



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“The short, important answer [about toys in libraries] is that these things are part of reading readiness – manipulating real items is essential to children’s learning.”

-Contributor to posting on PUBYAC (Public Libraries for Young Adults and Children) about the use of toys in libraries
pubyac.org

Every day as I sit at the children’s reference desk, I can hear various clicking, clacking and other noises as children play with our toys. The most popular ones are the large Legos, while the surprise box and the busy box run a close second. The dolls and cradle get less attention, but many times at the end of the day, I find one of the dolls tucked lovingly into bed or lying on our small child-size couch, covered with a blanket. The soft hand puppets are also in high demand and – as if they could get around on their own – I find them in strange places in the library, such as behind the checkout desk or sitting next to a computer.

In addition, there are the toys I keep behind the desk, on a low shelf where a bored child can easily browse them. Here there is a chess set, a Mankala board with shiny colored glass pieces, some easy puzzles and a few challenging educational toys. Of these, Mankala is by far

the most popular, although lately our dominoes have been getting more attention. And, of course, the old standbys of crayons and paper are always in demand, by all ages.

When I first started as the children’s librarian at the Albany Library, there weren’t any toys out for the children. I have slowly accumulated the ones we have and they have been extremely popular. The Legos have been surprisingly versatile – ages two to thirteen create towering stacks of these indestructible, brightly colored pieces. And I have learned one can create quite a hefty gun from them – something I hadn’t anticipated, but probably should have.

The surprise box – which has four different ways to pop up hidden figures – has an allure I noticed when my children were small. In fact, a ball, a pan of water and the surprise box were my children’s favorite toys. So I am pleased to see that no matter how the trap-

pings of childhood change, children stay the same.

The Albany Library is one of many public libraries that have toys for the children to play with. I searched in the archives of PUBYAC, which is a listserv chock full of information, opinions and suggestions for librarians. A recent question about toys in libraries prompted 15 pages of replies, most of them enthusiastic. The range of offerings included puzzles, puppets (and sometimes puppet theatres), crayons and paper, dolls and doll-houses.

Two of the most common comments about having these items were that they draw in families, and they give younger children something to do while parents either browse or spend time with an older child. This was definitely one of my motivations. Watching a toddler head straight for one of our computers - ready to

happily bang away - while a mom or dad is reading to an older child, made me wish I had something else to offer. For a while I had an old keyboard to distract aspiring computer users, but there is no one smarter than a toddler - at least in Albany. They knew the difference immediately.

While this continues to be an issue - although much less frequently - the toys have helped a lot. And perhaps it is the invisible teacher in me that makes me smile when I look around and see all the activity in our children's area: books everywhere, toys everywhere else, and children and parents engaged and happy.