

Independent expertise of games and toys in Germany: the experience of “Spiel Gut”

E. A. Abdulaeva*,

Educational Psychologist of Highest Category, Nominee of “Moscow Grants”, Methodist, Moscow City Center of Psychological and Pedagogical Examination of Play and Toys, Moscow State University of Psychology and Education

E. O. Smirnova**,

Doctor of Psychology, Professor, Head of the Moscow City Center of Psychological and Pedagogical Examination of Play and Toys, Moscow State University of Psychology and Education

The article describes the activities of a public expert organization in Germany “Spiel gut. Kinderspiel + Spielzeug” – “Play with Pleasure. Child’s Play + Toys”. The principles of its work are described: independence from manufacturers of toys, contact with families and child care institutions, comprehensive assessment of toys, including chemical, educational, technical, sanitary qualities and price characteristics. The toys evaluation criteria are presented in detail: facilitation of independent and creative child play, child success, encouraging the imagination, as well as realistic depiction of the world, image integrity, environmental friendliness and safety, balance between the toy price and its durability, etc. The principles of toy selection for the examination, procedure and the stages examination are described. The meaning of “quality label” put by “Spiel gut. Kinderspiel + Spielzeug” – “Play with Pleasure. Child’s Play + Toys” on the child play products is described. The impact of the examination on the quality of toys in Germany is discussed.

Keywords: “Spiel gut”, quality label, comprehensive assessment, toys evaluation criteria, play possibilities, playability, creating a conditional plan, quality of toys.

¹The article is prepared on the basis of the following materials: seminars with the experts-members of “Spiel gut” Board (Ingetraud Palm-Walter, Gabriela Pee, Michael Brandle and others.), Elien Posh’s report “50 Years of Spiel gut”, the book “Vom Spiel und vom Spielzeug”, the site “spielgut.de”

*elena-abdulaeva@mail.ru

**smirneo@mail.ru

The toys' expertise carried out in Germany emerged over fifty years ago in a small town of Ulm. In 1954 the headmaster of municipal museum Michael Pee exhibited his own collection of toys for the visitors. A year later the book "Spiel gut" ("Play with Pleasure") was published. The idea of the book was to explain from the scientific and aesthetic points of view what a good toy really is. That exhibition as well as the publication of the book have formed the basis for organizing the "Spiel gut" Expert Board, which in the course of 55 years has managed to become a really alive organ capable of connecting the needs of toys' consumers (parents and teachers) with the interests of toys' producers. Those toys which meet all the requirements and are highly praised by the expertise may obtain a special quality mark.

This quality mark is actually a bright orange disk with a big white spot in the centre and an inscription on its bright background. It can be seen on a number of toys sent by European producers which are on sale in Russia. The inscription on the Sign says: "Spiel gut. Arbeitsausschuß Kinderspiel + Spielzeug. Ausgezeichnet. Rekomendet." It means: "Play with pleasure! The working commission of Children's games + toys. It is remarkable. It is recommended."



Fig. 1. The symbol of high-quality toys

The organization "Spiel gut" consists of 30–40 experts from different regions of Germany. Among them there are psychologists, social and medicine experts, teachers, pediatricians, designers, physicians, chemists, etc. The main principle of the Board's work is that of independence from producers and their companions on the toy market. That is why an expertise is free for the large companies as well as for the small workshops.

The main principle of the expertise is that of combining the scientific and the practical interests. At the same time it should be underlined that working out the criteria for the expertise was not at all a scientific task. Moreover, a purely scientific approach has been consciously rejected, as it could detract the experts from real life and actual children development. The practical approach to the expertise of developmental qualities of toys and games is based upon empirical observations and has become system-formatting. It is important to mention that "Spiel gut" expertise is not only connected with psychology and education, but is really a complex characteristic of a toy including its chemical, physical, sanitary and technical parameters as well as such parameters as harm and price.

The criteria of toys expertise had first been systematized in 1954. The criteria of toys choice and appraisal were reconsidered and expanded approximately 15 years ago. Nowadays they include the positions expounded below.

The Criteria of the Toys' Expertise

- **The child's age and the stage of the child's development.** A toy or a certain type of toys are supposed to be used by children of a certain age group. "Spiel gut" has systematized the whole wide spectrum of produced toys and singled out about 100 subtypes, which are distributed according to age diapasons and meant either for individual play or play in a group. It has allowed people to be properly oriented in the variety of age groups of toy users. The varieties of purposes and age groups of toys' consumers have been described for every toy under analysis.

- **The toy suitability for a plan and for creating a conventional plan, i.e. the toy ability to arouse a child's imagination.** Playing is considered to be a free, self-oriented and independent child's activity which is not aimed at getting any results (educational, cognitive or practical), though the results can and should appear in the course of different kinds of playing activities.

A game and a toy should arouse a child's imagination, but not restrict it, as do, for example, the speaking dolls with their poor memorized phrases. Every child without any effort would invent more words instead of those his/her doll has to say' [3].

The easier and simpler a toy is, the more it can stimulate a child to produce an independent activity and the longer it remains interesting. A toy should not be too naturalistic and copy the reality too strictly.

- **A toy is to bring joy.** Playing can not be a fun without bringing bright, positive emotions. If a child plays with joy it will be good for his/her mental and physical health. The most important toy's quality is that it can give the child an opportunity to experience a feeling of success, as well as to give him/her a possibility to understand his/her own competences.

The main purpose of the expertise is to assign the actual age of a child which the toy is suitable for. The toy is not to be too complicated for a child (otherwise it can provoke child's negative feelings of unskillfulness and incompetence). At the same time the toy should require a certain effort, solutions search and is not to allow any automatic actions. Success and joy are, therefore, closely connected with the adequate match into the child's age and developmental level.

- **The toy should help children perceive the world around, provide "the child's affiliation with the world".** Playing tends to reproduce everyday life experiences, favor the child's full and deep perceiving of the environment and one's own place in it, as well as significant for the child impressions. The child perceives the world mostly with the help of a toy, while playing with it. Toys, therefore, should be reliable and, thus, support the child's understanding of people and the laws of nature.

- **Playing opportunities.** A good toy should provide a child with continuous and individual playing. The child is not to be bored and tired of the toy after an hour of playing, but on the contrary, the toy should keep his/her attention for a considerable period of time. It is true of furniture for the dolls, items for building doll's houses, etc. They all are to be properly arranged. It gives really new playing opportunities.

- **Package contents, kits, sets of playing items are very important characteristics, which support the development of playing.** The necessary components of a construction set, their proper number, the complete furniture set for doll's room, or a set of puppets for an action game allow a child to vary and develop the game. There

should be a proper number of items necessary for playing with each toy. A big set of construction items would motivate, stimulate the cognitive activities, the presence of a number of variants of rail-tracks and interchanges would make a child's railway more entertaining. Just one doll with accessory is better than lots of dolls without them.

- **Correspondence with child's physical parameters and playing tasks, i.e. the proper size and weight of a toy.** A small child is capable of constructing toys using large blocks, but a giant teddy-bear is not suitable for his/her playing.

- **The toy's material reliability should correspond to the playing task.** Toys for small children are to be used for a long time and remain safe. The broken toy which can not be mended, would disappoint the child and disturb his/her confidence to the parents.

- **The design, color, and unity of the form tend to influence the child's worldview and his/her intentions to play.** Toys are to give a child an adequate idea of colors, forms, sizes of objects, which exist in the world around him/her and this idea is to become a global one. For example, if the toy's material is too bright, it does not allow to create a proper image and, thus, breaks the unity (integrity) of the toy. Funny pink and blue toy-animals can cause the child's sentimental, primitive idea of the animal world. Exuberant ornamentality detracts the child from the game. The reliability of the image being extremely important, the toy at the same time is not to become the exact copy or a caricature of the reality.

The degree of realism in the toy seems to be a very important (though a subtle) criterion which needs to be evaluated by really experienced experts. It concerns both the image-bearing and all other toys (toy construction sets, toy vehicles, board games, etc.). For that reason the authors have resolutely rejected many available samples of modern toy industry (dolls like Bratz, transformers, robots, grotesque and satirical images of animals and human beings, etc.). Those products tend to distort the real image and proportions of the human body. However, some characters of the children's subculture, endowed with the charm and positive ethical direction (Mole, Carlson, Pinocchio) seem quite realistic.

- **Constructions and devices.** The simplicity and clarity of mechanisms of movement in a

dynamic toy are to be specially emphasized. If a toy has been endowed with the ability to move (e.g. constructions of a toy crane, mechanisms, dynamic toys, such as Kugelbahn', etc.), the nature and the character of its movements are to be quite clear and simple for children. Constructing devices and mechanical toys are to be absolutely simple for a small child. Technical toys used to become more complicated when children grow older, but principles of their functioning should still remain quite clear. While playing with those toys children are supposed to learn to understand rules of movements in practice and try to make use of them. From this point of view electronic toys do not correspond to the given criterion at all.

- **Durability of toys should satisfy the needs of the child.** If a toy is fragile and impossible for mending it would usually cause disappointment. The development of child's confidence in the adult world is based on the suitability of toys given to him/her by the adults. The child can gradually learn how to use the fragile things as well, learns how to be a careful child.

- **Safety, according to the norms of the European Community, should be confirmed by conformity with CE, GS, TÜV, VDE, etc.** before starting the expertise of all toys' materials and coverings. Thus, the sign CE and other designations of safety are not quality assurances, but rather indicators of conformity to the minimal norms (hygienic, electronic, etc.)

Absolute safety does not exist. Safety regulations by no means exclude the necessity of management and supervision on the part of those people, who are responsible for children. Each child would gradually learn to cope with his/her routine danger. Safety parameters for each toy and for each child are determined quite individually.

- **The toy's ecological compatibility parameter** depends on different factors and is to be estimated differently for various playing materials: an applied material, manufacture, the use and disposal of waste products, durability, maintainability and suitability for the new processing are to be taken into account. Having all necessary documents at his/her disposal an expert in chemistry or hygienic is to examine the toy's stuff, its constituents and the toy's safety for children. The information concerning the material used for the

toy's production is to be checked up with the TUV and CE register.

If there is any doubt in reliability of information or in toy's safety for children, a further laboratory examination can be recommended.

- **Price.** It's better to have a number of good, simple and different toys than a lot of identical and pretentious ones. Proportionality of toy's price and durability is really important. It's good if the toy can stay long and be passed to new generations, so that parents can learn to play with them again together with their children.

Psychological and pedagogical descriptions are to be exposed on the basis of empiric observations, for only then they can be valued and generalized by specialists. All principles of any toy's assessment are rather important, but in fact, their significance and importance may change. On the stage of evaluating the toy all principles are important. If the toy doesn't satisfy even one or two requirements, it can't be evaluated as "good" and, therefore, can't be recommended by experts to be used by children. Even if the toy doesn't satisfy one of the necessary requirements it can't be awarded a sign "Spiel gut".

How are toys got to assessment?

All toys which can be found in retail sales on the territory of Germany are liable to assessment. (Many European industrial toys producers are interested in "Spiel gut" opinion concerning their products.) Experts pick out toys at the first-rate World exhibition of toys, which is held in Nurnberg every year. Industrial producers can apply for their products' expertise on their own initiative as well.

Toy's experts are getting ready for a coming exhibition long before it is to be opened. They study catalogues of output and novelties. An expert commission would then distribute the visits of exhibition pavilions and stands according to personal preferences, interests and competences of the experts. Every expert usually observes 30 – 40 stands, looks through the variety of presented goods and chooses those toys, which he/she believes can be awarded a trade mark "Spiel gut".

After the exhibition is over all industrial toys producers would receive letters of order asking them to participate in toys' assessment. As a rule, producers get interested and don't reject the offer to send their products to the Experts' Board.

The only condition here is the free transfer of 2 toys, which are not to be returned to producers.

The examination itself and the award of the Order are both free for all toys' manufacturers, the basic principle being the postulate that every manufacturer, irrespective of the level of his/her products' circulation, can have equal opportunities.

The Examination Procedure

The Process of examination itself includes 6 stages.

Stage 1. Before the toy starts being tested the manufacturer has to present all necessary information concerning the material of which the toy has been made – wood, plastic, varnish, steep, textile, etc. The information about the price of the toy should also be presented.

Depending on the toy's functional purposes and functions, not only preferable natural materials, but also metal, plastic, rubber are permitted, in case all of them are safe and satisfy the high hygienic standards.

Stage 2. Testing toys with the children's assistance. At the meeting of the assessment Board toys are distributed among the experts according to their professional competences and the area of responsibility concerning certain types of toys. On the stage of examining the developmental qualities of toys the central part is constituted by testing toys in family conditions or in preschool institutions. Practical research of the value of toys is carried out. For a long time parents and teachers have been watching the children playing with toys. Then they are asked to answer the given questionnaire. The toy, according to the potential addressee of particular age, is brought to a certain institution, which is to be thoroughly selected for every single toy. The test procedure is to take place in most favorable conditions in order to reveal toy's maximal playing potential. A toy is given to the children who are interested in certain activities: games according to the rules are given to the groups of children where such games are preferred; constructors are given to families, where constructing is found to be the favorite spare time activity.

In the "Spiel gut" program a great number of families have been registered which have deserved the experts' confidences. Those families

have children under 14 years old. A number of kindergartens are also quite active participants of toys' testing program.

The time periods of testing the toys with children's participation can vary (a toy may be held in the family from 1,5 up to 3 months). In the course of long observation a possibility of the child's decrease of interest to the toy (because of his/her illness, change of dwelling and other unfavorable factors) is taken into consideration.

If the results are doubtful, or contradictory, or in case a particular toy appeared to be not very interesting for a child for quite a long period of time, the toy is to be sent to undergo the testing for the second time, and (when it is needed) for the third time. (The families where the toys are sent are all new participants.) After that the questionnaires are to be collected and processed.

Stage 3. After testing with children's participation is over both the toy and the questionnaires are presented to the experts specializing in the particular type of toys. Their tasks are to examine the developmental potentials of the toy more thoroughly and on professional grounds. The report on the experts' work is presented in the form of questionnaire, which contains more specialized questions concerning the developmental qualities of the toy, its strong and weak points. Empiric observations together with experts' opinions are to form mutually complementary unities.

Stage 4. The toy's complex assessment. The final discussion, as well as the previous one, takes place at the meeting of the Board where all the experts participate.

The collected results are to be compared with each other, and after the discussion a final conclusion is to be formulated concerning the quality of each toy.

These are just two possible variants of final conclusions:

- the toy deserves the high grade and a bonus trade mark 'Spiel gut – recommended';
- the toy does not deserve the high degree (detailed explanations and – on demand – recommendations are given).

The conclusions are then sent to the toys' producers.

Stage 5. In case the producer decides to improve the toys' quality (which is not always the

case), the toy may undergo an expertise again, and the experts' conclusion can be reconsidered.

Stage 6. Branding. An independent commission of experts 'Games and Toys for Children' would award a trade mark "Spiel gut" ("Enjoy Playing") the perfect toys only. Alongside with the name of the expert commission the trade mark also contains the results of the toy's quality evaluation – "good, recommended". There are no any trade mark's gradations or variations – the toy is either regarded as the perfect one or not.

If any producers wish to label their products, packings, or catalogues with the above trade mark, they are to apply for the "Spiel gut" license in order to be able to use the trade mark for a year, as well as to get the official stickers with the image of the trade mark. New license applications are to be sent to the Board every following year. The license is needed for each article of toys' products and is to be kept in the producers' main offices.

Correct labeling is checked up at the annual world-range exhibition of toys in Nurnberg ("Spielwarenmesse") alongside with selecting new toys for new expertise. The Chairman of the Board takes on the full share of responsibility for that.

In the toys catalogues it is quite legal to use the trade mark but only for labeling the concrete toys which have already undergone the expertise. In case the improper labeling is found, the toys producers are orally warned and then the letter of warning is sent which prescribes the producers to correct the mistake and avoid making future mistakes of that kind.

Outreach Activities

"Spiel gut" regularly publishes and distributes a standard book-catalogue. There the stages of children's development, children's games, children's independence and competences development, age peculiarities, potentials and difficulties of toys and games, roles and tasks of parents and other grown-up people in the process of harmonious development of children are explained.

Certain recommendations for choosing the toys for children of different age groups are also presented. The considerable part of the catalogue is devoted to the descriptions of different kinds of games and toys.

The catalogue of the best toys which contains twelve units is also regularly published. It includes

different comments concerning the child's age and the publisher's imprint.

A printed version of the catalogue "The Book of Toys" is now being published. It is the twenty-fifth edition which is coming to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of "Spiel gut". It contains the names and descriptions of 2500 of recommended toys, games, etc. for each age group of children. Brief information on toys' manufacturers and the prices of the toys are presented. The catalogue of cheap toys – "Good Toys for 10 Euros" – is presented as an Appendix. There are also some publications on topical subjects (e.g. "The Game in Motion"), articles written by the experts on the topic of "Motor Functions and Movements", recommendations on how to choose a toy for a child of a certain age group supplied with illustrations, etc.

Information concerning games and toys producers, books and catalogues for parents, toys experts and manufacturers is widely presented at the site www.spielgut.de. New expertise announcements, posters of experts, current publications, expert articles are also presented their.

Members of administration Board conduct work-shops on topical issues for parents and teachers living in different regions of Germany. They are conducted by highly qualified experts in the field.

A large travelling (mobile) exhibition has been organized to celebrate the fiftieth universities of "Spiel gut". About 2000 toys aimed at different age groups would be exhibited there. All the toys have been awarded the trade mark since the very beginning of "Spiel gut" expertise. Besides the toys themselves the expertise's results and professional designs, prints and video materials are to be demonstrated. The exhibition has travelled not only round Germany but also around the world, reaching even Japan.



Fig 2. The stand of a mobile exhibition

Influence of “Spiel gut” Expertise on the Quality of Toys in Germany

The “Spiel gut” expertise has been existing and functioning for 50 years. During that period it has got broad experiences and gained the authority status among both – manufacturers and consumers of toys. Toys from all over the world can be sent for the expertise to “Spiel gut” Board if they are on sale in Germany. Many European manufacturers of toys appreciate the opinion of “Spiel gut” experts and consider it honorable to get “Spiel gut’s” trade mark and stick it on their toys packages and catalogues. About 90 % of participants at the European toys marked would currently send their products to “Spiel gut” for the expertise. Annually about 500 toys are examined.

Many parents would pay attention to the “Spiel gut’s” trade mark when they are to buy a

toy for their children because that mark is a real guarantee of toys’ high quality.

“Spiel gut’s” activities tend to positively influence the quality and assortment of toys’ products. They are considerably higher than those in Russia as well as in other countries of the world (USA, France, Greece, Israel, etc.). Of course, there are quite different toys’ shops in Germany, and in some of them the toys of doubtful quality are sold. However, the number of good quality toys with high developmental potentials is much bigger in Germany than anywhere else. That country has become the motherland of such world famous toys’ manufacturers as HABA, Ravensburger, Beleduc, Grimm’s, etc. German toys usually take a worthy place at the world exhibitions of toys, which are regularly held in the German city of Nurnberg. This is to a large extent the result of “Spiel gut’s” expert activities.

References

11. Smirnova E. O., Abdulaeva E. A., Sokolova M. V. Psihologo-pedagogicheskie osnovanija ekspertizy igrushek v Germanii i Rossii // Kul'turno-istoricheskaja psihologija. 2010. № 1.
2. Vom Spielzeug und vom Spielen “Spiel gut” Arbeitsausschuss Kinderspiel+Spielzeug e.V. D-89083, Ulm, 2004.
3. Das Spielzeuggbuch. 50 Jahre “Spiel gut”. 25 Verzeichnis des “Spiel gut” ausgezeichneten Spielzeugs, “Spiel gut” Arbeitsausschuss Kinderspiel+Spielzeug e.V. D-89083, Ulm, 2004.
4. www.spielgut.de