

Your Shortcut to... Toys Around the World

They can cost hundreds of dollars, or nothing at all... they're important at every stage of childhood... and they. are. FUN! This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to Toys all Over the World—the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the big news stories. I'm Amanda Bower.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

It's almost school holiday time! Woohoo! So much extra time to PLAY! And depending on where kids live, the kinds of toys they play with could be very different.

Today, we'll take you through WHY toys are important...WHAT toys tell us about the culture they come from ... and HOW toys have changed over the years..

Listen carefully - there's a Squiz at the end!

WHY

Any kid who's walked through a toy shop will tell you that they REALLY need a toy. Well, they're right! Toys are important for kids' development!

When babies shake a rattle or look at a squishy fabric book, they are developing their senses of hearing, touch, and sight.

Toddlers are improving their coordination when they ride a tricycle, or stack blocks. Older kids are building up their memory and concentration when they play board and card games; they're developing creativity when they paint or draw; and a recent study found that when kids play with dolls, the area of the brain involved in developing social and emotional skills lit up. When kids are playing with toys, they're doing important work, developing and growing.

And the definition of a "toy" doesn't necessarily mean something you buy at a shop.

Definitely not! One of my favourite books in the whole world is called "Not A Box". I'll put a link in the episode notes—It's about a little rabbit who keeps being asked by an unseen adult what it's doing with a cardboard box. But in the kid's imagination, it is NOT a box... it's a car... or a building on fire... a robot... and much more. I don't know about you, Bryce, but my brother and sister and I spent a LOT of time in cardboard boxes!

And building pillow forts...

And making mud pies... and using a torch to make shadow puppets... and making leaf boats to send down the creek... well, you get the idea.

Now Amanda, I'm guessing that kids who live in a desert would not be making leaf boats. WHAT do toys tell us about the country, and culture, that they've come from?

WHAT

An obvious example here is dolls, because dolls are made to look like the people who play with them. That means that a Native Alaskan doll would likely have a fur hood and snow shoes... an Ndebele (In-de-bey-lay) doll from southern Africa has colourful clothing, with beaded necklaces and capes. Check out the link in your episode notes for an activity with paper dolls from around the world, although that doesn't include the dolls made from shells that Anindilyakwa Aboriginal boys and girls played with—which makes sense, because their country is an island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Plenty of shells.

What other kinds of toys did First Nations Australians play with before white settlers came?

Well Bryce, I think this is cool... you know spinning tops?

Sure do. They're toys with a pointed bottom, and when you spin them, they continue to turn independently, balancing on that point.

Exactly. I had a great one when I was a kid that was made of coloured metal. The colours blurred as it spun, and it made a really cool humming noise. It turns out that spinning tops have been found on archeological sites all over the world - where researchers dig up ancient objects to learn about those cultures. Historians believe that spinning tops originated independently in each place, meaning that it wasn't one culture that invented the top, with travellers spreading it around the world. Different cultures all just figured it out for themselves. The Meriam people of the Torres Strait made their tops from kolaps, the seeds of a tree, and they could go for as long as 20 minutes!

I want to play with a Kolap top!

Meriam adults felt the same way! The Australian Museum has a big collection of indigenous toys, as well as reports from people who saw them being played with. In 1901, an anthropologist called Alfred Haddon—anthropologists study other cultures—wrote that a Meriam ceremony on Murray Island opened with a men's top spinning competition. They sang songs, cheered on their tops, and shouted and jeered when one stopped. As a top was dying, great care was taken to shelter it from the wind so as to prolong its 'life' a few seconds longer. At one match he timed the four best tops, and found they span from 24 to 27 minutes!

That's incredible!

For thousands of years, people have been making toys using the resources around them. In Ancient China, a type of yoyo was made from bamboo, which grows easily there. This yoyo had two wooden cups, connected in the middle. The user held two sticks, joined together with string, and the yoyo spun on that string. Holes were drilled in the bamboo, and as air passed through the holes, it made a tune. This gave the toy its

nickname, tzuh-ling, which means wind bell. Nowadays, you can buy a rubbery version called a diabolo - they are heaps of fun to play with, and really build your coordination! I'll put a link in your episode notes to a video of a diabolo world champion, as well as a video from China of an older man who has made his own different types of yoyos.

How about those cars made out of scrap metal wire in Southern Africa?

A great example of kids using what's around them to make their own fun! There's a link in your episode notes to show you how to make one yourself, as well as a series of beautiful photos showing kids playing mancala in the sand... soccer from a ball made out of plastic bags and string... games using old tyres... and much more.

Amanda, so far we've concentrated on toys that are made from local supplies. But nowadays, many kids are playing with toys that are the same all over the world—I'm talking puzzles, LEGO bricks, and, of course, video games. HOW have they changed over the years?

HOW

I'd say the first big change is around gender. Lego announced a while back that it was going to remove gender bias—meaning that it would stop producing packaging showing girls playing with pink and purple LEGO, and boys building Star Wars sets.

Lots of shops, like Target, have removed their "boys" and "girls" toy sections.

And the American state of California—my home for 14 years—passed a law last year that insists that shops display toys in a gender neutral way. Because girls can have fun with cars, and boys can have fun with toy kitchens!

Of course they can. I'm guessing, Amanda, that there have also been a lot of changes around race.

Exactly right. If you had black or brown skin, it used to be hard to find a doll, or a book with characters, or a matching game that looked like you. Same goes for kids with different abilities. Now, toy makers are putting in an effort to make their products more diverse - just like the kids who are playing with them.

And, of course, technology has brought about a lot of change.

Yes indeedy! Video games have gone from nothing... to "Pong" - I'll put a link in your episode notes, it will crack you up... to virtual reality headsets. Not only that, but technology is also embedded in other toys... there are soft toys that can talk back to you; programmable robots; even a ball that can be moved with your facial expressions!

Whoa. And I thought that Chinese yoyo was fancy.

The S'Quiz

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening...

1. What did Aboriginal people in the Gulf of Carpentaria use to make dolls? (shells)"

2. What material did the Meriam people use to make spinning tops? (kolap seeds)

3. Kids in southern Africa are known for making cars out of what? (scrap metal wire)

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of toys around the world.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.