

Learning about the past through a study of toys and games

Helen Crawford

A learning theme centred on *toys and games* is perfect for younger children as the Early Years curriculum is, of course, all about learning through play. Planned carefully, it can also provide many opportunities for children to develop their understanding of the past.

Adult-directed learning opportunities

Provide the children with a range of toys which relate to different stages of a child's development (e.g. a rattle for a baby, large plastic bricks for a toddler, a scooter for a five-year-old). Ask the children to order them on a simple timeline (the timeline should be marked with different ages rather than dates).

This activity will help children to develop their sequencing skills and build an early understanding of chronology. It also supports one of the key learning outcomes for the Foundation Stage: 'children understand past and present events in their own lives and in the lives of family members.'

If you are able to gather a collection of old toys, create a toy museum in an area of the classroom or your role-play area. The children can help you to write captions for displays, thinking about what a 'visitor' to the museum might want to know about the different exhibits.

Provide the children with a range of different toys, both modern and from the recent or distant past. Investigate how they could

Figure 1: Identifying similarities and differences in toys



be sorted: by type, by material, by size, by colour and by age. Ask the children to look for key similarities and differences. Which toys have essentially stayed the same, and which toys have changed over time? Which toys would have been played with a long time ago? How do we know?

Developing historical language

Picture books such as *Dogger* (Shirley Hughes) or *Too Many Toys!* (Heidi Deedman) explore with children the continuity of a favourite toy – toys that stay with us through many different changes in our lives.

Invite parents and carers (or other adults in your setting) to talk to the children about their favourite toys and why they have been special to them over the years. You could then ask the children to bring into school their favourite toy and

explain why it is special to them.

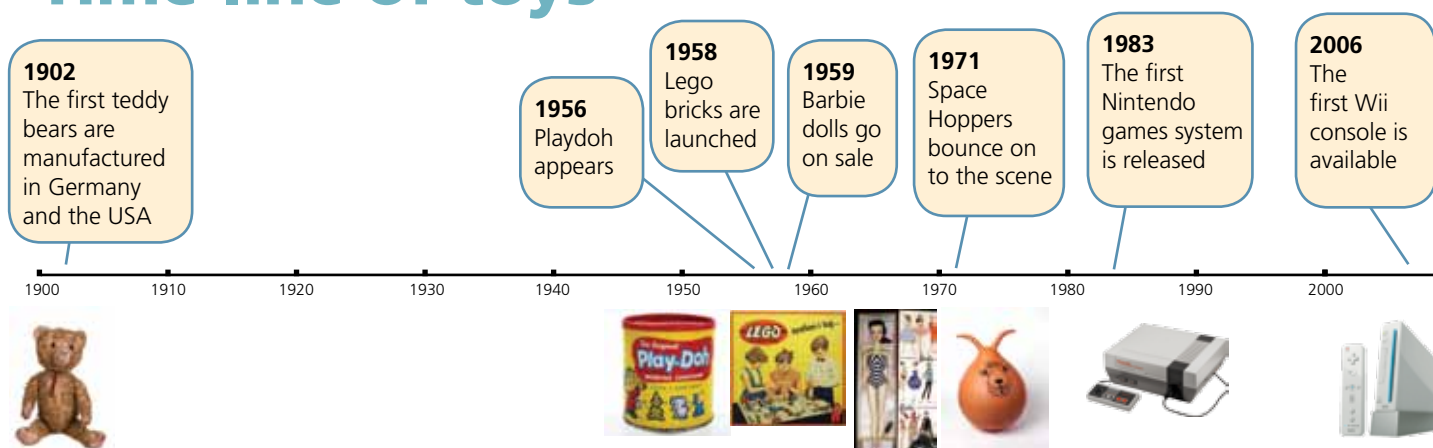
When children recall moments from their own past they begin to use language relating to time, they use the past tense and they begin to construct their own historical narrative.

The outside classroom

The outside area is, of course, the ideal place for children to learn how to play a range of traditional playground games – some of which are hundreds of years old. If possible, ask grandparents to visit the class to teach the children some of the games they used play.

Hopscotch: the first recorded reference to this game dates back to the late seventeenth century, where it was often referred to as 'scotch-hop' or 'scotch-hopper'. Once you have modelled the game to your class, it can be a

Time-line of toys



perfect child-initiated activity which requires nothing more than a typical playground surface and some chalk. The children can create their own hopscotch grids, which additionally supports early mark-making skills and practises number formation.

The farmers in his den: the rhyme upon which this ring game is based, was first recorded in Germany in 1826 and is thought to have been a type of courtship game.

Here we go around the mulberry bush: this rhyme was first recorded as an English children's game in the mid-nineteenth century. There was also a similar game which used the lyrics 'here we go round the bramble bush.'

Playing group games, whether led by adults or initiated by children, can develop language and communication skills, and promote turn-taking and social interaction. Other traditional forms of outdoor play could involve playing with hoops or learning a range of skipping songs.

Teddy bears

Teddy bears are a simple way to explore with children how one particular toy has changed over time.

The teddy bear is named after President Theodore Roosevelt who refused to shoot a bear cub

while on a hunting expedition in Mississippi. They were first manufactured in 1902. The earliest bears are characterised by their long snout, moveable joints and stiff fur, and were produced in naturalistic shades of brown. They are easily distinguished from the bears we know and love today. Modern bears tend to be more rounded with softer filling and fur. They come in a range of colours and tend to look slightly less ferocious!

Arrange for an 'old bear' to visit your class, and use this visit as a springboard to develop children's broader historical understanding. Who were the children who played with 'old bear'? What other toys might they have played with? What clothes would they have worn? What kind of house would 'old bear' have lived in? What would it have looked like inside?

Ask the children to bring in their teddies from home to meet 'old bear'. This provides a perfect opportunity for observing similarities and differences between all the bears. Ask children to think of some questions their bears might like to ask 'old bear'. And, finally, you can finish old bear's special visit to your class by inviting all the bears to a traditional teddy bears' picnic.

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Figure 2: Observing how bears have changed over time



Resources

How things have changed: Toys and Games by James Nixon (Franklin Watts, 2012)

Start-up History – Toys by Stewart Ross (Franklin Watts, 2014)

www.vam.ac.uk/moc/collections/The_V&A_Museum_of_Childhood website has a wealth of information and images of toys over time.

Many museum loan services will be able to provide you with a range of toys from the recent and more distant past.