A Child's Right to Play: The Social Construction of Civic Virtues in Toy Libraries

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In general, communities throughout the world hold that children have a fundamental right to play. Public policies and laws have long aimed to promote play by providing a range of financial and material resources. Toy libraries are an important resource that can provide children with vital developmental tools for play by allowing families to borrow toys in a process similar to public book libraries. An empirical study of a contemporary group of toy libraries explores how families use toy libraries to construct different social meanings. The toy library is an important way that parents can mediate their children's relationship with the marketplace. Moreover, different conceptualizations of citizenship are modeled within this institution based on the sharing of collective goods.

Keywords: children, play, toys, toy library, sharing, collective goods, materialism

The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens.

—David Lloyd George (qtd. in Hewes 2007)

According to Lloyd George, children's right to play is a fundamental right of citizenship (Powell and Seaton 2007). Children's right to recreation was formally affirmed by the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1959), and play was again acknowledged as a basic right of children worldwide in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1989), which by the end of 2008 was signed by 192 nations. In the United States, a wide range of legislation and many public programs seek the equitable distribution of public resources to benefit youth. For example, Lyndon B. Johnson's legislation on the War on Poverty produced programs that continue today, such as Headstart and Job Corps (Zigler and Styfco 1996). George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Pub. L. 107-110) aimed to close the achievement gap for children from low-income families. Although these programs are not without critics and have uneven success rates, they are all based on the assumption that investments in programs that assist children provide benefits to society at large. The strength of a democracy may be undermined if generations of youth grow up in poverty, receive substandard education, or lack access to important cultural and educational resources.

Similarly, marketing and policy researchers view children as a vulnerable segment worthy of special protections (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005). For example, recent special issues of different journals have explored the controversies surrounding marketing and advertising to children (Oates, Blades, and Gunter 2003), children's susceptibility to advertising (Friestad and Wright 2005), and the influence of the marketplace on childhood obesity (Moore 2007). Contemporary discourses construct childhood as a special space that should be protected. Yet, in economically developed countries, the time of childhood is becoming more organized and scheduled across the settings of home, school, and recreation. Schools increasingly focus on school work and standardized testing, which means less time for free play (Ginsburg 2007). Time after school, which was once free playtime, is often filled with organized sports, arts, and entertainment activities (Blackford 2004).

Amid fears that childhood and unstructured play is disappearing, a hotly contested issue is the encroachment of commercialized play areas (Postman 1982). Privatized play areas are no longer old-fashioned arcades and kitschy miniature golf courses but rather an increasingly sophisticated and heavily marketed array of options, such as indoor playgrounds, water parks, laser tag, rock climbing walls, and exotically themed amusement parks. In these spectacular retail environments, how is children's play constrained and controlled by marketers (Kozinets et al. 2004)? McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder (2000) argue that play is commodified when a normal daily experience is turned into a consumable product and sold. Perhaps even more ubiquitous are free leisure areas, such as soft ball rooms and small indoor play areas, available for paying customers in many

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fast food restaurants and retail establishments. Empirical work by McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder (2000) suggests that parents frequent these commercialized areas of play because of their own need to relax and cautions that children are giving up an important right to free and unstructured play. Alternatively, Blackford (2004) portrays commercial spaces, such as the ballroom at McDonald's, as a place that balances the needs of parents and children. In these customized spaces for children, youths can play free from the scrutiny of parents; children can disappear into tunnels and beneath mountains of balls, and parents are physically unable to follow. Mothers and fathers can share the burden of constant parental surveillance with the commercial entity they trust to provide a safe environment for their children's play while taking a break from shopping. Still, contradictions abound, such as the promotion of healthy active play amid what is usually a cornucopia of unhealthful fast foods and sugared beverages.

What is clear is that parents, researchers, and public policy makers have a growing concern about child's play, access to play areas and objects, and opportunities for free play. Commercial forces are increasingly colonizing the spaces of childhood and treating children as consumers who must author unique identities through their consumption practices across toys, clothing, and other consumer goods (Diamond et al. 2009). In this article, we examine one approach by parents to take back control of their children's play by patronizing and volunteering at neighborhood toy libraries. Toy libraries are locally run facilities that distribute toys to children and parents in much the same way that people borrow books from public libraries (Moore 1995). The toy library is an alternative business model of exchange that is based on sharing rather than ownership (Belk 2010).

Toy libraries originated in the United States, but they are also popular in many countries, particularly in Europe. Specific numbers are not known, but the International Toy Library Association has members spanning 60 countries, and more than 1000 toy libraries exist in the United Kingdom alone (Capacity and Play Matters 2007). Although the United States has almost 200 toy libraries, toy libraries have not diffused as widely as in other countries. Two dominant models of toy libraries exist. First, a Lekotek is a form of toy library, developed in Sweden and staffed by professionally trained personnel, that provides toys, support, and information to families to help children with special needs develop through play. Second, community toy libraries serve the needs of local families, tend to be more informal, and are often run by community and family volunteers (Rettig 1998). Community toy libraries are increasing in popularity and may serve families with children who are able bodied or face challenges (Mayfield 1993). However, each toy library system is influenced by the special conditions, needs, and development of its particular country and by each country's cultural and social system (Brodin and Bjorck-Akesson 1992).

This article is organized as follows: We first broadly explore the role of play in early childhood development. We then review key public policies that have supported toy libraries. Against this backdrop, an empirical study of toy libraries examines the social construction of meaning in these community libraries. We conclude with policy recommendations.

The Importance of Play in Childhood

Overview of the Recent Historical Construction of Play

The importance of play in childhood is a relatively modern concept, emerging at the end of the nineteenth century during the Progressive Era (1890s–1920s). Technology and labor force changes led to a decrease in the need for the labor of working class children. Child labor reforms were also well underway during this period. The dramatic growth in compulsory schooling also meant that a child's day became divided into a period of school work and a period of free time. Particularly in urban areas, children within low-income neighborhoods lacked areas in which to play. After school hours, these noisy and boisterous children filled the streets and took over public areas and engaged in a wide range of free play.

During this period, social ideas about play reflected contradictory impulses. Play was viewed as a natural activity crucial for healthy physical, intellectual, and social development. Yet children's free play was also considered wasteful. Peer groups of working class youths were perceived as rebellious when they played unsupervised street games based on rules constructed by them. In the early part of the twentieth century, social advocates sought to organize play under adult direction promising to use this playtime productively to produce better workers among the lower classes (Halpern 2003). The Karl Groos instinctual theory of play was popular at the time and influenced educators and policy makers. Rather than being an aimless activity, play was an instinctual drive through which children practiced the skills they would need later in life (Keller and Weiller 1993). This rhetoric of progress continues today as discourses on play stress its role in preparing children for the future (Scarlett et al. 2005).

Defining Play and Its Impact

Play is often defined by comparing it with what it is not; play does not involve work, it is not realistic, it is not serious, and it is not productive (Edmiston 2007). While these binary definitions could imply that play is unimportant, most theorists consider play a crucial childhood activity in which children create their own opportunities to explore and learn (Elkind 2007). Nevertheless, agreement on a definition of play is difficult because the role of play is culturally and socially changing, and each theory defines play differently (Saracho and Spodek 2003). Some of the most commonly used criteria to distinguish play from nonplay is that it is intrinsically motivated (Dockett 2001), enjoyable, under the voluntary control of the individual, and flexible and involves suspending reality and entering into a world of pretense (Scarlett et al. 2005). Play is also linked to a wide range of functions, including physical functions, such as improving fine and gross motor skills (Piaget 1975); emotional functions, such as building self-esteem and confidence; and social functions, such as teaching children to share and cooperate (Elkind 2007). From a consumer

research perspective, an understanding of children's play may also provide a deeper understanding of the experiential aspects of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

Play holds important but different roles in contemporary theories of early childhood development. The psychoanalytical tradition viewed play as important for managing negative emotional conflicts, such as feelings of helplessness. For example, when children engage in role playing, such as pretending to be a superhero, they exert control over their world; thus, play helps children deal with their emotions (Scarlett et al. 2005). Piagetian theory stresses that play moves children through the well-known stages of cognitive development (John 1999). In early infancy, children engage in practice games to master basic sensory motor skills. From early childhood until six years of age, children engage in games of pretend in which they develop the ability to think symbolically. In late childhood, children engage in games with rules to guide fair play, which is based on the ability to see other people's point of view (Dockett 2001; Piaget 1975). Cultural ecological theory tends to focus on how play is affected by the cultural contexts in which it is embedded. For example, in cultures in which social interdependency is important, play is more likely to be cooperative and stress harmony. Cultures that value individual achievements are more likely to encourage games with clear winners and losers, such as dodgeball (Scarlett et al. 2005).

Public Policy and Toy Lending Libraries

Toy libraries were first created during the economic hardships of the Great Depression in response to doubling rates of juvenile delinquency in the 1930s (Webb 2004). The first toy library opened its doors in 1935 with the Los Angeles County Toy Loan program, which continues today (Mayfield 1990; Moore 1995). This program was immediately successful and heavily used, but additional funds were needed to support the citywide expansion of the program. Under President Roosevelt's New Deal plan, toy libraries were placed under the Works Project Administration and funds were made available (Moore 1995). Although the exact number of these toy lending programs is difficult to determine, the citywide programs in Los Angeles and Milwaukee offer well-documented cases that provide historical context (Moore 1995; Webb 2004). These programs emerged in response to the problem of rising crime among youths. The Los Angeles toy library was created in response to the petty theft of small toys from dime stores (Toy Loan 2009), and the Milwaukee toy library was created after tragic bombings by two teenagers (Webb 2004). The toy libraries were praised for supporting values of good citizenship, such as responsibility, cooperation, sharing, and a respect of property rights (Webb 2004). Multistakeholder coalitions emerged to fund and support the toy loan programs, including educators, judicial and police officers, businesspeople, and religious and civic groups. Department stores donated unsold toys, schools and civic organizations ran toy drives, and government offices provided rent-free space (Moore 1995; Webb 2004).

The greatest contemporary expansion of toy libraries arose to address the needs of children with disabilities. The 1986 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Pub. L.

99-457) made funding available for early childhood intervention, and some of this money was used to fund toy libraries (Moore 1995). The Lekotek movement began in the Scandinavian countries in the 1960s and has had a significant international impact. This movement spread to the United States in the 1980s, and currently the National Lekotek Center operates in 35 locations. The National Lekotek Center has forged a relationship with toy manufacturers, and toys can be submitted for evaluation and rating on the developmental appropriateness for children with challenges (see www.ableplay.org).

An Empirical Study of Contemporary Toy Libraries

The Methodology

We conducted the study in New Zealand where toy libraries are popular resources. Currently, more than 200 toy libraries exist in a country with a population of just over 4 million (compared with just over 200 toy libraries in the United States with a population of more than 300 million). Most cities and towns in New Zealand have a community toy library. New Zealand is an attractive site because of its public policies supportive of children; for example, it is a leader in early childhood education and was one of the first countries to integrate its early childhood care and education services under the Department of Education to coordinate a national curriculum, funding, and training (Meade and Podmore 2002).

In New Zealand, the dominant form of toy libraries are community based. Members borrow toys for a fixed period, and fees and borrowing rules differ among libraries. Volunteer members run the libraries, with some larger libraries employing part-time paid toy librarians. The toy libraries vary considerably; some operations are quite modest, operating in a single room and open every two weeks, while toy libraries in larger communities may be housed in multiroom facilities and open several times a week. Some toy libraries in rural areas have mobile units. Parents were selected from five toy libraries located in the Canterbury region, which represents both lower- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Large and small toy libraries were sampled; three of the toy libraries had more than 150 members, and two libraries had approximately 50 members.

The lead author conducted a qualitative study using both in-depth interviews and participant observation at a toy library. Nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted with parents whose children ranged in age from newborn to seven years. Depending on their involvement, either both parents or the most active parent was interviewed. Although initial data collection concentrated on one toy library, emerging themes were challenged by interviews with parents at four other toy libraries to determine whether patterns differed. In addition, parents were sampled across levels of involvement from active to occasional users (see Table 1).

The in-depth interviews were primarily conducted at the informants' homes. These interviews began with broad open-ended questions to encourage the informants to take the lead. For example, parents enthusiastically answered initial questions about their children and their interests.

Table 1.   **Informants**

Name	Demographics	Children: Age and Sex	Library Involvement
Sheila	36, married Secondary teacher, NZ	5 ½ (boy), 3 (boy), newborn	Participant
Barbara	34, married City council planner, NZ	3 ½ (boy), 1 ½ (boy)	Active participant
Callie	38, partner Lecturer, American expatriate	3 (boy), 1 (girl)	Participant
Carol	38, married Receptionist, Canadian expatriate	6 ½ (girl)	Participant
Tracy	40, partner Local government worker, NZ	5 ½ (boy), 3 (girl), newborn	Member
Kim	38, married Lecturer/consultant, American expatriate	6 ½ (boy)	Active participant
Ellen	37, married Teacher, NZ	5 ½ (boy), 4 (boy), 1 ½ (girl)	Active participant
Steve and Ann	41, married Engineer/Sales, NZ	2 (girl)	Member
Bill	39, married Builder, Australian expatriate	4 (girl), 1 ½ (girl)	Active participant
Moira	37, married Researcher, NZ	4 (boy), 2 (boy)	Participant
Jane	40, separated Homemaker, NZ	7 (boy), 5 (boy)	Active participant
Nancy	36, married to Andrew Librarian, NZ	5 (girl)	Participant
Terri	35, Married Homemaker, NZ	4 (girl), 1 (girl)	Active participant
Andrew	40, married to Nancy Lecturer, NZ	5 (girl)	Member
Hannah	37, partner Business development Consultant, NZ	4 (girl), 9 months (boy)	Participant
Karen	36, partner Curator, NZ	2 (girl), 8 weeks (boy)	Member
Raewyn	36, married Part-time architect, NZ	7 (girl), 4 (girl)	Participant
Sherry	44, married Lecturer, NZ	6 (boy), 2 (girl)	Active participant
Melissa	38, Married Physician, British expatriate	5 (girl), 2 (twin boy and girl)	Participant

Notes: Level of involvement is defined as *active participant* who participates beyond the basic membership duties and gets involved with more volunteer work, *participant* who follows the expectations of regular membership, and *member* who occasionally goes to the library or is a parent who relies on his or her partner to participate. NZ = New Zealand.

Questions then explored the families' history with the toy library, their most recent visit to the toy library, and their best and worst experiences. Subsequent questions were more focused and explored parents' volunteer work at the toy library, comparisons between buying and borrowing, and the meaning of the toy library for each family. The interviews ranged from one to two hours in length and were audiotaped and transcribed. Both authors engaged in coding and analyzing all data using a hermeneutical analysis of the data (for more details, see Thompson 1997). First, the transcribed interviews were coded on the basis of a priori con-

ceptual categories as well as unanticipated categories that emerged from a close reading of the text. Second, to conduct the *intra*textual analysis, the coded data for each informant was closely read to develop a unique written interpretation of each informant. To conduct the *inter*textual analysis, themes across informants were compared to determine communalities. Iterative tacking between intra- and intertextual analyses continued until the tentative themes could be forged into a coherent interpretation.

The interview insights were supplemented with field observations by the lead author who used the toy library

Figure 1.   Example of Children's Drawings

every two weeks with her children and volunteered in a toy library over a two-year period. To gain the perspectives of the children, 15 children who had frequented or were currently frequenting the toy library were interviewed; of these children, 7 were in the primary target group ranging from three to five years of age, and 8 were in the 6–8 age range who were moving out of the targeted range but were more articulate. The children were recruited for interviews during regular borrowing sessions. After a brief description of the study to the children and their parents, the children were asked to draw a picture of themselves at the toy library, describe their drawing, and then talk about what they liked and disliked about the toy library (for examples of the children's drawings, see Figure 1). The human subject policies for interviewing children required that the children's responses were not audiotaped or their pictures kept, but notes were taken of their responses, as well as photographs of the children's artwork.

The Context of Borrowing in the Toy Library

A common family ritual surrounds visits to the toy library. In general, the visit begins with children's hopeful expectations—some parents' compared the visit to a "mini-Christ-

mas." Before the visit, a scramble often occurs as the toys from the last visit are found and assembled. Although few criticisms were voiced by parents about the toy library, the previsit scramble was one notable exception. Libraries inventory the toys with an accompanying form that reminds parents of the total pieces. Some parents were organized and able to locate all borrowed items. In one of the rare acts of policing, a few parents refused to check out these multipart toys, or when borrowing the toy, they carefully kept track of the pieces to be able to return the toys as they had received them.

On leaving home, parents physically juggle to get the children and toys into the car, particularly when large toys are borrowed. At the toy library, the parents check in the toys while their children look for new toys or play with other patrons. Finally, the parents and children select and check out toys within the rules that limit the number of toys borrowed per visit so enough toys will be available for all patrons. The ritual ends when the children return home to play with their new toys. Although sometimes parents return and borrow toys alone, most of the time an integral part of the ritual involves at least one parent and child visiting the toy library together. From field notes taken during the two hours the toy library was open, 30 families visited

the library, and 90% were accompanied by children. Mothers and fathers visited together 30% of the time, the mother visited alone 53.3% of the time, and the father visited alone 16.7% of the time.

Children's interest in the toy library changes as they get older. Because the toy libraries generally emphasize toys for younger children, around ages seven and eight, children's interest wanes. For example, four of the older children responded that they were getting too old for the toy library or that the toys were no longer relevant, and one child even refused to be interviewed, saying the toy library was "too babyish." Older children who continue to visit the toy library with younger siblings use the visits to socialize with their friends from school; as one parent said, "We usually have a really hard time getting the girls to leave."

Findings

The Benefits of Borrowing for Children and Their Parents

For the children, the benefit of the toy library is clearly the toys, which was usually mentioned when asked why they liked going to the toy library. Most of the children interviewed drew pictures of themselves playing with their favorite toys, such as toy cars, puzzles, computer games, and a roller coaster; a particularly popular subject were self-portraits dressed in various costumes, such as pirate, princess, Maori, and fairy outfits. Several of the children said they liked to go to the toy library to play with their friends, and when asked what they disliked about the toy library, a couple of children reported that they did not like to leave but rather wanted to stay and play.

For the parents, the pleasure of borrowing is best understood from the perspective of the pain of shopping. In general, parents described shopping for toys with their children as a "hard" or "stressful" task full of begging and negotiating. These visits were typified by parents as struggling to control and limit their children. Moira captures these tensions:

> The going out shopping thing with them is usually a nightmare because that involves a lot of direction from me in terms of "don't touch this," and "stay here," and "do this," and blah, blah. It involves cajoling and bribery and all those sorts of things.

Parents describe the toy store setting as fraught with potential conflict and thus try to limit this activity. As Hannah said, "In the store there is so much advertising and stuff. You go into the grocery store and you have all the lovely little pink packets and it just drives me crazy." Similarly, Melissa and her husband try to steer their daughter away from brands such as Barbie. Thus, the informants in this study shopped infrequently with their children for toys. On the occasion when parents did shop with their children, they exerted considerable influence and control in the purchase process by having a specific toy in mind or by including the child in a narrow task, such as the selection of a gift in which the child might offer limited input.

Although conflict can also arise when parents try to get their children to leave the toy library or when a toy is too large or has too many parts, in general visits to the toy library stood in sharp contrast as a relatively stress-free alternative. As Melissa expressed, "We are trying to steer her away from labels, away from certain brands, and there is very little branding at the toy library." When children visited the toy library, they knew that they would leave with toys in hand. As Callie stated, "If you want something at the toy library, then you just say, 'Throw it in!'" Because borrowing involved little financial risk or commitment, the parents gave their children significantly more influence borrowing toys than purchasing new ones. Although parents with very young children selected the toys, most of the parents tended to let their children age two and older participate. During several toy library sessions, it was noted that parents encouraged their children to select toys and be an active participant in the selection process. Sometimes the parents made suggestions, but most parents let the children select some or all of the toys. As Jane stated, "I let them explore their own individuality and imagination and choose what they want."

The freedom to borrow is facilitated by toy libraries' policies that edit and restrict toys that might be controversial given local community values. Different libraries have different policies, but most select durable toys that are developmentally appropriate and avoid toys that might promote violence (i.e., "no toys of destruction" [Bill]). As mentioned previously, although parents sometimes place limits on toys that are too large or have too many small pieces, they tended to voice few or no restrictions and let the children have "all their heart's desire" (Sheila). All of our fieldwork took place in established toy libraries, but establishing the shared values that will guide the purchasing of toys might indeed be controversial if parents have different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate toys.

Different Social Constructions of the Toy Library

The toy library is socially constructed to support a diverse set of meanings, which we explore next. These meanings range from being a good way to save money and have fun to being a political act of conscience and a way to build community. Some families frequent the library for one reason. For example, Steve and Ann seek primarily functional benefits, Bill strives to use the toy library as a way to build community, and Callie is most interested in the political implications of her participation. Because many of the families used the toy library for a range of meanings, we choose not to force families into categories but instead explored the range of meanings.

A provider of functional benefits. Some uses of the toy library were functionally driven. Patrons wanted or needed to save money, and the toy library provided inexpensive access to toys (Dockrell and Wilkinson 1989). As Karen stated, "We don't have to go out and buy—it is a big motivation." Similarly, most families wanted ongoing access to developmentally appropriate toys. Carol and her partner had a small home and wanted a convenient and economical way to find toys to stimulate their daughter. Similarly, three children mentioned they liked the puzzles, and two children mentioned they liked the computer games. Thus, the toy library provided access to toys that offer financial savings for the families and developmental challenges for their

children. These patterns are not surprising given that they reflect the original intent in constructing toy libraries and the benefits most frequently promoted by toy libraries (Mayfield 1993).

Because toys are borrowed and not purchased, more variety seeking occurs at the toy library than in the marketplace; for example, one child drew eight puzzles he could borrow. Other children rattled off a range of toys they liked; for example, one girl liked "the toys, the pink doll's house, animal video about the zoo, the princess puzzle, [and] the car mat that has a road and a village and you can play on it." While parents were sometimes surprised by their children's selection, they tended to honor their children's request. This diverse and affordable selection of toys is a major benefit that draws both avid toy library families and occasional users. In field notes, grandparents were observed visiting with their grandchildren across several borrowing sessions.

Another benefit is that library patrons could engage in limited trial of toys to determine if the toys were developmentally appropriate or had significant play value. Although some toys were rejected, it was not uncommon for a successful trial to prompt a purchase. The following quote evokes both the variety of toys that Steve found for his daughter at the library and the sometimes synergistic relationship with the marketplace.

> Last few times I got some dress-up clothes and she has really been enjoying those. I could see from the other little girl who she spends time with that this might be popular, and just from the other play I could see that she uses her imagination a lot.... A butterfly outfit. A doctors set. I had seen the little friend she plays with a lot, they are also members of a toy library, and she and Sally had enjoyed playing with the doctors set. A tool set because they had also enjoyed playing with that. I've tried to get the sets with castles and knights–because again I think it's good for the imagination. But, I think she plays with those for just a short time, probably not quite old enough to build up the big stories in her imagination. A zoo and a circus. I did bring home a sort of a train set and it made sounds. We brought a trike home because we thought she was ready for a trike–that was really good because it helped us determine that she could actually ride a trike and she really enjoyed it. I think that is really good—when you are thinking about a toy that may be a big expense, to bring it home, give it a go, and then make a decision about whether we would purchase it.

Similarly, Jane was surprised by the amount of time that her son played with a borrowed doll house, and this experience motivated the purchase of a doll house for him. Although at first blush toy libraries may seem at odds with the business of selling toys, Fischer Price funded the USA Toy Library Association in 1984.

A developer of human capacity. Although this study focused on interviewing parents about their toy library experiences, toy libraries are local organizations that are often run by volunteers. Thus, they offer the opportunity to develop local human capacities. Historically, toy libraries sometimes had toy workshops in which disabled adults were trained to repair toys (Moore 1995), but contemporary toy libraries offer a chance for volunteers to learn a range of new skills, from community organization to leadership, public speaking, fund-raising, grant writing, toy repair, and

web design, to name a few. One parent (Sheila) described how she had taken principles she had learned while volunteering at the toy library, regarding the care and storage of toys, and applied them to her job. Similarly, a study of best practices in the United Kingdom found that toy libraries teach skills, provide jobs, and develop community capacity (Capacity and Play Matters 2007).

Many of the toy selections led to significant skill building and development for the children as well. The children who were talented puzzlers might select increasingly difficult new puzzles across borrowing periods. Parents nudged children to try toys and activities that challenged their strengths, explored underdeveloped skills, or developed new skills outside their comfort zone. For example, athletic children might be encouraged to try a puzzle, while a child who enjoys construction toys might be encouraged to try musical toys. As Carol said:

> [If] she keeps going back to the same thing that she's had all the time, I'll try to direct her towards something that's a little bit different.... She's not really big on games, so we were trying to find some different games that we could get her interested in so that she could try and include herself a bit more in other people's play because she has a couple of friends who really like board games.... And so we hit on the Hullabaloo, which she really likes. So that was a good one 'cause there's not a real winner or loser in that one. It's more a fun one.

While parents gently tried to challenge and develop their children's skills, the children's freedom to borrow also ended up challenging parent's expectations, as Kim noted:

> I never pick the toys—it's always Billy.... Even from the very very beginning when he was probably a year, I let him. I followed his lead and it would be quite interesting. [There were] things that I thought would be really cool [that] he's just never been interested in. So I quickly found out that even though I thought something was nice and shiny and new, that I thought would be appealing, they may not necessarily mirror what his desires are.

An organizer of social support. The toy libraries are located in local neighborhoods and so provide an opportunity for both parents and children to socialize and form informal networks (Bjorck-Akesson and Brodin 1992; Brodin and Bjorck-Akesson 1992; Franyo and Settles 1996). Parents reported that their children, particularly as they got older, looked forward to the social aspect of toy libraries as a chance to play with friends; one child said, "I like to go to the toy library and play with my friends from school and kindy." Three children also drew themselves playing with their friends at the toy library. Some parents freely admitted that the socializing is even more important for them than their children. However, Jane offered a more dramatic example of the potential support found at her local toy library:

> I liked when I would be down there on a Saturday and everybody would come in and we would talk about all sorts of things—our kids, whatever. It was such a nice feeling, a really good feeling. And when I split with my ex it really gave me a place to go, when I often did not feel like it, and it really helped me through some bad times. To get out of bed and have a place to go and someone would give me a hug. And you are volunteering and you feel good about that. It was almost like a lifeline when you are having a rough time in your life.

Dockrell and Wilkinson (1989) suggest that young mothers who are socially isolated can benefit from the social opportunities found at toy libraries. Although this socialization can occur in other venues, such as day care, school, or a friend's house, this is an important benefit reported by parents and supported by the literature (Capacity and Play Matters 2007).

In addition to providing opportunities to socialize and exchange emotional support, parenting advice is freely shared. A certain esprit de corps binds parents who share common struggles with children who are going through, are about to go through, or just went through a developmental stage. The most common counsel is on age-appropriate toys and what to expect during different stages of development:

> It means you could, you know, you see other people down there with children of a similar age and you can say, you know, "What have you tried?" "What did your child like?" (Barbara)

> Well, we were first time parents and we really did not know what we were doing. Baby did not come with instructions—feed me now. Well, Brenda went down there [to the toy library] and it seemed like a good idea and it sounded pretty cool to me…. Yeah, you walk down to the toy library and everyone is sort of hanging out and talking, and kids cruising around, and you probably know half the people who are members. We felt that way after only a couple of months. (Bill)

Toy libraries were also an effective way to engage isolated families in areas of social deprivation and to redress part of the imbalance between the supply of play equipment available to children from affluent areas and those growing up in poverty (Capacity and Play Matters 2007). Brodin and Bjorck-Akesson (1992) suggest that toy libraries serve an important social function because they provide a valuable meeting place for families, a place to share advice and provide support to others, at a time when family patterns have shifted and support services are increasingly limited.

A builder of community. Among the families that were more than occasional users, the toy library represents a community based on reciprocity that extends beyond the sharing of toys. A significant number of patrons focused on both experiencing and contributing to the toy library community. As Callie said:

> [We] wanted community, we wanted a safe community … where people know each other and you know other people would look out for my kid and I'm expected to look after their's, if you know what I mean. And I think we've gotten that there [at the toy library] because we walk in and he goes, "Oh look, there's this person!"

During a visit to the toy library with her children, the first author saw this community in action. Karen's husband, who was also a volunteer emergency worker, handed his daughter to a woman he knew volunteering at the toy library, while he rushed to an urgent call. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest that members of brand communities are also bound to one another by a consciousness of kind, shared rituals, and moral responsibility. The local toy libraries directly build the social fabric of the local communities through ongoing social interactions, connections, and exchanges.

The toy library community functions through the volunteer efforts and labors of its members. Through volunteering at the toy library, many of the patrons, such as Carol, see this work as an important "way that I feel I can give back, that I'm doing something that's benefiting a wider community." Similarly, Raewyn talked about how the library helped integrate members into the community around a shared purpose: "We all participate in the running of it, so it is really our thing—we have a sense of ownership of it." Bill demonstrated what community meant to him during the actual interview. Bill got a call from a friend who needed help in the middle of the interview; he left the interviewer alone minding his kids, helped his friend with her car, and came back to the interview. On returning, he stated: "See, that's community…. I think generally people do need a little bit of help every now and again."

Informants reported minor and major acts of kindness, such as when a father working the front desk helped retrieve a lost part that had fallen down a sewer grate or when a family having economic hardship was quietly given a free membership to the toy library:

> I think it allowed them [the children] to see the importance of being part of the community and contributing to the community. I originally tried not to take them down with me, but being a single parent that was not always practical. I think children from a very young age are able to learn about community and volunteering,… I think it is very important from a young age to gently expose them to this sort of thing. Like I expect them from a very young age to take care of things, the house, their toys, and I think toy library has helped me to do this because they are asked to take special care of the toy library toys—to keep them separate from other toys, to bag them up, to keep them clean, you know. (Jane)

Similarly, Sheila suggested that the volunteer work sends a potent message to her children by modeling the behavior she and her husband hope their children will emulate: "We're teaching them, aren't we, about looking after each other."

A transforming political act. Similar to the work of Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) in which African American consumers are guided by their political ideology in their purchase decisions, significant ideological motivations drive the consumption of toy library services for some of the users. The most common political interest driving families' use of the toy library was avoiding supporting a consumerist society and fueling materialism (i.e., the significance their children might give to possessions; see Richins and Dawson 1992). Other societal interests included protecting the environment by minimizing purchases, trying to be more conscious in purchasing more sustainably produced toys, and supporting an egalitarian vision of society in which all children have the same opportunities and resources. The following quotes demonstrate three of these ideological interests, including minimizing materialism, overconsumption, and environmental harm:

> I really thought on a very anecdotal level a lot of my friends who had lots of stuff and they were just empty and I just didn't want to raise my kids like that, you know? (Callie)

It means that we don't actually accrue a whole big pile of toys. So we're not sort of drowning in them—a pile of stuff. The policy of loan rather than own, I think it's a great idea. (Barbara)

No, we don't do that [buy] because we'll end in piles of mountains of crap. We try to keep the landfill to a dull roar, because that's what it is, most of it is just for the landfill. (Bill)

This environmental interest focuses on protecting the local natural environment but also includes a concern about environmental damage in countries in which the toys are produced.

In addition, parents believed that borrowing toys develops a different relationship to goods that is a counterpoint to overconsumption and materialism. As Carol said, "You can still enjoy something even when it doesn't belong to you." Thus, parents stress that the toy library teaches their children that goods can have value even without ownership. Another lesson taught is for children to be creative in their play with the toys, regardless of whether the toy is new or used. As Moira articulated, "[Things] don't always have to be new and beautiful to have value. That toys can be just whatever a child is prepared to make of them. And I do feel that the toy library has reinforced that."

Although we found strong and different ideological themes throughout the data, they represent the idea the parents reappropriate the original meaning and the more traditional benefits espoused within toy libraries (Dockrell and Wilkinson 1989). Moreover, these findings suggest a potentially more relevant and invigorating direction that toy libraries and other communities of sharing could use to attract a broader and more committed set of patrons. We expand on these ideas in the next section, in which we explore the potential of the toy library to develop future citizens who understand the nature of collective goods.

Ozanne and Ballantine (2010) conducted a national survey of New Zealand toy library users, with a sample size of 397, using the results from the current study. Consistent with the qualitative results, the survey found support for four groups of consumers: socialites (25.7%), market avoiders (25.9%), quiet anticonsumers (26.2%), and passive members (222%). Socialites sought meaning in the toy library by developing social capital and fostering a sense of belonging. Market avoiders also benefited from community and social ties, but they valued the role of the toy library as a market mediator the most and had the lowest level of materialism. Quiet anticonsumers felt ownership of the toy library but did not seek out social connections. Instead, they strongly supported the values of anticonsumption, frugality, and sharing. Passive members, similar to the quiet anticonsumers, also felt a sense of duty to the toy library, but they did not view the library as a source of friendship, nor were they ideologically motivated.

The Sharing of Collective Goods and Creating Good Citizens

As mentioned previously, many toy library parents did not support the value of materialism and expressed concerns about potential deleterious effects of even borrowing, when their children have access to a seemingly endless supply of novel toys. Some parents wondered if this bounty might increase object attachments or if children might become easily bored or fickle. Furthermore, although frequenting the toy library meant that these parents could avoid buying toys for their children, many still did so. The national survey of toy library users found that 52% had negative attitudes toward consumption, but almost half were not against consumption (Ozanne and Ballantine 2010).

Chaplin and John (2007) suggest that materialism does not increase among children until middle school, but Chaplin and Lowrey (2010) suggest that children are aware of branding at elementary school ages. In this study, parents expressed worry over how the toy library experience might affect their young children's materialism. As Tracey said, "I did worry that they kind of got used to having new toys all the time." Although all the toys are borrowed, children did develop object attachments to favorite toys they regularly borrowed. Except for the seven-year-old girl who found the toy library too infantile, all the children quickly volunteered and drew pictures of favorite toys. Two forces mitigate person–object attachments in the toy library, which are discussed next.

Sharing of collective goods. The toys at the library are collective public goods that are shared (Belk 2010). Despite the considerable societal investment in public goods, such as public libraries, playgrounds, and parks, little research has examined the consumption of public goods (Visconti et al. 2010). Melissa stated that the toy library has taught her daughter to understand sharing: "Someone else is going to take it home for their turn but maybe we will have it next time." Children learn the concept of sharing at as young as two years of age. One five-year-old child drew a picture of her sister sharing a toy with her at the toy library. Another child reported that she liked sharing toys with her brother and "I always let Johnnie go first, but we share, I go after him." Very young children learn that the library toys are collective goods that need to be enjoyed while respecting the next user. Carol stressed that sharing collective goods teaches delayed gratification, and Andrew suggested that the whole toy library experience reinforces the nature and benefits of community goods:

You can still enjoy something even when it doesn't belong to you, yeah. And to learn that you have to wait to take your turn. Sometimes you can't have everything right when you want it. (Carol)

Well I guess one of those things about the toy library is that it is outside those circuits of consumption and therefore has a whole different attitude toward children's relationship to play. It's not consumerized. It takes a more direct relationship to the children's own lives, because they are going locally and they can get toys over and over again and they can return them. It's more collective I suppose. (Andrew)

Thus, in much the same way that a child may need to earn money to purchase a toy, delayed gratification can also be fostered in the toy library; one parent described how choosing a toy at the toy library was used as a reward during potty training (field notes). Moreover, the toy library selects durable toys that are used repeatedly and then mended when broken. Thus, the toy library experience offers a model of good stewardship over finite resources. The following quote by Raewyn demonstrates this concept of stewardship:

Well, it has definitely taught them how to care for things that are not theirs because we always say to them that they have to be careful with that toy because it belongs to the toy library and not us. I really noticed this because of the neighbor kids who are not members [of the toy library]. They have absolutely no respect for things, and it drives me crazy. They have broken more of our toys.

An interesting tension existed in the toy library social norms. On the one hand, the toys are collective goods, so it was expected that the objects of play would get worn, used, and, on occasion, broken. On the other hand, strong expectations existed that goods were brought back clean and in good condition. For example, in the toy library in which the participant observation occurred, this expectation was made explicit in a posted sign. Lost toy parts and even broken toys are understandable, but toys that are returned dirty suggest that they were returned without regard to the next user, violating the norms around sharing collective goods. One three-year-old child showed her understanding of the norms of sharing when she said she could not borrow the fairy costume again because "she had broke the fairy costume."

> Well lost pieces, that sort of stuff happens. That's the way the world goes. Things are going to get lost, you know. I know Harriet's bitten the edge off a piece of puzzle and things like that…. But you know there's repeat offenders, I mean if a toy comes back with food all over it and has obviously not been cared for. (Bill)

These findings are similar to research on the gift economy found on the Internet that is also guided by norms of reciprocity (Giesler 2006). Thus, the toy library models good stewardship in using and caring for collective public goods.

Social suturing. Object attachments are also not as strong in the context of borrowing because social connections are emphasized throughout the toy library experience (Bjorck-Akesson and Brodin 1992; Dockrell and Wilkinson 1989). Visits to the toy library are usually social affairs in which the children accompany their parents. As mentioned previously, significant socializing occurs during the visit for both the children and the parents. Throughout the process, social linkages are implicitly and explicitly stressed in the discourses surrounding the toy library. For example, children are regularly asked to think of other people as they borrow, use, and return goods. As Hannah stated, when explaining the need to share with her daughter, "Another family might need this." Children also were asked to borrow toys for younger siblings, which fostered an understanding of and empathetic concern about the needs of others. One of the interviewed children said she liked going to the toy library to borrow toys for her baby sister. Sherry's son helped find appropriate toys for his younger sister: "How about this Maddie, would you like this?" Carol explained how her daughter artfully considers the needs of several potential "playmates" as she selects toys:

> She usually picks two things and one thing she will pick that's something that she really likes and then she'll also pick something that she thinks is more of a boy's toy so that when Johnny comes over he'll have something to play with and her daddy will play with her. Daddy does not like dolls. So we have a police station right now [from the toy library]. We've been

playing cops and robbers and the Pollypockets have been used in the police station.

Finally, with the families in this study, sharing seems to be viral in nature. The positive experience of sharing fosters additional sharing such as joining book cooperatives, informally swapping children's and adult clothing, participating in a time bank, swapping used toys at a birthday party, sharing cars and lawnmowers, and car pooling, to name a few examples. Similarly, some of the children have donated toys that they have outgrown to the toy library or gifted well-loved toys to younger friends.

An Interpretation of Parental Mediation in the Market and Civic Space

Marketing researchers have long been interested in how children acquire the skills and information needed to navigate the marketplace (John 1999; Ward 1974). Significant research also has explored environmental and cognitive forces that affect the socialization of children as consumers (Chaplin and Lowrey 2010; John 1999; Moschis and Moore 1979; Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977). For example, family, friends, and mass media are key agents of consumer socialization (Carlson, Grossbart, and Walsh 1990; Chan and McNeal 2006). Using social learning theory, researchers have examined how parents, in particular, interact with their children to develop consumer skills (Carlson, Grossbart, and Walsh 1990; Chan and McNeal 2006). Ward (1974) conjectures that parents likely socialize children indirectly through subtle interpersonal processes rather than direct training. Subsequent empirical research provides support that parents make limited efforts to directly teach their children consumer skills and believe children will learn such skills through observation and imitation (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977).

Thus, there is widespread belief that parents are a crucial socializing agent of their children in the market. Moschis (1985) holds that parents mediate the impact of outside sources of consumer learning on their children, such as mass media. Although parents' mediating role is well documented, the current study aims to understand more deeply some of the processes by which this mediation takes place. Specifically, by patronizing toy libraries, the parents directly mediate their children's relationship with the marketplace and minimize what they believe are detrimental effects. In addition, various conceptualizations of citizenship are negotiated within the toy library.

First, the parents perceive that *toy shopping* is contentious and conflictual. Through visits to the toy library, parents reduce the need to shop or buy for their children. Although the literature suggests that brand names are not important to preschool- and kindergarten-aged children, product cues are, such as particular characters (Haynes et al. 1993); thus, parents value the toy-editing services provided by the toy libraries that remove offensive or objectionable products. Moreover, the toy library is relatively free from the type of in-store displays, promotion, branding, and packaging that inspire children to make purchase influence attempts and offers a level playing field for children to learn. Toy libraries offer parents safe havens from

the marketplace and the activities of marketers who lack restraint and seek to influence even very young children with sophisticated techniques of persuasion (Friestad and Wright 2005). Thus, toy libraries can give parents a way to exert control, particularly in countries that lack significant legal controls on business activities directed to young children.

Second, the toy library mitigates object–person attachments. All the goods are borrowed, so children learn at a young age to share collective public goods (Visconti et al. 2010). This collective space for sharing toys offers parents a foil to marketplace messages that they fear will fuel their children's potential for materialism and consumerism. The toy library affirms a relationship with locally consumed objects that is typified by good stewardship over finite and shared resources.

The toy library as an institution also educates children on the nature of citizenship within a democracy. Dewey (1916) was one of the first theorists to stress the importance of socializing children on citizenship and democracy. Contemporary theorists suggest that with play, children come to reflect on and understand rules, duties, and rights of citizenship (Elbers 1996; Jans 2004). In the toy library, three different conceptualizations of citizenship are negotiated and reinforced to varying degrees. First, the personally responsible model of citizenship is directly nurtured in the children. From this perspective, a good citizen is one who acts responsibly toward the community by following laws, paying taxes, and helping out in times of need (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Character-based forms of good citizenship, such as those promoting honesty and integrity, are consistent with this approach (see, e.g., www.charactercounts. org). So, the youthful patrons, through their relationship with the library's toys, are taught to share the collective goods, take their turn, show empathetic concern about the next user, and be good stewards by taking care of the toys. Although these civic virtues are essential for people who want to work well within a community, they are not the skills and values necessary for an effective democracy; thus, other theories of citizenship are important (Westheimer and Kahn 2004).

Second, the participatory model of citizenship has recently received considerable attention (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Daly, Schugurensky, and Lopes 2009). This concept of citizenship is most directly demonstrated through the volunteer efforts of the parents who work to support the toy library. A participatory citizen is actively engaged in the civic and social life of local and national communities (Jans 2004; Ozanne, Corus, and Saatcioglu 2009); from this perspective, a good citizen has the skills to organize and take actions in the interests of the community. The toy library develops human capacity among the parent volunteers by fostering skills of organization, leadership, and working with others. The toy library expands the skills of the children by offering a rich diversity of developmentally appropriate toys. Moreover, the toy library develops social connections and networks based on a shared purpose that can be leveraged to help the toy library function effectively.

The third model of citizenship, justice-oriented citizenship, is perhaps the least developed in the toy library, though clearly members who patronize the toy library as a political act are negotiating this conceptualization. This notion of citizen assumes that a good citizen will critique the existing social and economic institutions, look for root causes of injustice, and organize to change systems to be more just (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Several of the toy library parents purposively used the toy library to minimize their environmental impact and foster more egalitarian exchange based on sharing.

Thus, in their patronage and volunteer work at the toy library, the parents were modeling and encouraging various conceptualizations of citizenships for their children. A personally responsible citizen within the toy library would be sure to do his or her share by returning the toys in good order and completing volunteer hours. The participatory citizen in the toy library would organize a fund-raising drive to buy new toys. Finally, the justice-oriented citizen would critically reflect on the social and political inequities that lead to some children having no access to toys and strive to change the systems that reproduce these inequities. Toy libraries could explicitly develop opportunities to foster these different conceptualizations of citizens. For example, as children get older, the toy library becomes less interesting. Therefore, older children could actively participate in the domains that are relevant to them (Jans 2004), such as cataloging and caring for the toys, making suggestions for toys, or offering ideas for expansion of services. Similarly, parents could work more explicitly to flesh out toy-buying policies that support a more just marketplace based on greater sustainability.

Given the relative cultural and racial homogeneity of the toy libraries studied, one important aspect of citizenship that did not emerge is balancing the need for solidarity within a democracy with the need to respect multicultural differences. For example, in postapartheid South Africa, citizen education of youths aims to develop a national South African democratic identity while fostering a respect and appreciation for multiethnic and multiracial differences (Joubert, Ebersohn, and Eloff 2010). We might conjecture that the toy library could be part of this delicate balancing act. With their commitment to equal access to shared collective goods, toy libraries could expose children and their families to a diverse assemblage of culturally rich play objects and thereby foster an appreciation and even normalization of the cultural variety of their local community (see Diamond et al. 2009).

Limitations

Although we presented a broad review of public policies, the data from this study draw from New Zealand, and some caveats must be offered. First, although we attempted to capture a range of experiences with the toy library, by sampling a range of large and small libraries, our findings are likely more representative of lower- to upper-middle-class families. Families of lower socioeconomic levels may use toy libraries in different ways and derive different benefits. For example, research in the United Kingdom conducted in areas of economic and social disadvantage found that parents valued the toy libraries as a "gateway to other opportunities" and an accessible form of work experience (Capacity

and Play Matters 2007, p. 15). However, additional research is needed to understand how toy libraries influence the relationship of consumers with fewer resources with the marketplace.

Toy libraries operate on the premise that childhood is a special time worthy of protection and that childhood play is an important activity worthy of encouragement. In many parts of the world, however, even young children are engaged in important paid and unpaid labor and have a vital role in the economic viability of their families. In many developing countries, children under the age of 18 make up more than half the population. Even more sobering is the reality that children are the object of exchange when they are sold into slavery or traded in the sex industry (Bourdillon 2006). Thus, the notion of toy libraries assumes some degree of social and economic stability and a commitment to protect children.

For toy libraries to be viable, they need to be customized to the sociocultural and economic realities of the local context. This customization might involve minor adaptation, such as sanitizing the toys in cultures in which hygiene is valued. It might also involve customizing the toy selection to cultural practices, such as providing more costumes and props in cultures that value dramatic play. Even greater customization might be necessary in the social construction of toy libraries. For example, in contemporary Shanghai, noteworthy transformations are arising in childhood discourses and practices. In post-Socialist China, family sizes are smaller, the market economy is growing, and household incomes are rising. Professional urban families are increasingly able to purchase more commodious apartments. Both within official and popular discourses, children are increasingly viewed as individuals with rights to privacy and personal space within the home, similar to Western conceptualizations. Yet, ironically, children's freedom of movement, social contact, and free play is restricted by busy schedules; they are "caged at school, caged at home" (Naftali 2010, 304). Because families often have only one child, it is even more important to keep this child safe and for him or her to succeed academically, which is consistent with traditional Confucian values of duty to family. Within this context, toy libraries might offer safe havens for these children to have greater social interaction with other children, but the toys and activities would likely need to enhance academic skills or be culturally enriching (Naftali 2010).

Public Policy Recommendations and Concluding Thoughts

Finally, we explore three public policy recommendations. First, more funding is needed to create toy libraries in disadvantage communities. The United Kingdom provided £6 million to fund 150 toy libraries in poor neighborhoods (Capacity and Play Matters 2007). In the United States, 20.7% of children live in poverty (U.S. Census 2009). Such an investment might lessen the gap between the broad democratic rhetoric of equality and the firsthand inequality that children experience growing up in poor neighborhoods (Joubert, Ebersohn, and Eloff 2010). The potential of this institution to be used in less developed countries, after children's basic needs are met, is relatively unexamined. Toy libraries can expand access to developmentally appropriate toys for those children most in need, decrease economic demands on individual families, and facilitate exchanges of advice and support.

In a period of significant economic challenges and reduced government budgets, toy libraries are still a good deal. Toy libraries might be housed in existing primary schools, thus creating a bridge between the formal activities of teachers and the informal activities of parents stimulating their children with educational toys. Toy libraries can be run by volunteers and thereby expand opportunities to develop human capacity by training basic job skills. Toy libraries can be customized to meet unique community needs (Franyo and Settles 1996) that may be based on economic constraints, such as bridging the digital divide, or social opportunities, such as affirming ethnic and multicultural diversity, or physical challenges, such as promoting vigorous play among obese children (Moore 2007). Nevertheless, for many toy libraries, securing adequate funding is an ongoing struggle (Powell and Seaton 2007), and an inadequate budget for marketing and promotion means the general public is often unfamiliar with the concept (Capacity and Play Matters 2007).

Second, given the importance of access to suitable education promised by the Individuals with Disabilities Act, greater funding is needed to increase toy libraries targeted at children with special needs. Appropriate toys for play are particularly important for engaging children challenged by disabilities, and even severely disabled children can be engaged when appropriate toys are proffered in a socially supportive environment (Brodin 1999). Children with disabilities often require stronger stimuli and more social support from parents and educators (Brodin 2005). Although trained staff are not usually provided in community toy libraries, they are a particularly valuable investment for families with special needs. Play with caregivers can build the self-confidence that children need to seek out greater stimulation. Parents often lack the skills and tools to promote play with disabled children; toy libraries for children with special needs can fill this gap (Jackson et al. 1991).

Third, a web-based clearing house could document best practices and share resources. For example, such a clearing house might provide parent-generated reviews of toys, webinars for training volunteers, methods for documenting the impact of the toy library, promotional materials to increase awareness of services, and courses for improving parenting skills through manipulation of play objects. Toy libraries are informal organizations that are often run by parents and local community members, so they provide a safer place for parents to seek help. While formal educational institutions may be threatening to parents who lack literacy skills, the informality of community-based toy libraries makes them more inviting for, for example, teen parents who may lack parenting skills or single parents who may be socially isolated.

Perhaps the most provocative findings in this study are how some of the parents employed the toy library to mediate the influences of the marketplace and affirm ideological values. These are benefits that could presumably expand the demand for toy library services. Thus, a clearinghouse might also share various buying principles that affirm values of sustainability, document toys that are more humanely produced, and

even provide opportunities for meaningful debate on specific branded products or the commercialization of childhood. The potential of the toy library as a form of citizen education is relatively unexamined beyond promoting personal responsibility. However, the toy library is a flexible resource that could be used to advance a range of conceptualizations of citizenship. For example, the value of unity is affirmed when all members are asked to be good stewards of collective goods, but the value of community diversity can also be affirmed by selecting multicultural toys that respect the richness of a community (Joubert, Ebersohn, and Eloff 2010).

In conclusion, our findings suggest that parents are actively engaged in socializing their children by using toy libraries to mediate the influence of the market on their children. These parents find the toy library a stress-free alternative to buying in the marketplace; toy libraries provide their children with greater influence to pursue a wide range of toys and develop diverse skills. While prior research has suggested that children are becoming more market savvy (Gunther and Furnham 1998) and sophisticated (Valkenburg and Cantor 2001) consumers, our findings suggest that parents intervene to diminish the impact of the market on their children. Parents appreciated the noncommercialized space of the toy library that offered a safe haven for exploration and growth through the sharing of collective goods. Finally, parents used the toy library to foster important civic values in their children, which is an area relatively unexplored in the literature. Different guiding models of citizenship could be used to enrich the impact of toy libraries.

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