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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significant role of toys and games in shaping childhood memories, cultural identity, and family dynamics among multilingual individuals reflecting on their formative years in immigration. Through qualitative interviews, using content, thematic, and discourse analysis, 25 Russophone respondents share nostalgic recollections of cherished toys, ranging from classic items like plush bears to modern board games, highlighting their emotional significance and the developmental benefits of play. The findings reveal that toys are not merely objects but serve as tools for fostering creativity, social skills, and emotional growth. Additionally, the study examines the impact of cultural backgrounds, particularly among immigrant families, on play experiences and toy selection. Concerns regarding the shift from traditional play to modern digital games, as well as issues of sustainability and heritage language preservation, are also discussed. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of play in bridging past and present experiences, reflecting broader themes of personal development and family connections.

Keywords: *material culture of multilingualism, games, toys, play, childhood memories, cultural identity, family dynamics, play development, immigrant experiences, nostalgia, bilingual emotional growth*

Introduction

Exploring various Russian-speaking immigrant communities, we reflected on how the material cultures of the country of origin and the host country interact (Protassova & Yelenevskaya, 2024; Yelenevskaya & Protassova, 2023). In particular, we considered whether the objects brought along from the home country stimulate memories of the past or support language and culture, as well as how the dominant language and prevailing culture of the new surroundings influence an individual's choices. Addressing these questions led us to recognize the role of toys in the lives of immigrants, as it turned out that many—even those without children—not only remember the inanimate companions of their childhood but also strive to preserve tangible reminders of their games. The historical and contemporary significance of play and toys is affirmed by the establishment of the International Day of Play (June 11th) by the UN. According to the UN website, play is a universal language spoken by

people of all ages, transcending national, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries (un.org/en/observances/international-day-of-play). What may be particularly meaningful for immigrants is that play has been shown to promote tolerance and resilience in children and adults. Moreover, it facilitates social inclusion, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. It is no surprise that immigrants bring toys from their countries of origin and collect toys produced in various parts of the world. Some passionate collectors want to share their treasures with the public and organize exhibitions of their assets (see, e.g., the exhibit in Helsinki, Finland, organized by Elena Kolesova musikantit.fi/l/unikalnaya-vystavka-kollektsiionnykh-kukol-s-14-02-po-21-03-2025, or a doll museum launched and maintained in Zafet, Israel by Mila Rozenfeld, safed-home.com/store/c7/doll_museum_.html). In our own work with Russophone immigrants, we were interested to see how play experiences are transmitted to the next generation and test our perception of toys as vehicles of heritage language and culture preservation. Nostalgia plays a key role in the toys collecting process, tells Sotelo-Duarte (2022), influencing its beginning, progression, and difficulty in ending, as collectors form deep emotional connections with their items. The collecting community provides crucial support, offering guidance, shared experiences, and comfort, while external factors such as family dynamics and financial constraints can enable or hinder a collector's task.

Aronin and Ó Laoire (2013) argue that material culture provides a valuable tool for studying multilingualism by offering perceptible, measurable evidence that complements traditional sociolinguistic methods such as surveys and interviews. Linguistically defined objects not only reflect multilingualism but also serve as markers of cultural identity, revealing insights into beliefs, shared values, and social behaviors. By analyzing these objects in different contexts, researchers can gain a more precise understanding of multilingual environments, reducing uncertainties in language research and broadening the scope of multilingualism studies. Blackwood and Røyneland (2022) see multilingualism as a key aspect of identity formation, featuring interdisciplinary collaborations that offer fresh perspectives on language policy, rights, pedagogy, meaning-making, and linguistic activism. Ros i Solé (2022) formulates that the ordinary personal collections of wardrobe or cookie cutters illustrate how the materiality of multilingual ordinary personal collections are tightly entangled with processes and ways of becoming competent in multicultural settings. She understands how multilingualism is lived in relation to material culture and the forms and processes subjectivity may take, their entanglements with time, place, and life experiences. Thus, multilingual subjectivities transcend binaries and entrenched divisions between matter and humans, ultimately highlighting the importance of lived material repertoires in understanding the materiality of living multiple languages and the construction of subjectivities. Even the content of teaching materials shows that they are both

educational tools and cultural artifacts (Leont'eva & Maslinskii, 2008; Risager, 2023).

There is ample evolutionary and psychological evidence that play makes a crucial contribution to the human success as a highly adaptable species. Playfulness is beneficial for cognitive development and emotional well-being (Whitebread et al., 2012). What is particularly important for immigrants who have to adapt to a new language and a new environment is that play facilitates development of linguistic skills and representational abilities, such as understanding others and making themselves understood and appreciated. Play enables us to “try on” different roles, and supports development of metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities (cf. Frankel, 2008). Various studies reveal that play lets children diminish tension, frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, and anger (Fearn & Howard, 2012; Haiat & Shochat, 2003; Russ, 2004), which is particularly valuable in a stressful experience of relocation. First intuitively, and later consciously children and adolescents use play as a coping mechanism (cf- Protassova, 1992).

Play stimulates the child's curiosity and exploration of the environment. Even at a young age, playing with building blocks a child learns about relations between objects; later in table games children have to make sense of cause and effect relations, work out strategies and find links between events. Whether playing with toys or engaged in role play without toys, children reprocess their real-life experience developing the ability to meaningfully organize and test it in new situations (cf. Valdas et al., 2012). Grindheim et al. (2021) explore children's participation in place-based institutional practices across six countries through a cultural-historical lens, emphasizing the role of outdoor and nature-based experiences in play, learning, and cultural formation. Their work highlights societal inequalities that limit access to nature, examines how institutional practices shape outdoor education, and underscores the relevance of nature in response to global crises, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers.

According to Martin (2014), objects and toys serve as powerful triggers for childhood memories, connecting individuals not only to their playthings but also to the cultural and social contexts of their upbringing. Personal accounts reveal how traditional, homemade, and consumer-driven toys shaped experiences in different historical and geographical settings, from post-war Britain and Poland to the rise of modern consumer society. Additionally, toys hold deep symbolic value for migrants, representing both loss and nostalgia, while also shaping public perceptions of migration by portraying children as innocent and distinct from adults and their experiences. Chang-Kredl et al. (2024) explore how adults maintain emotional connections to transitional objects, like childhood stuffed animals, revealing layers of tactile, nostalgic, and psychological significance. Focus group discussions with education and childhood studies students showed that these objects evoke feelings of security, past innocence, and present anxieties. While they offer insights into adult vulnerability, they can also

reinforce traditional ideas about teaching and development, suggesting their potential as reflective tools for educators working with children.

Murphy (2019) shows that childhood memory offers a unique lens into modernity, revealing the toy as a commodity fetish and awakening both the individual and collective to history's utopian potential through fleeting moments of recognition, where missed happiness and denied desires form dialectical images that illuminate the possibility of transformation. For Henrich (2014), exhibitions on migration have showcased children's experiences through toys, highlighting how their meanings shift based on context. While toys symbolize childhood and migration's impact on children, displays often rely on adult recollections rather than firsthand child perspectives, making authentic representations rare. Effective exhibitions connect toys with shared historical or geographical experiences, ensuring they serve as more than nostalgic ornaments and instead reflect children's agency in migration stories. Mishchenko & Mishchenko (2022) demonstrate that the traumatic events of wartime children include memories of the enemy, fear of military equipment, and encounters with occupation regimes and collaborators, with many families connected to partisan movements. Their recollections reflect early maturation, identity formation, and ties to family and homeland, often shaped by factors like location, age, and gender, and featuring recurring themes such as fear, kindness, and hardship.

The study by Sandberg & Vuorinen (2008) highlights the diverse definitions and memories of play, emphasizing its value as shaped by personal experiences, cultural background, and social environments. Their findings have both theoretical and pedagogical significance, encouraging educators to reflect on their own play experiences, discuss evolving conceptions of play, and consider how media and commercialization influence children's play today. Grosse et al. (2022) showed that high-quality teacher-child interactions in early childhood care settings positively influence working memory and reduce disruptive behavior in three-year-olds, but they do not significantly impact other social-emotional skills like selective attention, inhibitory control, or prosocial behavior.

Immigrants' households are seldom completely monolingual. Even when the parents have not become proficient in the language/s of the host country they inevitably mix codes. Through his research in various communities, Rossi has shown that there is a direct correlation between the availability of multilingual and multicultural influences in a child's household and the multicultural characteristics of the children's play activities and toys (Rossi, 2002). Play is essential for identity development of children exposed to more than one language and culture. They do not only learn to use linguistic forms and patterns in the languages of their environment but also explore and creatively reproduce social meanings and structures associated with the context of their games which they hear in the communication of adults (Paugh, 2005). This is how they choose the language of their games. They

intuitively sense which language in their repertoire is more prestigious and is the norm in the local context and choose it when enacting situations familiar from their experience outside home (cf. Mirvahedi and Hosseini, 2024). Drawing on their knowledge acquired in real-life experience they enact roles such as mother-and child, doctor and patient, teacher and student, and others within the frame of play. In some of these situations they shift from the non-dominant home language to the dominant language of their environment (Mirvahedi & Cavallaro, 2020), but in others they are translanguaging like they do in their family communication. Moreover, in their play multilingual children start experimenting with their languages, mixing and playing with them, and in this way, they begin to act as multicompetent language users, symbolically joining the speech community new to them (Belz, 2002; Cook, 1992).

In this study, we examine the types of toys and games that are most cherished by individuals reflecting on their childhood and the significance these items hold in their memories. We focus on how toys and games contribute to the development of social skills, creativity, and emotional growth in children. Among immigrants of different generations, concerns about sustainability and environmental impact may influence modern toy selection and usage, affecting families' choices for their own children. We propose that there are indications of nostalgia and resilience, shaped by cultural backgrounds and immigrant experiences, that contribute to the sentimental value of these items.

Our research questions are:

- In what ways do parents' strategies regarding play and language influence multilingualism and cultural heritage preservation in immigrant families?
- How do retrospective memories of play inform current attitudes towards the importance of play in personal and familial development?

Materials and methods

Our study of play things, which are part of material culture and tools essential for children's speech development and identity shaping, utilizes discourse, thematic, and content analyses. Following McGee (2011: 8–10), we view discourse analysis as the “study of language-in-use”. The goal of researchers calling themselves “critical discourse analysts” is not merely to describe how language works or give explanations of its mechanisms and functions, but also to intervene in social and political issues, problems, and controversies which we witness in the world and which are reflected in the language. So, in critical discourse analysis all language is considered to be political and involved in the way people build and sustain our world, cultures, practices, and institutions.

Thematic analysis is a method employed in qualitative research. It requires systematic search for

and identification of patterns of meaning, or themes, across the chosen data set. When the themes are identified and the researchers see which ones are repeated and are therefore salient, the researcher can see and make sense of shared meanings and experiences of the group under study (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Content analysis is also applied in qualitative research and has much in common with thematic analysis. It is a method “designed to identify and interpret meaning in recorded forms of communication by isolating small pieces of the data that represent salient concepts and then applying or creating a framework to organize the pieces in a way that can be used to describe or explain a phenomenon” (Kleinheksel et al., 2020: 127). This method is accessible and particularly useful for analysis of large amounts of text, i.e., it is appropriate for open-ended questions in surveys and semi-structured or in-depth interviews. Besides manifest content analysis identifying and interpreting meanings easily observable to the researcher, there is latent content analysis interpreting meanings implied or hidden deep within the text. The latter type requires a more thorough study of the context and sometimes also the background of the participants. So, we employed methodological triangulation to enhance reliability of our conclusions.

Material for analysis was drawn from semi-structured group interviews involving 25 Russophones of different ages, with varied life experiences, migration destinations and differing in the number of years spent away from the countries of origin. Despite these differences, all interviewees were greatly engaged, and demonstrated willingness to share their opinions. Through discussions guided by the researchers, participants reflected on their connections to both their old and new cultures as represented in toys and games.

All participants were notified about the purpose of the interviews, their right to withdraw and the way the data would be used. The interviewees were anonymized: we assigned each one initials to be used instead of their names and do not provide any demographic data. This makes them completely unrecognizable and conceals their identity. The anonymized data was securely stored in a password-protected system, with access restricted to the authors. These measures ensured that privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

Results

The discussion on the role of toys in child development, family culture, and education reveals several recurring themes and shared perspectives. Central to the discourse is the belief that the true value of toys is that they inspire children to play, be creative and inventive, rather than in the toys themselves. Our respondents are convinced that the essence of play is more significant than the

physical objects involved.

R1 emphasizes the significant role of toys in her life, considering them a reflection of her experiences. She fondly recalls her childhood toys, including a puppet shaped like Piggy from the children's TV show "Spokoinoy nochi, malyshi" (Good Night, Little Ones) which is now with her family in Eastern Finland. **R2**'s cherished toy is a white, long-eared plush animal she received from her grandmother shortly before her passing, which she insisted was a dog despite its rabbit-like features. **R1** also shares a poignant memory of longing for a Baby Born doll, which her family couldn't afford; instead, she received a different doll she appreciated but felt wasn't quite the same. To address this childhood disappointment, she later gave her sister two Baby Born dolls as a New Year gift—one resembling a baby and the other an older girl with hair, thus fulfilling her own wish vicariously. "Before my diploma, I bought a tiny little hedgehog, and while writing my BA thesis, I would read it aloud to him and pet him, just to have someone to listen to me." As a child, **R3** dreamt of Bratz dolls, but her parents could not afford them, so she had regular Barbie dolls with handmade clothes sewn by her relatives. **R3** notes that toys remain meaningful in her life, as she still finds comfort in a pink plush cat she bought during a tough period of her life, which now helps her sleep peacefully. As a child, **R11** had various toys, including soft toys, Barbies, and McDonald's toys, but when she migrated at the age of 12, she left them behind except a soft toy dog. She doesn't buy toys any more, except for Funko Pop figures. As an adolescent she spent more time playing outside, particularly football, with both boys and girls.

When **R15** was younger, she only loved Barbies and did not care for soft toys or animals. She had Barbie dolls and a rubber Puss in Boots brought from Russia. She would play out scenes from the telenovela "Wild Angel" with her dolls and the cat overseeing a harem of Barbie dolls. She didn't come to like soft toys until later when she played with other children and realized that animals were often more popular among them. She no longer has her old Barbie collection but has recently received from her best friend a soft mammoth, which she was dreaming of for a long time and was very happy to get. In her childhood, **R19** had many toys, including a *nevalyashka* (roly-poly doll) which left a lasting memory. She also loved playing with small cars and would take them outside to drive them in the dirt, as well as building and blowing up clay tanks with the boys in her neighborhood. Her favorite doll was a simple plastic one named *Alyoshka*, which she adored, though it eventually faded in the sun, prompting her to ask for a new one. Later, she received a walking doll, which she had longed for, but it did not bring her as much joy as expected. Additionally, she had a large, brown, Soviet-style teddy bear and rubber dolls that she loved playing with. She impersonated a teacher, often pretending to teach her toys Russian in a classroom setup. This imaginative role play was bilingual, and the child

was enacting the scenarios from her own experience, coping with two languages.

Another prominent theme is the careful curation of toys to foster creativity. Respondents noted that an excess of toys can hinder imaginative play, advocating for a balanced approach where “there shouldn’t be too many or too few toys.” The idea of a “clear hierarchy of favorites among toys” suggests that children benefit from having a limited number of carefully selected cherished items, which can enhance their imaginative experiences.

R2 reflects on the limited number of personal toys she had during her childhood, as many toys in their home were shared or inherited within the family across generations. She mentions meaningful toys she now owns, including sentimental items like a plush hedgehog and a moose in a hat gifted to her brother by a late relative. Nostalgic memories include a gypsy doll made by their grandmother, who loved sewing outfits for it, though this doll and others didn’t move with them when they relocated. **R2** highlights the emotional role toys play, noting how they comforted her during bad days, especially a 20-year-old “stress-relief” toy that helps her sleep. Finally, she recalls the clever way her parents discouraged her from wanting a Baby Born doll, claiming it was scary, which they later realized was a winning tactic to avoid buying it. **R18** had many toys in childhood, including Soviet toys and others brought by his father, a seaman. One of his favorite toys was a whirligig, and he also had many cars, often playing with them. A particularly valuable toy was a football set from the Kinder Surprise, with goals, a footballer, and a goalkeeper, which he played with for about three years. When he left Russia, he was already too old for his old favorites and didn’t think much about toys, though he took a few small plush toys with him, including a hybrid of a hippopotamus and a bunny, and a small colorful alpaca. Larger plush toys were left behind in Moscow. **R21** does not remember many of his childhood toys before school, recalling only a boomerang he used when visiting the countryside, possibly inherited from an older brother. He fondly remembers Lego sets and remote-controlled toys he played with during his school years. He would mix and match Lego pieces to create different constructions. However, when he moved at the age of 12, he lost his Lego sets. As an adult, **R21** revisited his hobby, purchasing remote-controlled planes and a helicopter. He is not particularly interested in modern drones, preferring classic models like planes.

R5 does not recall bringing toys from Moldova but mentions having her mother’s toys from the 1960s–70s, including simple dolls. She had many Barbie toys as a child, including a Barbie house and car, and loved Bratz dolls as well. Her favorite soft toy and a bed companion was a monkey called *Obezka* [a childish variant for *obez’ yana*, ‘monkey’ in Russian], which is still kept in the storage room. Playing without phones was common among her peers, and she continued to enjoy playing games until the 7th grade. **R6** had many toys, including soft toys and toy cars brought from Lithuania. Among the

soft toys were a rabbit, a hedgehog, and two cows, each with stories behind them that her mother shared with her. A cherished toy car was a yellow Volkswagen Golf, gifted by a young neighbor in Vilnius, which the **R6** treasured and passed on to her brother. She does not clearly recall her first toys in Finland but favored the ones brought from Lithuania. These toys held a special sentimental value for her. When **R14** was a kid, he had a lot of toys, mostly Finnish ones like cars and Legos, and he always loved toys used to build structures or controlled with batteries. He did not really like soft toys and gave away the ones he got. He also had some Soviet-era wooden toys and building blocks of different shapes and size, and he loved playing outside more than anything else. Although he had some board games and got into computer games later, he still preferred outdoor activities like playing football and climbing. He was particularly proud of one game, “Well, I bought these Soviet dominoes, I found real ones in Georgia.”

R7 fondly remembers having two original Barbie dolls from early childhood, which her mother later brought to Finland. A real “drama” was wanting a Ken doll and not being able to get it. So, she improvised using a Transformer toy as Barbie’s partner instead. She cherished a toy kitchen with a working faucet and played with incomplete sets of Lego-like blocks, often mixing them with Soviet versions. A significant amount of childhood pastime was spent playing with stick “horses,” evolving from simple twigs to customized wooden sticks used in imaginative beauty contests for “horses,” complete with handmade medals. Upon moving to Finland at 14, **R7** brought with her a beloved plush dog named *Strelka* [the name of one of the first dogs sent by the Soviets to the outer space]—a gift from *Ded Moroz* [Santa Claus], a fancy gray bear a present of a classmate, and a small toy given by her father to be fair to all. These toys were symbols of a happy childhood and were carefully stored, with some still cherished by the entire family. Today, her original Barbies are enjoyed by her niece, continuing their legacy.

The participants reminisced about their favorite board and strategy games, showcasing a mix of cultural influences and childhood creativity. **R7** mentioned that board games were discouraged at home, as they were associated with gambling, but she learned chess moves from her father, though they never played. **R1** shared fond memories of a customized board game drawn by her father on a large sheet of cardboard and based on Russian folklore characters like *Baba Yaga* and *Leshiy*, which she and her siblings cherished and planned to scan as a keepsake. **R5** and **R6** mentioned playing chess, checkers, and card games in Russia, while in Finland, popular games included *The African Star*, *Alias*, and *Labyrinth with Ghosts*. **R1** also highlighted amusing childhood games like summoning imaginary characters and playing “Lapa,” a fast-paced running game. Despite cultural variations, the games reflected creativity, bonding, and fun.

R24 reflects on his early childhood, which was marked by difficult living conditions. They lived in a communal apartment on the fifth floor without an elevator, with five people in a 12-meter room. This participant recalls having a small area on the floor where he could build with blocks, but his creations were often knocked down when the door opened. He also spent time in a year-round daycare, which felt like a kind of exile. Despite the harsh environment, **R24** fondly remembers playing with large trucks at the daycare, where they could ride in the truck bed and slide down a hill, a rare experience they couldn't have at home.

R23 recalls his childhood toys, which included small animals like bears, some of which were about 5–10 cm tall. These animals, including their favorite, the okapi (a relative of the giraffe), had furniture and were part of a dollhouse-like setup. **R23** had around 20 such animals, including a fox that survived relocation. **R22** also enjoyed playing with construction sets, particularly metal ones with screws and bolts, where he began to experiment with bending metal parts to create sculptures rather than blindly following instructions. His brother had a set of electric racing cars and a shared electric train set, but **R22** remembers these toys often malfunctioning, such as motorized boats that leaked and would sink if left in the water.

Currently, **R10** has several stuffed toys which serve as substitutes for pets. She believes that people can get similar emotions from these stuffed toys as they do from animals. Her favorite toy at the moment is a pink pig named Pavel, and she takes it to bed with her every night. In her childhood, she had various toys, especially stuffed animals, and she often played veterinarian games, treating her “sick” pets. Her father was a dog handler, and her brother and she would watch him work with dogs and try to replicate his exercises “taming” their stuffed animals. In summer they played outside without any toys, creating games with other children from the neighborhood.

The discourse also highlights the importance of family involvement in toy creation and selection. Many families engage in making toys from natural materials or restoring old dolls, which not only fosters creativity but also strengthens emotional bonds. Handmade toys are often perceived as “alive,” adding depth and personal connection compared to mass produced items. This practice also reflects respect for tradition and cultural heritage, with examples such as restoring Soviet-era dolls and incorporating storytelling into play.

In her childhood, **R12** had a lot of plush toys, with her first ones being small rabbits, which she adored. When she moved out from her parents' house she took her two favorite rabbits, named Kiko and Mini, with her. Initially, she had only one rabbit, but her parents bought a second one to switch the dry one for the wet one which was taking a bath with her. Eventually, she discovered the metamorphosis and insisted to have both all the time. She also played with dolls, particularly *Winx*

dolls, which she collected due to her love for the *Winx* cartoons. Additionally, she enjoyed building and playing with Lego Friends, creating adventurous play scenarios rather than traditional ones like playing house.

R13 reminisces about the various toys she played with as a child, including a large plush dog inherited from her brother and Lego sets received from her cousins. She mentions that now she buys toys only for her cat. She also notes that she does not remember having distinctly Russian toys but recalls receiving a small doll from Spain brought by her aunt. **R4** recalls wanting a Game Boy but never receiving one, though Lego blocks were abundant, with large boxes still stored in the attic for future generations. He enjoyed stereotypically “boyish” toys like Airsoft guns and model kit. He used to build Roman shields, helmets, and weapons out of cardboard and played with them. “We always brought plastic model kits from Russia, especially from the “Zvezda” company, because they were cheaper there, and then “we assembled them in Finland.” Collectibles like Pokémon cards, Gogo figures, and Kinder-Surprise toys, including a hand-me-down collection, were also significant for games. **R4** mentions trends like mini skateboards for fingers, Beyblades, and fidget spinners, emphasizing the attraction of competitive and interactive play. In **R25**’s childhood, her toys were kept in the drawers of a great-grandmother’s vanity chest. Initially, they were allocated one drawer, but as the collection expanded, they occupied one more. The interviewee and her great grandmother made the dollhouse furniture together. The house was well-equipped with an aquarium, a fridge, a stove, and a box for linens, which **R25** made herself. Additionally, she crafted small furniture from matchboxes and filled them with beads and other useful items. Other toys included a traditional spinning top, a roly-poly toy, and large foldable cardboard books used to create mazes, in which the participant would play circus with her toys.

R16 often reflects on her childhood toys, recalling that she and her brother had many toys, filling half of their room with them. Among their toys were cars, soft toys, dolls, and modern dolls like Barbie, Bratz, and Baby Born. She remembers using her mother’s nail polish bottles as characters in imaginative play with her brother. One memorable toy was a snowman with a hidden photo, which the interviewee believed was her own, even though it was her mother’s photo. Her parents would bring many toys from Russia and other countries, often popular worldwide, as well as educational games like a guessing game that made sounds based on correct or incorrect answers. Despite the abundance of toys, some, like Bratz dolls, were too expensive, and **R16** acquired only one winning it in a contest. She has kept it as a cherished memory even though she received it in her teenage years and didn’t really play with it. **R22** recalls a wooden toy she received as a gift from her parents, a musical toy featuring a bear playing the piano and a fox singing. This toy, purchased in Klin at the Tchaikovsky

House Museum, was given to the respondent after a concert when she was 10. The toy is still cherished today, although **R22** is worried about its fragility when the children play with it enthusiastically. She also remembers several stuffed animals from her childhood, including a large brown bear named Christopher, a white bear with blue pants, and a donkey, which she still adores. As a child, **R22** did not play with dolls but had various other toys like a teddy bear with a golden spoon attached, and miniature furniture from a Polish store in Moscow, where they used to play with small animals under the piano.

Cultural identity and heritage emerge as significant motifs, with respondents noting the value of traditional or handmade toys that carry historical significance. Toys like matryoshkas and other traditional Russian items are cherished for their cultural stories and are often passed down through generations. While some families prioritize these traditional toys, others instill cultural identity through literature and cinema, reflecting diverse approaches to cultural education.

R17 was born in Jerusalem, Israel, and grew up speaking Russian at home. She recalls having a *Cheburashka* toy in her childhood, though she is unsure if it was the same one she took with her when moving from Israel to Germany. She also mentions a special toy from a store in America where she created a stuffed animal by choosing a hollow toy and having it filled with cotton, which she later named “the rabbit” and still keeps on her bed. While growing up **R17** had many toys especially in Israel, including Barbie dolls, some of which were not from Mattel, and a Barbie house she received after her half-sister was given a new one as a birthday gift. She also had a variety of soft toys and remembers a large cardboard toy her father made for her in the shape of a dreidel. One of her childhood toys was a red panda bear, with which she played “doctor”, enacting scenarios familiar from her own experience as a patient.

R17 notes that she never bought toys for herself as a child but now buys puzzles and board games for herself as an adult. Her parents did not have any heirloom toys from the Soviet Union, but her father used to mention a metal toy from his childhood, so she decided to buy one for him if she ever found it on sale. **R17** enjoyed playing with Lego and other building blocks, often following instructions precisely. She reflects fondly on playing with children now, as it allows her to reconnect with her own childhood and have fun without the pressures of adulthood. She also mentions her multicultural friends speaking German with their children.

R8 confides in us that she has a habit of buying toys to satisfy her inner child. This works as a compensation: as a child she was denied some toys she dreamt about. The toys she did have come from different countries, including Russia and Finland, and some special toys from Germany. She has pleasant memories about her treasures such as Bratz and Monster High dolls, which were unique

because of their unusual appearances and storylines. She recalls playing with these dolls as if they were characters in a school for monsters. **R8** also reminisces about old Christmas ornaments passed down through generations and her imaginative play with a large teddy bear named *Mishaba* [a unique childish word for a teddy bear] whom she considered to be her “bridegroom”. Additionally, she mentions playing with trucks and scooters outdoors and decorating wooden building blocks. Despite having many toys, she never owned male dolls like Ken, preferring to spend money on female dolls.

R25 believes that some toys and ways of playing are capable of provoking speech in children more than others. For example, puppets that “talk” to each other on various topics; a commentator for car races (“The gray one is falling behind, the red one has taken the lead, the green one is in between them”) – and the same can be achieved in a board game; if a conflict occurs and needs to be resolved (“You, hedgehog, washed my wide lace skirt, but it should have been the narrow leather one”—imaginative extension of the script of the fairy tale about a hedgehog washing the laundry of forest animals). Joint planning of a future game and negotiations on who will do what stimulates the use of future tense verbs, while a journalistic report about what happened (for example, when some cave dwellers tell in a newspaper who came there and how they settled in) provokes descriptions in the past tense (“First, a bird flew in, hiding from the storm. Then a girl came and lit a fire. A snake slithered in and settled by the fireplace”). Such games involving role play and organized by an adult, allow for the development of vocabulary, grammar, as well as narrative and communicative skills. Adults can propose the language in which they would play, alternating the heritage language of the country of origin and the dominant language of the host country. This approach to playing contributes to developing parallel vocabulary in the children’s linguistic repertoire and helps to bring up balanced bilinguals.

The role of toys in fostering family connections is another key theme in our data. Shared play, storytelling, and holiday traditions involving toys help create meaningful family bonds. The sentimental value of passing toys through generations is emphasized as a means to preserve memories and family history.

R20 had several rubber penguins, which were gifts from family members, including grandparents and parents. Along with the penguins, he also loved 1:43 scale toy cars. Since they were not common in the Soviet Union, he had just three, which made them particularly valuable. As for playing with the penguins, he does not remember many details but recalls dressing them in clothes given as presents by family members and placing them on the bed, sometimes tucking them in to sleep. He lost interest in penguins when he was 9 or 10, but they still remain in his mother’s storage room in St. Petersburg. Occasionally, when visiting, he would look at them but no longer plays with them.

Sustainability and environmental concerns are recurring topics, with many respondents criticizing the overuse of plastic toys. Statements like “plastic toys are too many and dangerous” reflect a collective desire for more sustainable and safer materials. Older, sturdier toys are praised for their durability, and there is a clear dissatisfaction with modern, disposable designs.

In her childhood, **R9** had both Russian and Finnish toys, as the family relocated when she was five. She has vague memories of Russian toys, which included soft toys, a doctor’s kit, and Pokémon collectible cards. Finnish toys included Bratz dolls, which were expensive, and plastic dogs, as well as weekly purchases of small figurines called Googles. A special family heirloom, a large glass Christmas ornament, was passed down from the great-great-great-grandfather. Currently, the speaker collects board games and occasionally makes toys, such as knitting a rabbit for her younger sister.

Many respondents recall particular toys that were cherished, such as plush bears, dolls, and classic items like kaleidoscopes and toy boxes. Many respondents enjoyed physical and creative games, such as “Sea Waves,” and “Cossacks and Robbers.” These games do not only develop children’s physical abilities but provide opportunities to act in a team, negotiate group actions, and learn the art of persuasiveness and leadership. The interviews highlight that toys and games hold a significant place in childhood memories, serving as a source of joy, creativity, and connection with other children and adults. While a few participants noted limited access to toys, even these memories evoke a sense of nostalgia, demonstrating the enduring impact of play in shaping personal and cultural identity.

Popular choices among the board games include *Ticket to Ride*, *Codenames*, *Settlers of Catan*, *Uno*, *Carcassonne*, and various versions of *Monopoly*. Many participants expressed nostalgia for childhood games, sometimes noting the challenge of finding the exact versions they once played in order to play them again but now introducing them to their own children.

Chess remains a meaningful activity in households where it is valued for its strategic depth. Even among those who do not currently play, many own chesses that hold sentimental value. These sets often come from relatives, are brought as travel souvenirs, or purchased for children. Some play chess occasionally but consider it more of a pastime than a serious pursuit. While some actively play and involve their children, considering it a valuable family-bonding activity, others preserve chess sets as sentimental keepsakes, often with unique origins. The enduring appeal of chess lies in its versatility as both a strategic game and a cultural artifact, appreciated across generations.

Word games remain a favorite pastime for many families and individuals. These games are not only entertaining but also serve as valuable tools for language learning and development, often adapting to the players’ linguistic backgrounds and contexts. Digital versions of word games (apps or

tablet games) are gaining popularity, especially for casual play or practice. Physical board games remain cherished for social or family uniting moments. Common languages among the participants include Russian, English, Italian, German, Hebrew, Turkish, and Czech.

One interviewee remarked, “In our childhood, we preferred outdoor, active games. Today, most children prefer video games.” The responses reveal a significant evolution in how children play and the role of games in their lives. While modern games are more diverse and technologically advanced, they often lack the spontaneity and social interaction of traditional play. The shift toward individual, screen-based activities has reduced opportunities for initiative, creativity, collaboration, and physical activity. However, games still serve as a critical tool for development, offering new avenues for education and competition. Balancing traditional and modern gaming experiences might be key to preserving creativity and social skills in today’s children.

The theme of non-interference in children’s play is also prevalent. Comments like “it’s important not to dictate what to play” highlight the belief that children should have the freedom to direct their own play, fostering independence and creativity. This autonomy is crucial for emotional and cognitive development, as children use play to process emotions and navigate transitions, particularly after stressful events.

The responses reflect a clear contrast between the simplicity and creativity of older toys and the technologically advanced modern toys of highly varied nature. While some see this as a positive change, others feel modern toys focus too much on predefined outcomes, limiting free play. While the abundance and educational value of today’s toys are highly appreciated, there is a strong undercurrent of concern about their potential to overstimulate children and limit imaginative play. The tension between nostalgia for the past and acceptance of modern advancements highlights the complexity of this evolution. Parents and educators face the challenge of balancing the benefits of innovation with preserving opportunities for creativity and hands-on learning. Some criticize these features for being overly stimulating or unrealistic. Many reminisced about the simplicity of older toys, which allowed children to use everyday objects creatively. Statements such as “we made our own toys” and “I turned a box into a dollhouse” illustrate the value placed on imaginative play.

Several interviewees emphasized the sentimental value of passing toys through generations, preserving memories and family history. The responses reveal that while toys are important, their true value lies in their ability to support creativity, emotional growth, and family connections. Thoughtful selection, moderation, and an emphasis on play over possession are key strategies for choosing toys that align with a child’s individuality and developmental needs. The input also highlights the need to integrate cultural traditions and consider sustainability when choosing toys.

Conclusion

The discussion reveals that while toys are important, their true value lies in their ability to support creativity, emotional growth, and family connections. Thoughtful selection, moderation, and an emphasis on play over possession are key strategies for choosing toys that align with a child's individuality and developmental needs. Integrating cultural traditions and considering sustainability are also crucial factors in toy selection. The collective insights underscore the multifaceted role of materiality in enriching childhood experiences and fostering lasting family bonds. As we see, the childhood memories of former immigrant children reveal the profound impact toys had on their lives, serving as reflections of their unique experiences (e.g., toys' names) and cultural backgrounds. From cherished plush toys and handmade dolls to longing for unattainable toys like Baby Born dolls and Bratz dolls, these narratives emphasize the emotional significance and sentimental value attached to one's favorite playthings. The stories we recorded also underscore the creativity and resourcefulness in the children's play, whether through custom-made board games, imaginative outdoor activities, or inventive use of everyday items for games. Despite varied economic circumstances and cultural influences, toys provided comfort, joy, and a sense of continuity, bridging the immigrants' past and present. These recollections not only point up the universal nature of play but also demonstrate how toys can serve as enduring symbols of childhood, family bonds, and personal growth.

Play has a special place within cognitive-driven processes such as learning, coping and processing real-world information in order to face internal (e.g., shyness, managing emotions) and external problems (hostile environment, neglect) (Capurso & Pazzagli, 2016). The discussion on the role of toys in child development, family culture, and education discloses recurring themes and shared perspectives. Central to this discourse is the belief that toys' true value lies in inspiring children to be creative and inventive, develop initiative, independence and perseverance rather than in the toys themselves. Respondents emphasize that the essence of play is more significant than the physical objects involved. Family involvement in toy creation and selection is also highlighted. Handmade toys are perceived as "alive," adding depth and personal connection compared to mass-produced items. The theme of non-interference in children's play is prevalent, emphasizing the importance of allowing children to direct their own play. Cultural identity and heritage emerge as significant motifs, with respondents valuing traditional or handmade toys carrying historical significance. Toys play a crucial role in fostering family connections through shared play, storytelling, and holiday traditions. Sustainability and environmental concerns are recurring topics, with respondents criticizing the overuse of plastic toys and praising older, sturdier toys for their durability.

Play is essential for bringing up bi- and multilinguals. In the early stages of immigration life

parents are concerned about their children lagging behind their local peers due to insufficient proficiency in the language of the host country, which is essential for their success in educational institutions. So, some encourage their children to play in the dominant language of the environment. Later, however, they may be worried about heritage language attrition and try to use games and toys brought from the home country to help maintain their heritage language and culture. Naturally, parents' strategies depend on the family language policy and on the parents' awareness of the impact of play on the children's cognitive and linguistic abilities and identity development.

Interviews we conducted were retrospective, and this type of interview often poses methodological challenges as participants often recall the past through a present-influenced lens, leading to faded or altered memories of emotions and thoughts. Concrete events, especially significant ones, are more reliably remembered than general feelings, but these memories may still be idealized or systematized over time. Despite these limitations, the focus of our study is not on verifying the accuracy of past events descriptions but on understanding how participants' memories of play shape their current views on its importance. Participants in our study expressed concern over the decline of unstructured outdoor play and highlighted the developmental benefits of risky play, aligning with research advocating for a balance between safety and exploration. Additionally, older adults emphasized that play continues to provide physical, cognitive, emotional, and social benefits throughout life, serving as a source of enjoyment, stress relief, and self-expression. Our findings suggest that play remains a lifelong process, connecting past and present experiences, supporting holistic development, and reflecting broader life themes of innocence, maturity, and transcendence.

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