



Transcript for the video:

Do New Toys Need to be Introduced?

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Julia DeLapp, Co-Principal Investigator, TIMPANI Toy Study: We've been studying toys for ten years, so we know that toys influence children's learning and their behavior, and that it's important for teachers to be thoughtful about the kinds of toys they bring into their classrooms. What there's been less research on is HOW those toys should be brought into the classroom.

Do New Toys Need to be Introduced? Findings from a 3-Year Study

Julia DeLapp: When a new play material comes in, should a teacher introduce it, formally? Should they have a discussion about it? And if so, what should that discussion look like?

Teacher: This is called a puppet theater. So...

Child: What's a puppet theater?

Teacher: Glad you asked!

Julia DeLapp: As part of the TIMPANI toy study, we gave a new toy to every classroom every week, and we recorded the children as they were playing with the toys. And then we analyzed the level of their play quality with those toys. We asked teachers to introduce the toy before they put it out during center time. But we didn't tell them HOW to introduce the toy—we just let them do whatever came naturally. And we began to notice that there were really significant differences in how teachers conducted that introduction.

Teacher: So there's, you can see that there's two different kinds of mallets. What do you notice that's the same, and what's different?

Julia DeLapp: And so it really got us wondering about the impact of those teacher introductions on children's play quality. So, for the next three years, we looked at both what happens when teachers formally introduce a toy before it comes into the classroom, and also after it's been in the classroom for a little while.

Teacher: What did you make?

Child 1 (boy): P!

Teacher: Ah! You could make letters with them. Robert made...

Child 2 (boy): I'm going to make a J.

Teacher: Robert made the letter P.

Research Question #1: Do Whole Group Discussions About New Toys Lead to Higher Quality Play?

Julia DeLapp: With most toys, children engaged in higher quality play when there was no discussion about the toy at all that was led by a teacher.

Child 1 (girl): You go away.

Child 2 (girl): Hey. Be nice.

Julia DeLapp: But some toys can benefit from a full group discussion. For example, we saw that with some of the toys that had magnets in them, we saw higher quality play with the toy after there was a group discussion about the toy.

Teacher: Oh! What do you notice?

Child (boy): They're connecting!

Teacher: They are. You know why? Watch. Magnets. On each side.

Child (boy): Magnets. And we can make a castle.

Julia DeLapp: It may be that some children just needed a little bit of a demonstration about how those magnets worked to really play at the highest quality when they played with the toy. But that wasn't the case for most toys.

Research Question #2: Does the Child's Age Affect the Response to Toy Discussions?

Julia DeLapp: Three-year-olds seemed to benefit from some kind of group discussion. Three-year-olds engaged in higher quality play after there was some kind of full group discussion about the toy. But we did not see that for four and five-year-olds. They were less likely to have higher quality play after that kind of discussion. This suggests that some classrooms may benefit from a more differentiated approach, so that younger children can get a little extra scaffolding and support if they need it. It may even be valuable to strategically pair an older child with a younger child when they're playing with a new toy, because the older child may model more elaborate, complex play.

Research Question #3: Does the Length of Toy Discussions Matter?

Julia DeLapp: We saw some examples of these incredibly rich, elaborate discussions with children about toys.

Child (girl): I made, what I made was a tower, too.

Teacher: Just like that?

Child (girl): And I made lots of triangles stacked together to make a BIG triangle!

Julia DeLapp: Those discussions resulted in a lot of great language use—they were beneficial in many ways—but they didn’t translate to higher quality play. Anything over about three minutes for a toy discussion was not associated with higher quality play. So shorter was really better.

Research Question #4: Which Elements of Group Toy Time Discussions Affect Play Quality?

Julia DeLapp: There were some elements of group time discussions about toys that were associated with higher quality play. One of those was when the teacher asked open-ended questions during those group time discussions.

Child (girl): Uh, they’re building blocks.

Teacher: You think they’re building blocks? What makes you say that? Why do you think they’re building?

Child (girl): You build.

Julia DeLapp: Open-ended questions seemed to help children engage in some play planning. So it got them to think about how they might play with the toy and then to verbalize it, and then of course they got to hear their peers’ ideas about how they might play with the toy.

Teacher: So Venus thinks they’re building blocks, and you can build a castle. Gus, what are your thoughts?

Julia DeLapp: Another teacher behavior during group time discussions that was associated with higher quality play was when teachers acknowledged the suggestions that children made during those discussions.

Teacher: So if I was this creature-

Child (boy): A shark!

Child (boy): It would go in the water!

Teacher: Cayden thinks he might go in the water. *[whistles]*

Julia DeLapp: And then the third teacher behavior that was associated with higher quality play was when teachers described what they had observed children doing with the toy during free play.

Teacher: I saw Galilea was a lot of the times pretending it was a cell phone and talking on it.

Julia DeLapp: What each of these behaviors has in common is that they all engage children in really meaningful ways. It’s not a teacher just describing a toy or giving a demonstration of “Here’s how you play with it,” but it is believing that children have the capacity to find their own ways to play.

Child (boy): Look. Ready? Whoa! We knocked down your person.

Study Implications

Julia DeLapp: I think the main takeaways from our research with toys is that, number one, teachers need to be thoughtful about what materials they're bringing into their classroom and what they hope the children are going to get out of them. But then teachers might consider just placing a new toy in the classroom and letting children explore it and discover it on their own. And then sitting back and observing what they do.

Child (girl): This is a big sword.

Julia DeLapp: I think sometimes children can really surprise us. Sometimes they'll play with it in a way we never would have expected.

Child (girl): Let's see if it's taller like you?

Teacher: He wants to measure.

Julia DeLapp: If children need a little bit of scaffolding, if they're struggling with the toy, or if they're just continuing to do the same thing over and over again, then a teacher can step in really quickly, provide a little bit of scaffolding, and then back off and let them play.

Teacher: How will we get it to stay?

Julia DeLapp: But it does make sense to pay closer attention to the younger children and see if they need more support than the older ones. If teachers do decide to have some kind of full group discussion about a toy, keep it short, and make sure you are engaging children in a meaningful way. Don't just demonstrate how to do it, but really ask them for their ideas, and acknowledge the suggestions that they have.

Study Lessons

- Most toys don't need to be formally introduced
- However, a group discussion about a new toy may benefit 3-year-olds
- Group discussions about toys should:
 - Be short
 - Include open-ended questions
 - Acknowledge children's suggestions
 - Describe ways children in the class have used the toy