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## Playing for a living

### **From its office in Timonium, a foundation evaluates toys and games, to help parents make informed choices.**

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At the Parents' Choice Foundation in Timonium, the winners -- brightly colored, neatly arranged -- occupy a coveted corner of the back room. There's a mammoth bouncy ball in primary colors, with ridges for throwing and catching. A realistic-looking cobra puppet, undulating from a basket. An alligator who, praise be, helps pick up his own blocks.

On the other side of the room, the losers lie in an ignominious heap, uncharacteristically silent. Their boxes typically shout from the store shelves and from the ads, promising a leg up in learning and hours of fun. Their contents are usually bleeping, singing, dancing, counting or exercising. Princesses, used to being adored, are here ignored. Pirates have no one to fight.

The Parents' Choice Foundation, which calls itself the nation's oldest independent nonprofit evaluator of toys, has no use for them. From this small Timonium office, it coordinates the evaluation of hundreds of toys, video and computer games, DVDs, CDs and books for children each year, giving its seal of approval to a scant 15 percent.

Parents' Choice began in 1975 when Diana Huss Green, who taught children's literature at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Mass., convened a group of parents interested in learning more about how to find the best playthings for their children. The Parents' Choice magazine grew out of that several years later.

The first edition that reviewed toys, printed in 1979, pointed readers to ethnic dolls and games like King-Sized Go Fish Cards and Double 9 Dominoes. One early winner of the Gold Award -- the group's highest honor -- was Little Tikes' Cozy Coupe, a simple plastic ride-along car that is still popular today.

The foundation moved here when Green retired about five years ago and handed the reins to daughter Claire Green, who had attended Goucher College, worked in Baltimore City government and married a local photographer.

It might seem an unlikely place for a 52-year-old woman who studied political science and has no children of her own to end up -- playing with and poking at toys all day, obsessing about what will open a child's mind. But her mother's work meant enough to Green for her to want to continue it.

"She launched an industry," Claire Green said.

### **Began in childhood**

In a way, Claire Green had the perfect qualification for the job: She knew which of her mother's experiments had worked on her as a child. Inspired by her mother's tales, she would invent worlds in her head during car trips. Her favorite toy: "My bicycle, because it allowed me to go and explore."

She now evaluates a vastly different world of toys than the one her mother analyzed a quarter-century ago. Toys are now a more than \$20 billion-a-year industry. Technology has embellished even the simplest toys. Television and the Internet have made kids, not their parents, the primary targets of marketing.

Now Parents' Choice has its database of favorites online for free, and it has a lot more competition in the nebulous field of "toy evaluation." There's the Toy Guy, Dr. Toy and an educational psychologist who calls herself a "toycologist." There are kid polls, teacher polls, and editor picks in virtually every magazine having to do with children.

"The fact that it's expanding reflects parental anxiety about the loss of control over children's fantasy life and culture," said Gary Cross, a toy historian and Pennsylvania State University professor.

So what makes a good toy in the eyes of Parents' Choice? The foundation's stated criteria include "excellent production values, universal human values, appeal to children and age appropriateness."

That means guns, other weapons and products that obviously promote gender bias are out. After Green and a small staff have culled through the 400 to 500 samples sent in any given category, they pass the rest to testers throughout the country -- usually to parents who are educators or otherwise work with children who can try the product.

After four to six weeks with the toy, they fill out a lengthy evaluation form. Specialty toys are sent to people with expertise; a rocket scientist might examine a rocket toy, for example. Recommended toys go on to a group of judges -- game industry experts, professors, child development professionals -- who decide whether they're worthy of an award.

The foundation usually rejects products featuring so-called "licensed characters" from television shows and movies, seeing them as little more than advertisement. But a version

of Chutes and Ladders that stars characters from Sesame Street was approved because it might draw a child fan into a worthwhile game.

If the pirates are snarling and come with a complete battle scene, they'll probably be rejected. Yet a Folkmanis pirate puppet made the cut even with a knife plainly sheathed on his belt. "You can make him good and you can make him evil," Green said.

### **Toys do too much**

Green's chief complaint: Toys today talk and do too much. "Don't tell me how to play," she says, describing an overly chatty toy shopping cart. "The more the toy does, the less there is for the child to do."

She recommends that parents read toy boxes as if they were nutrition labels, looking past big promises. Will it hold interest after a few days or weeks? Does it provoke questions, or just give answers?

Parents' Choice doesn't pay its testers, Green says, but lets them keep the toys they evaluate. The foundation pays for its small staff and Padonia Road office with entry fees (\$150 for toys) and by requiring winners to pay if they want to use the Parents' Choice seal on their products. Parents' Choice won't divulge or describe the losers, except in broad terms. Nor will it give feedback.

For those who are recognized, a nod from Parents' Choice can launch a dream. "For us, it was an opportunity to get heard," said Susan Beacham, whose Money Savvy Pig received top honors two years ago.

The see-through piggy bank, designed by the former private banker from the Chicago area, has four slots instead of one, marked Spend, Save, Donate and Invest. When Beacham learned it had won the Gold Award, she sat down and cried.

But the Parents' Choice seal hasn't put the pig in every household. It's still sold primarily on the Web site for Beacham's company, Money Savvy Generation, and in smaller toy stores.

There are those that question Parents' Choice's methods. The Oppenheim Toy Portfolio, also started, in 1989, by a concerned parent with expertise in child development, bills itself as the "only independent guide" -- a not-so-veiled challenge to Parents' Choice's objectivity.

The portfolio is a for-profit company that sells books and its seals, but offers picks and reviews for free online.

Stephanie Oppenheim, a former attorney who founded the company with her mother, Joanne Oppenheim, said Parents' Choice might not be considered independent because it charges an entry fee. The Oppenheim group does not, she said; instead, it chooses toys it

will review at the industry's yearly Toy Fair.

Maria Weiskott, editor of Playthings magazine, won't run stories about any toy award programs because of concerns about fees and seal sales. Parents, she said, "are so easily conned into buying a toy with the most stickers."

But Marianne Szymanski, founder of toytips.com and author of a new book on toy lists, said Parents' Choice's list is one of the few she respects. "The stuff I see that have their awards on it are worthy of having awards," she said.

Green wouldn't comment on other evaluators, other than to say that Parents' Choice has no commercial ties and that there is room for more than one opinion on what makes a good toy.

"We're not a gospel," she says. "We're just a guide. We're just a place to start."

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