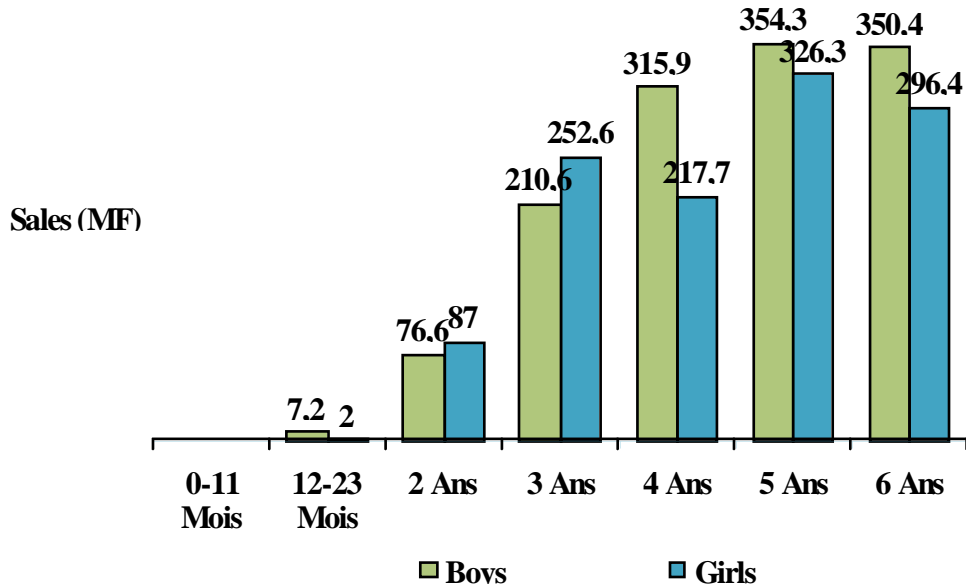
Where the educational aspect dominates, it rarely does so alone. It is usually accompanied by entertainment. Cases of the absolute utility of the toy (of the mother who also recognises a toy in terms of its educational purpose) are rare; and even then utility is defined in its wider and not strictly educational sense.

In addition to the toy's dual purpose (primarily entertainment and secondarily education), we found a less informed, more "popular" view of the toy's occupational value. This view, while not opposing the idea of entertainment, is somewhat cynical, because it assumes that without toys parents would not know what to do with their children. "It keeps them occupied. We are busy and cannot always attend to them."

2. The child's tastes, interests, desires and demands strongly influence the make-up of a toy collection.

The panel's data (made up of buyers of toys) presented in Table II shows how the child's demands influence buyers' opinions.

Table II - Spending on toys demanded by the child.



For children aged six and under, child-driven spending accounts for 32% of purchases and varies sharply according to age. Child-driven purchases appear around the age of two (21.4%) and thereafter climb sharply to peak at 50% of all toy purchases. From the age of five, the child demands half the toys bought. The child's involvement is in fact significant (between a fifth and a quarter of all toys) from the age of two. Roughly half the demand is name-driven and half type-driven, with type being preferred by the very youngest and name by the six-year-olds.

Since the purpose of purchasing toys is to create a world where children can amuse themselves and use their imagination children's tastes, interests and demands must be taken into account. Giving a toy means giving pleasure. This can be done even if the purpose is educational. Parents, therefore, seek to know a child's interests according to its age. They do so by observing, seeing what interests, what the play with and by asking what they would like. The aim is to offer toys that will be used.

This demand is sought and triggered by parents at a very early age, (around two years, in line with the quantitative data). The child is asked what kind of toys they like. Parents listen to the child, observe how they react to advertising, and even draw up a list (or ask the child to tick off

toys in catalogues). The child is encouraged to participate in the selection.

The only requests likely to cause friction at this age are those for the « instant toy purchases » expressed in a shop. Some parents accept them, others refuse them, and some put them off. Parents often talk about not yielding to a child's "whim", but attitudes vary. Not all children accompany their parents when shopping. Some parents take their young children along so that they can choose the toys for themselves, but can be difficult for the very youngest.

These different attitudes allow the child to influence, directly or indirectly, the make-up of their toy collection. The greater the emphasis on pleasure, the greater the child's contribution. Some parents regard the child's demands as the absolute.

Parents were found to react in various ways, yet not one believed the child's requests were unjustified as such. Some feared that TV advertising might have influenced the child and thus their choice might not correspond to their real interests. However, as soon as a child can demonstrate, through play, that their interest is real, most parents will accept toys that they otherwise might not like or would not have bought on their own.

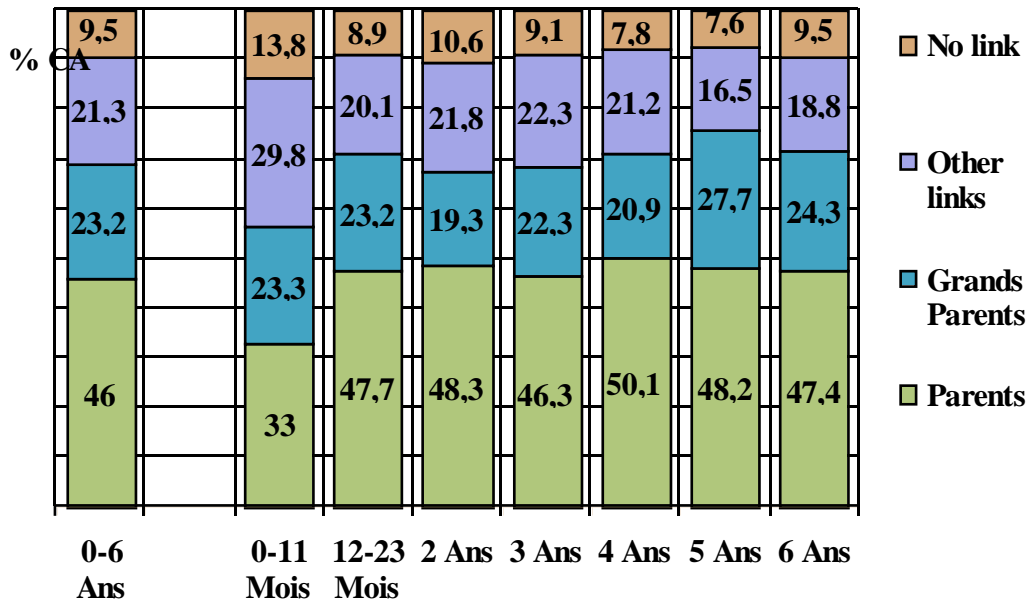
The process of showing consideration for a child's needs includes:

- Watching the child live and play
- Showing them a toy to get their reaction
- Taking them to a shop to find out what they want
- Listening to their demands, whether or not verbally expressed
- Choosing from a list it draws up
- Responding to its specific and precise requests.

3. Diversity of donors

Parents are not the only ones who contribute to a child's toy collection. Our study shows that their gifts account for only part of a child's toy collection.

Table III - Breakdown of spending on toys by relationship



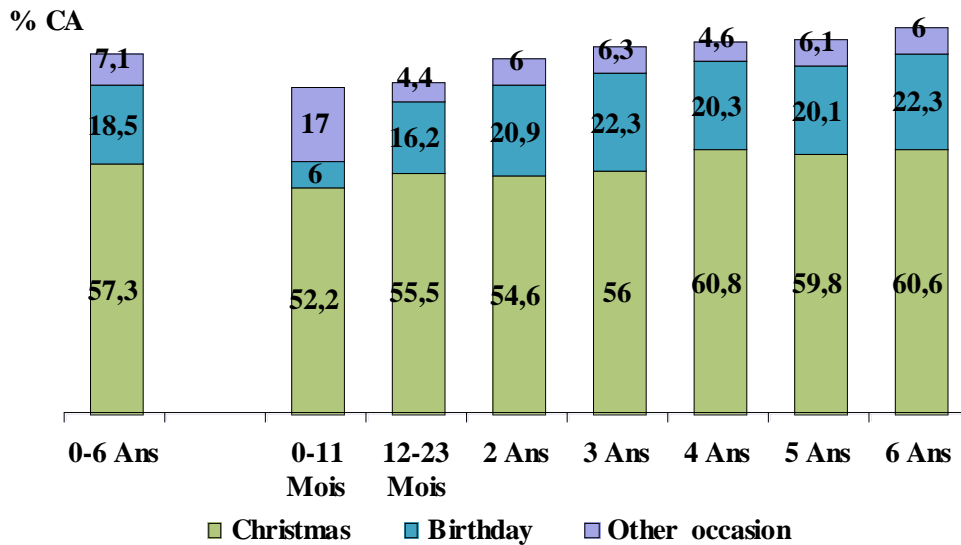
Parents account for less than 45% of total spending on toys for the under-six-year-olds. A child's relatives, other than the father or mother, account for more. Grandparents alone account for almost a quarter of toys bought for this age group. The contribution of non-relatives is small (around 10%), although it is higher during the year of the child's birth and sometimes even in their second year. By contrast, the parents' contribution is the smallest during the first year. The family's role grows as the child gets older.

The data given in the table was borne out by the interviews. Grandparents are one of the most active donor groups. They are the main donors after the parents, and sometimes even surpass them. The fewer the grandchildren, the greater the contribution. They may have their own ideas as to what sort of toy they should buy or let themselves be guided by the mother. Aunts and uncles, godparents and friends give toys too. They add diversity to toy collections, and are responsible for the abundance of toys between birth and the first few Christmases and birthdays. External donors enrich the child's toy collection and give it the variety sought by the mothers.

4. The toy is a present offered on ritual occasions

A toy is characterised by its function as a present ("As a toy is a present, you do not buy it every day"). This function is primarily reflected in the offering of ritual gifts on occasions such as Christmas and birthdays.

Table IV - Breakdown of spending on toys by occasion



Christmas leads the way with over 60% of toy sales, followed by birthdays (20%). Other occasion or no occasions at all account for the remaining 20%. The child's first year is the only exception to this rule. By the child's third year, the Christmas- and birthday-dominated system is already in place, eroding the role played by other occasions or the absence of occasion. Nevertheless, Christmas still accounts for 48.3% of sales in the child's first year, reflecting the child's early initiation to this ritual.

Table IV shows that Christmas toys are usually an expression of what the child wants. The data show too the importance of family, other than the parents, during Christmas. In fact, the contribution of parents and grandparents is smaller than that of the rest of the family. Christmas is an occasion at which the whole family, and not just the child's parents, is united. The parents' contribution is strongest during other occasions, or no occasions.

Christmas and birthdays are so important for mothers that some even consider that toys not bought for a special occasion do not really count as gifts. Rituals are associated with an abundance of toys. A gift is relative to the pleasure it gives the child. It is defined by the pleasure felt, by the feelings conveyed and by the strength of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. Birthdays lend themselves more easily to gifts of clothing, though toys are also important at that age.

While toys have a role outside these two occasions, the interviews show a marked bias towards rituals. The purchase of toys outside these occasions is justifiable only for the youngest children on the grounds that ritual has no meaning for them.

Behind this emphasis on the occasion lies a refusal to undertake unwarranted purchases, except for articles of small value. The buying of toys is a social act and is justifiable from the moment the mother recognises the importance of this act for the child. Mothers see no justification for toys for no reason because they want their children to realise that things do not arrive gratuitously. Thus social imperatives (Christmas or birthdays) are preferred rather than the child's needs, probably because these needs are associated usually with entertainment and pleasure and only marginally with education.

Special occasions provide donors with an opportunity to offer gifts. The concept of a child celebration is important and is in line with the toy's pleasure image. Be it Christmas - a celebration for all children - or a birthday - a particular child's celebration - toys serve to celebrate the child and introduce them to pleasure. In our society enjoyment is related to consumption.

There is an economic rationale for using occasions to assemble a toy collection. Parents believe that since Christmas implies presents, it may as well be used to build the child's toy collection. A collection is not assembled as and when it is needed, but by piecemeal, as occasions arise. This helps to control desire, demand and consumption, and to postpone the satisfaction of the child's demands to the next occasion.

Occasions, because of their pleasure-gift connotations, stimulate the child's participation in gift selection. They also allow parents to limit toy purchases to specific periods and to control and manage the child's toy demands. Parents give way to their children with an easy conscience if the gifts are for legitimate children's celebrations. Our study shows that mothers are afraid of being swamped by demands. Society offers them the means of managing these demands.

Parents use social rituals, to which they seem very attached, to build a world of play for the child.

5. Uncertain outcome

A toy - or gift offered for the child's pleasure - is a complex object, which may well not perform the entertainment role assigned to it. Parents are disappointed at times with the child's lack of interest in certain purchases, which they see as having symbolic or fundamental importance. This is the toy's basic paradox. That is why parents pay so much attention to ensuring the toy's assimilation by the child. Parents do not believe in the accumulation of objects for its own sake but in the provision of an active toy collection in which the child has what they want to play with.

6. Key relationship to consumption (quantity, variety)

As a consequence to the above the « toy » is a consumer product. In fact, many mothers believe that abundance is a defining characteristic of a toy collection. Children are seen to have many, and in some cases too many, toys. The adjectives cited most often are "enough" "sufficient" "a lot" or "too many", but rarely "too few". When "few" is used, it denotes the choice of parents who consider that there are already too many toys for a child under eighteen months.

"Too many" refers not to some objective threshold but to toys that are not, or no longer, used. If the child does not play with all their toys, they are said to have "too many". Likewise they are seen to have "the right number" "because they play with all of them". The notion of "too many" is usually applied to "others", as if the nurseries of other people's children contained more toys than one's own, and therefore "too many". Consequently, the number of toys possessed by one's own child always conforms to the "average": "Our child gets as many toys as the others".

The ideal solution is the medium between "too many" and "too few": "Too many toys and the child is lost and cannot settle down; not enough toys and they are in danger of getting bored". To meet uncertain needs, some parents feel the only solution is to get lots of toys.

Abundance is ultimately seen as a means of ensuring diversity, while variety is regarded as a justification for abundance. Diversity becomes something of a watchword, but its scope is restricted by the child's tastes, as it is the child who, in the end, decides.

The principle of diversity is perhaps the most visible element in designing a toy collection. It is the element, which truly guarantees that the collection is not skewed towards one direction alone.

7. Technical difficulties in assembling a toy collection

The assembling of a toy collection is beset with a number of technical difficulties, including the age factor - the main criteria in the case of the youngest children. If a toy is not used, it usually means that proper account has not been taken of the child's age.

- Age reflects the dichotomy between the pleasure and educational functions.

Parents are divided on the issue of age. Some refuse to take the child's age into account, or at any rate do not always take it into account, being only interested in the child's taste. Others – the majority (28/40) - regard age as important criteria. The former may not take safety into account when dealing with children under 36 months ("they're careful", "they do not put anything in their mouth", "I'm watching"). The majority of parents, however, take the child's age into account. Of these, some follow the age recommendations on the box, while others buy toys suitable for children who are a few months older (the general rule, except for parlour games where some adjust in the opposite direction, buying games intended for children a year younger). Age is often seen as the best way to target or adapt the toy to the child, and thus avoid its non-utilisation.

There are several reasons for buying toys intended for children who are several months older: the toy lasts longer (the same strategy as for buying clothes, which is perhaps the model here); pride (it shows the child is advanced for their age and would be bored with toys suitable for their own age group). Some parents push their children to select toys meant for an older age group. However, not all parents see the point in taking short cuts and rather rely on the child's capabilities at the moment of purchases as well as on their own knowledge of the child.

The child-driven demand factor rapidly overtakes the age factor, although some parents refuse to buy toys intended for a younger child.

- Donors' gift selection reflects the dichotomy between the child's choice and parental control.

We observe two extremes: one where parents give donors complete freedom of choice in recognition of the fact that the making of gifts is an intensely personal matter; the other where parents influence the choice of gift in order to avoid duplication. The majority of parents lie somewhere in the middle. Some answer specific requests from donors comprehensively, others give general recommendations designed to avoid getting the same toy. One way is to use long lists drawn up by the children themselves.

Donors seek to give the child pleasure. They therefore seek to understand their tastes, through direct knowledge, through the mother, or through their general experience of children.

We can summarise our main findings as follows:

- a toy is an object of pleasure firstly and an educational tool second
- a toy collection represents a sizeable investment, for toys are an essential part of a child's life
 - the child participates, directly or indirectly, in assembling their toy collection. This task is not left to the parents alone.
 - the offering of gifts and the ritual associated with this is a social act
 - a toy collection owes its diversity to a multiplicity of donors.

If we were asked to shortlist two elements, we would place as paramount the child's enjoyment and the mutually reinforcing relationship between the social ritual and the occasion. Although gifts perform an educational function, it is their pleasure and social functions that determine the shape of a toy collection. This does not mean that a collection is based on irrational choices. The rationality of a collection is defined not in psychological or educational terms but in emotional and social terms (the relationship of parents to children, the child's assimilation into a social network). The variety factor undoubtedly enables the majority of children to find diverse sources of amusement in their toy collection without the parents having necessarily intended it. To understand toys we should place them within the social and emotional relationships between parents and children. These close-knit family relationships are themselves situated within a wider social context and are expressed in child-centred social rituals.

We will verify these hypotheses and examine the differences related to the child's age and the socio-cultural background of the parents in a new quantitative study. In this way we hope to gain new insights into what

mothers expect from the toys or collection of toys making up the material world of their children.