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# **How parents handle the disposal of their children's toys: an emotional and controlled process**

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**Abstract:** this research aims to understand how parents deal with their children's toys when they have to dispose of them. We consider disposition as a dispossession process, in which parents and children have to undo the affective and utilitarian links with the toys. Through a qualitative and longitudinal study with 16 parents, our results show that both parents and children suffer from this disposal, due to the affective link with toys that are perceived as meaningful and transitional objects. Parents have to use detachment strategies such as spatial distancing and reliable arguments (replacement, passage of age, solidarity). They want to control the disposition process, by ensuring the future of the object and giving them to relatives or to people in whom they believe. This research provides managerial implications for toys' recycling organizations to prevent families from accumulating unused toys.

**Keywords:** disposition, dispossession, toys, attachment, detachment

## **Introduction, objectives and research question**

In France, 110 000 toys are throwing away every day, corresponding to 40 million toys every year – knowing that 7 out of 10 are no longer used 8 months after purchase (Planetoscope, 2020). Although many research has been done on objects disposal (Belk et al., 1988; Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2019; Ekerdt, 2017; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005), toys remain understudied in marketing research, even if they present important environmental issues. Children are often reluctant to dispose of their toys because these are transitional objects that comfort and help them deal with difficult emotions or situations (Winnicott, 1953). Parents themselves find it difficult to dispose of their children's toys, which they consider as special, symbolic and filled with positive memories (Price et al., 2000). Toys gather many identities such as the child's, the parents' and sometimes the grandparents', which creates tensions that must be managed (Phillips & Sego, 2011). In this context, we seek to understand how parents handle the disposal of their children's toys. Through a longitudinal qualitative study conducted with 16 parents, our goal is to understand how parents perceive this dispossession and what practices they use to help their children to detach from their toys.

## **Conceptual framework**

In this research, we consider the disposal of children's toys in terms of voluntary dispossession, that is, as a process in which an individual reduces his or her physical and/or psychological ties to an object (Vanier et al., 1987). This allows us to understand the disposal before the object leaves the house when the past literature has mainly studied disposal at the time where the object leaves home. It showed that disposition gathers a multitude of practices such as reuse, trading or trashing (Jacoby et al., 1977). It highlighted the symbolic and social dimensions of these practices (Arsel, 2010; Bajde, 2012; Sherry, 1990) as well as their psychological mechanisms (Albinsson & Perera, 2009; De Ferran et al., 2020) or their links with identity (Cherrier, 2009; Trudel et al., 2016). It also showed a shift in the status of consumers to consumer-merchants through new exchange platforms (Bailly, 2019; Juge et al.,

2019). However, it has little considered disposition as a process of dispossession, which involves choosing which practice to adopt and how to "endure" the separation from the object (Vanier et al., 1987). Dispossession is made of several steps that involve divestment (breaking the bond of physical control over the object) and/or detachment (weakening the affective bond between the object and its owner) and helps to break the ties that exist between an object and its owner (Roster, 2014; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). By disposing, individuals change their identities (Ekerdt, 2017) and use rituals to make the separation easier (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005). This process has been little studied, except for "special" objects (affective ones), which have strong symbolic values for their owners (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005), or during life changes such as moving (Marcoux, 2001).

In the context of toys, parents must regularly make choices about their future. In their research on disposal practices, Hibbert et al. (2005) identified that all parents surveyed had to deal with disposal of toys in the previous year. Toys are constantly changing within homes as they are frequently evaluated, checked, and renewed (Gregson et al., 2007). In their research on how mothers handle their identities in the disposal of their children's belongings, Phillips & Sego (2011) show that dispossession, far from being individual, can also be collective, leading to conflicts and strategies to reduce them, such as subterfuge, avoidance, forced choice, and training/discussion. In line with this, we want to understand the meanings of this dispossession process, and to identify the constraints or opportunities that help parents dispose of their children's toys.

## **Method**

To answer our questions, we conducted a multi-method and longitudinal qualitative study with 16 individuals recruited through family, work and friendship networks as well as through a "snowball" method. These participants -aged 25 to 54- have one or more dependent children and have had to manage the disposal of their toys at least once in the past year. Of the 16 individuals, nine individuals were interviewed only once, and seven individuals were followed up longitudinally, i.e., they were interviewed once again and kept a logbook. The interviews focused dispossession's memories, including of children's toys. We conducted interviews in the informants' homes; they lasted an average of 62 minutes. At the end of each interview, we made a home tour to understand real practices and spatial-temporal toys' trajectories. Longitudinal follow-up, through new interviews and/or diaries, consisted of finishing the processes in progress at the first meeting and of collecting new ones, anchored in daily life.

The data obtained were coded using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to bring out themes and categories from the informants' discourse and not from existed literature. The analysis was thus refined as the data was collected, which we then interpreted by cross-referencing the material collected with the literature.

## **A complex process requiring various stratagems**

### ***Disposition as a transition process for both children and parents***

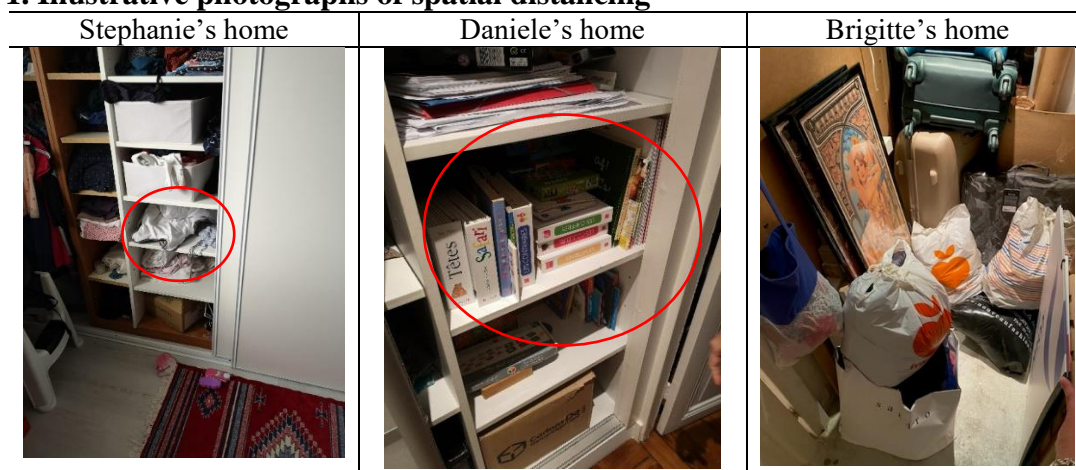
First, both parents and children find it particularly difficult to dispose of toys because of the symbols they represent. The dispossession appears to be particularly painful, since it raises strong negative emotions such as fear and anxiety for both the child and the parent. Diane, 40 years old, mother of an 8-year-old boy who tends to want to keep everything, explains to us: "*my son could keep everything from the subway ticket to the games when he was a baby. Now he want to keep stuffed animals, so he is more into a logic of absolute accumulation*". His stuffed toys comfort him and make him feel secure: he gets emotionally involved in them, which

he makes "live" through imaginary stories. What is interesting to note is that parents also have difficulties separating from their children's toys. It questions the parents' identity transition, who move on. They have to accept that past is over and that their "babies" are growing up. For example, Yasmine explains us that she keeps some of her children's toys, especially Playmobils, because they bring back memories: she remembers playing with and cannot resign herself to dispose of them. These toys are the link between her present and past identity (as well as those of her children). To help them detach, parents use different strategies.

### ***A long process demanding detachment strategies***

The difficulty of separating from these toys needs several practices that help detachment: spatial distancing, replacement or negotiation. First, most parents hide their children's toys, like Brigitte, who has a small room under the stairs in which she *"cleverly hides toys that [she] would like to part with, so [she puts them] in this transitional locker there, so that if they don't ask for them after a certain amount of time, they don't want them anymore"*. This distancing has two purposes. The first is to allow the child to forget the existence of the object, and thus to detach himself from it, as in the case of Brigitte. The second is to allow the parents to detach themselves from the object, by using a gradual distancing, through *"transitional spaces"* (Daniele), *"decompression chambers"* (Stephanie), in closets closed to living areas. This allows for a smooth transition, until the time make its work: *"I have stored the bed bumpers. My daughter is three and a half years old and she's been in a big bed for a year now but...no, I've stored them. And I still have my son's sleeping bag and bumpers, who is 8 years old. I'm not yet... decided. I know it's going to be sold at some point but I'm not ready yet. I need time, yeah, on these things I'm waiting. I don't want to have any regrets"* (Stephanie). Box 1 shows photographs of the spatial distancing practices.

### **Box 1. Illustrative photographs of spatial distancing**



Many also choose to negotiate with their child, to discuss, trying to put forward arguments that will help the child to gently separate from the object and to avoid a strong impact on the child's well-being. Parents often used the 'age argument': *"it's the magic phrase because as soon as you say something is too babyish, like now she considers herself a big girl"* (Paula). This values the passage to a higher age; the separation embodies the transition and the maturing of the child. Another argument is the reusing one. Parents explain to their child that he can help another one, who does have the same opportunities in life. This allows him to learn how to detach himself while learning ecological and civic values: *"I involve them when we give things, by telling them that there are children who have not had the chance to have vacations, trips,*

*gifts, etc.*" (Paula). Finally, the last strategy is to replace the object, to say that new toys will come. It makes the transition easier: the child will be focused on the new toy received.

### ***A controlled disposition in which toys' future are secured***

What to do about the toys is a hard question for parents. It raises negative emotions such as anxiety. First, several parents feel helpless facing the mass of toys accumulated, as Christian said: *"With me, it's complicated... it's changing and obviously it takes much longer than it should. We have too much"*. Others are more undecided about the future of the object: Cindy would like to give away her daughter's old stuffed animals, but they are perceived as highly contaminated (although clean) and therefore not very reusable. This raises paradoxical feelings, between wanting to part with the object while ensuring and controlling its future. Because of their status within the household and their meanings, they require a controlled transfer that will not lead to any regrets. They do it by giving them to relatives or by letting the child decide.

Most of the time, parents wait for an opportunity to give the toys away, such as a friend who becomes pregnant, a family member who needs toys, or an association that specifically collects toys. In the case of a sale, our respondents usually prefer to meet the potential buyer: this helps them by the exchange they have around the object. In some cases, especially for teenagers and less "cumbersome" toys, the parents let the children choose directly. Suzanne, a mother of two teenagers lets them do so: *"Generally, I would take out what I wanted to sell and they would look at it and say OK. Still, it's their toys. Sometimes they have a hard time, they say 'no no' and then finally they put it back in a corner"*. Some parents also keep them so that their grandchildren could enjoy them: *"the idea is to say, well, one day we'll have grandchildren or maybe there will be other children"* (Marie). Then, parents leave the choice to the children when they are older. In order not to have to decide for themselves, parents hand over the decision to their children. They avoid choosing themselves.

Sometimes, parents arbitrarily decide for their children, believing that they should not be "capricious". For example, Stephanie's husband is *"a little harder [than her] so if they don't end up agreeing with us, he goes ahead and says, 'Okay, let's sell it'. They'll scream a little and then they'll go away' (laughter)"*. In this case, negotiation are barely possible: the parents decide. Nevertheless, this case is for non-attached toys that can be easily part with; they are not "torn" from the child.

### **Discussion, conclusion, limitations, further research and managerial implications**

The aim of this research was to better understand children's toys dispossession. Our results show that both parents and children suffer from this process because of the attachment to these objects. It refers to the extended-self theory of Belk (1988) in which some objects contribute to the expression of its identity. Separating from toys means an identity transition, which children and parents are not always ready to accept, because this will result in the loss of a part of oneself (Winterich et al., 2017). Children are torn between the desire to "grow up", which involves separating from their childhood objects, and the desire to keep their toys close to them, while parents are divided between the desire to make room, to "force" the child to grow up, and the guilt of potentially making their child sad. It therefore requires detachment practices such as a progressive spatial distancing and argumentative strategies (replacement, passage of age, solidarity) which make this disposition a symbolic act closed to the transfer of special objects (Price et al., 2000).

Moreover, the future of the object is important for parents as well as for children, who give a strong place to the Other – the one who will receive the toys. In the Mauss' definition of giving

(1923), things that are given have a power (the *hau*) which represents a part of oneself and of past identity. This power compels the recipient to return the giving; in our context, it compels the recipient to take care of the toys given. Meeting or knowing the recipient allows the giver to understand that he or she is recognized by his or her gift, without necessarily creating a dependency bond. Reciprocity is immediate and occurs in the interaction and encounter (Guillard & Del Bucchia, 2012). The meeting allows the toys and its owners to tell their stories and to make them last (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005).

To conclude, this process is collective, because it involves children and parents. Then, it would be relevant to interview families together, parents and children, in order to observe dispossession from a microsocial point of view. We could see the interactions between family members and the conflicts that this can raise. We could confront the children's discourses with parents' ones to understand how the collective decision is constructed. Disposal of toys has been little studied, but it has a crucial issue in sight of their fast renewal and the current political context, which seeks to find solutions for reusing and recycling toys. Two elements stand out and allow us to propose managerial recommendations. First, some toys are perceived as too contaminated, such as stuffed animals, making their reusing complicated. Brands and public authorities must better communicate on how to recycle these toys. Then, regarding the anxiety about the toys' future, actors must better communicate about how they will reuse them.

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