

Sometimes Children Just Need a Cardboard Box

Every year the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, NY inducts a toy into The National Toy Hall of Fame. Some of the toys inducted over the years include Checkers (2003), Erector Set (1998), Raggedy Ann and Andy (2002), and Slinky (2000). All of these are toys that someone would purchase for a child and to one degree or another, each of these toys has a particular use.

In 2005, The National Toy Hall of Fame inducted a different kind of toy; that year they inducted the *cardboard box*. They didn't induct a particular cardboard box or one that is designed by some toy company; they inducted the cardboard box that served some other purpose - contained the Huggies diapers, the television set, the shoebox - and just happened to be available for a child's play.

Here is what the Hall of Fame website says about the cardboard box.

"Over the years, children sensed the possibilities inherent in cardboard boxes, recycling them into innumerable playthings. The strength, light weight, and easy availability that makes cardboard boxes successful with industry have made the endlessly adaptable by children for creative play."

"With nothing more than a little imagination, those boxes can be transformed into forts or houses, spaceships or submarines, castles or caves. Inside a big cardboard box, a child is transported to a world of his or her own, one where anything is possible."

Possibilities. Recycling. Endlessly adaptable. Creative play. Imagination. Transformations. These are all words that describe the importance and power of materials and toys that aren't *too finished*, toys whose uses aren't predetermined by the people who designed and manufactured the toy.

Toys and materials provided for children's play and activity are often divided into two categories: closed materials and open materials. Closed materials are those that have a predetermined end product. Puzzles are a classic example of a closed material. The material itself suggests the goal - put all the pieces together to reproduce the original picture or image. Open materials, on the other hand, do not lead a child to a particular end result. Wooden building blocks are an example of open materials. A child playing with a set of building blocks may construct a fort, a castle, or a skyscraper. She may also use the blocks as bowling pins, cooking utensils, or as objects to be counted and sorted by size. The goal for the activity is left to the child's interests and imagination.

There is a place for closed materials in the play life of children. Because they suggest a particular end result, closed materials can help to focus children's attention and foster

task persistence. Closed materials provide feedback as to how successful the child is (e.g., all the puzzle pieces fit together) and cue the child as to when she has completed the activity.

There is a danger, however, to overemphasizing closed materials. In today's climate of an emphasis on academic achievement and school success, toy manufacturers, electronic game developers, and curriculum developers try to convince us that children need toys and materials that will teach them specific skills and concepts. Some of these toys, games, and curriculum activities can provide enjoyment and may, in fact, help children learn some important skills and concepts. But children also need the materials (and time) that provide the opportunity for them to do their own goal setting, planning, and problem-solving. They need the opportunity and support to exercise their imaginations, negotiate social interactions with their peers during activities of their own choosing. They need the opportunity to decide for themselves when their activity is done and how successful they were.

Sometimes children just need - and want - a cardboard box.

T.J. Corcoran, JD, MEd
Founder, The Corcoran School