Too many toys are bad for children, study suggests

Children become distracted when they are surrounded by toys

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It's what parents have suspected all along. Children who have too many toys are more easily distracted, and do not enjoy quality playtime, a new study suggests.

Researchers at the University of Toledo in Ohio, US, recruited 36 toddlers and invited them to play in a room for half an hour, with either four toys, or 16 toys.

They found that youngsters were far more creative when they had fewer toys to play with. They also played with each for twice as long, thinking up more uses for each toy and lengthening and expanding their games.

The authors conclude that parents, schools and nurseries should pack away most of their toys and just rotate a small number regularly, to encourage children to become more creative and improve their attention spans.

"This study sought to determine if the number of toys in toddlers' environments influences the quality of their play," said lead author Dr Carly Dauch in the journal Infant Behaviour and Development.

"The higher number of incidences of play in the 16 toy condition did seem to interfere with duration and depth of play. Other toys present may have created a source of external distraction.

"During toddlerhood, children develop, but may not have mastered, higher level control over attention. Their attention, and therefore, their play may be disrupted by factors in their environments that present distraction.

"The results of the present study suggest that an abundance of toys may create such a distraction.

"When provided with fewer toys in the environment, toddlers engage in longer periods of play with a single toy, allowing better focus to explore and play more creatively".

Getting rid of toys encourages children to read more or paint, say researchers

Britons spend more than £3 billion each year on toys and surveys have shown that a typical child owns 238 toys in total but parents think they play with just 12 'favourites' on a daily basis making up just five per cent of their toys.

However it is not the first time that research has suggested that too many toys can be distracting. In the 1990s German researchers, Elke Schubert and Rainer Strick conducted experiment where toys were taken away from Munich nursery for three months.

After just a few weeks, the children re-adjusted and their play became far more creative and social. They published their findings in a book, The Toy-free Nursery.

In his book, ClutterFree with Kids author Joshua Becker also argued that fewer toys are better for children because sparse playrooms encourage creativity, help develop attention spans, and teach youngsters about taking care of their possessions.

“A child will rarely learn to fully appreciate the toy in front of them when there are countless options still remaining on the shelf behind them,” he said.

“When kids have too many toys, they will naturally take less care of them. They will not learn to value them if there is always a replacement ready at hand.

“Fewer toys causes children to become resourceful by solving problems with only the materials at hand. And resourcefulness is a gift with unlimited possibilities.

The research was published in the journal Infant Behaviour and Development.