

This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Marketing and Communication Strategy Branch in the Division of Health Communication and Marketing, National Center for Health Marketing, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Parents, you don't have to buy the latest tech toys. A new study reveals that children still enjoy playing with traditional toys

Research objective: To investigate how technology is changing the way kids play, learn and connect in today's world.

Methods: A cross sectional online survey of 1,353 8-18 year olds living in the United States (538 were between the ages of 8-12 years old and 815 between 13-18 years of age) was conducted. Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. This survey was designed in collaboration with the Sandbox Summit.

Findings: Youth today are demanding a lot in a toy--it is now up to the toy makers to deliver. Toys need to be easy to use and simple to interact and play with. It's also vital that these toys are designed to deliver a variety of experiences, in a single product. Youth today are more likely to be playing alone with their favorite toys versus playing with others.

Tweens--Both males (86%) and females (83%) agree that the most important part of a toy is that it is entertaining and fun. Males like a toy because it is challenging (21% versus 11% for girls) whereas girls like the ability to play with their favorite toy in different ways (22% versus 16% for boys). When asked what they enjoyed most about playing with their favorite toy, the top five responses reported were fun (22%), variety of ways to play (22%), pretend role play (20%), creativity and building (16%), and imagination (13%). Males (78%) and females (84%) usually play with their favorite toy by themselves and enjoy the creativity and building aspect of it.

Teens--Both males (73%) and females (77%) greatly enjoy toys or games that make them think, followed closely by toys that involve technology, like video and computer games (71% males versus 53% females). Females also enjoy toys that allow them to pretend or role-play (35% versus 2% for males). In contrast, males prefer toys that allow them to play in a variety of ways (15% versus 12% for girls) followed by being able to play it alone (13%), playing to win and challenging (12%), other (9%), spending time with friends (8%), and making up stories (6%). Combined, male and female teens enjoy the creativity and building aspect of playing with their favorite toy.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals

This research indicates that the most important goal that kids have when playing is to have fun--whether it is a traditional or high technology toy. Traditional toys are still important to tweens and teens so consider partnerships with respected toy brands which can help present health messages in a fun way. Health communication and marketing professionals should devise creative ways to deliver health messages in a way that resonates with children's expectations of toys. For example, given the high percentage of kids (73-77%) who want toys that make them think, partnering with toy makers to include mind-teasers focused on health with certain toys or would broaden the reach of health messages. In addition, traditional toys can be packaged with different health messages or have an advertisement directly on the toy such as "MyPyramid for Kids—Eat Right. Exercise. Have Fun." Finally, consider incorporating elements of traditional childhood play in health promotion and marketing messages.

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