Toys that spark a child’s creativity

This year’s ECSU study recommends easels, Hot Wheels

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WILLIMANCNT — With the holiday season in full swing, parents are heading to the store to shop for the perfect toys for their little ones.

They might want to take some advice from researchers at the Eastern Connecticut State University Center for Early Childhood Education.

The results of the annual TIMPANI (Toys that Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination) study were revealed during a press conference at Eastern’s Center for Early Childhood Education Monday morning.

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Easels, Hot Wheels top ECSU study

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Research for the annual study began in 2009, but the first announcement wasn’t made until 2010. The purpose of the study is to evaluate how preschool-age children play with a variety of toys in natural settings and identify toys that best engage children in intellectual, creative and social interactions within classrooms. Over the years, study results have consistently shown the most popular and best-quality toys are basic.

The two winners this year — Hot Wheels by Mattel and an easel by Community Playthings — are no exception. "I think it was surprising that the toys that were so popular in the classroom weren’t so novel," said student researcher Alyssa Zebrowski, a senior and early childhood education and English major. The study is designed to train students to conduct behavioral research. “These kinds of experiences are part of what makes a liberal education at Eastern so valuable,” said Julia DeLapp, program coordinator at the Center for Early Childhood Education. An advisory committee reviewed a list of toys nominated by teachers, researchers and education faculty from across the country.

The 10 toys that were chosen meet the committee’s basic criteria, including developmental appropriateness, cultural and gender sensitivity and other areas. Student researchers videotaped children in Eastern’s preschool, which is adjacent to the Center for Early Childhood Education, as they used each of the 10 toys. They then watched the videotapes and evaluated and coded the children’s behavior in several categories: thinking/learning, social interaction, self-expression, imagination and for the first time, verbalization. According to Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, the Phyllis Waite Endowed Chairman of Early Childhood Education and principal investigator on the study, the selection process was difficult. "This was a really tough one this year," he said.

He noted four toys scored highly in different categories. Other toys that scored highly were table puzzles and a toy doctor kit. ECSU President Elsa Nuñez spoke to various traditions at Eastern, including the TIMPANI toy study. "This study has become a real tradition at Eastern," she said. "Six years ago, I didn’t think we could even get it off the ground. Yet here we are." The two winning toys had the highest scores in the “promoting quality play” category. The easel scored highest in creativity and highest overall for play quality. It also scored high in the social interaction and problem-solving categories. Hot Wheels were the second most frequently selected toy during free play and the second highest overall scorer. "Those cars have been around forever," Trawick-Smith said. "I used to step on them when my kids were little." Preschool teachers spoke about the study as they watched preschoolers play with the toys. "I like seeing the children using their hands-on materials," said preschool teacher Angelica Booker, who was helping children make spider webs out of a variety of materials. Amy Doyle, another teacher at the preschool, said it is great to observe the children playing. "That’s when you can see what they’re learning and if the teaching is being effective," she said. The simpler toys, Doyle said, are "open-ended" and "leave room for imagination." The TIMPANI toy study has garnered international recognition. According to Nuñez, the study is being used as a model in Turkey. "This is, indeed, wonderful news," she said. Past winners of the TIMPANI toy study were wooden vehicles and signs by Melissa and Doug, 2010; Tinker Toys by Hasbro, 2011; Duplo blocks by Lego, 2012; and Magna-Tiles by Valtech! and My First Railway by Brio, 2013.