

Modern Cartoon Characters in Children Play and Toys

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This article is devoted to studying perception and understanding of modern cartoon films by children of preschool age who in our days spend a lot of time watching modern cartoon films. The way this phenomenon influences children's state of mind and health, their feelings and understanding of the surrounding world worries various people now. The modern market of cartoon products for children was studied and preferences in a choice of cartoon films among parents and children, investigation of children's games on plots of the cartoon films with toy characters from them were analyzed. Other aspects of this study are: 1) an attempt of the psychological analysis of the plots of modern and classical cartoon films and their perception by a preschool child; 2) psycho-pedagogical examination of toys-characters of a cartoon film; 3) a description of substantial characteristics of these cartoon characters. The results of a comparative research of characteristics of the cartoon films that promote deployment of a child's full-value playing are presented. From the point of view of the author an important task is working out the psychological criteria evaluating the quality of media production for children which can give reference points to parents and experts in the field of choice of right production with positive effects on a child's development.

Keywords: game, toys, character, cartoon, plot, hero, psychological examination, observation, media-culture influence, image, play content, identification.

During the last few years the structure of preschoolers' activity has changed dramatically. Some years ago the main occupation of preschool children were playing games, drawing, constructing and listening to fairy tales. Now all these activities are supplanted by watching car-

toon films. According to sociologists, children spend from 20 to 40% of their free time in front of TV and prefer watching cartoon films or playing computer games [3].

Today a cartoon film became for a child one of the basic bearers and compilers of world rep-

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resentations, human relations and norms of their behavior. Watching cartoon films has got some kind of “totally-fanned” character, i.e. when all people watch a new product at one and practically the same time – at cinemas and on TV, on disks or in Internet. Thus, the majority of children of preschool age appear included in watching a new cartoon film, its discussions, buying toys and playing with them. The modern industry of cartoon films promotion has started manufacture and distribution of series of “animation” toys-characters from cartoon films, their companions and numerous accessories. Such toys representing characters from cartoon films became original bearers of social and cultural norms and values.

What does watching cartoons for hours give to children? How do they play with toys from these films? How does it influence their development, emotional condition, the understanding of the surrounding world? Today these important questions occupy the mind of parents and specialists.

The analysis of the cartoon films’ influence on a child’s development involves a systematic research work. In this article we deal only with one aspect of this influence – the effect of a cartoon film on children’s playing with its toys-characters. It is well known that the main activity of a preschool age child is a process of playing in which the most important stages of his development take place [4]. The primary goal of our investigation was to define the influence of media culture on a child. The following questions were of particular interest:

- What cartoon films and characters are most popular among children of preschool age and why?

- How is the viewing of cartoon films reflected in the content of games of preschool children?

- In what way do children play with toys-characters from popular cartoon films?

Another important feature of our analysis is studying the characteristics of cartoon films, for example, appreciations of the plot of an audio- and video-picture from the point of view of its age addressing, and also an expert estimation of toys according to their assistance to the process of a child’s development [2].

In 2010 we began to study the impact of cartoons’ images on a playing process of preschool children. At the first stage of investigation some

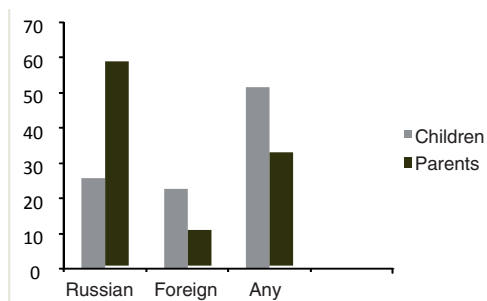
40 families with children of preschool age took part in the research, and 35 preschool children from Moscow kindergartens participated at the second stage. The investigation included:

- interviewing of parents;
- observation of the way the children are watching cartoon films (for a week);
- talks with children;
- observation of a child’s free playing;
- observation of a child playing in two experimental situations;
- analysis of children’s drawings of the film characters.

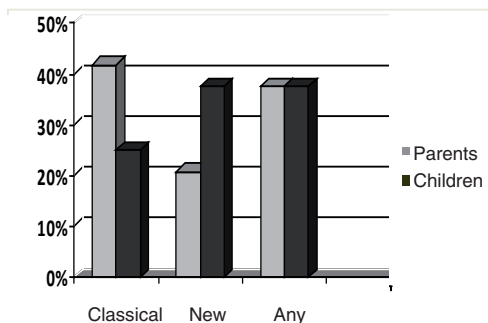
Children’s preferences in choices of cartoons

The results of parents’ questioning showed that about 75% of preschoolers spent all their free time in front of the screen. The mean age of children starting to watch TV is one year and eight months. For comparison, at the end of the twentieth century, children started watching TV when they were about four years old, whereas today even infants watch their development and entertainment programs.

Parents have noticed that their children do not have special preferences in a choice of cartoon films (Russian, foreign, classical, modern), they are ready to watch any one (figures 1, 2). As to parents they prefer familiar Russian classical cartoon films or cartoons by Disney issued at the middle of the twentieth century and which they remember since their own childhood (figure 1). The majority of parents do not like modern cartoons, however they often buy them and don’t mind when their children watch them. They noted that these media products are very popular, dynamic,



Pict. 1. Comparative analysis of preferences in watching Russian and foreign cartoons among children and their parents



Pict. 2. Comparative analysis of preferences in watching classical and modern cartoons among children and their parents

colorful, keep a child's attention and children like them.

A week long observation over children's games after viewing cartoon films showed that children often refer to cartoons' plots. The majority of children (78%) demonstrated this in their games, they spoke from the name of cartoon characters, dressed like them, denoted the role with the similar hair-do and other attributes of the personages. For example, «I am a spiderman, I have a mask, look, how I've drawn my face and hands blue and red », «this is my fairy Winks, these are her wings and a handbag», «I am Wolt, rrr-gav, I save everyone!». The children play though the plot of cartoon films and take the roles of cartoon characters in role games. During our observation only 22% of children did

not use the plots of the cartoons in their games. However, their parents noted that they had seen sometimes such episodes. All children who had participated in our research showed frequent and active using of toy-characters from cartoon films in their play.

We can assert that.

Our conclusion is that watching cartoon films has an essential influence on the content of preschoolers' games and their choice of toys. All the children take the roles of cartoon characters, use the cartoons' plots, toys-characters for their games, speak on the part of the heroes. As a result of questioning of the parents we received a list of cartoon films and their characters preferred by the children. In the following review we listed cartoon films and characters preferred by children of preschool age (table 1).

All the personages preferred by children are those embodied in toys. These are specific image toys, that need additional criteria of expertise used in the Center of Play and Toys, Moscow City University of Psychology and Education (MCUPE) [1]. Such toys differ from traditional toys or dolls in the way that they have a certain history, a visual and semantic basis, an image and a character (Figure 3).

Observation of the children's games with toy-characters from the cartoon

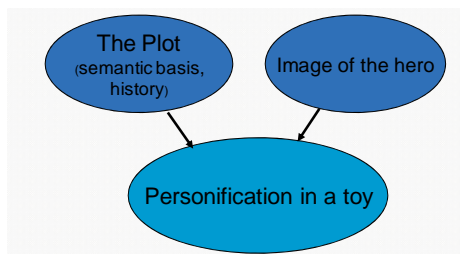
To confirm our suppositions we carried out an investigation¹ observing the games of five-

Table 1

Children preferences in choice of the favorite cartoon and its characters

№	Child preferences in choosing cartoon	Percent of choice	Child preferences in choosing Hero	Percent of choice
1	«Luntic»	39,5	Luntic Mila	15,5 5,2
2	«Smeshariki»	31,6	Krosh, Nusha	26,9 2,1
3	«Winx»	21,1	Bloom, Stella	7 7
4	«Ice age»	13,2	Mammoth	3,4
5	«Cheburashka»	10,5	Cheburashka	3,5
6	«Nu, pogodi!»	7,9	Hare	3,5
7	«Turtle Ninja»	7,9	1 turtle	5,2

¹The investigation was carried out with M. V. Mazurova (2010–2011).



Scheme 1. Plot, image of the hero and its personification in a concrete toy

year-old children in a certain kindergarten using two experimental situations. Children from three kindergartens took part in this investigation; each group consisted of 8–10 children. We chose a very popular in Russia cartoon serial “Smeshariki” (it means “funny balls” or “Kikoriki” in American version), which contains more than 200 series. The preliminary talk with children showed that all of them had seen this cartoon already. Some of the children had the toys personages from this film at home and played with them. We offered children to play with toys Smeshariki first **as they want** and in the second situation **according to the cartoon plots**, afterwards to speak about them and to draw the favorite personage.

The children from the first group, playing Smeshariki, were throwing the toys up in the air for nearly half an hour, they laughed, screamed, threw toys to each other, jumped with them on the floor, and kicked them as in football. Here it is necessary to notice that the form and the material from which these toys are made favor such games. In the course of our observation we didn't noticed that they used **any plot** from a cartoon. Then children started to include toy personages in traditional plots of their game – small house construction, giving meals, traveling.

In 25 minutes the experimentalist offered the children to remember any plot of the cartoon and to play with toys according to a plot. Children have hardly remembered only one plot – “Birthday Party”, and the next 10 minutes played in accordance with this plot, then they continued playing traditional games (traveling and small houses construction for the toy heroes).

The second group of children has a positive response to our offer to play in accordance with the plot of the cartoon «Smeshariki». But 5–10 minutes later children abandoned the

game, unexpectedly changed its subject and began to discuss lively the popular teenage cartoon serial “Winks”. Children refused the offer of the experimentalist to play with Smeshariki in accordance with the plots of the cartoons.

Children in the third group played a similar way – first active games with figures-balls, then traditional games. The offer of the experimentalist to play in accordance with a cartoon plot disclosed the fact that children could not remember any plot, but when reminded they could not agree on a concrete plot and continued the previous game “traveling”.

So we can see that in a free game with toy personages children did not use plots from the cartoon “Smeshariki”. Only four children could recollect one plot for their play.

Why did not the popular cartoon film plots become a basis for a plot game or a role game for preschool children? One of the reasons we think is the characteristics of the toys, the second is the particular plot of the cartoon and the way of its presentation to preschoolers.

Let's look at the toy itself. The toy Smeshariki looks like a ball. It is round, springy, soft. It is convenient for holding with both hands. Such toy is a good substitute in a ball game – easy to throw, slap on a floor, try to make it jump. It is natural that children start experimenting with these qualities. They throw a toy to each other, slap it on the floor, play football with it. This type of behavior was typical for all the children from three groups (100%).

After a more attentive examination of the toy some children started to pay attention to the *human* traits of the toy – eyes, a nose, a mouth, the expression of the face – she smiles, he is merry and this one is thoughtful. It hampered the experimentation and active games. Children disco-

vered an image of a person in a toy and began to play with it as with a doll – using traditional plots. The majority of children demonstrated this type of playing (about 75%). At first sight, this toy is open to different play actions with it – it is possible to play with it as with a ball or as with a doll. However a closer examination proves that these actions block each other. *Having opened an image for himself, the child can't play with it any how*, for example, football.

It is necessary to note that among the drawbacks of the toy is inconvenience for a child's hand to hold control over it. It is not convenient to put this "ball-doll" in a toy bed or in a toy car. It does not go as a doll. The expression of this toy's face is statically friendly but a little grotesque. Among the advantages is that all the children from the first and the third groups kept the main features of the characters in their game. For example, a hare is cheerful, a hedgehog is thoughtful, an owl is wise, a bear is practical, etc. Special advantage is that at all series of supervision over plays with toys children showed the general positive emotional spirit of the personages, the peaceful plots sated with communications and general benevolent atmosphere.

The cartoon serial "Smeshariki" is among the cartoon films bearing positive emotions – fun, pleasure, laughter, general positive mood, vivacity and activity, and also such important values as kindness and care about nearest and dearest. We saw just these features in the children's play with toys.

The second part of the answer needs an additional research of the content of modern cartoon films. We have analyzed several series of cartoon Smeshariki and also about 20 megaserial cartoons (from 30 to 250 series) popular in children's subculture according to the following criteria:

- the analysis of video- and audio-pictures;
- the image of the character (movement, action, acts, appearance, character, speech);
- correspondence of cartoons' plots to the age-related activity of preschool children.

Character properties of modern cartoons

The analysis of modern cartoons allowed to reveal some features which impede the deployment of high-grade play:

- An exceedingly high speed of screen events presentation;

- Absence of subject pauses enough for understanding the screen events;
- Superplus multiseriarity of cartoons which complicates remembering the plots;
- A divergence of age addressing of a hero image and a context of its speech and activity;
- Discrepancy of real activity of preschoolers and cartoons' plots and their complexity for children;
- A primacy of external characteristics of heroes over their internal, the "flat", simplified characters of personages;
- Affective, pretentious, grotesque presentation of characters;
- Abundance of **special effects** which disguise the sense of events and complicate perception of a plot.

These features of modern cartoons complicate the possibility of perception, understanding of a cartoon's plot and high-grade play activity of children. Characters of such media products cannot become a sound model of identification for a child. The logic of their behavior and sequence of actions remain not clear. But, as D. B. Elkonin marked [5], the role in a game with plot is always personified in play actions and **if the sequence of actions of the character is not clear to the child, the play is impossible**.

These data allow assuming that children cannot immediately understand and feel deeply cartoon personages and events. If identification however occurs (as for example, with Krosh from "Smeshariki"), the abundance of series and the speed of screen events and other features set forth above complicate the possibility to single them out from the general stream of stimulus.

Children's watching modern cartoon films (in spite of their popular characters), does not result in plotting plays as based on the content of these films. It remains watching for the sake of watching, in a sort of way a transcendental object: **a thing in itself**. Seen and heard actions do not give any material for feelings, comprehension and eventually for attainment of cultural experience ("interiorisation", by L. Vygotsky).

Plots are modern and dynamical, however the child, owing to plots' isolation from specificity of preschool life, can't be included in these senses and motives. Cartoon film plots are in most cases non-comparable to plots of life of preschool chil-

dren so, can't generate motives for role play or play-dramatizations. It is sooner meditative or entertaining plots, rather than plots for realization in the child's play.

However, some toy heroes of cartoon films become characters of the high-grade play. The cartoon film can become an impulse, a material and a helper in appearance of new game plots [1] that directly correspond to the development of imagination or play themes on the basis of cartoon films plots and dramatizations in play.

Observation of children's play and discussion with parents showed that such heroes may be, for example: Winnie-the-pooh, Moomintrolls, kiten Findus, Bembi, King-lion, Buratino, Neznajka, Domovenok, etc.

These characters have the following characteristics:

- simple and distinct behavior and slow speech;
- logically correct acts;
- face expression, movements and activities typical for children;
- natural, recognizable image;
- correspondence to a child age image and activities.

It is obvious that these characteristics promote child identification with image of the hero, and possibility to operate as this hero. Even if these toys represent animals or imaginary characters, it is very easy to recognize children's characters and behavior in their prototypes. Such cartoon has the slowly unfolding plot, distinct and clear speech of characters, presence of subject pauses, and a story understandable and interesting to children. Many of these films are created on the basis of classical literature for kids, this makes the cartoons personages recognizable. Watching such films stimulates children's play, provides it with new contents and senses and enriches the subjective experience of preschoolers.

Summing up, it is possible to assert that the character of influence of cartoon films on game of children and so on their development, depends on quality and the contents of cartoon films, from their conformity to age features of preschool children, and also from quality of toys-characters. In this connection there is a problem on working out the psychological criteria for an estimation of children's media production quality [2] so as to give parents and tutors reference points on selection of necessary and useful films for children.

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