



Eastern Connecticut State University

NEWS

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Contact: Edward Osborn

Director of University Relations

(860) 465-5043 or Osborne@easternct.edu

Eastern Unveils Research Results for Best Toy

Willimantic, CT — Magna-Tiles® by Valtech, LLC, and My First Railway by Brio® have both been named 2013 TIMPANI Toys (Toys that Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination). The results of the 2013 TIMPANI Toy Study, conducted by faculty and student researchers at Eastern Connecticut State University, were announced on Dec. 4 by Eastern’s Center for Early Childhood Education.

The study is now in its fifth year. The first year was devoted to validating the research methodology; TIMPANI toys have been recognized in each year since.

“Today’s announcement of the highest-scoring toys in the fifth annual TIMPANI Toy Study demonstrates the depth of empirical research that is occurring at our Center for Early Childhood Education,” said Eastern President Elsa Núñez. “At the same time that Eastern faculty and students are identifying and testing toys that promote the intellectual, social and creative development of children, we are also helping our students prepare for careers as professional early childhood educators. I congratulate Professor Trawick-Smith and his students for their insightful research. The investigative work they are doing to identify sound learning tools for young children will positively impact children in our early learning center and far beyond.”

The annual empirical study by Eastern researchers examines how young children in natural settings play with a variety of toys. Toys are selected for the TIMPANI study based on recommendations from parents, teachers and faculty. After the toys are chosen,

they are placed in preschool classrooms and rated on three subscales: thinking and problem-solving; cooperation and social interaction; and creativity and imagination. Magna-Tiles and My First Railway tied in receiving the highest overall scores in this year's study.

Magna-Tiles are three-dimensional magnetic building tiles made from colorful plastic in various shapes. "Magna-Tiles were extremely popular with the children," said Cassie Savalli, an Eastern senior majoring in early childhood education who was involved in the study. "They learned to build together, and there was a lot of creative imagination around what they were building." Savalli and junior Chamari Davis, also an early childhood education major, were responsible for videotaping children playing with the toys and coding the videos according to the evaluation rubric.

"It's not surprising that Magna-Tiles did well," said Professor Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, the Phyllis Waite Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education at Eastern and the study's principal researcher. "They have been nominated every single year that we've conducted this study—teachers and parents recognize their value. Construction toys have done very well in our studies over the past five years. They tend to inspire a lot of problem-solving as children figure out how to construct different objects, but we also see a fair amount of pretend play and social interaction."

My First Railway is a set of wooden train tracks and wooden trains. "Children used the trains to create different scenarios, which they would act out together," said Davis. "It really brought out their creativity and imagination, and also reflected any experience they have had riding on or seeing real trains." Along with Savalli, Davis co-presented with Trawick-Smith on the results of the study at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Conference in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 22.

Núñez said that conducting research side-by-side with faculty is usually reserved for graduate students at larger universities, and applauded the two Eastern undergraduates for their work. During the TIMPANI Toy Study’s five-year history, students have presented papers at five national conferences and co-authored four articles for juried journals. More than 50 toys have been tested with more than 300 children. The evaluation rubric developed by Eastern is now being used as far away as Turkey.

Trends from the TIMPANI Toy Study suggest that basic, open-ended toys seem to inspire the highest levels of play. “The high-scoring toys tend to be fairly simple toys that are not too realistic, and they don’t have a lot of gadgetry or computer chips,” said Trawick-Smith. “They are often the ones we played with when we were growing up. I always say to parents: ‘Think about the toys that inspired your most imaginative or elaborate play when you were a child—some of those may be very good toys to provide for your own child today.’”

Trawick-Smith characterized this year’s two TIMPANI toys as being highly popular with the young children in Eastern’s early learning center, inspiring creativity, promoting collaboration, and retaining the children’s interest over time.

For more information about the TIMPANI Toy Study, contact the Center for Early Childhood Education at (860) 465-0687 or visit www.easternct.edu/cece.

Prior TIMPANI toys have included Wooden Vehicles and Signs by Melissa and Doug (2010); Duplo Blocks by Lego Systems (2011); and Tinker Toys by Hasbro (2012).

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Disclaimer: The TIMPANI toy study does not consider, nor does it test, the safety of toys. The study makes no claims about the safety of any toy studied. Neither the Center for Early Childhood Education nor Eastern Connecticut State University is liable for any mishaps related to the use of toys mentioned in study findings. Concerns about any toy listed in the study findings should be directed to the Consumer Products Safety Commission.

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