

**When Is a Doll More Than a Doll?:  
Selling Toys as Reassurance  
for Maternal and Class Anxiety**

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*Working Paper No. 28  
April 2001*

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## Abstract

In this study of the visions of appropriate motherhood purveyed in toy catalogs, I found that notions about the *social world* and the *nature of play* are the building units of larger belief systems. These belief systems bring with them anxiety and reassurance which are then tied to the toys for sale. *Maternal anxiety* can come in two forms: the working mother's question about how she can be a good mother if she is not there, and the stay-at-home mother's question about just how much of herself is enough for her child. Two kinds of *class anxiety* include that for the child's future, i.e., how the child will be able to reproduce or surpass his or her class origins, and that for the mother's present, i.e., how she can deliver a childhood protected from adult society. Thus, marketers address a relatively homogenous group of mostly white, middle-class mothers, and nonetheless believe they experienced anxiety of varying types. Sometimes these anxieties interact to form coherent rubrics I dubbed "*alone and ambitious*" and "*nurturant and nostalgic*." I suggest this finding of multiple sources of difference can be fruitfully used to refine Thorne's (1999) powerful concept of child rearing as "caring project."

Are you wondering if it's too **early** to introduce a counting or letters toy? **Exposure** to letters is the beginning of **literacy**; likewise, your child can have fun **counting** before reading numbers. But take a look at the range of other **challenges** the toy provides – often, they'll include basic problem-solving activities for younger children. By encouraging play at your child's level of **understanding**, you'll pose "problems" that prepare your child's mind for more complex **learning**.

Kathleen Alfano, Ph.D., Fisher Price PlayLab.

*For more advice on how to unlock your child's full potential through play, visit PlayTips on our website: [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com)*

*Fisher Price catalog, p. 48, boldface in original*

The copywriter's image of "unlocking your child's full potential" is an apt one – first of all, there it is, lying dormant and untapped, your child's future. Second, it awaits your (the parent's) activity to unleash appropriately. Your child's future is locked up; only you have the key. It is your obligation, the only possible definition of appropriate parenthood, to use that key as soon and as well as possible.

As I explore in this paper, this vision – and its commensurate urgency – is one propagated by many toy marketers who seek to tap into maternal and class anxieties to sell toys. We have come a long way since the early 20th century, when the sacred space of motherhood was perhaps first harnessed to the profane world of commerce (Cook 1995). Now, appropriate child rearing is embedded in consumption strategies and the marketplace. Hand in hand, childhood and motherhood are commercialized, mediated through the world of buying and selling. As Schor (1992, 1998), Hochschild (1997), and others have noted, this commercialization process has fundamental impact on the experience of family and work for the middle class; as what makes for appropriate parenting is ratcheted up in terms of necessary products, the work-spend-work cycle is perpetuated. With that cycle comes a diminution of our investment in the home, making the home less welcoming and contributing to the cycle all over again.

In this paper, I consider the ways in which marketers use visions of motherhood to pitch their wares, focusing on toy catalogs as an effective means of capturing the parenting ideologies for sale. I analyzed the content and graphics of more than 3,000 products in 11 catalogs; through a grounded theory approach, I found two basic themes that structured the ways in which

marketers tapped into consumer anxieties and offered toys in possible reassurance. I outline the current state of knowledge about mothering practices and beliefs, report the techniques of sampling and analysis that produced the data at hand, and explore the themes and anxieties that worked to undergird the selling efforts under scrutiny. I conclude with a look at these anxieties and how they can help to revise our current theorizing about motherhood.

### **Motherhood as Universal and Particular**

In the burgeoning field of motherhood research, scholars have sought to capture the prevailing ideologies and constraints animating mothering activities (Arendell 1999). Landmark studies by Chodorow (1978), Ruddick (1980), and Hays (1996) outlined the psychological and socially constructed exigencies of mothering, the demands to which mothers must respond in their assumed responsibilities for care. These studies painted mothering with broad brush strokes, implicating all of us in the same near-universal project.

Other scholars took issue with the essentializing of what they saw as principally white, middle-class mothering issues and approaches (Collins 1994; Segura 1994; Segura and Pierce 1993). Analysts sought to take account of mothering on the margins of the hegemonic versions they viewed as central to previous theorizing (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994). A fundamental insight provided by such research was that mothers (like all people) are positioned in several social locations at once, social locations that come with particular perspectives that flavor mothering efforts. In her study of how women of color choose child care, for example, Uttal (1998) found that her middle-class mothers considered “racial safety” or “cultural maintenance” as overweening priorities, goals certainly as critical as that of providing educational opportunities for their children. Only in “the mundane extreme environment of racism,” as Uttal (1998: 605) puts it, wherein educational opportunities mean “white,” are women of color often forced to choose between these goals in constructing their mothering practices.

The “flavoring” that class stratification lends to mothering practices has a long research history (Kohn 1969, Lynd and Lynd 1956). Much of this earlier research, however, was preoccupied with making linkages between class differences in parenting styles and implications for how the children turn out. Later work has returned to class differences in parenting, but

seeks an understanding of these differences as *strategies* given particular institutional and social contexts. Annette Lareau's (1999) exhaustive ethnographic efforts take this tack. She describes two approaches to mothering and the child's future as "concerted cultivation" and "the accomplishment of natural growth" and finds these terms most salient in distinguishing middle-class and working-class approaches to mothering.

According to Lareau (1999), middle-class mothers are engaged in "concerted cultivation", seeing the child as a bundle of individual talents, each to be nurtured and encouraged to the utmost, so that the child becomes most fully himself or herself as these talents are expressed and trained for future success. In contrast, the working-class parents in Lareau's sample undertook child rearing as the "accomplishment of natural growth," providing physical care, teaching the difference between right and wrong, and providing comfort, but not developing individual skills and talents, in fact, not taking part in the diagnostic reading of individual talents at all. (Lareau 2000)

Other work suggests Lareau's distinctions might be overdrawn. Some studies have named a certain form of "cultivation" among the mothering habits of the working class (Hallden 1991, Thorne 1999). According to Hallden (1991), working-class parents share a worldview of "child as being" in which development does not have to be formed or shaped. "Does this mean, then that these parents have no projects with respect to their children? No, it does not" (Hallden 1991:341-2). Hallden's informants sought to cultivate in their children a certain moral system rather than the particular components of whatever will drive the child toward future success in social and occupational worlds. Working-class parents in Hallden's sample labored and aspired for their child to grow up with a knowledge of right and wrong, the ability to obey and be considerate, and the capacity to be independent "so no one can walk all over them" (Hallden 1991:342). Noting the common striving for knowing the "difference between right and wrong," Hallden and Lareau may have found similar aspirations in their working-class samples, but may have differed on whether to call it "cultivation."

Even those scholars who sought to theorize the particular and the specific in mothering practices engaged in some of the same missteps they accuse others of making. Scholars who brought difference to the analytic table challenged previous theories with questions such as: is

there but one kind of mothering? Is maternal identity so totalizing that it obliterates other kinds of experience in the construction of appropriate motherhood? By this point, however, we have learned enough to keep asking: is there even but one kind of working-class mothering, for example? Is the class experience so totalizing that it dictates the preoccupations and desires of its occupants? Even for the hegemonic and relatively homogenous worlds of white middle-class mothers, can we conclude that their class-based identities mean the same thing or have the same priorities for women in the same social location? Or are there different ways to “be” middle class, just as there are varieties of maternal identity (Ribbens 1994)?

Barrie Thorne (1999) usefully combines the universal and the particular with the notion of child rearing as a “caring project.” Thorne’s extensive research in Oakland included broad diversity of racialized/ethnic and class positioning; the very breadth of her sample led her to theorize that parents of all stripe were trying much the same thing, within resource and cultural constraints. For Thorne, caring projects “encompass long-range goals, hopes and fears, and keen awareness of the here and now, including the immediate challenges of organizing children’s daily lives, keeping them safe and out of trouble and juggling these efforts with other activities” (Thorne 1999: 12). The term “project” captured the notion of parenting as open-ended, but aimed to the future, which she found throughout her diverse ethnographic sample.

“Caring projects” is a helpful term because it steps out of the fray of looking for and finding differences according to class or other social relations. At the same time, it does not impute middle-class mothering goals and priorities to all. As Thorne writes, within “caring projects” can coexist such diverse practices as sending your son back to Yemen to stave off the toxicity of American peer culture or enrolling your daughter in after-school soccer in the hopes of a Stanford scholarship 10 years hence (Thorne 1999). Yet the notion could be refined to be useful in grappling with difference – perhaps even explaining it, rather than merely absorbing it under its theoretical umbrella.

In the United States, caring projects and the variety of identities and practices that come within that rubric occur within a powerful context of consumer capitalism, which acts to shape and reflect salient identities through their interaction with the market. With regard to school choice, for example, the decline of the public (of neighborhoods, of civic participation, of free or

low-cost programs for children, and, most critically, of schooling) generally gives middle-class mothers two options: invest copious amounts of energy and time to shore up your child's public school experience with PTA work, extra lessons, and parental involvement or join the full-time workforce and use your money for one-stop shopping for a privatized childhood at a full-service, fee-based school (Putnam 2000, Thorne 1999).

Caring projects, then, are enacted and molded in part through the terrain of consumption. Market researchers are engaged in constant effort to identify ways in which visions of appropriate mothering underlying such projects can be effectively harnessed to sell. Indeed, we can perhaps view the marketing "frames" as a sort of funhouse mirror on mothering – the reflection of belief systems underlying mothering practices, albeit distorted or exaggerated in order to amplify certain needs or desires. Despite the playfulness of the carnival metaphor, however, the funhouse mirror has important implications because markets work to determine choices just as choices work to determine markets. The formation of such frames is an interactive process in which the marketer purveys to the buyer the funhouse reflection, which reflects and shapes the buyer's own perspective of appropriate needs and wants, which in turn feeds into the marketer's efforts to further hone his message, and so on.

What is the character of these funhouse images? What kind of visions of mothering undergird the marketer's efforts to sell? How do marketers construe the varieties in maternal and class identity? What do these visions tell us about the competing discourses shaping the social landscape of motherhood? What choices are these visions offering mothers as they attempt to steer their way through their caring projects?

To address these questions, I sought to capture the latest round of funhouse images, the notions of good motherhood purveyed by marketers to the middle class. I hoped to tap into commercialized analyses of the varieties in maternal and class identities and the ways these varieties are used to sell. I analyzed the marketing of more than 3,000 products in 11 toy catalogs from the winter of 2000. I found that these catalogs tapped into different perspectives *on the nature of the social world* and *the purpose of play* in order to sell their wares and that these perspectives drew from at least two varieties of *class anxiety* and two varieties of *maternal anxiety*. Most important, even though they derived from analysis of a commercial source, I

contend these insights into the varieties of identity and anxiety found in such a homogenous sample can be fruitfully brought to bear on the task of theorizing contemporary child rearing. I end by urging just such an undertaking, to enable the concept of caring projects to wrestle more nimbly with the concept of difference.

### **The Spectrum of Selling: Methods and Sample Selection**

In this research, I undertook an in-depth analysis of toy catalogs and the ways in which they marketed their wares. Direct mail comprises but a small fraction of the \$23 billion annual “traditional” toy market (excluding video games) in the United States, responsible for just 5 percent of sales in 1999. According to the industry group the Toy Manufacturers of America, most people bought toys at national discount chains like Wal-Mart or at national toy chains like ToysRUs; together those two types of sales outlets comprise 60 percent of the market (TMA 2000).

But several factors make toy catalogs perhaps one of the most useful windows into the marketing of good mothering, particularly good middle-class mothering. First, as collections of text about toys, catalogs are a frozen moment of representation, offering a vision or set of visions particularly accessible to research and in-depth analysis. Second, catalog buyers are predominantly women – the most frequent buyers are in households with more than \$80,000 – and toy catalog shoppers are predominantly parents (Beaudry 1999).

Finally, catalogs are not subtle with their messages – they can’t afford to be and don’t have to be. Walk-in stores have a random element to their sales – they don’t know for sure who is coming in to buy (a grandparent? a divorced dad? a neighbor?) – and thus they are likely to be forced into using more neutral frameworks to do their selling. In contrast, there are two reasons why we can expect catalogs to have more focused sales pitches. First, direct mail is expensive, “easily” \$1 per household according to one industry advice book (Guber and Berry 1993); that kind of price hurdle surely limits the randomness of constructed sales pitches, because marketers have so much to lose if they get it wrong. Second, catalogs are mailed to families whose names are chosen (bought) based on specific characteristics – household income, number of children, years of education, etc. – and the care and precision that go into mapping a

catalog mailing list onto particular demographic groupings is unlikely to be then wasted on a haphazard, merely neutral, or even particularly muted angle for selling.

For this working paper, I chose 11 catalogs from the December 2001 holiday season (See Appendix A for a breakdown of their corporate and sales information.) I selected the sample for maximum variation across the market. To do so I used several means of choosing a catalog for analysis. First, I sought toy and direct mail industry leaders, getting their names from industry sources, including the magazine Catalog Age, The Toy Industry Fact Book, and two leading directories of mail-order firms. From information gleaned from these sources, I chose Back to Basics (which is owned by the web giant Amazon.com), Fisher Price (which is owned by Mattel, the \$4.8 billion maker of Barbies), Lilly's Kids (an offshoot of the major catalog company Lillian Vernon Corp.), and FAO Schwarz, (a branch of FAO Schwarz Company, based in New York but also mounting a significant national drive in e-commerce). I selected an additional 7 catalogs from the middle and lower tiers of market sales (I considered 14 more but eliminated them on the basis of their being duplicative of catalogs already sampled or because they were owned by the same companies as those putting out the seven I chose). Three of these I chose for their general descriptions ("toys for children") in the Directory of Mail Order Catalogs; these included Creative Kidstuff, Constructive Playthings, and Sensational Beginnings. I sampled the remaining 4 based on their "alternative" discourse, as when they claimed to sell nonsexist and nonviolent toys for children, for example, or offered "childhood's purest treasures"; Magic Cabin Dolls, Natural Baby Company, PlayFair Toys and Rosie Hippos comprise this group.

The vast majority of the sampled catalogs shared many similarities. Most of them were between 40 and 80 pages long, and most put between five and seven products per page. Accompanying every product was some kind of descriptive copywriting framing the sales pitch, and virtually all of the products were pictured, sometimes with children. In most of the catalogs, most of the children pictured were white boys, although catalogs varied in the ratio of boys to girls and in the number of children of color represented. (Magic Cabin Dolls was an exception, showing mostly white girls and only one boy in its catalog.) These are of course observational distinctions, relying on the extent that gender and racial/ethnic identity can be assessed visually;

nonetheless, I include them here because they are part of the visual message each catalog is sending.

Most of the children were photographed playing alone with the toy, although some catalogs did include some shots of several children together. PlayFair Toys had the most pictures of children playing together; there were more than 100 shots of boys and girls playing alone, while 32 products were sold alongside pictures of children playing together. In all of the catalog graphics, grownups were almost totally absent. With regard to their visual cast, most of the catalogs projected an unintentionally eerie quality with their photographs of children smiling in the general direction of the camera while they were engaged with the toy in question. When real children are with a real toy, however, like adults, they don't usually smile off in some direction; rather, their poses might be particularly unphotogenic. For example, their brows might furrow in concentration. The persistently cheery aspect of the children depicted in these catalogs was jarring.

Once the catalogs were sampled, I "read" each one closely and repeatedly, considering both text and graphics as I evaluated the ways in which they were positioning themselves to their market. I analyzed the photographs of toys and children, including who was pictured and what he or she was doing. I scrutinized the text selling each product with an eye to the undercurrents of each sales pitch.

There was an average of 330 products per catalog, so I analyzed the sales pitch behind approximately 3600 products. In steps described by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995), I identified several "themes", or observations about repeated tactics the catalogs use to sell these products and the larger issues to which these tactics appear to be linked. I gathered instances of these themes to develop them into analytic memos, which subsequently guided my evaluation of those themes that were most pivotal in structuring the marketing that is the subject of this paper. This analytic process involved the use of grounded theory, an interactive effort that includes exploring several themes, returning to the catalogs to test the salience of these identified themes, and gleaning a sense of which themes are more present, more apt, or more explanatory than others (Glaser and Strauss 1968).

This paper cannot address the ways in which the consumer receives or shapes the messages these catalogs purvey. Scholarly work in the sociology of consumption and in cultural studies generally has sought to demonstrate the variety and unpredictability of consumer response; these studies have used this variety to assert a place for agency and resistance in studies of cultural discourse (Holt 1997). People alter, view askance, and even play with cultural images, however carefully they are constructed or soberly they are tendered (Chin 1999). This paper cannot broach that process.

Nonetheless, my data allow me to consider the ways in which these catalogs are purveying a particular image or set of images in their efforts to sell. With these data, I analyze how catalogs attempt to “hook” the buyer, and I look beyond the specific marketing claims to consider what broader visions they are selling. In brief, I found that catalogs employ anxiety as a shoehorn, a means to slip onto the shopper a sense of their wares as necessary solutions. I identify and elaborate upon the themes underlying toy catalog marketing and demonstrate how these catalogs bring anxiety and reassurance to bear in their efforts to sell.

### **Playing in a Social Context**

All the catalogs are trying to sell products, so all urge upon their readers consumption, sometimes in the most naked ways. “If your child is going to spend hours in front of a mirror, shouldn’t it be a nice one?” asks Sensational Beginnings (p. 23). A few pages later, it describes a toy that will “give your child the pride of ownership”. (p. 34). Rosie Hippos intones: “With serious block builders, there can never be enough blocks”. (p. 13) Counsels Constructive Playthings: “Race around no more hunting for little cars. Here are 50 sporty vehicles in over 15 different styles to meet kids’ small transportation needs” (p. 42) Consumption can bring the benefits of the public into your private world, these catalogs assure, remarking how certain toys are “the favorite of playgrounds everywhere,” had been made in the past for schools, or enable families to “bring the excitement of the arcade home.”

These catalogs differ in the way they use certain themes to cloak their central message of consumption. The advertising copy under every product must answer the question “Why should I buy this?” To do so, catalogs must perceive and name a desire on the behalf of the buyer –

most often a parent (a mother) or grandparent. Because these are toy catalogs, wishes often center explicitly upon a child or children for whom the toy is ostensibly being bought. But because the buyer is most often a grown-up, these catalogs are marketing notions of childhood and motherhood to appeal to the grown-ups first and foremost. When desire is linked to a problem, even one the parent didn't know she or her child had, then the urge to buy is given extra force. But as the following analysis demonstrates, to name a problem is to purvey a particular worldview, an image of the mother's life, of her goals for herself, her children, her family. Although all the catalogs sampled here overlap in their sales pitches at one point or another, for the most part, they may be grouped according to differences in the family lives and goals they seek to portray.

Two central themes help to bring out some of the salient differences among these catalogs. One pertains to **the social world**: What kind of relationships are assumed for the child? Who is present and who is absent? What kind of connections can the child count on? How are these relationships experienced – as competitive, or encroaching, as supportive or cooperative? I found that, with a few important exceptions portraying a world of connection and relationship, most of the catalogs sell most of their toys based on the premise that the child is alone, without parents or friends to act as guides, playmates, or audience.

The second central theme is about **the nature of play**: What is the point of play, and of toys? What (does the catalog presume) are the buyer's hopes and fears about children's play? What kind of play is worthwhile on its own, and what kind of play needs more justification or even rules, limits, or avoidance? The answers to these questions reveal the images of childhood, family, and motherhood underlying differing worldviews. I found that the working premise underlying most of the catalogs' pitches for most of their toys was that the point of play is to acquire worthwhile skills, although some toys in a few catalogs are sold on the basis that the point of play is to have fun.

In the sections that follow, I elaborate upon these two most salient themes of the social world and the nature of play, using examples from the catalog texts to expand upon my analysis, and showing how these themes can be represented along two dimensions — of isolation versus relationship, and of skill versus fun. I explore the implications of each of these dimensions, and

map out how the sampled catalogs are distributed along these axes. Then trace their links to perceived shared apprehensions about motherhood and about class. Then I map out how the sampled catalogs are distributed along these axes. Finally I analyze the ramifications of using these worldviews to sell toys, particularly for the experience of contemporary childhood and motherhood.

### **The Nature of The Social World**

Although there are exceptions, at once the most common and the most striking feature of these toy catalogs is the image they purvey of the child as alone, isolated and without much opportunity for connection to parents, family or friends. Toys are often sold as replacement for absent parents or friends, although a few catalogs sell with an image of the child in a relationship.

*The Child in Isolation: Toy as Parent in Absentia.* Catalogs proffer toys that act as replacements for parents as *teachers of skills or values*, as *playful grown-ups*, even as *sources of comfort*. For the most part, parent “replacement” seems an apt, albeit strong, word because these toys provide these functions without requiring any other human but the child. Many toys, of course, enable parents to encourage kids to play by themselves. “Just fill the vinyl mat with warm water, place it on the floor and let your baby play away,” Constructive Playthings urges, in just one of plentiful examples. As Sutton-Smith (1986) contends, toys are given for solitary play paradoxically even though they are most often given in communal settings such as birthday or Christmas celebrations. Perhaps at another level, however, are those toys that promise to take on tasks commonly assumed for parents.

First among these tasks is early childhood teaching. By selling toys that promise to do that on their own, catalogs are of course tapping into a preoccupation with skills I explore later. But I contend these toys are also sold on the basis of their social context (i.e., on the promise that learning will happen without the parent having to be there). Back to Basics writes that one electronic language toy for very young children “helps children learn other languages the way they learned their first” (p. 28), by which they mean hearing a word and associating it with an object. What the pitch forgets, however, is that children learn their first language from constant

interaction with a caregiver, not with an electronic toy. Again, a whole series of toys from Fisher Price explicitly connects branded toy characters with teaching:

When children interact with characters they already know and love, they play longer. And the longer they play, the more they learn. Help your child find out how the right teacher – the right friend – can make a world of difference with learning toys. (p. 50)

One such product enlists the toy — a Winnie the Pooh doll — in actually “reading” to the child. Pooh comes with two books and turns his pages as the child does, “reading” the text. Afterwards he asks questions about the stories. “Everything’s friendlier with two...especially when you’re reading with Pooh,” the ad copy declares (p. 59).

Parents, both live and inanimate, do more than teach academic or other skills; they also instill certain beliefs about the world and other people. Creative Kidstuff sells a video that it bills as a “tool for improving self-esteem, strength and respect for nature,” family values perhaps, but in this case taught by the TV. In case kids won’t sit still for values teaching from non-human objects, PlayFair Toys promises “eight catchy original songs with danceable beats and sing-along lyrics hold kids attention as they teach valuable lessons about accepting people different from ourselves” (p. 8).

Parents are also for fun, for comfort, and for supervision; and when the real ones aren’t available, toys can step in to fill the gap, these catalogs aver. “It’s fun to play doctor with this silly patient,” Fisher Price writes, describing an Ernie doll that says “funny phrases” and whose body parts turn and wiggle when touched with “the doctor’s” instruments (p. 52). If the child is afraid of the dark, Fisher Price has the non-parental solution: “This huggable friend helps kids fall asleep as he hums a lullaby, talks and softly glows when his tummy is squeezed” (p. 57). Parents struggling with sleep issues are urged by Fisher Price to buy an electronic aquarium with classical music, lullabies, and twinkling lights, “activated by remote control, so you won’t disturb baby.” (The picture shows baby asleep with an inset of the mother holding the remote.) A “testimonial” in the catalog – entitled “Mom-to-Mom” – reads:

We struggled to get our twins to sleep by themselves... Night after night, nothing helped but holding them. [After buying the aquarium] soon we’d creep out of the room, and before the aquarium

turned itself off they'd fallen into a peaceful sleep. Our boys use this wonderful product every night! (p. 43)

Lastly, parents supervise. When they can't do so in person, catalogs sell opportunities to do so in absentia. FAO Schwarz offers a special remote control that allows parents to limit the channels their children can access. They bill this as "a smart way to control what they're watching, since they can only choose from channels you've programmed" (p. 55).

Sometimes the parent the toy purports to replace is implicitly gendered; several toys appear to be replacing the father, for example, perhaps in silent acknowledgment of the social context of divorce and maternal custody or perhaps simply a nod to busy fathers. "Yees! A weekend of fishing, canoeing, cooking-out and more. Great fun...even if it's only pretend!" Constructive Playthings crows under a "camping" set with dolls (a man and a boy), tent, and other equipment. "These two articulated figures can spend lots of quality time together, in touch with nature." (p. 3) Back to Basics offers an electronic toy that teaches the child to pitch, taking the place of any human tossing balls back and forth in the backyard. "A personal pitcher to follow your batter's development," the catalog declares. "Radio-controlled bat works with speed control dial to let kids be in charge of when and how fast the pitch flies" (p. 77) FAO Schwarz, which targets the uppermost end of the mail-order class ladder, sells an electronic chessboard named Ivan, that will "teach you, then play you with a 500-word spoken vocabulary, with Ivan commenting on your play...in a most amusing way" (p. 98). These catalogs seem to be holding out the promise that children won't miss fathers who aren't around to camp, toss balls in the backyard or teach them to play chess, thanks to these toys.

*The Child in Isolation: Toy as Friend.* If toy catalog copywriting can be read as a barometer of the social lives of contemporary children, one of the clearest messages is this: contemporary children are lonely. With surely unintended poignancy, catalogs sell nothing less than friendship, most often through electronic means. "When is a doll more than a doll?" FAO Schwarz asks, and answers: "When she is made with breakthrough technology that customizes her 'memory' to form a one-of-a-kind friendship with a child... Tell her your secrets...she'll remember!" (p. 47). Upscale FAO Schwarz, with the most technologically advanced toys in its

arsenal, sells those that use voice technology and artificial intelligence to make for more lifelike companions. They urge:

Parents can program a “Barney” doll to become a child’s very own, one-of-a-kind, talking friend, so that Barney knows the child’s name, birthday, favorite things and more. Just squeeze Barney’s hand and all the customized fun begins (p. 63)

Another doll “grows physically and emotionally,” the catalog promises (p. 42). (Although the only abilities they mention the doll acquiring are skills in numbers, letters and vocabulary.) For older kids, a set of teen dolls “talk and have life-like conversations with you or each other about things like self-discovery, sports and fashion” (p. 91). Other catalogs use technology to the same ends, as when Fisher Price offers a similar pet-friend:

He listens and responds only to you...can sense and respond to your touch...has all the actions and emotions of a real dog...is so lifelike, so convincingly canine... It’s Rocket and he is looking for a loving home here on earth! (p. 23)

Sometimes the interpretation given to the electronic borders on silly, as when Constructive Playthings describes one dog: “All the while, his red eyes flash *in approval*.” (p. 34, italics added). FAO Schwarz also sells responsive toy canines and other animals that change their projected emotions, depending on whether or not the child has been playing with them. “The more care and attention he receives, the more he is willing to do tricks,” FAO Schwarz writes. One wonders if the children feel the same way.

Friends may offer loyalty, companionship, cuddling and even “tricks,” but they also act as playmates and as audience. And for the kids depicted in these catalogs, they are largely absent. Of 36 games offered by Back to Basics, all but 8 can be played by a single person. For single-person ping-pong, Back to Basics writes “This unique twist on table tennis lets a child play against his toughest competitor – himself” (p68). Sometimes the electronics provides approval or witnesses, as they do for this Constructive Playthings product (and many others like it): “A star is born every time kids step up to this mike with built-in audience response” (p. 28).

If other kids are present, in many catalogs they seem to be there not so much as friends, who might share or contribute to the child’s pleasure, but competitors, there to envy the child for

the product bought. Fisher Price offers a number of large “ride-ons”, or cars; they advise “your child will love tooling around in this Jeep vehicle, making a big splash in the neighborhood” (p. 28). Creative Kidstuff has a number of products that would draw neighborhood kids and eyes the buyer’s way.

We know a family who had one of those big backyard trampolines. Of course it drew a big crowd of neighborhood kids. But when the mom brought this shiny red drum set out into the yard to assemble, in seconds flat, every child from the trampoline line was now standing in a drum line to try it (p. 49).

Constructive Playthings sells a toy billed as “a must-have for young comedians or simply to become the top banana in the neighborhood” (p. 28).

*The Child in Relationship: Parents and Children Together.* Less frequently, catalogs also sell toys based upon the image of children in relationships – indeed, a subgenre of the sampled catalogs use this as their prevailing image. The most prevalent of the relationships depicted is that of the parent and child together, although for the sampled catalogs generally, these are still quite rare. In selling nostalgic toys, Back to Basics has many opportunities to suggest that the adult buyer could relive the past in playing with the child and the toy or could offer advice while joining the child in experiencing the toy. Back to Basics does this just once: “Or you could show them how it’s done” (p. 18). FAO Schwarz suggests one toy “can strengthen the bond between parents and children, as you can build it together and add pieces as the years go by” (p. 3). And even though the Sensational Beginnings catalog offers very few toys to encourage this, the greeting from the company head at the front of the catalog intones: “As always, I encourage you to spend as much time with your children as you can this season! That is my dream for you.”

Most advertising copy that depicts a social world full of connections and parent-child interaction sells toys based on images of *parents playing with their kids*, of *family togetherness*, and of *father-child bonding*. Rarer tactics include portraying the parent’s participation as a way to enhance the educational value of the toy or suggesting ways to overcome the assumed barriers to parent-child connection, such as parent-child conflict or feelings of parental anxiety.

Most often, parent play is portrayed as a way to enhance the child's fun or as fun for the parent. Creative Kidstuff, ever on the lookout for the perspective of the modern, knowing kid, notes: "Delightful game for preschoolers and adults to play together because sometimes the kids have more manual dexterity than their all-thumbs grown-up opponents" (p. 29). Back to Basics lures parents into sledding fun: "The snow family toboggan lets parents ride too" (p. 85). Rosie Hippos, aimed at parents who aspire to construct a "simpler, gentler" childhood for their progeny, describes one product as "a neat project to do with the wee ones" and says another one is "an adventure game designed for parents to play with their children." At Fisher Price, sections entitled "Mom-to-Mom" attest to the parent-child play value: "Thomas is quite the chef and cooks up anything I buy at his grocery store" (p. 6). The copy for a set of plastic outdoor toys reads: "We immediately set up camp and began roasting marshmallows with the delightfully realistic 'crackling' sounds stick. He also received the lantern, and we listened to all the outdoor sounds as we sat under the tent for a long while and 'camped.'" Of course, for some parents, even this kind of connection and support comes with limits. For parents who have only a set amount of time for playing, PlayFair Toys includes estimates of how long it will take to play a number of different games that it sells. "Plays quickly, just 10-20 minutes," the catalog promises for one typical offering.

Some catalogs try to sell toys based on images of family togetherness. Back to Basics offers several toys sold to get the family involved together: "Air Mazes are big enough to invite parents and grandparents into their imaginative worlds" (p. 28). "Parents, grandparents and kids all have fun competing on our family-sized shuffleboard" (p. 72). PlayFair Toys writes that an infant sled is "a great way to include the youngest family members in winter fun" (p. 21). In perhaps an extreme case, Rosie Hippos sells a large weaving loom for group projects. "The whole family can share their creative energy by working together on a cooperative piece of art," they suggest (p. 25).

A few catalogs seem to be offering toys the mother can buy so that the father and child can spend time playing together. Magic Cabin Dolls is most explicit: For one dollhouse, they note that "our unique treehouse has been designed to cross the lines of gender and age" (p. 31). Another one is "guaranteed to captivate children 3 years and older (especially men – they love

this)” (p. 30). FAO Schwarz offers a “Just like Dad’s” line of toys, which are essentially collections of tools, baseball equipment, and other gendered items. Natural Baby Company advertises a potty for kids with a telling portrayal: “Just imagine, Dad on his potty, you on yours. He’s got his toilet paper, you’ve got yours. He’s got his newspaper, you’ve got your nursery rhymes. His feet can reach the floor, and so can yours. It doesn’t get any better than this.” In this scene, of course, the connection portrayed is perhaps a tenuous one – dad and child are not talking with each other, not playing together, not interacting, but rather just sitting side by side in the bathroom.

*Children and Friends.* Catalogs rarely suggest friendly peers, or harmonious relations with the wider community. Fisher Price depicts such a goal is possible, but only with the right toy. “Somehow there are never too many chefs in a play kitchen! Children willingly take directions from each other and, when newcomers appear, happily expand their imaginative scenes to fit all” (p. 8). For older kids, FAO Schwarz offers a phone that can “autodial up to 10 best friends.” But instances of happy and present friendship were infrequent in the advertising copy. In part, this dearth of represented communal spirit could be due to the fact that, even among those sampled catalogs more inclined to depict cooperative social relations or nostalgic childhood worlds, the focus is more on the nuclear family or the mother-child dyad than the wider community.

## **The Nature of Play**

In their efforts to sell toys, catalogs also communicate strong visions of the nature and meaning of play. The point of play is depicted most often and most powerfully as the chance to develop worthwhile skills, but play is also portrayed variously as the opportunity to have fun, to keep kids busy, to create memories/families, and to mimic and/or experience the adult world. Each catalog uses all of these tactics, but most settle along the dimension of skill versus fun. Thus my discussion is largely limited to these perspectives.

*Skills Development.* It is hard to overstate the pervasiveness of the belief that the point of play is to develop skills. To at least some degree – and sometimes for almost every toy – each catalog espouses the stimulating, educational value of its toys, positing them as worthwhile

because they deliver more than “just” fun. As Sensational Beginnings exemplifies in one ad: “Combines the *fun* of playing store with the *value* of learning math skills” (p. 28, italics added). In another, their catalog states: “We love these toys because they are developed so perfectly to walk that fine line *between fun and learning*” (p. 58, italics added). Underlying these pitches are notions of what areas of competence count as skills, how one comes by such skills, and the dire consequences if parents ignore their cultivation.

*The Important Skills.* In most instances, certain physical and academic skills are worthy of focusing on through play. Physical skills such as manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination are relentlessly advertised in toys sold for infants and toddlers, but also in copy describing timed board games, arcade games, and sports toys sold for older kids. “Used by coaches and trainers,” Back to Basics promises, “strengthens the muscles and develops coordination.” “Develop soccer ball tracking and trapping skills in your own backyard,” Back to Basics urges. Academic skills are generally pushed in toys aimed at preschoolers and up through preteen years, from letters, numbers, and math symbols to geography, chemistry and programming. Back to Basics writes: “Leaptop takes preschoolers to the head of the class” (p. 36). Particularly for the younger set, the more of these skills a toy includes, the better. “Sorting board teaches them a lot more than a thing or two! It helps them learn about hand/eye coordination, counting, size order, shapes and colors” (Lilly’s Kids, p. 74). Another toy “teaches ABCs, phonics, number and colors – even manners!” (Lilly’s Kids, p. 27).

Rarely are other skills described, making their occasional appearance particularly noteworthy. The gendered nature of which skills are valued and which skills are not is ever-present, albeit hidden by the mostly gender neutral language. Interests commonly coded as masculine, such as those in math or science, are always referred to as skills; those commonly stereotyped as feminine, such as role-playing or caring, are most often *not*. As an exception, Fisher Price sells a supermarket checkout set with the tag line “smart little shoppers love all the activities and sounds,” suggesting shopping as a skill (unrecognized in the other sampled catalogs). Most important, only one of the catalogs refers to the “nurturing skills” that might arise from doll play. “What better way for children to practice their nurturing skills than with this soft, natural baby doll?” asks Magic Cabin Dolls.

The other catalogs abandon the skills discourse to sell dolls, appealing instead only to the notion that the toy will “win your child’s heart,” noting “the *instinct* to love and nurture” (PlayFair Toys, p. 17) or calling them “nurturing feelings” (which can grow with the right toys) (PlayFair Toys, p. 14). Recognizing nurturing feelings seems a step forward from leaving them unnamed, and surely close to recognizing nurturing skills, but PlayFair Toys ends up lumping together nurturing feelings and aggressive feelings, suggesting that what they are talking about here is very different from a skill. “We all have nurturing feelings, and this easy-rocking cradle gives your child a good way to express them,” PlayFair Toys suggests (p. 9). Just a few pages later, their catalog notes “We all have aggressive feelings. This [boxing] set gives kids an acceptable way to deal with them” (p. 13).

*Learning the Important Skills.* Lurking in these catalogs is an essential mistrust of children that underlies the pushing of these toys, particularly for those billed for infants and toddlers. Every skill, from talking to walking to playing peek-a-boo, is somehow better taught than discovered, as if little children will not pursue these developmental milestones at all – or perhaps just not fast enough – without prodding. As Fisher Price advises: “Get the best possible start: playing classical music, providing sensory stimulating experiences, sharing lots of one-on-one time. There’s so much you can do to enrich your child’s development, and our infant toys are a smart way to encourage natural abilities” (p. 40). Back to Basics urges its classic wood wagon on patrons because it “helps children learn to walk” (p. 44), and Fisher Price sells a dog for the same purpose: “*To encourage and reward first steps*, puppy happily barks along as your toddler takes him along for a walk” (p. 43, italics added). A shape-sorter toy sold by Back to Basics “helps your child discriminate between colors and shapes, develop fine motor coordination, and learn a trial-and-error approach to problem-solving” (p. 30). Even the youngest infants need a toy’s positive response, it would seem, as Fisher Price commends one toy for “encourag[ing] baby to use natural kicking motion to make things happen – all on their own, right in the crib. Rewards kicking with songs, instrument sounds, animal noises and dancing lights.” Fisher Price spends a fair amount of space articulating a particular child rearing ideology, one advocating the prodding of skills in even the earliest toy user: “Creative experiences make childhood richer, and pave the way for a lifetime of self-expression.

Creativity comes naturally for kids, but it helps to jumpstart the process with toys that encourage exploration through creative activities” (p. 34).

For older kids, the apparent mistrust continues in the form of seeming not to believe that children might conceivably want to learn. “What would it take to make your child actually want to pick up a book and read?” FAO Schwarz asks (p. 61). This underlying attitude is evidenced by the *constant rewards, quick mastery, or “thrills”* promised by the toys, which then mask from children the fact that they are actually learning. The implicit philosophy of childhood here seems to counter Ehrenreich’s (1989) contention that the principal task of middle-class child rearing is to teach children to delay gratification. As PlayFair Toys outlines, “Our goal at PlayFair Toys is to nurture our children’s natural curiosity and reward it with feelings of accomplishment and joy that encourage more exploration – more fun!” (catalog insert).

Although what counts as *reward* sometimes seems quite patronizing of the children for whom the toys are intended, catalogs like Creative Kidstuff outlined the reason for such gratification in its pitch for electronic math and literacy gadgets:

When kids are learning things, instant rewards help ‘em hang in there and keep trying more. The unique sound effects of these tools, er..., we mean toys, reinforce correct answers and encourage more play. Using a musical beat, a cool voice and 3 different games, these gadgets teach and quiz the fun way (p. 34)

“Makes math ‘sound’ like fun – because every time they press a button, they’ll hear a cheerful beep,” according to Lilly’s Kids (p. 17). Fisher Price promises “Pooh and his friends bring the joys of learning to life [by] asking your child questions and saying funny phrases to reward answers” (p. 59).

For other toys, assurances of the *quick mastery* of skills entices parent buyers on behalf of their children. “Kids play beautiful string music instantly with our melody harp,” Back to Basics encourages (p. 50). “Whether it’s polka or salsa, your child will be playing in no time.” (p. 54) “Ensure success, with this specially engineered pottery wheel,” Constructive Playthings urges (p. 19). For a snowboard, FAO Schwarz promises that it is “easy to learn – master the basics in under 2 hours” (p. 100). The constant promise of quick mastery is made more obvious by the (single) exception over the entire sample, when Constructive Playthings suggests that,

with a comedic dummy, “kids (not batteries) make it happen... They practice, practice, practice the skill of throwing their voice.” This was the only instance among the sampled catalogs of advertising copy mentioning that some skills might take “practice.”

Lastly, catalogs pledge that *thrills* will make learning palatable for kids. FAO Schwarz answers its earlier question about how to get kids to read with an electronic book-reading toy that initiates games and asks questions about the story. (p. 61). Back to Basics declares one toy “provides real learning power with voice effects, games and music *to make learning fun*” (p. 36, italics added). PlayFair Toys notes that electronic details spice up a geography quizzing toy: “Lights and sound effects enthrall kids and make learning fun, like a game” (p. 37).

Several catalogs give away the “secret” that kids will be learning, in the form of stage-whispering to the parent buyer: “There’s so much fun deciding which tops and bottoms go together, they’ll never realize they’re developing fine motor skills,” Constructive Playthings writes. In particular, Creative Kidstuff, whose hip graphics and tongue-in-cheek copy often portray parents and kids with divergent desires, asks “Who’s going to clue the kids in that it will improve understanding of multiplication, decimals and fractions?” (p. 34) and “officially, this safely teaches the basic principles of electronics with easy to use building blocks. Bottom line for kids is: you can have a blast” (p. 36). Selling a cash register, Magic Cabin Dolls uses the same tack: “You don’t need to tell them it’s great for practicing their arithmetic.”

*The Consequences of Not Cultivating Skills.* Several catalogs suggest the risks of ignoring these important skills are great. A number of catalogs offer “The Babblers,” a baby toy that spews nonsense syllables in three non-English languages in order to lay down critical neuron pathways for linguistic skills later on. Only FAO Schwarz warns against *not* cultivating “an infant’s amazing capacity to distinguish all sounds of the world’s languages,” because this ability is one “they lose as early as ten months as they focus on the language sounds they hear more frequently” (p. 52). Sometimes the stakes are unstated, but “experts” weigh in about the importance of certain toys in a child’s life, letting the adult buyer imagine what might happen were they not purchased. “Educators agree: blocks are one toy that no child should be without,” intones Back to Basics (p. 7). Or, “An easel should be part of every child’s basic equipment” (p.

8). Even the trendy, knowing Creative Kidstuff chimes in, urging on the buyer “fun experiments about solids, liquids and gases every child should do before the 4th grade” (p. 47).

*The Wider Implications of a Skills-Based Perspective on Play.* With the near universality of a skills-based approach to toys and play, we need to consider the implications of evaluating almost every toy and play experience based on its ability to impart worthwhile skills. Hovering beneath such thinking, it would seem, are underlying notions of *time*, *hope*, and *the worth of a child*.

If toys are worthwhile only if they impart valuable skills, then how does one justify time that is not spent learning these skills? A skills-based hierarchy of toys leads to a hurrying mindset, as well as a notion that there is such a thing as “wasted” time in childhood. “Shifts kids’ color and shape recognition skills into high gear,” Constructive Playthings promises (p. 13). “Gives kids a head start in math and reading,” PlayFair Toys assures (p. 13) and later, “kids will have a head start in spelling. Also encourages early sentence construction. Can be played as a timed contest” (p. 33). In addition, skills considerations encourage time scheduling, at the very least, as efforts to constantly impart certain skills run up against certain child overload. For just those moments, Creative Kidstuff describes a learning toy with usefulness for “downtime” as well, even though this toy is targeted for children under one year: “*And when it’s time to just veg out and chew, there’s a knobby teething handle*” (p. 9, italics added).

The oft-implicit character of time as hurried, scheduled and not to be wasted becomes most apparent in the presence of very rare counter-examples, as when Constructive Playthings sells its modeling clay: “Best of all, kids’ imaginations *have time to take shape*, because the clay stays soft and pliable til baked in a regular oven” (p. 18, italics added). Also in contrast, Rosie Hippos purveys a model of family life that does not run on this hurried schedule: “There’s nothing like hanging out at the kitchen counter with a ball of dough. It’s a volcano, a herd of turtles, a garden of chop sticks...” (p. 30). At another point, Rosie Hippos urges: “Shake out some of your inner tensions, invoke the beat of your inner rhythm, dance around the house with your children chanting and singing” (p. 28). Natural Baby Company is explicit in its disavowal of the speeded-up vision of childhood time: In a treatise on why buy wood toys (instead of

plastic), Natural Baby Company contends “the wild synthetic colors of today’s toys seem to hurry children out of their inner peaceful world. What’s the rush?” (p. 36).

Another idea underlying a skills-based notion of play is one of *hope*: the hopeful one that almost every worthwhile skill or attribute can be acquired — it just depends on the right toy. The prevalence of this belief is also highlighted by counter-examples, very rarely used (in this sample, by only one catalog). “Inventive kids will create anything, from a car to a thing-a-majig,” Constructive Playthings observes (p. 2). Note that the ad copy is *not* urging parents to buy in order to make/inspire/encourage their children to be inventive. Rather, the copy assumes that there are inventive kids out there and in fact can be seen as laying down an implicit challenge to parents: Is your child one of these inventive ones or not? Constructive Playthings repeats this tactic in selling a transportation set it bills as fit for a kid, “particularly one with a colorful imagination” (p. 42). Does your child have one of those?

Most important of these implications of skills-based selling is perhaps *the view of the child* that such a perspective stems from and inspires. Clearly, if the only toy worth buying is one that imparts skills, who is the (only) child worth buying for but one who develops skills and can demonstrate them? If skills become the basis of what parenting is about (as emotional connection surely is not, the preceding analysis shows), then at what point do skills become the basis of love? In a related vein, the performance component of the obsession with skills comes through in these catalogs. “Kids can script and stage award-winning play with this magnetic storyboard” (Constructive Playthings, p. 41). Lilly’s Kids offers a music toy for children 18 months and older for which the ad copy exclaims breathily: “There’s even a ‘game’ mode to test their reaction skills” (p. 26). Fisher Price wonders aloud: “Wouldn’t it be great to see your child get hit after hit? That’s the idea behind this baseball training center” (p. 32). This toy’s reward, we can surmise, is for the parent.

Does this perspective affect the kids? What are the consequences of this skew in the way in which toys are sold? What does it mean for kids that more catalogs are marketing skills as the only worthy result of play? Such an understanding is beyond the scope of the text-based empirical research behind this paper. Nonetheless, one problem cited again and again in the text

copy perhaps indicates how children are responding to the preoccupation with skills: the problem of self-confidence.

A number of catalogs seem to view kids' self-esteem as a problem. "The success little ones will find in working these puzzles will build their self-confidence and encourage them to try more challenging tasks" (Constructive Playthings, p. 15). "Think of them as coordination-and-confidence-boosting equipment for active preschoolers," Fisher Price counsels. "Designed to help you take your kids through the learning curve and beyond, these grow-with-me toys move attitudes from "I'm not so sure about this...." to "I can do it!" (p. 32). Another catalog maintains "Playing an instrument builds kids' confidence. The right equipment is the first step to success with music" (PlayFair Toys, p. 26). In a "Mom-to-Mom" testimonial, Fisher Price offers the following story as a selling point (as opposed to a cautionary tale):

He and grandpa go around the yard together, then he comes back bragging about how he's faster than grandpa. He thinks he's awesome... Thanks for giving my son so much confidence (p. 29).

Perhaps we can view these urgings as a self-diagnosis, that all caring projects are not the same and that kids are responding to the constant measurement of their worth through skills with a confidence gap. Perhaps toy catalogs can stand as a kind of unintentional divining rod, pointing to the undercurrents buried within children who are over-scheduled, over-hurried, and over-performing in a skills-based, lonely world.

*Playing for fun.* Not all the catalogs use the potential acquisition of skills incessantly to sell toys. At times, play is portrayed as having no other purpose than to have fun. Back to Basics writes: "Will make your little one laugh and want to do it again and again." (p. 49). Constructive Playthings promises: "With this all-time favorite, kids, too, will giggle with glee." (p. 27). And Creative Kidstuff notes: "Funny, isn't it, how kids still love simple, low-tech toys." (p. 37).

Most often, copywriting relying on fun to sell simply declares that a feature is fun, and often that label is given to electronic gadgetry. As Fisher Price maintains: "Extremely fun and extremely cool for extreme off-road action" (p. 29). "It's fun to change the signal light to green or check under the hood." "Attach this 'driving' toy to baby's stroller for key-turning, flashing, honking fun" (p. 55).

Other catalogs rely on descriptions of the toy from the child's perspective — how he or she might use it — and intimate that fun is the point of the toy in the absence of any other discourse. Rosie Hippos describes a wooden helicopter: “It is a fun play toy for emergency rescues and those times when you need to hover in one spot for a while” (p. 5). “This toy is perfect for rolling along the floor listening to the tinkling of the colored balls inside.” (p. 9). As Magic Cabin Dolls relates: “One little butterfly boy whom we know refused to take his wings off for bed, saying he was going to make a cocoon in his sleep” (p. 46). Natural Baby Company makes it simple — “An old-time favorite...The idea: to bang in the nails, turn it over and start again.” (p. 36). Says Constructive Playthings, for the following toy: “It's easy to see the fun here! Kids pound the ball...and then start over again.” (p. 15).

Some catalogs suggest that parents and children might not share the same idea of fun, as Rosie Hippos contends when they write: “You will be surprised how much children enjoy this” (p. 15). Creative Kidstuff in particular seeks to convey and reassure buyers about the company's familiarity with kids and what they want, and most often they do so by portraying adults and children as having very different perspectives. “I'm so dizzy my head is spinning'...Sounds awful to adults, totally awesome to kids” (p. 56). “When they find fool's gold, a real emerald or a dinosaur's bone, they feel like they have struck it rich” (p. 33). “Kids' mouths fall open when this rocket blasts” (p. 37). “We'll warn you right now this is one of those things you might eventually have to hide cuz your child won't get off of it; they'll bounce for a whole day if you let them” (p. 15).

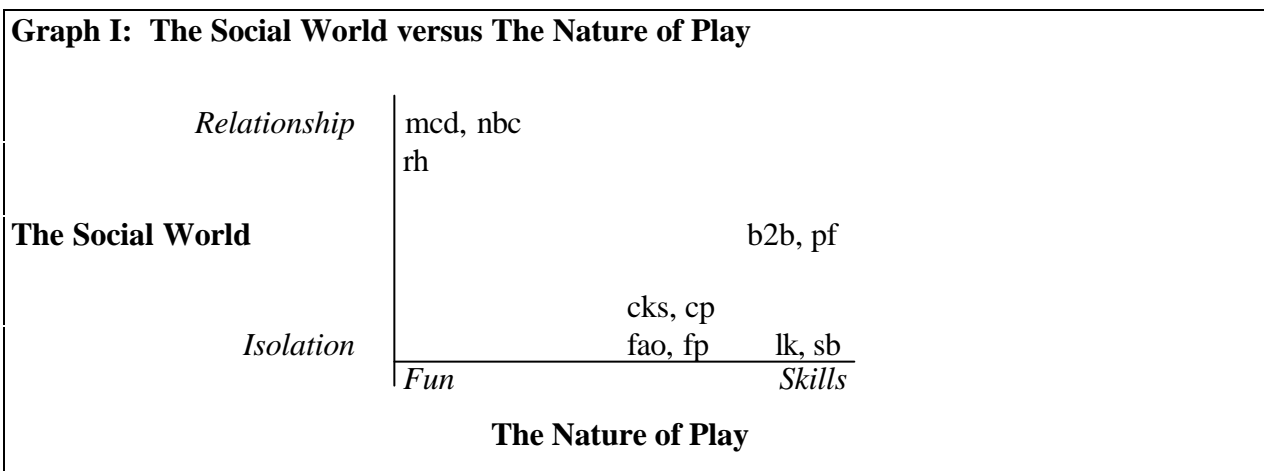
While a number of compelling themes arose in this in-depth analysis of toy catalog content, the two perspectives on the nature of the social world and the point of play were most fundamental to the sales pitch. In the following section, I explore the implications of each of these dimensions, and trace their links to apprehensions about motherhood and about class status.

### **Maternal and Class Anxieties: Interpreting Social Context and The Meaning of Play**

The foregoing analysis shows that these catalogs repeatedly call upon particular images to sell toys, images that tap into the two central themes again and again, albeit from different positions along the spectrum. Assuming that the catalog's ultimate purpose is to sell toys, why

do these dimensions work? Why are social context and the nature of play presumed to be the most powerful frameworks for this audience of middle-class moms? What are these catalogs really selling?

In this section, I argue that catalogs are eliciting anxiety first and foremost, and are selling “solutions,” or reassurance, to allay that anxiety. The dimension of isolation versus connection taps into anxieties about *maternal responsibility*, while the dimension of skill versus fun feeds on anxieties about *class status*. Perhaps these frameworks are most frequently called upon to sell toys to middle-class mothers because these dimensions play (havoc) with what might be considered their twin core identities — as mothers and as middle-class. Graph I is a rough mapping of how the sampled catalogs fall along the two dimensions.



*Connection and Maternal Responsibility.* The axis of isolation versus relationship addresses a seemingly prevalent anxiety about just what makes good parenting, specifically, what makes good mothering. When catalogs portray the child in isolation, the parent is offsite, presumed to be engaged in the paid labor force in an enterprise that pays for the toy at hand (Thompson 1996). For this parent-as-buyer, these catalogs are selling the toy as at once a *representation* of her mothering and as an *actual moment* of her mothering. Catalogs sell the mothers of those solitary children on the notion that good mothering rests not in being there with their children, but in thinking about them, knowing their particularities, and taking responsibility

for their needs and wants. This concept is perhaps akin to Elaine Bell Kaplan's "worry shift" parents, for whom good parenting is rooted in thinking about the child, when parent and child are apart (personal communication). The drumbeat of isolation plants a type of *maternal anxiety* that is primarily the working mother's: Can I be a good mother if I am not there? Is my child lonely? And the reassurance simultaneously offered is aimed at her too: Buying the right toy, chosen for her child's specific needs and desires, can be a moment of caring consumption, of good mothering.

At the other end of the spectrum along this same dimension is the child in relationship, with the mother onsite and in charge. For these buyers, catalogs portray the challenge of good-enough mothering as not just in buying the right toy, however carefully selected and targeted to a child. Rather, mothers are challenged more directly with the responsibility for making the play experience right; just what is "right" depends on how it falls along the fun-skill dimension. If toys are purveyed on the basis of their skill-developing capacities, the mother is depicted as enhancing that process. If toys are supposed to be fun, then mothers can intensify the fun. In each case, relationships are portrayed as *useful*; the on-site mother is parlaying her relationship with her child into something more on behalf of the child, as when Rosie Hippos prescribes: "Making a doll for (with) your child creates a special bond with the doll as well as being just a fun thing to do" (p. 27). In these portrayals, motherhood performed appropriately is a "child-centered, emotionally absorbing and labor-intensive" phenomenon (Hays 1996), one replete with perhaps more pressure and personal responsibility for doing it right than the most remunerative occupation. The intensive motherhood ideology at work here contains no logical limits on maternal investment and involvement. The *maternal anxiety* inherent in these approaches is pitched to the stay-at-home mom: Am I doing my job well enough? How can I use myself to make even more of my child's childhood? In reassurance, toys are proffered as props for the main show, the mother-child relationship.

Alongside the entire dimension, however, catalogs depict toys as — of course — essential. If toys for the isolated child are like a buoy thrown to the child by the good mother who is standing on land, toys for the connected child are like a bridge across which the good

mother conducts her mothering. In both scenarios, the consequences are dire if the mother fails to buy.

*The Nature of Play as a Path to Class Status.* As the other dimension omnipresent in toy catalogs attempting to sell their wares, the nature of play as skill or as fun is also turgid with other meanings, including a deep-seated anxiety about class status in contemporary life. Implicit understandings of success and the “outside” world — the grown-up world of rationalized inequality, individualized work, harried stress, and measured achievement — undergird the images catalogs rely upon to sell toys. Another way to view this dimension is as a reading into the meanings of childhood. Is childhood a training ground, a place where little ones get ready to launch into the meritocratic jungle, as it is from a skills-based perspective? Or is childhood a preserve, a place of special innocence that should be protected from invasion by the jaded, sped-up world of grown-ups and their cares, as it is from the perspective of play as fun? Both questions are linked to a unique form of class anxiety, I contend.

For none of these catalogs is the outside world a gentle or a welcoming place. Rather, for some — those along the skills side of the fun-and-skills dimension — the relevant “outside world” is a zone of work and achievement, and the issue at stake is how to enable the child to master this world and meet its demands. Within this individualistic perspective, time is somehow owned — not by the child, nor by the parent, but by the child-as-adult; the child’s future dictates the obligations and duties of present-day motherhood and childhood. These pitches are tapping into the middle-class anxieties so incisively analyzed by Ehrenreich (1989), who contends that, unlike the children of the working class and of the wealthy, the future class status of children born to middle-class parents is more uncertain, to some extent because of the educational and occupational barriers to entry erected in part by those self-same parents. Thus, Ehrenreich argues, a principal motivating anxiety underlying middle-class child rearing is how to enable children to reach or surpass their class origins. Although these catalogs are *not* selling lessons in the delayed gratification that Ehrenreich thought necessary for those children who will have to wade through the years-long professionalization process, Ehrenreich’s theory does fit with the preoccupation with particular skills and their mastery to be found in these missives. Skills-based selling is tapping into *class anxiety*, into mothers’ fears about their children’s future financial and

occupational success in a competitive outside world of paramount importance. The reassurance these catalogs offer is that, with these toys, your child will indeed acquire the right mental and physical equipment to be able to achieve appropriate middle-class status markers — the right skills, the right teams, the right schools, the right careers.

For those catalogs on the “fun” side of the fun-and-skills dimension, the outside world is a polluting cloud of stress and worry, and the issue at stake is to stave off the contamination as long as possible. Part of that stress and worry, of course, may be the striving for class status that characterizes later years; selling toys on the basis of their fun could signify merely a delay in when — as opposed to whether — class anxiety about the child’s future strikes. In addition, those catalogs that sell electronic gadgetry as sheer “fun” fall on either end of the abbreviated class spectrum in the sample: FAO Schwarz, which sells at least in part to the rich, and Fisher Price, which appears to be selling to the lower middle class. According to Ehrenreich, these catalogs would not be hawking the same anxiety about class reproduction as those with other more solidly middle-class clientele.

However, like the skills-based perspective, characterizing play as “fun” also taps into middle-class anxiety, only a different version, one perhaps with roots further back in history. The notion of childhood as a special preserve was propagated by middle-class mothers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, mothers whose husbands were paid well enough to support unemployed children and the unemployed wife who could take care of them (Gordon 1988). Middle-class mothers headed up reform efforts to cease the child labor practices of the working class and to establish universal minimum years of education (Smelser 1968; Zelizer 1985). They sold their reform efforts by painting childhood as a unique time of innocence and wonder that should be protected from invasion by the corrupting adult world (Postman 1994). “Good” motherhood, middle-class motherhood, served as that protective wall, nurturing the gentle amusements and haphazard, unscheduled whimsy of childhood against the day when children would have to enter the grown-up fray. When catalogs attempt to sell toys based on a play-is-fun perspective, they are recalling this notion of appropriate childhood, they are cultivating or calling upon *class anxiety*. This time, however, it is a class anxiety the mother feels about her capacity to construct a shielded childhood in the present day, rather than the child’s capacity to achieve a

particular status in the future. What kind of a childhood am I able to give my child right now? How well can I shield my child from unnecessary adult burdens? Toy catalogs offer immediate reassurance in the form of fanciful fun and child-centered pleasure.

### **Combining the Two Dimensions: Motherhood, Class, and Feeling**

The two dimensions of social world and play are two routes to the principal anxieties and reassurances offered by toy catalogs to their primary consumers, middle-class mothers. When we examine the interaction of the two dimensions, ideally, a typology of four groupings in which two different kinds of class anxiety engage with two different kinds of maternal anxiety would arise. Graph I shows that only two of these four groupings actually applied to some of the sampled catalogs. Others in the sample fell more in the middle of the range of one dimension or the other.

*Alone and Ambitious: Mothers Look Forward.* The combination of the isolated child and the skills-based perspective of play — what I call *alone and ambitious* — found at least two adherents, while six other catalogs hovered closely around the edges, defying easy categorization because they also had a number of products selling fun-based play or the image of the child in connection. For catalogs purveying alone and ambitious imagery, childhood is a training ground for a hard, cold future, and good mothering provides for the toys to practice on. The feeling that pervades these catalogs is one of singleminded determination; there is little or no sense of guilt or sadness about the separation of mother and child or the pressure of achieving, but instead a prevailing kind of urgency and focus.

*Nurturant and Nostalgic: Mothers Look Back.* The combination of the child in relationship and the fun-based perspective of play — what I call *nurturant and nostalgic* — comprised the sales pitch of three catalogs, which are distinct from the rest of the pack. The nurturant and nostalgic angle relies on the notion of maternal responsibility for a protected childhood. Natural Baby Company uses an ecological perspective to critique the modern world; caring parents stave off the pollutants out there. “Uncontaminated and safe to use even on your littlest child,” they urge (p. 18). Later, they plead “Our babies spend most of their hours sleeping, so let’s keep their environment chemical-free” (p. 31). “That long list of unnatural

ingredients causes many moms to think twice about exposing their baby's skin to them" (p. 29). For vestiges of modernity that inevitably find their way into a child's experience, Magic Cabin Dolls sells a "dream pillow" for children one year old and up, complete with an herb packet inside, which it suggests will "create a subtle aroma with a calming effect — perfect for quieting the soul after a busy day" (p. 15). The assumptions of plenty of time, the images of mom at home sharing interests and playing with the child, the appeal of bygone days, all coupled with allusions to the polluting, corrupting influence of the outside world make up the marketing framework of the nurturant and nostalgic.

### **Explaining Social Patterning: Race, Class and Time**

All the catalogs used visions of the social world and the nature of play to position their toys as solutions to problems parents or children purportedly have or as extensions of perspectives claimed to be shared by the catalog and the reader. But as we consider these findings, it is also illuminating to think about what in-depth analysis did *not* find. Differences based on class or racial/ethnic categories were not apparent, although the relative homogeneity of the sampled catalogs (and of the universe from which they were drawn) would make that finding elusive. Among this largely white, broadly middle-class demographic, however, there were of course class-based and racialized practices, which can be perceived even without a comparison group; the preceding discussion of different types of class anxiety delved into the former.

Racialized practices discovered in the sampled catalogs include the marketing of exposure to difference in order to "enrich your children's view of humankind" (Magic Cabin Dolls, p. 35) or to teach "valuable lessons" about acceptance (PlayFair Toys, p.8). Based on the markedly white population of children pictured in these catalogs, it is clear just whose "difference" is to be "enriching" or "accepted." More subtly, writings particularly by Latina scholars and others have suggested that mothering by ethnic minorities takes into account and relies upon the community in ways that white, middle-class mothering does not; in this view, the near absence of community voice in these catalogs suggests the marketing of white, middle-class mothering practices (Collins 1994; ; Glenn 1994; Segura 1994; Uttal 1998).

Still, racial/ethnic or class differences do not clearly structure the *variation* in the ways the catalogs market their wares. If not, then what forces can be at work in making sense of the ways these catalogs differ from each other? At this point in this exploratory study, answers must remain fairly speculative. I hypothesize that the perceptions and use of technology in toys are important factors, because, in a solitary social world, the products most often identified as fun are electronic ones.

Another critical ingredient is evaluations of available parental time or more specifically, the extent of the mother's labor force participation, a factor that has links to class-based resources and ideologies. FAO Schwarz, the most upscale catalog, and Fisher Price, perhaps the one targeting those lowest on this middle-class rung, purvey common visions of play and of the social world. But those catalogs which sold toys based on the *nurturant and nostalgic* framework (as well as the *alone and ambitious* one) are particularly middle-class. The type of class and maternal anxiety tapped into by catalogs selling to the *alone and ambitious* center on their presumed status as employed mothers for whom mothering work was about providing — providing opportunities, providing a ladder for their child, providing for toys. In contrast, the type of class and maternal anxiety cultivated in the *nurturant and nostalgic* sales pitch is aimed at their presumed experience and identity as stay-at-home mothers, for whom mothering work is about being present. Hochschild and other scholars have documented that the biggest time crunch may be felt by the very rich and the very poor — the former because their time is valued too highly not to work, the latter because their time is paid so little they cannot survive without putting in many extra hours (Hochschild 1997). Perhaps the catalogs selling the nurturant and nostalgic target the only demographic with enough time to contemplate and undertake the project of maternal protection.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study of the visions of appropriate motherhood purveyed in toy catalogs, I found that notions about the *social world* and the *nature of play* are the building units of larger belief systems. These belief systems, as sold by the marketers in these catalogs, bring with them particular sources of anxiety and reassurance that are then tied to the toys for sale. *Maternal*

*anxiety* can come in two forms: the working mother's question about how she can be a good mother if she is not there and the stay-at-home mother's question about just how much of herself is enough for her child. *Class anxiety* also comes in two forms: class anxiety for the child's future (i.e., how the child will muster up the capacity to reproduce or surpass his or her class origins) and class anxiety for the mother's present (i.e., how she can deliver a childhood appropriately protected from the stresses and demands of adult society). Thus, the marketers are addressing a group they believe experiences both class and maternal anxiety; sometimes these anxieties interact to form coherent rubrics I dub *alone and ambitious* and *nurturant and nostalgic*.

This variety in anxieties and identities offers an important challenge to existing social theories of contemporary mothering practices and beliefs. Marketers are aiming these competing visions at a relatively homogenous market largely comprising white, middle-class mothers. Even those theories of mothering that involve particular social contexts and categories often seem to assume that these categories are particularly determinative of experience and perspective. From this angle, what are we to do with the insight that the class and maternal identities can come in different forms, even among the white middle class?

Thorne's "caring projects" concept is loose enough to be able to absorb difference, even from within ostensibly the same social location. But the concept could do with some refining if we are to ask it to be able to do more than fold in such difference, if we are to use it to help explain and analyze multiple identities and anxieties, for example. Several social theorists have suggested multiple sources of identity and practice and plausibly argue that these varieties stem from the cultural components or *schemas* that inform our social biographies and that are the source of resistance, creativity and social change (See, for example, Giddens 1979, Ortner 1996, Sahlins 1981, Sewell 1992). One useful project could be to consider caring projects in light of these multiple sources and try to ascertain when one source becomes more salient than another. That undertaking is beyond the scope of this paper, but such a foray would add considerable theoretical power to our grasp of the impact and experience of what Holt (1997) calls "social patterning," as well as enrich our understanding of contemporary child rearing practices and their meanings.

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**Appendix A**  
**The Sample**

| Catalog                 | Owner                  | Parent Co.<br>Annual Sales | No.<br>Mailings<br>per Yr. | Circulation    | %<br>Sales<br>by<br>Catalog |
|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Back to Basics          | Amazon.com             | \$609 million              |                            |                |                             |
| Creative Kidstuff       | Creative Kidstuff      | \$5.1 million              |                            |                | 5%                          |
| Constructive Playthings | U.S. Toy Company       | \$100-500<br>million       | 6                          | 12 million     |                             |
| FAO Schwarz             | FAO Schwarz            |                            | 1                          | 800,000        |                             |
| Fisher Price            | Mattel                 | \$4.8 billion              | 5                          |                |                             |
| Lilly's Kids            | Lillian Vernon Corp.   | \$255 million              | 10                         | 100<br>million | 95%                         |
| Magic Cabin Dolls       | Foster & Gallagher     | \$450 million              | 4                          | 140<br>million | 96%                         |
| Natural Baby Company    | Kids Stuff             | \$16.7 million             |                            |                |                             |
| PlayFair Toys           | PlayFair Toys          | \$2.5 million              | 6                          | 1.5 million    | 66%                         |
| Rosie Hippos            | Rosie Hippos Toys      | very small                 | 2                          |                |                             |
| Sensational Beginnings  | Sensational Beginnings | \$10.1 million             | 12                         | 8 million      | 97%                         |

Sources: Directory of Mail Order Firms 2000; Gottlieb 2000, *Catalog Age*