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# PARENTS PURCHASING PROCESS OF CHILDREN'S TOYS

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A qualitative interview study of mothers in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

Toy sales for children are steadily increasing each year, with a major shift towards online purchases. Parents are known to hold the main responsibility of being the purchasers of toys for their children. While previous research on parental decision on toys have mainly focused on what toys parents are selecting for their child to play with, little is understood about *how* parents make the *decision* to purchase the toy. The aim of this study is to be able to gain a better understanding of the toy purchase process of parents with children between the ages of two and six years old. A qualitative method was used to interview six mothers in the United States over Zoom on their reasonings for purchasing toys and to find out how they are purchasing these toys and what factors are important to them. The responses from the mothers corresponded with the increasing trend of purchasing toys online, as well as using the internet as a source of information on the toys being sought out. Further analysis demonstrated that the toy purchasing process is in fact incredibly complex with many different factors being considered by these mothers before making the toy purchase.

Keywords: parenting, children's toys, toy purchasing, purchase process, parenting choices

## FOREWORD

This study has been very interesting and personal for me as I am a mother of two children myself. My family moved to Sweden three years ago from Florida in the United States and being a mother of two young children, I have seen a difference between the countries not only in child rearing but also the toys for children. It appears to me that the viewpoint and the availability of toys are quite different. I was interested to compare the countries in my study but unfortunately was only able to focus on one country. I look forward to the future opportunity to continue this study by focusing on parents in Sweden.

I would like to thank all my professors and my thesis supervisor at Tema Barn at Linköping University for this amazing experience and opportunity for me to obtain my master's degree in Child Studies. I would not have made it without the support of my fellow classmates even at a distance and for this I must give a special thanks to the "Red Group" for always being there. I am so thankful and appreciative for my Dad's personal interest in my studies and always talking to me throughout this process. I would then lastly like to dedicate this thesis to my Momma. She is the one person I wish I could share this with, and I know that she would be proud to see me achieving a major goal of mine in obtaining my master's degree in Sweden.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Toys are a common daily occurrence in the lives of children, they spend hours every day interacting and exploring their world through toys. The sales of toys steadily increase each year, in 2012 it was estimated that \$84 billion would be spent on toys in the world, with the United States making up at least \$22 billion of toy sales (Al Kurdi, 2017:104). The increase of purchases has continued with record breaking toy sales in the United States in 2020, despite the ongoing pandemic the toy market has done well (Tsai, 2021). Toys for children are often purchased as gifts for birthday or holidays, given as a prize for doing well or even sometimes a simple spontaneous purchase. With a trend of purchasing of toys increasing each year, over the last decade, it is evident that toys play a vital role in the lives of children (Bedford, 2021). Previously shown during economically difficult times parents will often make purchases for their children over themselves, and this is currently occurring in the United States with the continuing increase in toy sales during the global pandemic (Tsai, 2020:1-2). In 2019, the average American child, between the ages of 0-9, was receiving approximately \$300 worth of toys (Bedford, 2021).

The toy market is influenced by the purchases being made and those purchases are influenced by the way toys are marketed but each level has many factors that affect the decision as well. Knowing the reasoning behind the purchases of toys for children is therefore essential and needs to be further investigated (Al Kurdi, 2017:105). Typically, most toys have a suggested age range that the toy is suitable for play with. However, when parents read the recommended age for the child for the specific toy, they are often sceptical of this suggestion and make their own judgments specific to their child (Richards et al, 2020:7).

While parents may be the ones often purchasing the toys for their children, children are active agents in their lives and influence the purchases the parents make (James & James, 2012:21). However, research shows that parents who purchase toys from online websites are less likely to receive their children's inputs on their decisions (Richards et al., 2020:2). This raises questions about the toy purchasing process, who initiates and makes purchasing decisions about children's toys, and on what grounds? Although the process of purchasing a toy may seem rather simple there are considerations that need to be explored (Al Kurdi, 2017:104). This qualitative interview study focuses on mothers and the purchasing process they go through when selecting toys for their children.

## 1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM & QUESTIONS

With the increase of toy sales each year, parents being the primary provider of toys for their children, and the complexity around understanding parental purchases and all its factors, it is important to study how parents reason the purchases of toys for their children (Richards et al., 2020:1). Parents are putting a lot of time, effort, and money into purchasing toys for their children. Even though toys are important to the everyday lives of children and families, little is known about the toy purchasing process (cf. Hogan, 2007:164; Richards et al., 2020:1) and the fundamental factors parents consider when making a purchase (Kollmayer et al., 2018:339).

This thesis builds on the growing field of research on parents' toy choice decision making process. While many previous studies on parents' toy purchasing processes are quantitative, this study utilize a qualitative approach. This study focuses on toddlers (2-6 years of age) compared to previous research that has focused primarily on infants and adolescents. Parents with toddlers were selected for this study since parents are often the purchasers of toys and toddlers typically have a significant number of toys to play with. Through qualitative interviews with six parents, the aim of this study is to gain a nuanced understanding of the process parents go through when purchasing toys. I ask:

How do parents' reason about toy purchases for their children?

What factors do parents highlight as important for the decision to purchase a toy and why?

## 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Since this is a growing field, there is limited research that directly focuses on the purchasing process of parents when purchasing toys for their children. Although there is plenty of research on if parents select specific toys in relation to the gender stereotype of their child regarding play and purchases (Kollmayer et al. 2018; Eisenberg 1985; Fisher-Thompson, 1993; Liu et al., 2020) there is little research on distinguishing if this is the only reasoning for the parents' purchase. Research on parenting in relation to children's toys has primarily in the past, focused on what type of toys they would purchase in relation to gender or safety aspects. In addition to those reasonings, the price of toys is just as important of a factor in the toy purchasing considerations of parents (Al Kurdi, 2017:110; Clarke, 2010:535). Other research on children's toys, focus on marketing influence and creating trust within the toy market (Hogan 2007; Clarke & McAuley 2010). As well as an overwhelming number of studies that focus on educational

toys. The age range of the children in these previous studies ranges from infants to adolescents up to 12 years of age.

## 2.1 PARENT'S PREFERENCE OF SELECTING GENDER SPECIFIC TOYS FOR THEIR CHILDREN

A substantial amount of the previous research focused on whether parents selected gender specific toys for their children, as well as whether the children did the same. The notion of gender stereotypes in toy preference is not a new concept, in 1985 a short-term longitudinal study was conducted in the United States, and toy selection was observed through a play session between the parent and child that was between 1 and 2 years of age (Eisenberg et al., 1985). This study on toy selection in comparison to gender stereotypes reflected that the parent often chose a toy associated with the child's gender (Eisenberg et al., 1985:1511). A more recent quantitative study in Jordan shows that parents still consider it to be an important factor for their children to have gender specific toys (Al Kurdi, 2017:112).

Further research focusing on gender specific toys suggests that parents are the ones that introduce new items into the lives of their children and assist them in the choices they make (Hogan: 2007:168). Children are then often making choices in which toys they want out of reflection of their parents' behaviour of selecting toys for their child (Al Kurdi, 2017:106, see also Kollmayer, 2018:330). Parents are influencing their children's own preferences with toys by rewarding their children for selecting certain toys to play with and by communicating directly to children about their own beliefs and concerns, and toys play a role in this (Kollmayer, 2018: 330).

Even when Australian parents' desirability of pre-picked toys was assessed of toys that were edited to remove stereotypical colouring of gender specific toys, the parents stated they preferred either gender specific or gender-neutral toys for their children over toys that were cross-gender (Kollmayer, 2018, 333). This study showed that parents still chose gender specific toys for their children, a common theme that has been researched significantly over the years.

## 2.2 TOYS ARE MARKETED FOR CHILDREN BUT IT'S THE PARENTS MAKING THE PURCHASES

Marketing of popular brands of toys is limited for parents, however at Christmas time parents often buy these popular brands as gifts for their children (Clarke & McAuley, 2010). Often these advertisements or marketing strategies are aimed at children, while it is the parent that is making these purchases (ibid, 534). Frequently parents and young children are watching

television together, the child sees a toy they like, and the parent builds an opinion from the advertisement (ibid, 535). The children then are being made part of the process by seeing the adverts and asking the parents to make these purchases (cf. Sjöberg, 2013:312). The parent takes into consideration many factors including the children's own desires as well as information on the toy being advertised (Clarke & McAuley, 2010:539).

There is also the marketing of toys that is directed towards children but not by toy stores, rather fast-food companies. In Australia children are exposed to over an hour of advertisement on television of toys that are for fast food restaurants (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2006:60). Mothers in Australia participated in either a focus group or an individual interview and were asked how they felt about toys being used as a fast-food premium in kid's meals and the results were conflicting (ibid, 61). While the marketing of the toy was directed to the child, it is the parent that must make the decision on whether to go there so their child can get the toy they wanted. This decision is not just solely based on the request of the children, parents must also take other considerations into factor, such as their budget for eating out, the choices of food for them and their child amongst other factors (ibid, 61-62).

Another popular way of marketing is through toy descriptions, allowing for the purchaser to understand the toy and what it does. A recent study by Hassinger-Das (2021) surveyed 63 caregivers in the United States to see if toy purchase decisions were impacted by toy descriptions. They were first shown a selection of pictures of traditional toys and electronic toys and answered a questionnaire, they then were shown the same toys but with descriptions of the toy and then asked to answer the same questionnaire. The results showed that parents do in fact take into consideration what the toy description is and if it will benefit their child as their responses to the questionnaire changed after reading the description of the toy (ibid:9). The responses the caregivers gave after having read the toy description also changed, this time suggesting they believed that electronic toys would assist with their child's development over the traditional toys originally picked (ibid, 9). After the parents read the toy description it is being suggested that their reasoning for the toy has changed also.

These studies show that the toys parents purchase influence what the children request for toys, which raises questions if the parents are taking into consideration what the children want.

### 2.3 PARENTAL PREFERENCE ON TOY BRANDS

In a survey of parents leaving toy stores around Christmas time in Australia, parents place focus on giving popular toy brands as Christmas gifts to their children (Clarke & McAuley, 2010). The study suggested that a popular brand or a well-known brand would be more receptive as a gift as it could be seen as a good quality gift or one that would last a long time (Clarke & McAuley, 2010:534; see also Hogan, 2007:164). Parents are looking for a sense of security in purchasing toys, they want to know they are getting a good value as well as a good quality (Clarke & McAuley, 2010: 539). These studies are showing that children are getting their toy requests from a mixture of marketing and influences from peers. Parents often take into consideration their children's request for specific brand of toys when making a purchase (Clarke, 2008:350) with the most common example revolving around children's request for specific toys at Christmas time (O'Cass & Clarke, 2002:39; Clarke, 2008:351). Preferences of requesting popular toy brands is also reflected in a study on 422 letters written to Santa by children in Australia. O'Cass and Clarke (2002:37) concluded that children could differentiate between toy brands and identify which brand they prefer, which allows them to make specific requests to their parents for certain toy brands (ibid, 50). Therefore, it can be concluded that both parents and children show a preference in purchasing popular toy brands over others.

### 2.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION TO PARENTS

Previous studies shows that educational or learning toys are an important factor to parents and that parents with a specific developmental goal for their child should then find the toy that matches the child's developmental level or the specific skills they are looking for (DeContin, 2015:3; Richards et al., 2020:5). A study was set out to test whether these educational toys being marketed were truly making a difference in the children's learning, and therefore observations of the child playing with toys were made as well as interviews with teachers and parents about the toys (DeContin, 2015). Parents expressed that they believed their children could learn through play and that many toys can initiate learning (ibid, 63). A Test of Spatiality was given to the children prior to the observation as well as after the observed play session to test the children's spatial ability to learn new things (ibid, 33). The results were not significant enough to show that these educational toys were in fact more beneficial to the child (ibid, 66). Despite findings such as these, educational toys are still being purchased and used in the daily lives of children, which could show the value learning has to parents. While toy descriptions are leading parents to make purchases of certain toys (Hassinger-Das et al., 2021:9) there is little known about the actual benefits these toys have and if their descriptions are in fact true.

Parents see toys as educational if the toy is enhancing an aspect of their child's life. In a Jordanian study, parents cared about their children's toys having educational, physical and entertainment benefits (Al Kurdi, 2017:109). The parents were looking for toys to purchase that would benefit their child's creative side. It is the ability to be able to teach new skills with the toys, that was an important factor to these parents (ibid, 111-112).

In a scientific article discussing research done by the toy company Mattel in 2004, UK mothers stated that learning was important to them and that three quarters of the moms believed the earlier the child began their learning process the better (Clement, 2004:24). This study revealed that mothers believe learning should be fun for the children, and that their children can also learn through experiences (ibid, 24). Mothers in Washington, DC in the United States reported their first consideration when purchasing a toy was educational features, along with considering their child's personality and skills (Richards et al., 2020:3). Toys that have been purchased directly in a toy, were however often more based from either a child's direct request, or a gender specific selection. A possible reason for this could be that children are not asking for educational based toys (ibid: 5-7). A reason for this could also be due to the vast selection of toys now available for children (Hassing-Das et al., 2021:3) and children are being influenced not only by marketing but their friends as well (Hogan, 2007:169; Clarke & McAuley, 2010:535; Al Kurdi, 2017:111).

While many studies focus on what toys are being selected during play or even in the purchase, there is a little expressing the reasoning behind the toy choice and the purchasing process for parents. By conducting qualitative interviews this study will aim at understanding how the toys in their home even got there and asking the parents for explanation on their reasonings behind their purchases. This study aims to go deeper into understanding why the parent chose the toys their children have and how much thought and what factors go into the process of selecting the toys.

### 3 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This section explains the process of how I selected the participants for my study, the method I chose for collecting data as well as analysing the data gathered from the interviews I conducted and the ethical considerations around these steps.

#### 3.1 SAMPLING, RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANTS

My research questions assisted in the selection of participants (Bryman, 2015:410) and so I began the process by thinking of who I knew with children in the age range of two to six years

old for my study, after reaching out to one mother I knew that fit the criteria, she then suggested another person who I was friends on Facebook with so I then decided to use my Facebook account to see if I could find more participants. The criteria I had for selection was whether the individual had a child in the age range for my study and that they lived in the United States. I reached out to nine participants and while all were willing to participate, I was only able to conduct six interviews. The other three interviews were not conducted due to communication delays and the issue with scheduling an interview with the time difference between the countries. It could be noted that two of these three participants would have added a father's perspective, which could have shifted the findings of this study. I initially reached out to the participants through Facebook messenger with a general description of my study and if they were willing to participate or knew anyone else that may be interested.

The participants ended up being a mixture of female acquaintances with an age range of 35-37 years of age and university graduates. Five of the participants were married and one was in a committed domestic partnership. It could also be noted that two of the participants had stepchildren in their family. All the parents participating had more than one child, with at least one child being in the target age range for this study. One of the mothers was currently a stay-at-home Mom, while the others all currently worked one or more jobs. I took into consideration that since the participants of this study shared similar demographical information, that the results could be limited to within those specific demographics. There was also the consideration that the participants and I had either gone to High School or College together and whether that would influence or alter the findings. However, I also believe that since we knew each other and regardless of how long it had been since we spoke last it allowed for the interview process to be comfortable.

Six interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom with mothers of children ranging from 14 months of age to 13 years of age, with the focus on children between the ages of 2 and 6. According to the American standard family income, these parents are middle income to upper middle-income earners. All the participants were given pseudonyms and are referred to as Lizzie, Mandy, Amanda, Polly, Sarah, and Jessica. These mothers combined have 16 children. A limitation of this study lies in the small sample size, a larger sample size could possibly show results that vary in the way, type, and number of toys the parents may purchase for their children. As well allow for a broader result based off the participants and their socioeconomic backgrounds.

### 3.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

By drawing upon previous research of these different areas, it helped shape the current study and allowed interview questions to be drawn from them. Previous research became a large motivation in this study, since many previous studies did not utilize interviews, I believe this study by utilizing interviews allowed for a better understanding of the thought process of parents when purchasing toys for their children. Interviews allowed for comprehensive data to be gathered, that often cannot be found in questionnaires. Since interview allows flexibility for the participant to fully explain their responses, more can be understood about the purchasing process (Bryman, 2015:468).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six mothers in the United States. The semi-structured interviews allowed for each interview to comprise of the same general questions, therefore allowing for more reasoning from a participant perspective (Bryman, 2015:468). In this type of qualitative method, a list of questions was created around the topic to help loosely guide the interview process and is referred to as the Interview Guide (see appendix 1). Each interview addressed the same general questions, but the flow of the interview varied between participants as well as the questions asked, and therefore allowing room for additional questions to be asked or additional input from the interviewee to be heard (Bryman, 2015:468). It was important that I was flexible in the interviews, that I understood and respected the participants refusal to answer a question or need to elaborate more on a certain topic (Bryman, 2015: 483). The combination of specific questions and open-ended questions helped not only keep the interviews on the topic of the study but allowed for the participants to also explain their reasonings for their purchases and highlight any similarities or differences between the participants.

The interviews were all carried out remotely using Zoom and recorded. From my perspective, the digital platform has not had a negative effect on the interview situations (cf. Bryman, 2015: 485). I feel that both I and the participants were able to hear and see each other clearly and that the interaction between us has worked well. While only the audio was recorded for the transcription process, the ability to see the participant allowed the experience of the interview to feel personal and more like a typical in person interview. A questionnaire may allow room for a parent to fully explain their answers, however it does not allow room for the researcher to ask follow-up questions. By conducting semi-structured interviews, I was able to clarify certain responses, ask additional questions and thus gain a nuanced understanding of the mothers' toy purchasing processes.

The interviews on Zoom lasted between 35 minutes to 65 minutes. By using the Zoom platform for the interview, I was able to use the record feature and the audio was recorded and saved directly to my LIU One-Drive account. The audio recordings were transcribed into a word document, which is essential to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006:87). A key step in thematic analysis is the transcribing of the data, as it develops a detailed understanding of the data (ibid:88). Listening to the recording and reading the transcribed interview together was an important part of the process for me to become familiar with the data.

### 3.3 INTERVIEW GUIDE

By coming up with a few themes for the interview questions, I was able to focus the interview around specific areas of the toy purchasing process. These themes then became the basis of the Interview Guide (see appendix 1) and from there I added possible follow up questions. While already having a general direction in mind for the questions, the previous research assisted in adding additional areas to be discussed during the interview. For example, after reading research on the effects of marketing on toy decisions, a question was formed under the reasoning of the purchase and so I asked if the parent “saw the toy somewhere?” While conducting the interviews often another interview question would come up, that I would then ask in the following interviews. These additional questions allowed for a deeper thought process on the research question and by adding more interview questions, allowed for a clearer response of the research questions. This also allowed for me to keep the interviewee engaged and speaking on the topic. I began the interview with general questions, asking the participants their name, how many children they have and what their occupation was. These general questions formed a framework to go with and understand the dynamics of the family I will be asking questions about. Allowing for a flowing conversation into asking the participant what reasonings they had for purchasing the toys they have in their home.

I sought to ask as many open-ended questions as I could to allow the parent to have the opportunity to elaborate on their reasonings. Sometimes, I did ask direct questions, such as if they purchased toys online or in a store. But then if they said they did purchase in stores, I would ask them what store or stores do you purchase toys in? The flexibility of a semi-structured interview and an interview guide, allowed for detailed and structured information to be gathered on the purchasing process of toys and the reasonings behind parental purchases.

### 3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While utilizing a method such as interviews often yield rich data for studies such as this one, there are many ethical considerations that must be considered. Since conducting an interview

is an interpersonal process, as an interviewer I must be aware of my own behaviour and assumptions (MacDonald & Headlam, 1986:39). The process should be comfortable for the participant, and the interviewer is to ensure this. The participant should be well informed about the study, so that they are then able to give their consent (Farrell, 2005:27). Informed consent was obtained two ways for this study. First, I sent the participants a consent form to be signed, that outlined the study and explained how I would be storing their information and for how long. The second part was during the actual interview, as I asked for consent from the participant to record the interview. In the email to the participant enclosing the consent form, I told them to let me know if they have any questions about the form or process and at the time of the interview, that they could refuse to answer any question or end the interview at any given time.

With this study being conducted in the United States, additional ethical laws were taken into consideration. The United States have local and federal laws that must be followed when conducting research. While many of the guidelines are reminiscent of the current ones being used in Linköping University, I re-familiarized myself with the United States ethical guidelines and ensured that I was following them appropriately. I needed to remain professional in my research, even though the participants were acquaintances, I treated them all professionally and respectfully during the entire process (American Sociological Association, code of ethics, 2018:5). Discrimination is taken very seriously and includes the selection of participants and their ethnicity; socioeconomic status and any health or disability was not discriminated upon or in any way a deciding factor for them to be participants in the study (ibid: 7). The selection of my participants was based on whether they had a child within the appropriate age range for my study and lived in the United States. The privacy of the participants in the study is an obligation of the researcher (ibid, 10). The handling of the data, storage of the data and the representation of the participant all must be considered in their privacy. A main consideration here, is that my computer that holds all the data through One-Drive, which is secured through my Linköping University account. An important step of protection is that the computer the data is being held on be password protected (Müller, 2012:174) and using a secure server such as OneDrive. I have given my participants pseudonyms and considered how much information I gave away about their background, so that they cannot be identified from my study.

There are ethical considerations to keep in mind even while analysing the data. It is important to not impose my own personal views onto the data. It is very difficult to be unbiased therefore when searching for codes during the thematic analysis I had to be careful that my own

opinions and viewpoints were not influencing the themes that were coming out from analysing the data. Ensuring the validity of my data is an important consideration. It is important to note that I took into consideration the fact that I wanted printed material to work with, so when I printed the transcripts, I only had the pseudonyms on them and when I was not using them, I had them put away in a locked cabinet.

### 3.5 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was selected for the data analysis of this research project, it allowed room for the opportunity to work in an inductive way, close to the interview data and create themes from it. Why thematic analysis was important here is that themes can be found in the responses from interviews, and I was really looking for a way for my research to be highlighted into specific themes. Thematic analysis reports experiences and meanings and these give depth to the responses in an interview (Braun & Clark, 2006:81). By utilizing thematic analysis, I became familiar with the data searching for codes and themes. By conducting the interviews and transcribing them it allowed me to understand my data and feel comfortable in explaining the data as well.

The themes are not directly standing out in the data, they are the stories that the data tells and highlights theoretical assumptions of the researchers work (Braun & Clark, 2019:594). With the interview transcripts printed I could sit down and read them through and highlight responses from the parents that stood out to me or even those that very similar across participants, I even made notes in the side-lines of the transcript. To create themes, I needed to come up with a way to code the data from the interview transcripts and after reading the transcripts and seeing that certain words were standing out to me, I decided to use these highlighted words to become the codes for the thematic analysis. Codes help identify a feature of the data, it is something that is interesting to the researcher and refers to the basic idea of the research problem (Braun & Clark, 2006: 88). I then created a list of these codes and went through the transcripts another time to see what questions were being answered with these codes by the parents.

Since I did not have a partner to collaborate with and allow for another take on how the data was being represented and developed, that is often important in the analysis of research, I had to make some adjustments in my analysis (Braun & Clark, 2019:594). I then came back to the data at different points through the whole process of the thesis, in hopes that the next time I went through the data, another code or theme would develop, this was a very successful step

in my analysis. To come up with the themes for the analysis was a process that was refined several times. I made a visual aide by creating a mind map and connecting the codes to possible themes. While some themes turned into subthemes and others needed revisions to correctly fit together and even simply refining the name of the theme. The final step would be to describe the theme, so the reader understands the themes definition.

While several different themes emerged from analysing the data, I only highlighted the central findings from the interviews in my analysis. I wanted to be able to include as many participants as possible in the analysis and present a wide range of factors that showcase the complexity of parents' purchasing process of toys for their children. While the focus was on answering the research questions for this study, many other themes were prevalent from the data, but I did not elaborate on all of them and a main reasoning behind this was since some previous research has already focused on those areas, and I wanted to move beyond what has already been said. As mentioned earlier in previous research a returning theme within these studies is that parents consider gender appropriate toys. This was a returning reasoning in this study as well but not as influential on the purchasing process as stated in earlier studies, so this was a theme not selected for the analysis in this study.

From the thematic analysis the following themes were created: The occasions mothers are purchasing toys, child's wishes or parental preference, the value of toys (monetary, outdoor play, durability, safety, educational) and the Internet (purchases, reviews). After reviewing the research question and the responses the main themes were selected for the analysis, it was also then that the themes were refined, and subthemes were created. For example, originally, I had the subthemes under the value of toys (monetary, outdoor play, durability, safety, educational), all as their own *main* theme, but after reviewing the data again I realized that these were all *values* to the parents, so I was able to create a main theme with the subthemes under it, representing the values discussed in the interviews. It is important to understand when you are working with research data, often things come together quickly but after careful review it can be clear that themes could be categorized into a large theme and those that I originally considered a theme are now in fact subthemes. This occurred when I was then specifically attempting to answer the research questions. This is also when I realized that values were very important to these parents and that their values were playing a vital role in the process of purchasing toys.

While in my analysis I touch on most of these mentioned themes from the findings, some are more in depth for the main purpose of answering the research questions. All the

findings from the study are important; however, the focus is on how parents reason their toy purchases and what factors play a role in the process.

## 4 ANALYSIS

The findings from this study show that there are *numerous* factors that go into making a toy purchase for a child, in fact it is rare that a purchase is spontaneous. To answer the research questions the analysis will be presented in the following order: The occasions mothers are purchasing toys, child's wishes or parental preference, the value of toys (monetary, outdoor play, durability, safety, educational) and the Internet (purchases, reviews).

### 4.1 THE OCCASIONS MOTHERS ARE PURCHASING TOYS

My first research question focused on how mothers' *reason* their toy purchases for their children and as I have found in this study, it is not a simple question to answer, the data has shown that it is a layered and complex process. One of the main ways parents are reasoning about the purchase is the occasion the toy is purchased for. It became evident when reading the transcripts that holidays and birthdays were the occasions parents were making important decisions about toys for their children. This is to not say that this is the only time they purchase toys, other times included rewards for good behaviour or grades, summer vacation, and the child purchasing the toy with gifted or earned money. Christmas was mentioned in all the interviews as a time the mothers made significant decisions about what toys to purchase for their children.

Majority of the mothers stated that toy purchases are not a spontaneous act, that they are often planned out. Jessica explains that she will

[...] not purchase toys randomly. Like I won't go into the store and buy my kids toys, or do I buy them every month. It is very rare that I will just go and buy toys for the sake of buying toys. Their birthdays are around the same time as the holidays. I don't necessarily purchase toys throughout the year for like rewards or anything (Jessica).

When I then specifically asked when she is then purchasing toys to clarify this response, she says "For the most part just holidays and birthdays maybe during the summer when they are home, will I then maybe make a special purchase." Amanda's response was similar but that she tries to think about purchasing toys more often since her children's birthdays are also right around the holidays, she says "I try to be better about being more spontaneous throughout the year because new toys are fun. I just do not splurge too much."

Beyond these occasions, the frequency mothers are purchasing their child's toys, does however vary.

More than just birthdays, probably once a month or so there is something new that comes into the house (Polly).

[...] the middle one...once every two to three months if he has been behaving in school, I will get him a toy as a reward. The younger one, I buy her toys frequently because she is spoiled, she is my only girl, and she gets what she wants or what I want (Lizzie).

Polly and Lizzie both talked about new toys coming into the house monthly. Lizzie often purchases toys as a reward for one of her children doing well in school, so the frequency then varies depending on when a reward is due. Then when she talks about her daughter Lizzie uses the word "spoiled" here and a few other times during the interview, it could be a way for her to reason why she purchases her so many toys when compared to her other children.

Toys are most often being purchased for a gift, but these mothers showed us that there are times when a parent will purchase a toy for their child for the fact that getting a toy is fun, whether it is for a reward or for something new to play with during the summer. Now it is understood when parents are most often purchasing toys, but then how do they decide what toy to purchase?

#### 4.2 CHILD'S WISHES OR PARENTAL PREFERENCES?

While the mother may be encouraging their children to share their input on the type of toys they like, over half of the mothers stated that will typically pick only a couple toys off the child's own wish list because they already have their own ideas of what they will be purchasing. Amanda explains that her husband and her,

[...] usually end up having our own ideas of things we want to get the kids and we will have separate conversations with the kids and see what they like or asking for [...] There are usually a few things I want to get them and a few things he wants to get them. Then we usually have a conversation, what will be fun, what will the use, what have they been asking for (Amanda).

Amanda and her husband talk to their children to get their input but ultimately it is them together that is making the decision on which toys to purchase. Other mothers showed similar responses, when asked if she tries to make her child a part of the process of purchasing toys, Polly explained that:

With the older one, I will sit there and show her the toy and ask what colour she wants the doll in or if she likes this toy or what she wants

to play with and if she says no, then we will find something else (Polly).

So, while she is asking what preference her child has in a toy, the initial toys she is showing her child are ones she has already pre-picked out for her child to choose from and then as a last choice, allowing her child to choose her own ideas of what toys they would like if the ones the mother initially picked out are turned down. The mothers were clearly stating that while it is important to take their child's wishes into consideration, it was just as important that their wishes were a part of the process. Mothers are considerate of their child's own wishes however there is a certain balance that must be obtained between purchasing what your child wants and what you see is best for your child. Mothers have their own ideas of what toys their children should have, and they are in the position to make that final decision as the primary purchaser of toy.

However, the mothers also expressed understanding which toys their children preferred or what characters their children enjoyed, and they often would make purchases decisions based off these. Selecting which toys to purchase for their children, is not a simple process. These mothers showed that in fact it is very complex process of attempting to balance what their children's wishes are along with their own preferences of toys. Amanda spoke about how she has now learned to pay close attention to what toys her child asks for and she does this because she says that her child's wishes often changes. These mothers want their kids to have the toys they like and will play with, but they also have a good understanding of their children and know what is best for them. There is a balance being played here between who's agency is the most important when it comes to toy selection, is it the children or is it the mothers? These mothers all discussed the importance of hearing their children's request for toys and even how they do this but also that they believe they know their child best.

#### 4.3 THE VALUE OF TOYS

##### 4.3.1 COST OF THE TOY – MAIN FACTOR OR NOT?

While the cost of the toy is a returning theme when discussing the toy purchasing process with the mothers it is however not always the primary reasoning. Throughout this study the cost of a toy is mentioned in junction with other factors the mothers discussed as part of their process. When asked about the monthly budget for toys the mothers said that they did not have a specific toy allowance in their monthly budgets. They are instead purchasing toys from other categories in their monthly budget, such as gifts, Christmas, miscellaneous and even sometimes savings. Which could be a reason for why the cost of the toy is an important value since the mothers are

having to take money away from another part of their monthly budget to purchase toys. While Mandy and her husband have a monthly budget they follow, there is not a section allotted for toys, but Mandy says that is not a problem because she is very frugal and if a “Toy is \$60, I won’t spend that, I can’t in good faith spend that much on a toy when in a year, no one will play with it”. Sarah also had a similar response when discussing toys and a budget. When asked if she had a budget for toys, she stated:

No never really thought of it that way, they (the kids) do not know how much it costs, as long as it is something I know they are interested in. But if it is a ridiculous amount of money, I am not going to buy it. They are at an age where they are not going to play with it too long (Sarah).

With these examples, we see the indication that cost is not always a main factor to these parents, there are other factors they are considering also, such as how long a child will play with the toy. The cost is still a valued part of the purchasing process because the mentioning of costs comes up again and again in the interviews. Both mothers are saying, as well, that they won’t spend a huge amount of money on a toy for their child because they know the children won’t use the toys for that long. So, cost then becomes important here in relation to the longevity of a toy for these mothers.

During the holidays the mothers discussed monetary concerns with purchasing toys for their children. One concern revolves around trying to spend the same amount of money per child, when asked specifically if she does this, Polly stated “So I try to but because they are all different age groups, their toys vary and what they are into vary, so the prices of toys vary, so it’s kind of hard”. Polly goes on to say that often she must purchase the same toy for her two older children, so they don’t fight over the one toy. Then Mandy even went to explain further that with her children, while she tries to spend the same amount of money, she is ultimately “going to buy the kids equal amounts of presents because on Christmas morning they count the presents.” So, while Mandy goes on to say that she is “frugal” and won’t “spend a ridiculous amount of money” on a toy, she is also concerned that what she does purchase in the end is equal between her children, while attempting to keep the cost equal and the amount of toys purchased equal.

These mothers reveal how many factors are in play at once in the toy purchasing process, the parental thought on the costs is one, the child perception of the value of a toy is another, and the age group of the child is another. These examples show how mothers try to spend around the same amount of money on, for example, Christmas gifts for their children while the children

seem to focus more on the number toys they receive. Mandy's children seem to care less about the monetary value of the toys they receive, they value the number of toys and compare that number to their siblings.

As shown, cost becomes important in various ways and this study shows that there are many variables in play when purchasing toys for special occasions. Mothers consider their own and the children's wishes and needs and invest time in reasoning around toys based on both costs and occasions when it is appropriate for children to receive a toy. In addition to this, as will be shown next, there are also different values linked to toys which become central in parents talk about the decisions to purchase a certain toy or not.

#### 4.3.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF OUTDOOR PLAY

I think it is important to note that in the interview guide there was not a specific question asking the parents about outdoor toys. However, four out of the six participants mentioned the purchasing of outdoor toys in their interviews. Mandy said that it is very important for her children to be outside as much as possible. Her children and her are participating in the 1000 hours outside project, encouraging parents to go outside with their children and to get away from screens, such as TV or tablets. The global movement states that in a years' time children spend 1200 hours in front of screens and the goal is to also have children be outside with nature for 1000 hours (Yurich, n.d.).

In our childhood we would wake up and go outside and be outside ALL day. And so that is why I started the 1000 hours outside challenge, so I have a pie chart for the kids to see how much time they are outside. It is shocking how much time they do not spend outside, so I make them go outside more so it becomes natural (Mandy).

Mandy goes on to discuss how it's not the same now for her children as it was when she was growing up, that kids do not play outside like she did. She is being active in making sure her children have a childhood like her own by participating in the 1000 hours project. Therefore, it is important for outdoor play to be fun and inviting to their children.

All but one of the mothers were honest that the pandemic made a large impact on their increase in purchasing outdoor toys for their children. At the start of 2020 the sales of toys in USA were low but after schools were cancelled and families were asked to stay home, toy sales drastically rose around April 2020 and continued to grow the rest of the year (Lennett: 2021; Tsai, 2020:1-2). Sarah stated at the time they were in quarantine, living in an apartment and could not go anywhere, she ended up purchasing some outdoor push toys for the children to play with. She was not alone in this trend; Polly and her husband purchased a large outdoor

playset for their children due to the pandemic. Typically, she said they will not purchase a toy above \$150 but since they were being quarantined, it was important to encourage their children to play outside. Polly stated she initially attempted to get her children to go outside in their yard and play but they wanted to only go to a playground. It was after this that her husband and her decided that it was beneficial to their family to purchase an outdoor playset. She says that her children were happy to go outside and play and she says they still use it, even though they are no longer in quarantine. The outdoor playset was a very valuable purchase for their family. The pandemic was not the only reason for outdoor purchases. Jessica stated she purposely purchases more toys for outside than inside. She says a large motivation of this is for the purpose of having less clutter in her home. It is important for her that her children's room stay nice and neat, and she encourages them to play outside as often as possible.

It was evident that being outdoors was very important to these mothers and they valued that their children are playing outside and why they invest money in toys encouraging their children to be outdoors. While some of the mothers highly valued keeping a routine and normalcy during the pandemic, they also valued the kids getting fresh air and not only sitting by the computer. Others drew to nostalgia and memories and said that they wanted the children to have the same childhood experiences as they did.

In our childhood we would wake up and go outside and be outside all day. And so that is why I started the 1000 hours outside challenge [...] so I make them go outside more so it becomes natural (Amanda).

One mother also highlighted a more practical aspect, and that outdoor play was also associated with fewer toys to clean and keep track of indoors. In this way, parents value outdoor play in several ways, but it becomes one of the key factors that they consider when reasoning about toy purchases.

#### 4.3.3 DURABLE TOYS

In addition to outdoor play, the parents of this study also value durable toys. The parents have, for example, reasoned that toys that can be used by several children and mean fewer toy purchases over time. Mandy said that she would rather spend the extra money on the name brand toy, so it would last longer and be passed on from one child to the next, than spending money on a cheaper version of the same toy. This finding supports Al Kurdi's findings that "toy durability was essential" in purchasing toys for children (2017:111). Parents are wanting their children's toy to be a quality product and can last through multiple children, and they are successfully seeking them out. Mandy was also the first parent to state that she has not

purchased any toys for her youngest child, since she has saved all the toys her two older children have had, therefore there has not been a need for new toys. These toys are “new” for her youngest child, and she says they are enjoyed just the same as when they were initially purchased. These durable toys have been very successful and valued purchases for her. This seemed to be one of the larger factors that Mandy considered in relation to the toy purchasing process, some toys need to last over time and are therefore seen as investments. Many of the toys certainly seem to have become investment since Mandy additionally told they had lasted for more than ten years now. So, while she may have purchased the toy at a higher price point originally, the fact that it has lasted for over ten years, it can be said the family got their money’s worth out of the toy purchase.

The analysis further indicates that the parents in this study are excited to see when the toys grow with their children. There are toys marketed in the United States that will grow with your child, there is a market for these types of toys and in the interviews of these parents in the United States it was clear that it was of great value to them that when they purchase certain toys for their children, they are looking that these toys can last a long time and even grow with their child. When discussing budgets and purchasing toys, many of the mothers said they do not see value in purchasing a toy that their child is not going to be interested in shortly after receiving it. They want the toy to be of interest for a longer period of time. Jessica for example said she was happy to see her children still playing with their play kitchen. Even her oldest child still plays with it and with their younger sibling, Jessica says they play restaurant now together. The toy kitchen grew with her children, instead of just pretending to cook, they are now setting up a restaurant and playing cook and server and she is so happy to see that it is still of interest to her children. It was a large purchase for the family, so to see it still being used several years later seemed to be highly valued by Jessica.

That parents value durable toys and invest a little more money in a toy that they think will last over time can also be understood in relation to the fact that the parents in this study seemed weary of toys that are not of good quality. I want to bring up a notion that Amanda called a “time limit toy” which she describes as,

A cheap toy like the McDonalds happy meal toys, or from a goodie bag (at a children’s party) [...] When the kids get them, they think they are the greatest, best thing ever but by day 3 they never touch it again. Instead of getting rid of the toy, I told them it’s a time limit toy. It is a toy we play with for a few days and then when it is done, we are going to donate it, and another kid can play with it (Amanda).

Amanda goes on to explain that these toys are not her favourite, and she had to come up with a better tactic than just throwing them away and having upset children because the toy was gone. So now when her children get these types of toys, she reminds them that it's a time limit toy and they understand that they will only have it for a short time to play with. Often these toys are not good quality and would not be something a parent would typically purchase. The example of Amanda is interesting because it shows how the value of sustainability moves beyond buying toys that last over time whether it is about letting a sibling inheriting toys or watching the toys grow with the children. Parents also use the durability of toys to teach their children that certain toys do not last forever, that it is good to recycle and reuse and that some toys are of better quality than others.

#### 4.3.4 PLAYTIME SAFETY

During the interviews it became clear that an important part of the toy purchasing process for parents is about whether the toys are safe for the children. Parents are factoring in different safety aspects when making purchases and place a lot of trust and value in providing their children safe toys. While previous research shows how parents often consider safety aspects such as age recommendations when purchasing toys for their children (Liu et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2020) the parents in this study primarily highlight their concern about the toxic materials toys are made of.

For Sarah a main factor in toy selection is based on whether the toy could be efficiently cleaned and were not made of any harmful materials. With two children under the age of three, this was very important to her as children of this age are often placing toys in their mouths. As a result, when purchasing a toy, she looks to see how easily it would be to clean the surface. Sarah said she received a wooden train set as a hand me down toy and she does not like that it is not so easy to clean, because it is wood it will absorb the chemicals she cleans with. So, while the train set can be asked to be played with, however she says it is often not taken out to be played with because of the hassle of cleaning it. Even when asked if she has a toy brand, she prefers it revolves around this specific topic

There is something at Target called Green Toys and they tend to be more environmentally friendly and green and have no harmful chemicals in them (Sarah).

Amanda had similar concerns about the toy containing BPA (bisphenol A), or other toxic chemicals in them. Her concerns started when the children are younger and at that stage when they are putting everything in their mouths just as Sarah stated. She wanted to make sure the toy was not made from any toxic chemicals. She goes on to say it is still a concern to her child

as they have grown up and now making sure what her child cup for example is BPA or toxic free.

This is a very common factor for parents in the United States, they want to be able to clean any germs off surfaces their children play with and that there are no harmful chemicals found in their toys. In the United States there has been news segments done showing the inside of bath toys and how many bath toys held mould inside and the potential harm it can cause to children who ingest water from these toys (Bhaskar, 2021). This provoked different responses from parents all over the country, and even resulted in many parents now purchasing non-traditional bath toys for their children or plugging up the holes in the bath toys, so no water can get inside and develop mould. Therefore, it was no surprise this was an important factor to the parents in this study as well. Sarah for example stated she makes sure that the toy she purchases for bath time does not have a hole in it so no water can be absorbed or toys that she can glue the hole shut to avoid water from getting inside.

Another safety aspect to consider when it comes to toys is that today, many toys come with age recommendations. Age recommendations as such are not only designed for the safety of children, but when it comes to young children, age recommendations usually indicate whether the toys contain parts that could potentially harm the child. As in previous research, the parents in this study relate to such recommendations regarding age, but in a slightly different way than just following the recommendations given on the toys. A mother in this study, Polly, for example mentioned having to consider the type of toys her oldest child gets, since toys with smaller parts could be dangerous to the youngest child.

When I purchase toys now, the main thing is the safety aspect of it, like if I purchase something for the older child will it have small parts the baby can get too (Polly).

Here, the recommended age of the toy is not a problem for who the toy is intended for, it is rather dangerous for the younger sibling that could accidentally get a hold of the toy. This does not stop Polly, however, from purchasing these types of toys for her child, it just means implementing new rules in the house for when her children can play with the toys. Another mother, Sarah, says she tends to buy toys that the age recommendation is older than her children because she wants them to be able to grow into the toy. Another mother, Mandy, even stated she does not even look at the recommended age because she says every child is different and the parent knows what is best for their child, not the toy manufacturers age suggestion.

These reflections on age recommendations on children's toys adds to the very vast area of studies (Richards et al., 2020, cf. Fisher-Thompson, 1993). This study shows that parents are

not mainly focusing their deciding safety factors on age recommendation, however they do take it into consideration when wanting to protect the younger siblings in the house or even to use the toy more of a learning tool, to let the child grow into the toy. Parents are concerned about their child's safety, and this is no different when it comes to the toys their children play with. However, as the study shows, parents are very creative in the ways they protect their child, from purchasing bath toys that can't hold water and grow mould, to making play rules so that the toys they purchase for their older children will not harm their younger ones.

#### 4.3.5 DEVELOPMENTAL VALUES

When discussing younger children often developmental goals are used in The United States to talk about the way a child is growing up. Many toys in the United States, especially those marketed for younger children, emphasize what the toy can do to benefit the child and their development. This marketing strategy often reflects a parent's preference in purchasing these types of toys that highlight developmental benefits for children (Hassinger-Das et al., 2021:9). Therefore, it was understandable when most of the mothers in this study discussed that often a purpose of a toy purchase is for the benefit of their child and their developmental growth. Parents are wanting their children to learn new things, to develop and be educated.

One mother, Lizzie, for example feels so strongly about educational toys, that most of her children's toys are initially learning based. She says she wants them to start off being able to learn the basic tools for life. When she was asked which types of toy brands she prefers, her answers were toy brands that are well known in the United States for being learning based toys: V-tech and Leapfrog. Another mother, Polly, was also very adamant that her husband and her truly believe the best toys for their children are learning based toys.

We try to stick with more educational toys, it's just something that my husband and I have always agreed on, if it's educational we don't mind spending the extra money on it (Polly).

Both mothers stated they had no problem paying a higher price for a toy, if the toy was educational, it was worth the money to them to purchase it for their child. However, both mothers believe that it is just as important that their children learn during playtime as that the children also enjoy the toy being played with.

In addition to the strong educational value that toys are attributed by parents, these examples show how parents need to consider various factors, such as enjoyment of toy and child's own personal interest, at the same time when making decisions about purchasing toys, which further shows how involved the toy purchasing process truly is. It could have been interesting to at this point also ask these mothers if any of their reasonings behind the

educational toy purchases was influenced by them wanting to show what a good mother they were by purchasing these types of toys for their children.

#### 4.4 THE CONVENIENCE OF TOY SHOPPING ONLINE

##### 4.4.1 PURCHASES FROM HOME

Toy purchasing has increased online in recent years. The current events of the world during the timing of the interviews were also taken into consideration, as a global pandemic was happening. Therefore, when I asked the mothers where and how they typically buy their toys, I added in for them to possibly elaborate if this answer has recently changed because of the ongoing pandemic. The pandemic has made an impact on the everyday lives of families and some mothers in this study reflect on this. Some of the mothers will report that they did in fact buy more toys online because of the pandemic but others stated they have already been purchasing toys online for many years.

Mandy stated she only shops for toys online and more specifically she “cannot remember the last time we purchased a toy in the store.” For her husband it is all about the convenience of getting the toy as quickly as possible, so he will choose the first one he likes regardless of price and select the delivery option that will arrive the fastest. In all the interview’s mothers mentioned they purchase a lot of toys online and each of them also mentioned the same online retailer, amazon. The other common websites mentioned were for Target and Walmart. It almost became a pattern during the interview process when I asked this question and they all started having the same responses, this is when I realized that the internet was such a huge factor in the process of purchasing toys for parents.

The mothers are now wanting the ease of purchasing toys online, whether it be to avoid the hassle of children asking for every possible toy while in the store or to them rather being at home spending time with the family than out shopping. Regardless of the reason, the internet is playing a large role in the lives of these families and assisting in the purchasing of toys. Online shopping allows for consumers to compare not only prices between retailers but also the reviews of toy products. Parents find it hard to pass up the convenience of online shopping especially when their daily lives are busy (cf. Rosen, 2017).

The internet is also assisting parents with discussing with their children the toys they want. It is being used as a tool also to look at toys of interest and make decisions about them together.

Yeah, so for the last few years we will sit her down at the computer and pull up amazon or Walmart and go to the toy section and we taught her how to

click favorite or even just put it into the cart, the things she likes so she will go through the different things and put something things into the cart, so that gives us a really good idea of the types of toys she is interested in playing with (Amanda).

Amanda even goes on to say that she has a Wishlist for each family member on her amazon account, so anytime she sees or thinks of something she adds it to her list and now she is doing this with her child as well. Amanda also stated that if her child asks for a specific toy, she will often pull it up on the computer so they can sit down together, look at the toy and discuss it. This could then argue that the findings in Richards et al (2020:2) is not always the case, that in fact parents are still gaining their child's input on their decisions while using the internet for both the research and discussion of the toy to the actual purchase of the toy. The internet can still be like going to a toy store together with your child.

What was interesting was Sarah stated her children have never even been inside of any store, including a toy store, due to the pandemic. She also purchases her toys solely online, stating she is just not a fan of going into stores, even before the pandemic she felt the same way. While some may have started using online services more recently due to the pandemic, several of the mothers stated they have been utilizing the internet for many years now for aiding in their purchasing of toys. While we can see that the pandemic did have an impact on the frequency the internet was the source of purchasing toys, it is also just as clear that the internet as a tool for parents is not a new concept. Parents in this study for example mentioned they relied on the internet for several different reasons and that they are using it to find good deals on toys for their children, for convenient delivery options and for reading reviews on toys.

Despite the pandemic growth of sales of toys online increased drastically in 2020 but also did the sales of brick-and-mortar stores that offered online purchases and delivery option (Lennett: 2021). This is a new area of research and any information about family situations and circumstances due to the pandemic is very important. This is a new way of normal and any insight into it will be greatly beneficial and add to the growing importance area of study. The internet is becoming more prevalent in everyday lives, so to better understand the outlets parents are using them with their children would be beneficial to the field of child studies.

#### 4.4.2 INSTANT ACCESS TO REVIEWS

With the abundance and easy access of being able to purchase toys online, parents also have the great advantage of being able to read reviews while they are shopping online. It is just a scroll or click away and they can read what others have had to say about the toy. The data from the interviews clearly show that online reviews are in fact very important to the parents and

often a great aide in the toy decision-making process. Amanda utilizes the reviews in a different approach than the other mothers mentioned:

Today there are so many reviews online, and I feel like that is where I go. I read the reviews, I try to read the one star or two-star reviews and see what people are negatively saying about the product. To see if I can deal with that (Amanda).

Not only is she reading the reviews but also focusing on the bad reviews to get a better understanding of the deficiencies in the toy. Combined then with the convenience of not leaving the home (Richards et al, 2020:1) and finding a positive online review of the desired product, parents are more likely to make the purchase online after reading the review (Flanagin et al, 2014:14). Online reviews are thus helping parents communicate to each other about the good and bad qualities of the toys they have purchased for their children. Sometimes these reviews are detailed that you can specifically relate to the parent leaving the review because your children have similar characteristics, so if you see the toy was beneficial to that child you may be more inclined to purchase the toy after now having read the reviews. Another mother, Sarah, also says she spends a lot of time researching and reviewing toys for her children, especially STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) toys, she says the quality of the toy matters to her, and she goes to the reviews for this information. She is very interested engineering-based tools for her young children, so she does research to make sure the toy fits what she is looking for her children.

To understand what the toy is specifically designed for is important to, parents want it to be clear when they are looking for certain types of toys that they see what the aspects of the toys are. This is common in the states with toys for younger children, often aimed at assisting in their developmental goals. Typically, the toy description listed on the website will describe to the parent what the toy can do, whether it is to teach colors, learn to count, or hand eye coordination, it is important for the parent to see what the toy can do, they are then taking this toy description and reading other parents reviews to see if the toy is doing what the description is claiming to do.

In addition to the other factors shown throughout this chapter, these parents' stories show that online reviews are one factor that has become very important when parents are planning for the purchase of toys for their children (cf. Richards et al., 2020). Not only do parents value the rating of a toy, but also the personal reviews of other parents and their likes and dislikes of the toy they are considering purchasing for their child.

## 5 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Children interact with toys daily; however little qualitative research has focused on why parents purchase certain toys for their children (Richards et al., 2020:1). Parents are often the primary purchaser of toys for their children and this study revealed that mothers are the main purchasers in the family. The aim of the present study was to explore how parents' reason about the toy purchasing process, what factors that becomes important for the decision to purchase a toy and why. Previous research focused on one or two aspects that affected parental toy preferences however this qualitative approach made it possible to show how all factors come together demonstrating how complex the processes of toy purchasing truly is.

The analysis showed that parents indeed consider a variety of factors and not only one or two and in fact different factors are interwoven when considering purchasing toys for children. Mothers' responses revealed how the occasion the purchase is for and the cost of the toy together with several values connected to the toys, children's own wishes, the convenience of online shopping and reviews are interwoven when parents make decisions. Parents want their child to have educational toys and they consider aspects tied to the children such as age, skill ability, preference in toys and their own wishes and values such as durability, price, quality, safety, nostalgia, etc. while reading reviews of other parents on the selection of toys before then coming to a decision and making the purchase. The study also shows how parents discuss that the purchasing process varies each time depending on the purpose of the toy and then noticeably changing per child as the mothers also clearly stated that each of their children are different and so they then therefore have different factors to be brought into the purchasing process. While this is a multifaceted process, these American mothers did not complain or seem to mind going through this process, in fact when they spoke about purchasing toys for their children, it was clear they enjoyed it and were eager to discuss this topic.

These mothers communicated that how much their children influence their purchasing of toys varies and they are considering, more or less, their children's wishes. Children are for example communicating which toys they want and which ones they enjoy playing with, the parents then decide what toys they will purchase for their children. Sometimes these mothers are taking into consideration the direct wishes from their children, but it is more involved than that. Often the parents also have their own views on what toys their children should have; they then research reviews on the toys, safety factors, compare prices, consider what purpose the toy should serve to ultimately find the right toy for their child. Further, as shown, the parents own preferences of toys have a big impact on what toys are purchased for their children.

In the United States there is a lot of focus on children's development and their learning goals, so it was not surprising when in every interview the importance of their children having educational toys was discussed. The mothers are seeking out toys that help teach their children new skills, (cf. Al Kurdi, 2017:112). Whether the toys are initially learning based and helping children with learning their shapes and colors or to more advanced toys encouraging children to broaden their development with STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) based toys, parents are honest that developmental and learning goals are important reasons in purchasing toys. These mothers talk about such understanding and care for their children when it comes to the reasoning of their purchases.

Gender has been a common topic over the years in previous research, especially recently with toy selection. Many of the previous studies showed that parents are still preferring to purchase gender specific toys for their children (Kollmayer 2018:339, Al Kurdi, 2017:105). Due to the abundance of previous research I decided to not focus on gender in the analysis and also while I did not specifically ask the mothers their viewpoint on gender specific toys it is still an interesting topic for discussion here. This study, as an alternative, demonstrated that there is very little emphasis placed on this, by not asking directly about gender specific toys it could be argued that the mothers did not know to discuss it, but the focus of this study was to understand the purchasing process and the reasonings behind their purchases, so therefore to these group of mothers' genders was not a reasoning. While none of the parents directly stated they purchase toys specifically for their child's gender or that they purchase gender neutral toys, it was clear that some toys being purchase may fit into the typical gender stereotype. For example, the mother of a young boy purchasing dump trucks or a daughter getting "anything girly" because the mother wanted her to have those types of toys, such as purses and dolls. So, while there may be some gender stereotypical purchases being made, gender specific toys did not become a part of the discussion on their own. Again, showing that many factors are being taken into consideration by these mothers.

Further, the internet seems to be currently the most popular way of purchasing toys. Between previous research findings (Richards et al, 2020:5) and annual toy sales statistics, parents are utilizing the internet more frequently for purchases. The current study added to this research by agreeing that the internet is a *main* source for parents to research and make their toy purchases and discovered that parents in the United States are utilizing the online retailer Amazon for most of their online toy purchases with Target and Walmart being runner ups. Online purchases allow for an already busy life to be a little less hectic for parents. The current

pandemic of COVID 19 adds another layer of complexity of purchasing toys for children. Parents are already taking into consideration several different factors when purchasing toys and the ongoing pandemic adds to this. The families had to adapt to a different normal during this time and that meant purchasing different toys and more toys than usual for their children. Parents that did not utilize the internet prior to the pandemic now relied on it to bring toys home for their children during quarantine and lockdowns. The parents that already utilized online stores, had an advantage of already navigating the internet to find the best value and quality toys for their children.

There is a lot of communication that goes into purchasing toys, parents are talking together about what to buy for their children and parents are also speaking directly to their children about their own wishes and wants in toys. While the parents are communicating to each other, the interviews revealed that the primary purchasers in the family are in fact the mothers. This does not mean that Fathers are not active in this process, it is just that Mothers in this study are more frequently making the purchases, just as previous research has shown that females are the primary purchasers of gifts in the family (Clarke & McAuley, 2010:535). This is an important finding to this study, allowing connections to be made from the primary purchasers of toys for children, to the multiple factors that are taken into consideration when purchasing toys which showcases the purchasing process.

The mothers of this study clearly showed they have a process they go through when purchasing toys. They are first researching the toy, searching for good deals, all while taking into consideration their own, the other parent and the child's wishes into account when purchasing toys for children. Since previous research focused on either gender appropriate toys or age-appropriate toys, the findings from this study add a more nuanced understanding of the toy purchasing process of parents. It also shows how parents invest both time and money to give their children a fun and enriching childhood in which toys becomes a central part of. This qualitative approach made it possible to show how many factors go into purchasing toys for children and how these factors come together in the decision-making process. These mothers showed that there is always more than one factor behind the reasoning of the purchase of toys for their children.

## 5.1 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study opens the door for more exploration into the toy purchasing process of parents. With toys being a daily occurrence in the lives of children and the parents being the primary purchaser of these toys, there is useful information that can be gained from future research. To be able to

continue this area of research focusing on parents will allow for a larger picture of childhood to be understood. It would have been interesting to explore more if these mothers purchased certain toys in order to be present themselves as a good mother in their children's childhood. To ask if any of their purchases are to show that they are in fact a good parent to their child and if so, what those toys are and to explain further.

In future research I would like to conduct a study that has both fathers and mothers as respondents. In the current study it was said that when the father buys a toy the process is different than the mothers process. It would be interesting to have this data to see if there are differences in responses across mothers and fathers as well additional demographical information that could be gathered from a larger sample size. This information then could assist other families that may be struggling with getting toys appropriate for their child. It would also be beneficial to be able to have the children's perspectives from the families being interviewed as well, how they view their influence over the process and examine the similarities and differences.

Being that I am an American living in Sweden, I see many differences in the lives of children and the way that parents purchase toys for their children. It would be interesting to research these differences and find the similarities in the two countries. There is a large emphasis placed on educational toys in the United States and encouraging parents to purchase these toys. While there are many similar toys in both countries, I believe the way the toys are viewed, marketed, and purchased are different. The findings from the study conducted in Jordan (Al Kurdi, 2017) were very similar to the findings in my own study with the American families, which then builds my curiosity to how it would be with Swedish families.

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## APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

### General/Intro Questions:

- Name
- Marital Status
- Occupation
- Monthly Income
- Family structure
  - Ages of children
  - Family members

### The Actual Purchasing of toys:

- Who typically buys toys for the children in the home?
  - Are there any differences between when you or your spouse purchases a toy?
- How do you purchase the toys, online store, online second hand, in person in store?
  - Or perhaps they are donated or given to you?
  - The toys in your house, purchased or donated to you
  - Do your children have any of your childhood toys?
- What stores do you prefer to buy toys in?
- How often do you purchase toys?
  - Has the pandemic affected your toy purchases?
- Do you have a budget for toys?
  - Amount per toy?
  - Amount per child?
  - Amount per month?
- Is there any parental influence on the purchases made by grandparents, aunts/uncles?
  - Tips given; specific toys suggested?

### Reasoning of Choices:

- Is there a purpose for the toy? Purpose for the purchase?
- What is the reasoning behind the toys you purchase?
  - Did something motivate you to choose it?
  - Did you see it somewhere?
  - A familiar character for your child?
- Are your purchases impulse buys or planned?
- What would be a deciding factor?



**Ending Question:**

- Was there anything else you would like to talk about or perhaps elaborate on something we have already talked about?