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PARENTS' METAPHORICAL PERCEPTION OF TOYS AND THEIR VIEWS ON PLAY¹

ABSTRACT

This article explores how parents of preschool-aged children in Türkiye make sense of "toys" through metaphor and how these meanings shape views of play and toy selection. Drawing on a qualitative phenomenological design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 parents. Metaphor analysis was used to map recurring figurative constructions of toys, and descriptive thematic analysis was used to examine parents' accounts of play and purchasing criteria. Parents' metaphors clustered around three interpretive registers: toys as companions (affective and relational support), as developmental instruments (learning and future-oriented investment), and as commodities (objects evaluated through safety, durability, and price). The dominance of the "friend" metaphor foregrounds toys' role in children's everyday emotional life, while the investment and commodity frames reveal how developmental ideals and economic constraints co-produce parental decision-making. By connecting everyday parental talk to wider questions about the social organization of childhood, consumption, and the governance of "good" parenting, the study offers implications for early childhood education, family guidance, and policy.

KEYWORDS

play, toys, metaphors,
parental perceptions

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Introduction

Early childhood is a formative period in which cognitive, social, emotional, and physical capacities are shaped through everyday practices. Among these practices, play and toys occupy a central position, not merely as developmental supports but also as culturally and socially mediated elements of childhood. Play is widely recognized as a fundamental activity through which children explore their environment, negotiate relationships, and express emotions (Ginsburg 2007). Through playful interaction, children develop social competencies, construct experiential knowledge, and strengthen self-regulation (Pellegrini and Smith 1998; Singer and Singer 2005). Toys, however, are not neutral objects within this process. They function as material and symbolic mediators of play, shaping the kinds of experiences that become available to children. Toys can foster creativity and exploratory learning, yet they also reflect broader social expectations concerning development, education, and “appropriate” childhood (Sutton-Smith 1986; Semiz 2022). In this sense, parental choices about toys are embedded in normative ideas about what constitutes good parenting and a successful developmental trajectory. Parents, as primary social actors organizing children’s play environments, play a decisive role in defining the meanings and boundaries of play. Their perceptions and preferences influence not only the quality of children’s play experiences but also the ways in which childhood is socially constructed within families (Heidemann and Hewitt 2009). Examining parental meaning-making processes therefore offers insight into how developmental ideals intersect with economic constraints, cultural values, and contemporary consumer practices. Metaphors provide a particularly useful analytical lens for studying such processes. As cognitive and linguistic tools, metaphors reveal how individuals structure abstract concepts through everyday language (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Investigating parents’ metaphors of “toys” thus allows us to grasp the implicit frameworks through which toys are understood – as companions, educational instruments, or commodities – and how these understandings shape practices of selection and play. Despite the growing interest in play and childhood studies, metaphor-based research on how parents in Türkiye conceptualize toys remains limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring the metaphorical perceptions of parents with preschool-aged children and examining their views on play and toy selection. Importantly, the Turkish context provides a particularly relevant setting, as contemporary parenting practices unfold under conditions of economic uncertainty, rising consumer costs, and the increasing marketization of childhood. In such a setting, toys are not only understood through developmental ideals but are also evaluated through affordability, safety, and social expectations. By linking parental metaphors to broader questions about consumption, economic constraint, and the governance of “good” parenting, the article contributes to both early childhood research and wider theoretical discussions on family life and contemporary society.

Play and Child Development

Play is widely regarded as one of the most fundamental activities supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Piaget (1962) conceptualized play as a mechanism through which children explore their environment and construct cognitive structures, while Vygotsky (1978) emphasized its role in social interaction, self-regulation, and the development of higher mental functions. Through play, children express emotions, establish relationships, and strengthen social-emotional capacities such as creativity and empathy (Singer and Singer 2005). Research further suggests that different forms of play during the preschool years shape development in distinct ways: structured play may support cognitive and motor skills, whereas free play fosters imagination, flexibility, and creative thinking (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel 2012). Recent studies also highlight the importance of play in contexts of disruption and change. Digital play environments have been shown to shape children's attention, perception, and emerging forms of cognitive engagement, suggesting that contemporary play increasingly unfolds through hybrid material and technological forms (Marsh et al. 2016). Thus, the quality of children's play experiences is shaped not only by play types but also by the materials and media through which play is organized.

The Role and Importance of Toys

Toys are essential mediators that enrich children's play processes and extend the developmental possibilities of play, providing children with resources for exploration, learning, and social engagement (Sutton-Smith 1986; Richards et al. 2020). Toys also support emotional expression and motor development: for instance, building blocks and puzzles foster cognitive skills, whereas dolls and role-play materials strengthen social and affective capacities (Shaffer 2009). Recent scholarship has drawn increasing attention to the developmental implications of toy quality and design. Toys that provide rich sensory and exploratory opportunities may support children's engagement, fine motor development, and early problem-solving through play (Shaffer 2009; Sutton-Smith 1986). Digital educational toys and games have been discussed as potentially supporting children's engagement and emerging learning-related skills in early childhood, while also raising concerns about screen-based play and technological mediation (Marsh et al. 2016). Parental toy selection is shaped by multiple criteria, including children's interests, safety, educational value, durability, and economic considerations (Heidemann and Hewitt 2009). In this sense, parental attitudes toward toys are critical determinants of both play environments and children's everyday experiences.

Parental Perceptions and Metaphorical Approaches

Parents' understandings of play and toys directly shape the opportunities they provide and the objects they select for their children (Ginsburg 2007). Metaphors serve as powerful cognitive tools through which individuals conceptualize abstract ideas and organize everyday meaning-making (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The metaphors parents use to describe toys reflect the values, expectations, and child-rearing orientations they attach to them. While some parents frame toys as “educational tools,” others depict them as sources of happiness or companionship. Recent studies suggest that parental metaphors are especially revealing in relation to digital and screen-based toys. Some parents conceptualize such toys as “educational,” whereas others frame them as risky or harmful, highlighting the tensions between opportunity and threat in contemporary childhood. These findings underscore the relevance of metaphor analysis for understanding how toys are positioned within changing family contexts.

Rationale for the Study

In Türkiye, metaphor-based qualitative research examining parents' perceptions of toys and play in preschool childhood remains limited. Existing studies often focus on toy safety, purchasing criteria, or general attitudes toward play, while fewer investigations explore parents' deeper meaning-making processes. Examining parents' metaphorical constructions of toys is therefore important for filling this gap and for developing practical insights for educators and families. Furthermore, there is a lack of up-to-date evidence on how digitalization, the diversification of toy markets, and shifting family structures influence parental understandings of play. Strengthening the theoretical foundation of the present study thus contributes to a more comprehensive account of how parents conceptualize toys within contemporary childhood.

Theoretical Framework: Toys, Play, and Metaphor in Contemporary Parenting Culture

In this study, parents' metaphors are approached not merely as rhetorical expressions but as condensed “everyday theories” of childhood and family life. Metaphors do more than decorate language: they structure attention, evaluation, and justification, shaping what parents perceive as a “good” toy and what forms of play are considered meaningful. Within conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors organize abstract domains – such as learning, care, and safety – through more concrete domains, including tools, friends, and dangers. Because metaphors encode value judgments and assumptions, they can be read as windows into cultural scripts of parenting that are often taken for granted. When a parent calls a toy a “friend,” an “educator,” or a “danger,” the metaphor does not simply describe the object; it frames the child–toy relationship, legitimates certain practices (such as purchasing educational toys),

and problematizes others (such as screen-based play). For this reason, metaphor analysis in the present study is treated as an interpretive bridge between micro-level parental talk and macro-level social meanings.

Toys are social and cultural artefacts rather than neutral objects. They circulate in markets, are shaped by advertising and educational claims, and often arrive with implicit “scripts” about how children should play and what kinds of capacities should be cultivated. Contemporary childhood is frequently pulled in two directions at once: on the one hand, play as freedom, imagination, and self-directed exploration; on the other, play as optimization – an investment in measurable skills and future success. Within this tension, toys can be understood as both instruments and symbols: they promise developmental benefits, signal parental care, and express aspirations about the child’s future. When parents prefer intelligence-enhancing toys or structured educational materials, this may reflect a broader tendency to instrumentalize play, turning it into a regulated activity with expected outcomes. Conversely, metaphors emphasizing friendship, family, or joy foreground the relational and affective dimensions of toys, highlighting how play objects may function as companions and emotional resources.

From a philosophy-and-society perspective, parental toy choices can be read as part of a moral economy of parenting. Parents are increasingly expected to act as responsible planners and risk managers while also sustaining children’s wellbeing and family relationships. In sociological discussions, these expectations have been theorized through notions such as “intensive parenting” and “concerted cultivation,” which encourage families toward deliberate, expert-guided investment in children’s futures (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). Such pressures also resonate with broader accounts of modern risk management and uncertainty (Beck 1992). This moral economy is further intensified by digitalization (screen-based play and smart toys), consumer culture (rapidly expanding toy markets), and educational competition (pressure to “support” development early). Within such contexts, toys may be framed simultaneously as opportunities for enrichment and learning, and as potential threats involving screen dependency, safety risks, consumerism, or undesirable socialization.

Accordingly, the analysis interprets parents’ metaphors and statements through three intertwined lenses: (1) developmentalism and instrumentalization, where toys become vehicles for skill formation, discipline, and future-oriented outcomes; (2) relationality and emotional infrastructure, where toys are imagined as companions or family-like figures mediating intimacy, loneliness, and attachment; and (3) commodification and regulation, where toys are seen as valuable commodities whose costs, risks, and effects must be managed. These lenses are used heuristically, helping connect empirical categories to broader debates without reducing parents’ experiences to a single explanation.

This framing enables the results section to move beyond listing metaphor categories toward explaining what is at stake in parents’ meaning-making; which ideals of childhood are implied, which anxieties are negotiated, and which social conditions – marketization, digital media, and changing family routines

– are mirrored in everyday parental talk. In the discussion, empirical themes are explicitly connected back to these lenses to demonstrate how micro-level metaphors relate to broader societal patterns in contemporary parenting and the social organization of childhood. In this way, the paper aims to contribute not only to early childhood education research but also to wider discussions about family life, consumption, and the cultural politics of play.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study was conducted using a phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research approaches. Phenomenology aims to examine in depth phenomena that are known to exist but are not yet fully understood (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). In this context, parents' perceptions of play and toys were explored through metaphors, focusing on the meanings they attributed to these concepts.

Study Group

The study group consisted of 25 parents whose children attend public pre-school education institutions located in the central district of Mersin, Türkiye. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, which provides practical advantages in terms of accessibility while allowing for in-depth qualitative exploration (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). In accordance with confidentiality principles, participants were anonymized using the code "P;" and their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers based on expert consultation. During the interviews, parents were asked to express their perceptions of toys through metaphors and to explain their views regarding play and toy selection. The data collection process was carried out through face-to-face interviews between March and April 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview setting was arranged to ensure that participants could comfortably express their opinions (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Two researchers independently examined the interview transcripts. Parents' metaphors were first coded and then grouped according to shared characteristics to form conceptual categories. When the same metaphor was used by more than one participant, it was categorized accordingly, and representative quotations

were identified. Category development was also informed by previously established metaphor analysis procedures (Saban 2009; Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, analysis progressed through iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the transcripts, (2) initial coding of statements related to toy choice and play meanings, (3) clustering codes into candidate themes, (4) reviewing coherence across the dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the narrative report. Importantly, metaphors were interpreted together with participants' "because..." explanations, which clarified whether toys were framed in terms of developmental benefit, emotional comfort, entertainment, or risk. Discrepancies between coders were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, direct quotations from participants were included (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). Reliability was supported through expert consultation and inter-coder agreement. Agreement was calculated using the Miles and Huberman (1994) formula: $\text{Reliability} = \text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement})$. The metaphor categories were also reviewed by an independent child development expert, and the agreement rate exceeded commonly accepted qualitative research thresholds (Saban 2009; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Mersin University. The application was reviewed and approved on May 8, 2024 (Decision No: 166). Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Parents were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. All identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis, and participants were anonymized using codes (P1, P2, ...). Data were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

Reflexivity and Context

Because metaphors are culturally situated, interpretation requires sensitivity to context. The study was conducted in Mersin, and the meanings parents attach to toys may reflect local socioeconomic conditions, schooling expectations, and prevailing parenting norms. Throughout the analysis, the researchers kept analytic memos to reflect on how their professional backgrounds in education and child development could shape interpretations. This reflexive step helped distinguish between participants' explicit statements and broader theoretical inferences developed in the discussion.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Group (N = 25)

Demographic Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	20	80.00
	Male	5	20.00
Marital status	Married	25	100.00
Age	25–31	3	12.00
	32–38	14	56.00
	39–45	7	28.00
	46 and above	1	4.00
Number of children	1	8	32.00
	2	10	40.00
	3	7	28.00
Child's age (preschool)	4	2	8.00
	5	6	24.00
	6	17	68.00
Monthly household income (TRY)	15,000–24,999	4	16.00
	25,000–34,999	4	16.00
	35,000–44,999	6	24.00
	45,000–54,999	3	12.00
	55,000–64,999	1	4.00
	65,000 and above	7	28.00
Father's occupation	Tradesman / small business owner	4	16.00
	Worker	9	36.00
	Civil servant	6	24.00
	Self-employed	4	16.00
	Retired	2	8.00
Mother's occupation	Homemaker	17	68.00
	Worker	5	20.00
	Civil servant	3	12.00
Highest education completed	Primary school	3	12.00
	High school	7	28.00
	Associate degree	8	32.00
	Bachelor's degree	7	28.00

Note: Percentages are based on N = 25.

Toy Categories and Priorities as Developmental Investment

The ranked preferences reported by parents are summarized in Table 2.

[illegible]

According to the findings, the most frequently preferred toy category was intelligence-enhancing/cognitive toys ($n = 23$), while the highest first-rank priority was given to movement-based toys ($n = 21$). Sarıkaya and Kaya (2022) similarly report that parents' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in toy selection are shaped by factors such as the perceived educational role of the toy, children's interest, difficulties experienced in selection, awareness, and freedom of choice. Related research suggests that families often favor toys framed as educational or cognitively enriching while also valuing toys that support motor development (Kollmayer et al 2018; Richards et al. 2020). Broader systematic reviews likewise indicate that parents commonly balance educational value with physical activity, safety, and practical considerations when selecting toys (Kumari et al. 2025). Interpreted through the theoretical lenses of this paper, these preferences reflect a tendency to treat toys as developmental resources – objects expected to “do work” in producing desirable skills – while still acknowledging the embodied and playful dimensions of childhood.

The meaning of play: between enjoyment and optimization

Table 3. Parents' Views on the Meaning and Importance of Play and Toys ($N = 25$)

Views on the importance of play/toys	Frequency (participants)
Supports development	8 (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P11, P12)
It is fun; provides enjoyable/quality time	7 (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P10, P12)
Enables self-expression	3 (P7, P8, P9)
Develops skills	3 (P2, P5, P11)
It is educational/instructive	2 (P4, P5)
It is the child's 'work'; the child spends time playing	2 (P7, P10)
Helps the child focus and think	2 (P3, P5)
Helps the child regulate emotions	1 (P7)
Allows time with friends/peers	1(P10)
Encourages sharing	1 (P10)
Increases interest in the surroundings	1 (P4)

As shown in Table 3, parents most frequently described play and toys in terms of supporting development ($f = 8$) and providing fun, enjoyment, or quality time ($f = 7$). Other recurring themes included enabling self-expression ($f = 3$), developing skills ($f = 3$), being educational/instructive ($f = 2$), supporting concentration and thinking ($f = 2$), and helping regulate emotions ($f = 1$). A smaller number of parents emphasized play as part of children's everyday routine (“the child's work,” $f = 2$), as an opportunity for peer interaction ($f = 1$), as encouraging sharing ($f = 1$), or as increasing curiosity about the environment ($f = 1$). These findings align with research emphasizing play's role in children's

cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Polat and Kara 2023; Ginsburg 2007; Singer and Singer 2005). In our data, however, developmental language co-exists with an affective vocabulary of enjoyment and quality time. This co-presence suggests that parents negotiate two meanings of play at once: play as a domain of pleasure and relational wellbeing, and play as a vehicle for optimization and early skill formation. Such a tension echoes contemporary parenting cultures in which play is valued both as freedom and as an instrument of responsible, future-oriented childrearing (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). Read through the paper's theoretical lenses, "development" themes resonate with instrumentalization, while "fun/quality time" themes foreground relationality and emotional infrastructure. Some exemplary statements are presented below:

P5: "It is an educational and instructive activity through which children spend enjoyable time. Toys that positively affect their development improve their hand skills and thinking."

P12: "It is important because it supports the child's development and also contributes to spending quality time."

Toy Selection Criteria: Safety, Developmental Value, and the Management of Risk

Table 4. Criteria Parents Reported for Toy Selection (N = 25)

Toy selection criteria reported by parents	Frequency (participants)
I prioritize toys that support knowledge/skills and overall development	15 (P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P13, P14, P16, P17, P18, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25)
I choose toys that attract interest and that the child enjoys playing with	4 (P1, P2, P6, P20)
I ensure the toy is not harmful to health	4 (P1, P5, P12, P15)
I take the child's preferences into account	2 (P3, P19)
I prefer toys that encourage physical activity	1 (P8)
I buy toys the child can play with friends/peers	1 (P10)
I consider age- and development-appropriateness	1 (P11)
I prefer calming toys	1 (P12)
I pay attention to softness (plush, etc.)	1 (P1)

As shown in Table 4, the most frequently emphasized criterion in toy selection was prioritizing toys that parents believed support children's knowledge, skills, and overall developmental progress ($f = 15$). This was followed by selecting toys that attract children's interest and provide enjoyment ($f = 4$) and ensuring that toys are not harmful to health ($f = 4$). Less frequently mentioned criteria included considering the child's own preferences ($f = 2$), preferring toys that encourage physical activity ($f = 1$), choosing toys that facilitate peer play

($f = 1$), paying attention to age and developmental appropriateness ($f = 1$), preferring calming toys ($f = 1$), and selecting soft (e.g., plush) toys ($f = 1$).

These patterns align with prior research showing that parents typically treat toy selection as a multi-criteria decision in which developmental value and safety are central concerns (Adak Özdemir and Ramazan 2012; Kollmayer et al 2018; Richards et al. 2020). At the same time, the presence of enjoyment, child preference, and calming effects – albeit less frequently mentioned – suggests that toy selection also reflects everyday affective and practical considerations. Read through the theoretical lens of this paper, parents' emphasis on “non-harm” and developmental benefit can be interpreted as a form of risk management and responsible parenting, where toys are evaluated not only for what they enable (skills, learning, activity) but also for what they might prevent (harm, overstimulation, undesirable influence). Consistent with this interpretation, Kumari et al. (2025) note that parental choices are shaped by children's preferences as well as contextual and environmental influences.

Illustrative statements include:

P1: “I make sure to choose plush toys that are harmless and enjoyable for the child.”

P8: “Beyond children's own preferences, if I have a say, I prefer intelligence-enhancing puzzles or toys that encourage physical activity.”

P12: “I pay attention to choosing toys that do not harm the child and that help them remain calmer while engaging in play.”

To identify parents' metaphorical perceptions of the concept of “toy,” they were asked to complete the prompt: “A toy is like ... because ...”.

Metaphors as Cultural Scripts: From “Friend” to “Developmental Tool

Table 5. Metaphors Produced by Parents Regarding the Concept of Toy (N = 25)

No.	Metaphor	f	%
1	Friend	8	32.00
2	Productive tool	2	8.00
3	World of imagination	2	8.00
4	Educator	2	8.00
5	Preparer for life	1	4.00
6	Life	1	4.00
7	Book	1	4.00
8	Park	1	4.00
9	Child's property	1	4.00
10	Real object	1	4.00

No.	Metaphor	f	%
11	Good time	1	4.00
12	Child	1	4.00
13	Danger	1	4.00
14	Family	1	4.00
15	Helper	1	4.00
16	Entertainment/Fun	1	4.00

Table note: Percentages are based on N = 25

The data indicate that parents perceive toys through multiple symbolic frames and define them using a diverse set of metaphors. As shown in Table 5, participants generated 16 distinct metaphors, with the most frequently expressed metaphor being “friend” ($f = 8$, 32.00%). Other recurring metaphors included “productive tool” ($f = 2$, 8.00%), “world of imagination” ($f = 2$, 8.00%), and “educator” ($f = 2$, 8.00%). Interpreted through the theoretical framework of this paper, the prominence of “friend” highlights the relational and affective dimensions of toys, positioning them as companions within children’s everyday emotional worlds. At the same time, metaphors such as “educator” and “productive tool” reflect an instrumental understanding of toys as vehicles for learning and developmental optimization. In this sense, parents’ metaphorical language reveals the coexistence of relational and future-oriented cultural scripts of parenting. Comparable findings have been reported in previous metaphor research. Giren and Durak (2015), for example, found that preschool teachers most frequently described toys as “friends.” Sarıkaya and Kaya (2022) similarly emphasize that parents view toys not only as entertaining objects but also as symbols supporting learning and development. More broadly, those studies underline the critical role of toys and play in children’s cognitive, emotional, and social growth, while also demonstrating that parental interpretations shape how toys are positioned within family life (Polat and Kara 2023; Richards et al. 2020). Overall, these metaphors suggest that parents do not treat toys merely as sources of entertainment, but as emotionally meaningful and developmentally charged objects embedded in broader expectations about childhood, care, and “good” parenting.

Table 6. Conceptual Categories Formed from Parents’ Metaphors for Toys

Category	Metaphors (participant counts)	Category frequency (f)	Number of distinct metaphors
Developmental support	Productive tool (2), Educator (2), Helper (1), Family (1), Entertainment/Fun (1), Friend (1), World of imagination (1)	9	7
Providing enjoyable time	Friend (4), Park (1), Real object (1)	6	3

Category	Metaphors (participant counts)	Category frequency (f)	Number of distinct metaphors
Facilitating learning	Book (1), Preparer for life (1)	2	2
Offering life experiences	Life (1), Friend (1)	2	2
Supporting imagination	Friend (1), World of imagination (1)	2	2
Attachment and bonding	Child's property (1), Friend (1), Good time (1)	3	3
Attribution of value	Child (1)	1	1
Perceived risks	Danger (1)	1	1

Note: Frequencies indicate the number of participants whose metaphors were grouped into each category. Because the metaphor "friend" appeared across multiple interpretive dimensions, it is represented in more than one category.

As shown in Table 6, the metaphors produced by parents were grouped according to shared characteristics, resulting in eight conceptual categories. The most frequent category was developmental support ($f = 9$), followed by providing enjoyable time ($f = 6$). Less frequent categories included facilitating learning ($f = 2$), offering life experiences ($f = 2$), and supporting imagination ($f = 2$). Metaphors emphasizing attachment and bonding ($f = 3$) highlighted toys as emotionally meaningful companions, while smaller categories reflected the attribution of value ($f = 1$) and perceived risks ($f = 1$).

These findings are consistent with earlier metaphor research. Giren and Durak (2015), for example, categorized preschool teachers' toy metaphors into themes such as developmental support, entertainment, basic needs, emotional reflection, and family membership. Similarly, the present study shows that parents attribute multidimensional meanings to toys, emphasizing their role in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Giren and Durak 2015).

Beyond parallels with previous work, the distribution of metaphor categories in this sample is theoretically informative. The prominence of developmental-support metaphors echoes the instrumentalization of play, whereas metaphors clustered around attachment and enjoyable time foreground the relationality and emotional care. The coexistence of these clusters suggests that parental meaning-making is layered rather than uniform: toys are simultaneously imagined as companions and as technologies of development. This layered structure is precisely what metaphor analysis captures, revealing how developmental, affective, and regulatory concerns intersect in everyday parental language.

Discussion

This study shows that parents do not relate to toys as neutral objects. Rather, toys are evaluated through a mix of developmental expectations, moral responsibilities, and relational meanings. The prominence of intelligence-enhancing and movement-based toys indicates that many parents interpret toy choice as a

consequential decision – one that should support skill formation and “healthy” development – while metaphors of friendship, assistance, and learning reveal how toys are also positioned as companions and symbolic resources in family life.

Developmentalism and the Instrumentalization of Play

Across participants’ statements, the most purchased and most prioritized toys were those associated with measurable developmental outcomes – intelligence, problem-solving, and motor skills. Read through the first lens proposed in the theoretical framework, toys appear as instruments of developmentalism: they are expected to cultivate competencies and to prepare children for future success. Such expectations resemble broader patterns described in the literature on intensive parenting, where parents are encouraged to actively manage children’s trajectories through educational investments and expert-informed choices (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). The findings therefore suggest that the meaning of play is partially reorganized around optimization, even when parents also affirm the intrinsic value of playfulness.

Importantly, this instrumental framing does not necessarily imply that parents reject play-for-its-own-sake. Rather, parents often combine developmental language with statements about enjoyment and wellbeing, indicating a hybrid orientation: toys are valued when they are both “fun” and “useful.” This hybridity is analytically significant because it shows how contemporary parenting scripts can absorb play into an educational logic without fully eliminating its experiential and affective dimensions.

Relationality, Attachment, and Emotional Infrastructure

The metaphor analysis highlights a second, relational register. When parents describe a toy as a “friend,” “companion,” or “family member,” they articulate toys as part of children’s emotional infrastructure – objects that mediate comfort, attachment, and everyday companionship. This framing resonates with sociocultural accounts that treat material objects as participants in social relationships and as carriers of meaning within family routines. In this sense, toys function not only as pedagogical tools but also as resources for intimacy and self-expression.

From the standpoint of philosophy and society, these relational metaphors also point to normative ideals of “good childhood” that include warmth, creativity, and security. They complicate purely consumerist readings of toy acquisition by showing that parents often justify purchases in terms of care and emotional wellbeing, not merely in terms of status or entertainment.

Commodification, Risk Management, and Regulation

The third lens foregrounds commodification and regulation. Parents’ attention to safety, appropriateness, and potential negative effects suggests that toy choice is also treated as a matter of risk management. This aligns with the idea

that modern family life increasingly involves navigating expert claims, market signals, and anxieties about harm (Beck 1992). In our findings, concerns about technological toys and their perceived effects echo broader debates about the social organization of childhood under conditions of digitalization and consumer expansion.

Taken together, the three lenses clarify why the results cannot be read as a simple list of preferences. Parents' toy choices are situated at the intersection of (a) future-oriented developmental investments, (b) relational and affective needs, and (c) market-driven risks and regulatory concerns. Toys thus emerge as everyday sites where cultural ideals, economic structures, and moral responsibilities are negotiated.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study is limited by its sample size, its focus on a single urban setting (Mersin), and the reliance on self-reported statements. Future research could compare different socioeconomic groups, examine the role of advertising and social media in shaping toy meanings, and include observational data on how children actually use toys at home. Such work would deepen the link between metaphorical constructions and everyday practices, strengthening contributions to debates on consumption, childhood, and family life.

Implications for Inequality, Markets, and Public Guidance

A broader implication concerns inequality and the commercialization of “good parenting.” When toys are framed primarily as instruments for cognitive advantage, families with greater economic resources may be better positioned to access expensive “educational” products, while other families may rely on improvised play materials or secondhand toys. In this sense, the cultural elevation of educational toys may unintentionally reinforce classed distinctions in early childhood opportunities.

Public guidance therefore matters: rather than equating good play with consumption, early childhood professionals and policymakers can emphasize low-cost, child-led play practices, community play spaces, and toy-sharing initiatives. Regulatory attention to marketing claims – especially around digital and “smart” toys – may also reduce parental anxiety and support more informed decisions. For a Philosophy and Society audience, these findings invite reflection on how markets, expert discourses, and family moral responsibilities converge in the everyday politics of childhood.

Overall, the study highlights toys as morally and culturally charged objects through which contemporary childhood, care, and social expectations are continuously negotiated.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that parents most often preferred intelligence-enhancing toys, while movement-based toys held the highest first-rank priority in selection. In discussing the meaning of play and toys, parents emphasized developmental support alongside enjoyment and quality time, and they reported prioritizing toys that foster children's knowledge, skills, and overall developmental needs. Parents also framed toys through a rich metaphorical language, most notably describing them as "friends," which highlights their emotional and relational significance in children's everyday lives.

Beyond these descriptive patterns, the analysis demonstrates that parental talk about toys is structured by broader cultural scripts of contemporary parenting. Preferences for educational toys point to a future-oriented developmental logic, whereas relational metaphors foreground toys as companions and affective resources within family life. Concerns about safety and appropriateness further suggest that toy selection is shaped by the management of perceived risks within expanding consumer markets. Taken together, these findings show that toy consumption is not a neutral practice but an everyday site where ideals of childhood, care, and parental responsibility are continuously negotiated.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, the following implications are suggested:

1. Educational programs may be developed to increase parents' awareness of age-appropriate toy selection and the value of child-led, low-cost play practices.
2. Toy manufacturers may design products that support cognitive and motor development while avoiding exaggerated "educational" claims that could intensify parental anxiety.
3. Early childhood education policies may encourage play-based learning environments and promote access to developmentally rich play materials in public preschools.
4. Parents' metaphorical perceptions should be considered in family guidance programs, as metaphors reveal the values, expectations, and concerns shaping everyday parenting decisions.
5. Community-based toy-sharing initiatives (e.g., toy libraries) and safe public play spaces may help reduce inequalities in access to quality play materials.
6. Clear public guidance and consumer protection regarding safety standards and marketing practices – particularly for digital and smart toys – may support more informed parental choices.

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Metaforička percepcija igračaka kod roditelja i njihovi pogledi na igru

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad istražuje na koji način roditelji dece predškolskog uzrasta u Turskoj razumeju „igračke“ putem metafora i kako ta značenja oblikuju njihove stavove o igri i izboru igračaka. Oslanjajući se na kvalitativni fenomenološki pristup, sprovedeni su polustrukturirani intervjui sa 25 roditelja. Analiza metafora korišćena je za identifikovanje ponavljajućih figurativnih konstrukcija o igračkama, dok je deskriptivna tematska analiza primenjena na ispitivanje iskaza roditelja o igri i kriterijumima za kupovinu. Roditeljske metafore grupisale su se oko tri interpretativna registra: igračke kao saputnici (afektivna i relacionala podrška), kao razvojna sredstva (učenje i ulaganje usmereno ka budućnosti) i kao roba (predmeti koji se procenjuju na osnovu bezbednosti, trajnosti i cene). Dominacija metafore „prijatelja“ ističe ulogu igračaka u svakodnevnom emocionalnom životu dece, dok okviri ulaganja i robe otkrivaju na koji način razvojni ideali i ekonomska ograničenja zajednički oblikuju donošenje roditeljskih odluka. Povezujući svakodnevni govor roditelja sa širim pitanjima društvene organizacije detinjstva, potrošnje i regulisanja „dobrog“ roditeljstva, ova studija ukazuje na implikacije za obrazovanje u ranom detinjstvu, savetovanje porodica i javne politike.

Ključne reči: igra, igračke, metafore, roditeljske percepcije

