

A Generation of Innovators at Risk

by John Di Frances

Everyone from the President to senators, representatives, governors, business executives and educators is talking about the critical need for Innovation. It seems they finally 'get' it. After trying everything else, we are now waking up to the startling reality that we MUST find creative new ways of addressing the issues we face, not just across America, but worldwide.

This is good. Now we need to begin creating the frameworks that will enable and empower people in all kinds of organizations to develop the mindset and skills necessary to become active innovators.

However, a disturbing trend that has concerned me for many years is our departure from working to conscientiously develop inquiring and innovative minds in the youngest members of our society, young children. Although this issue may not seem particularly relevant to the issues we face today, in a mere matter of twenty years or less, it is these small children, the upcoming generation which we will rely upon to fan the flames and carry the spark of innovation we initiate now. And although twenty years hence may appear today to be a very long time in the offing, anyone who has raised children knows just how rapidly a handful of years can pass into memory.

What is it about the way young children are being raised today that puts our future innovators at risk? More than we would like to admit, but here I will focus on something that is too often overlooked. Toys!

You may immediately counter that many of today's toys are intended to stimulate creativity and that would be correct. The problem is that in many cases, they do not really accomplish this goal.

Intent on buying 'developmentally rich' toys designed specifically to 'stimulate imaginative play', well meaning parents sometimes miss the obvious. They fail to understand that with young children, all play is imaginative, because nearly everything in their world is new to them. They see their world with eyes full of wonder.

What parent hasn't experienced frustration after spending long hours wrapping toys for their child's birthday or Christmas, when their child is fascinated not with the toy, but in playing with the box it came in. It is the often the 'simple', rather than the or 'contrived' that most stimulates imagination.

Case in point, when I was growing up, we did not have a television until I was eight years old. While my friends were watching cartoons, I was reading or listening to the

radio. My favorite radio program was the Lone Ranger. It was the flood of images my imagination created which made the stories come alive. With TV, my friends simply sat and watched, no imagination was required to complete the experience.

Imagination is a key aspect of innovation. Developing a vivid imagination in young childhood is critical if we are to cultivate a future generation capable of rich ideation and spectacular innovation. Toys of every sort are useful in developing this capacity. However, in the toys we give our children, especially young children, it is best to focus on those that simply kindle ideas, allowing them to use their own creative powers to finish building the picture.

By doing so, we will help to cultivate the ability to truly imagine, which in later life, will produce the fruit of ideation and innovation. Let's let our children learn from play that they are the real creative agents, not the toys we buy for them.

Strategic Innovation Consulting (www.StrategicInnovation.Consulting) provides Open Innovation and Strategy consulting services to a wide range of corporate, Fortune 100's to startups, not-for-profit and government organizations globally. John Di Frances is Managing Partner.