



Eastern Connecticut State University

NEWS

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Eastern Reveals 2014 TIMPANI Toy Study Results

Willimantic, CT – Eastern Connecticut State University’s Center for Early Childhood Education announced on Dec. 1 that “Paint and Easel” by Community Playthings and “Hot Wheels Cars” by Mattel have both been named 2014 TIMPANI Toys (Toys that Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination). This is the second consecutive year that two toys have been named TIMPANI toys in the annual study conducted by Eastern faculty and student researchers.

Now in its sixth year, the study investigates how young children play with a variety of toys in natural settings. This year, 10 toys were randomly selected for the study from a list of 108 recommendations from parents and teachers.

The toys are placed in preschool classrooms and scored on subscales of thinking and problem-solving, cooperation and social interaction, creativity and imagination, and, for the first time this year, verbalization. Student researchers videotape the children playing with the toys and code the videos according to the study’s evaluation rubric.

“We have been amazed at the national and international attention given to the annual TIMPANI toy study over the past five years,” said Eastern President Elsa Núñez. “I think parents, educators and researchers all appreciate the depth to which our faculty and students have investigated and evaluated the merits of hundreds of toys during that time. They have consistently seen that “low-tech” toys that allow for a child to use his or her imagination have scored highest. I applaud our students and their faculty for conducting this scientific research as they seek out the best learning tools we can provide children, knowing how critical playtime is in a child’s development.”

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Selecting this year's TIMPANI toys was challenging, as several toys scored high in promoting quality play, yet no single toy scored the highest in multiple categories. "Each of these toys contributed something special to children's development," said Professor Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, principal investigator of the study and the Phyllis Waite Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education at Eastern. Paint and Easel had the highest overall scores, followed closely by Hot Wheels Cars.

Paint and Easel scored highest on creativity, and also scored high on social interaction and problem solving. For the purpose of the TIMPANI study, the easel used was a double easel covered with a single piece of paper so that two children could paint side-by-side using standard classroom paints. "Allowing enough space for two children to play at the double easel encouraged cooperative play, which resulted in plenty of conversations while children were creating art," said Alyssa Zebrowski, an Eastern senior majoring in early childhood education and English who was involved in the study.

Paint and Easel, while scoring highest overall for play quality, was also the toy least frequently selected by children during free play. "The paint and easel was really interesting to me because it was not used as much as I anticipated, but it inspired some cool interactions," said Kristen Krause, an Eastern senior majoring in early childhood education and psychology who was also involved in the study. "The children navigated the double easel differently, ranging from sharing the page to drawing a line down the middle to split it." One of the reflections of this year's study is that toys that inspire high quality play are not always necessarily preferred by children, and likewise popular toys do not always promote high quality play.

Hot Wheels Cars were popular and of high quality play, as they were the second most frequently selected toy during free play, and the second highest overall scorer. "The toy cars were extremely popular with the children. Cars are a familiar source of transportation, which allows for in-depth scenarios to be portrayed in their play based on prior personal experiences," said Zebrowski.

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The cars scored particularly high on social interaction and verbalization. “I was most surprised by the creative ways children found to play with them. They did not just use them to race, but they built houses and garages for them as well as made them talk and have relationships,” said Krause. Added Trawick-Smith, “What surprised us about these toys is that they inspired higher quality of play for girls.”

The results of this year’s TIMPANI study demonstrate how play is unique for each child. Trawick-Smith suggested that teachers and parents might strive to select a balance of toys that foster various areas of child development. “Different toys elicit different kinds of play for different children,” he said. “I think, ultimately, teachers and also parents need to do some careful observation of how their children play with toys and pick things that really connect with their particular play style.”

In addition to Zebrowski and Krause, seniors Kimberly DePaolis, Danni Meskill and Heather Oski also participated as student researchers. DePaolis, Krause, Oski and Zebrowski, along with Trawick-Smith, presented their findings at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Conference in Dallas, TX, on Nov. 8.

Previous TIMPANI toys include Magna-Tiles by Valtech!, and My First Railway by Brio (2013); Duplo Blocks by LEGO (2012); Tinker Toys by Hasbro (2011); and Wooden Vehicles and Signs by Melissa and Doug (2010).

For more information about the TIMPANI Toy Study, contact the Center for Early Childhood Education at (860) 465-0687 or visit www.easternct.edu/cece/timpani.html.

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Disclaimer: The TIMPANI toy study does not consider, nor does it test, the safety of toys. The study makes no claims about the safety of any toy studied. Neither the Center for Early Childhood Education nor Eastern Connecticut State University is liable for any mishaps related to the use of toys mentioned in study findings. Concerns about any toy listed in the study findings should be directed to the Consumer Products Safety Commission.

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Eastern Connecticut State University is the state of Connecticut’s public liberal arts university, serving more than 5,300 students annually at its Willimantic campus and satellite locations. In addition to attracting students from 161 of Connecticut’s 169 towns, Eastern also draws students from 23 other states and 52 other countries. A residential campus offering 40 majors and 56 minors, Eastern offers students a strong liberal art foundation grounded in an array of applied learning opportunities. Eastern is ranked in the top 30 public universities in the North Region, by U.S. News and World Report in its 2015 Best College ratings. For more information, visit www.easternct.edu.