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BLOCK PLAY JUMP-STARTS CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Pilot Research Unlocks New Possibilities for Impact of Blocks on Child Development

MONTREAL (November 9, 2006) – Findings from an independent pilot clinical research study released today by the University of Washington indicate that children who engage in block play benefit from improved language acquisition. The study, commissioned in September 2005 by MEGA Brands, validates a growing body of research that supports the benefits of block play for a child's development.

The University of Washington research team conducted a randomized controlled trial for six months in a sample recruited from a pediatric clinic in Seattle, Washington. The children studied were between the ages of 1.5 years and 2.5 years of age. The sample was split into an intervention group and a control group, with children in the intervention group receiving two MEGA BLOKS playsets – one set at the start of the study and one set approximately two months into the study. In addition, parents received suggestions for block-play activities. Key findings from the study indicate:

- That playing with blocks leads to a statistically and clinically-significant increase in language acquisition
 - Children who received blocks scored 15 percentage points higher on the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventories (CDI) instrument, a highly-regarded scale that measures toddlers' language development
- A statistical trend in decreased probability of watching television was noted in the same sub-sample
 - On any given day, children in the same sub-sample who received blocks were more than 80 percent less likely to watch television
- Parents who facilitate block play with their children can help foster creativity and their child's development

"Many parents of young children are looking for ways to improve their child's cognitive development," said Dimitri Christakis, MD, MPH, lead researcher of the University of Washington study, a pediatrician at the Seattle Children's Hospital and the author of *The Elephant in the Living Room: Make Television Work for Your Kids*.

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“Despite many implicit and explicit claims that are made to the contrary, few products have actually been proven to do so until now,” he added.

The University of Washington pilot clinical research study is the latest in a series of recent findings throughout the academic community that identify block play as a constructive alternative to activities that offer little to no value for a child’s development. In fact, a recent study released by the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a return to “true toys,” like blocks, in which “children use their imagination fully, over passive toys that require limited imagination.¹”

“This pioneering pilot research study signals what many in academic circles have suggested for years – block play is not only fun, but is also an intellectually-rewarding activity in which a child can mentally and physically engage,” said Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, director of the Infant Language Laboratory at Temple University and author of nine books, including, most recently, *Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How Our Children Really Learn – And Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*. “This research demonstrates what child development experts have known for years – PLAY = LEARNING,” she added. Dr. Hirsh-Pasek and her team at the Infant Language Laboratory are currently investigating how free play with blocks might also affect spatial learning in preschool-aged children.

“Feedback from concerned parents suggests increased television watching and video game playing may inhibit children’s creativity, imagination and attention span,” noted Vic Bertrand, executive vice president and chief operating officer of MEGA Brands. “The results of this pilot study are encouraging and we will continue supporting further research to study if and how playing with blocks, which are affordable and accessible to the vast majority of families, can stimulate a child’s development in areas such as science, math and attention.”

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¹ “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds,” American Academy of Pediatrics: October 9, 2006.

Study Methodology

Led by Dr. Dimitri Christakis, The University of Washington research team conducted a randomized controlled trial in a sample recruited from a pediatric clinic in Seattle, Washington affiliated with Children's Hospital. The children studied were between the ages of 1.5 and 2.5 years of age and were ineligible if their primary care taker did not speak English or if they had been diagnosed with developmental delay. Each child was studied for six months.

The sample was split into an intervention group and a control group. Children in the intervention group received two sets of building blocks, one set at the start of the study and one set approximately two months into the study. The initial set of blocks was the Maxi Bag, a pack of 80 basic blocks. The second set was a smaller pack of specialty blocks in shapes such as cars and people. In addition to the blocks, the parents in the intervention group received a newsletter with suggestions of things they could do with their child and the blocks. These suggestions, called Blocktivities, consisted of simple activities such as sorting the blocks by color, seeing how big a stack the child could make, etc.

Data was collected in several ways. At enrollment, all parents completed a baseline questionnaire.

During the course of the trial, both intervention and control parents were asked to complete time diaries to track the activities that their child engaged in during the day, including block play, other types of play, and television viewing. At the conclusion of the study, parents in both groups were telephoned to complete an exit interview, which included an assessment of language and attention in their child. The outcomes of language acquisition, attention and television viewing were analyzed by the research team after the clinical period was complete.

About MEGA Brands

MEGA Brands provides stimulating creative experiences for children and families through innovative, well-designed, affordable and high-quality products that are marketed worldwide under the leading brands MEGA BLOKS®, ROSE ART®, MAGNETIX® and BOARD DUDES®.

The company designs, manufactures and markets high quality construction and magnetic toy sets, games and puzzles, activity and craft sets, art materials, boards, writing instruments, school supplies and stationery. MEGA Brands is headquartered in Montreal and present in 14 countries with sales in over one hundred. For more information, please visit www.megabrands.com

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About The Child Health Institute

The Child Health Institute (CHI) is a joint research effort comprising faculty from the University of Washington's Division of General Pediatrics, the Maternal and Child Health program within the School of Public Health and Community Medicine and the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Washington. Established in 1998, CHI consolidates pediatric health services research under one roof and organizational umbrella. CHI's particular areas of interest include: clinical effectiveness, community-based research, evidence-based medicine, quality of care, and health informatics.

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