

# Five (or maybe six) toys for a desert island

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## ABSTRACT

istockphoto It's easy to look askance at the hordes of Barbie dolls and Beanie Babies overrunning other people's houses, so the wave of horror that greeted "Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century," a recent anthropological study of 32 middle-class American families and their obscene quantities of stuff, was predictable.

## FULL TEXT

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It's easy to look askance at the hordes of Barbie dolls and Beanie Babies overrunning other people's houses, so the wave of horror that greeted "Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century," a recent anthropological study of 32 middle-class American families and their obscene quantities of stuff, was predictable. Published in coffee-table book form and illustrated with gorgeous pictures of freezers packed with prefab food and avalanches of clothes and swaying towers of molded plastic in bright primary colors, the book elicits sympathetic revulsion.

"Look at how these people live," you say to yourself as you leaf through the pages, perhaps realizing that, if the study's photographer set up at just the right angle in your home, he could find scenes comparable to those in the book. You can distance yourself from this response by reminding yourself that the participating families all lived in one region, Southern California; that things would look different if the sample were more diverse; that 32 isn't a statistically significant number of households. All true, but the deeper truth of the book still comes through: Americans have too much stuff, and it clutters up not only their homes but their lives, their time, their consciousness.

To me, the book's most arresting detail is that the United States has 3.1 percent of the world's children but buys 40 percent of all toys sold worldwide. Obviously, American kids can't possibly extract all the play-value out of that many toys, most of which end up piled somewhere.

That got me thinking about how drastically a family could cut back on its toys. So, an exercise: You're marooned indefinitely on a desert island with your kids, who are under 12. (If you don't have kids, mentally borrow some that you know well; if your kids are older than 12, think back to when they weren't.) You can bring five toys. There are trees to climb, waves to swim in, and animals to hunt and evade, so there's no need for specialized sports equipment. You get to bring a separate box of books and musical instruments, so just concentrate on the toys – and nothing that requires electricity, since there won't be any.

What to bring? I consulted with my in-house experts, who are 9 and 11, and we came up with the following:

1. A medium-size ball. You can make up an infinite number of games to play with it, and it's useful for all ages.
2. A board game. We considered Monopoly, which would assuage our homesickness for city life, and chess, which would provide a perpetually escalating challenge as the kids grew older. But we chose The Settlers of Catan, a cousin of Monopoly that goes beyond real estate into agriculture, herding, mining, and town-building, and features more trading and negotiation. And you can change the layout of the board each time you play, which helps keep it fresh.
3. Legos. Not one of those kits they sell now – the ones that come with assembly instructions for achieving a

single preconceived outcome — but a freestyle assortment you can use to make whatever you want in the older spirit of the toy.

4. Playing cards. You can play all sorts of games with cards, but my daughters are partial to poker. The younger one, when she shows me a winning hand, likes to quote a favorite line from "True Grit": "Shot by a child." No need for chips; we can bet pebbles or ants.

5. A stuffed animal. The girls insisted on bringing their number-one bears; in fact, each would bring her bear before anything else. And the bears are versatile toys, providing comfort, sociability (they have their own personalities, which adds to the size of our island community), and opportunities for imaginative play.

Honorable mention: My wife pointed out that the girls would probably play half the time with the empty box that the books and instruments came in.

So, five toys for a desert island. I don't think that reducing to just these five would really cause much of a hardship. And if it's this easy to imagine cutting back on toys, why is it so hard in the real world?

Carlo Rotella is director of American Studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

Credit: By Carlo Rotella

## Illustration

Caption: istockphoto

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