

A Childhood Toy Holds a Much Deeper Connection Than Once Thought

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There is something deeply satisfying about rediscovering the lost world of your childhood. Whether it is gazing back at the swing which rocked on the cries of adventure, or handling prized possessions that birthed fantasy worlds, you — along with every adult — have been molded by the inquisitiveness of early years. It is now widely accepted that childhood development is one of the holy grails in determining the future behavior of adults.¹ The foundation of who we are and the creation of our modern society is quite literally poised on the building blocks handled by infants. Therefore, garnering a better understanding on the origins and consequences of childhood's far-reaching impacts can aid in solving not just current day dilemmas, but the struggles of future generations.

As this appears in a history magazine, specifically with a theme of ancient history, you may now be wondering, well, how are we even supposed to understand what children were doing thousands of years ago when even I can't figure out what they are doing now? You would be correct: we can barely — emphasis on “barely” — discern whether an object found is pertinent to

childhood or masquerading as a miniature ritual token. Simply stated, ancient history has ensconced and humanity overlooked childhood life in archaeological connotations, unknowingly inviting a deeper analysis and critical perception of who we were in the formative years of our lives.²

One method to assist in unlocking the calcified questions of who children were in ancient times is by analyzing what they played and worked with. If you take a moment to reminisce about your life as a child, you may stumble upon a memory which revolves

around a cherished LEGO set, doll, or simple natural finds. Likewise, we still see the remnants of ancient Egyptian wooden dolls and Roman lead soldiers in the archaeological record, appendages of the child's mind born into a reality unfazed by cultural transformations.³ However, due to the nature of most toys or objects likely being constructed from readily available materials, it is reasonable to assume that there is simply little preservation of child-tailored devices in the archaeological record. Yet as you're reading this, archaeologists are still uncovering the telltale signs of childhood in antiquity, enabling us to craft a narrative that weaves together children, the society they lived in, and the environment of past times.

For instance, the thaumatrope hypothesis provides a captivating vignette of childhood intrigue stretching back to the Paleolithic time period (11,000 to 18,000 years ago).⁴ Named after the optical toy popular in the 19th century, the modern-day thaumatrope is a small disk with unique yet connected pictures on both sides that can be spun by two attached pieces of string.⁵ When twirled in rapid succession, the two sides merge together, forming an optical illusion reminiscent of a greatly simplified GIF. In the case of Paleolithic thaumatropes, many small (1 to 2 inch in diameter) flat discs were discovered in Western Europe carved from bone, stone, and ivory. One such found disc illustrated a doe or goatlike creature standing on one side, with the backside displaying the same animal with legs tucked. Another disc from the same study depicted a mammoth alive on one side, and possibly hunted on the other. Once spun in an energetic manner, both discs have been shown to create the same optical illusion that the modern-day thaumatrope relied upon. Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that we will never likely know whether these objects were made for children, adults, or anyone with a curiosity waiting to be satiated.



Thaumatrope of flowers and vase from 1825.



Flint core images from Qesem Cave Project, photographed by Pavel Shrago and Sasha Flit

Critically, the artifacts studied in the hypothesis were most likely made by adults. Therefore, while children may have been the intended audience for the thaumatropes, the objects served as bridges across generations to form and strengthen social bonds, teach the young, and remember and reinforce lessons from their own youth. All of these insights enable one to revel in the complexities of intergenerationality through such simple playthings, with childhood toys also setting the stage for future adulthood responsibilities.

A fascinating example which blurs the definition of childhood toys and transition to adulthood can be found in Qesem Cave, Israel, 400,000 years ago. Continually inhabited for 200,000 years, the cave bears the remnants from the earliest moments of our species emergence. At this site, researchers have started to piece together a possible assemblage of a prehistoric school. Various flint tools, butchered animals, and a variety of other working tools were found to display varying levels of expertise in handling.⁶

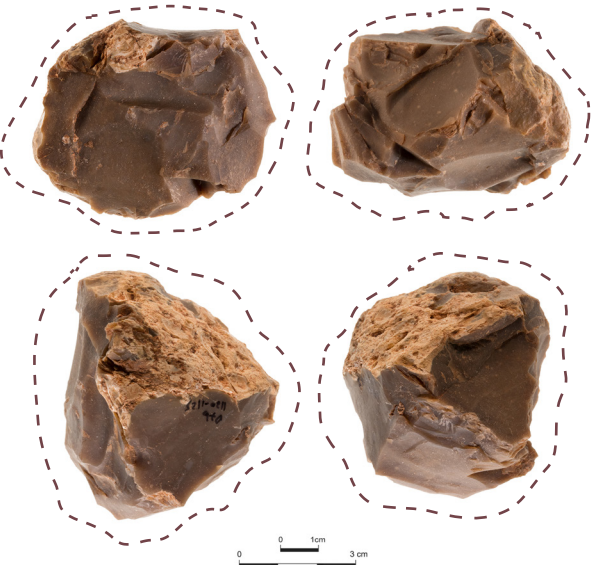
For instance, numerous flint cores exhibited contrasting levels of expertise in their shaping. A skilled prehistoric worker could craft multiple tools from the same flint core, while an inexperienced laborer (possibly children) would display repeated breakages, mistakes, and failures. As elegantly observed from the lead researcher on the project Ella Assaf, “...we can see a specific tradition, a specific way of doing things in the cave, which was passed on from generation to generation” for a time span of

200,000 years.⁷ The researchers do acknowledge skepticism behind the formulated hypothesis. In particular, it may be reasonable to assume that a well-worked core was thrown away, and then eventually picked up and reused by someone less skilled. However, this claim refutes both the simple magnitude of tools found and where they were discovered in the cave. Supporting the learning theory, shared cores were found to be concentrated in a few particular spots, especially around the main hearth. This discovery may indicate specific learning areas for the humans living there and aligns with contemporary hunter-gatherer tribe practices.

The learning hypothesis is only reinforced by research indicating that even basic flint shaping techniques would be nearly impossible to learn through simple imitation, requiring hands-on experience to develop proper skills.⁸ These findings also blend the hazy line of work and play in prehistoric times. It is commonly acknowledged that one of the essential reasons for children using toys is to develop future relevant life skills.⁹ This early stage development is even found in other animals, such as young female chimpanzees treating sticks like baby dolls, in a similar manner to how mother apes treat infants.¹⁰

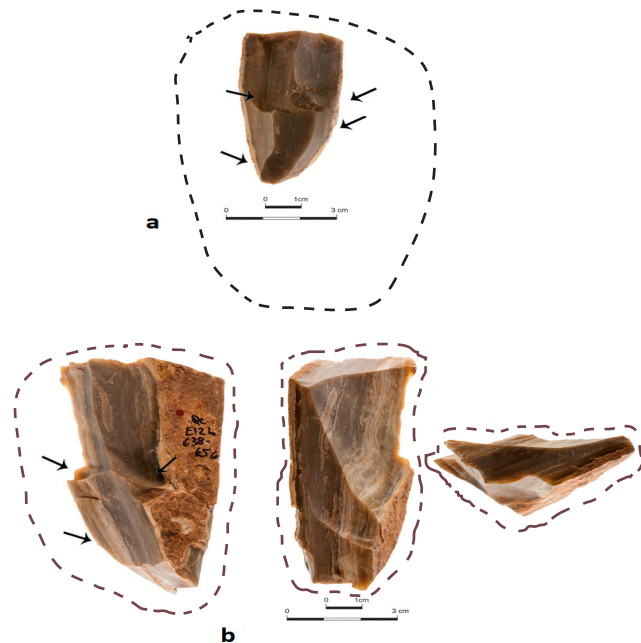
Were young children the creators of these shared crafted cores? Working yet playing at the same time? Once again, there is no definitive answer. Regardless, eventual information transfer from generation to generation must have happened. There is no

Flint core reflecting low-skill knapping



Images of flint cores obtained through the Qesem Cave Project. Photo credit: Pavel Shrigo and Sasha Flit.

Flint core reflecting two generations of item removals



overt sign of childhood glee on the shared flint cores, but research is now starting to reveal that playing with tools and weapons was a “normal” part of prehistoric childhood.¹¹ As one adage from a hunter gatherer tribe in Southeast Asia bluntly acknowledges: “How can you learn to use a knife if you do not use it?”¹²

When analyzed through the lense of childhood, the past two case studies take on a rich undertone with regards to the forces that make up humanity. Not only does applying varying perspectives to historical sites enable the construction of more precise hypotheses, but it also reflects on how modern-day society can move forward in a diverse and mindful manner.

It is an unfortunate circumstance that the word “toy” can take on such a derisive definition in English. Phrases such as “to toy with someone” or “the man was playing with children’s toys” often invokes a miasma of disdain and backwardness. In reality, the use of toys by children enables not just physical development through reinforcing motor neuron pathways, but also sets the scaffolding for future complex social relationships.¹³ Children are strengthened from a robust upbringing, but adults also benefit from passing essential life lessons down to their progeny, bestowing concrete relevant skills and a sense of imagination. Ultimately, we will always be linked through the graceful dance of generational knowledge that goes back to the heart of humanity’s origins. ■

Notes

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