



Take one humble cardboard box, one child, and a dollop of imagination. The result? A whole lot of fun for all, and lessons in creativity for parents and kids included

Thinking out of the box

WHEN PATRENA TEO BOUGHT A NEW 29-INCH TV SET several years ago, she noticed her then two-year-old son Isaac playing with the box the set came in. It was large enough for him to hide in, and so, deciding it was a good way to recycle the box, she slashed the bottom of it, and cut out doors and windows. Isaac took to it immediately. Together, they painted on it, decorated it in their own way, and stuck wrappers all over it. In the end, it became one of his most enduring toys.

“He would have teddy-bear picnics in it, and play house in it. It was his ‘house’ till he was six years old!” Patrena, 38, recalls. Her daughter, Chloe, now two years old (Isaac’s now eight), has revived Isaac’s memories of his box house. “Now the girl uses a big piece of cloth draped over a string tied up on two ends. That’s her, ‘we’re camping out! It’s raining, it’s raining, let’s go in!’ thing.”

●●● BOX FUN

It’s a scenario you probably have firsthand experience with. Most of us would have at least fuzzy childhood memories of telling ghost stories by torchlight in a makeshift blanket-over-table ‘tent’, tea parties in tents, boxes, tree houses, or playhouses. Having a roof over our heads, it seems, is compelling, even before we are aware of why.

Early childhood educator Michelle Lim sets up learning corners in her classroom at the international school where she teaches children aged five and six. Each corner is constructed to develop a skill through play. Michelle notes the sold-out popularity of her Dramatic Play corner, whose focal point is a tent, her modern version of box.

“The kids actually fight to get in when it comes time to play.

“I see the box as a sort of open slate kids use to project their fantasies onto, be it a house, rocket ship, or car, they’re projecting their imagination onto it”, says child psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health’s Child Guidance Clinic, Carolyn Kee

You have to set a limit on the number of kids allowed into that corner at any one time, otherwise the whole class will end up in the tent!” she observes.

That’s because the tent, she observes, is like a “home corner” with “masak-masak” toys, where the kids can “play house”, regardless of their age. Hence it provides a familiar environmental structure where their imagination adapts to their surroundings. “The older ones take it a step further – they’ll shred paper and pretend those are noodles,” she adds.

The children also re-enact real life situations in their games. While both girls and boys play house, they tend to gravitate towards their respective gender groups and roles. “The girls would all be mummies and sisters and babies, and if they manage to grab hold of someone from the boys’ side, he becomes the “daddy”, who goes to work and comes home and brings the money back,” Michelle describes.

The Dramatic Play area in Michelle’s classroom changes often, and the kids use their imagination to play along in each setting. Sometimes she throws in dress-up clothes and frills to add to their fun, or gives the corner a supermarket theme. Sometimes, it’s a camping trip, or a circus with climbing blocks, or even simply a library or reading corner.

“It really depends on how you set up the area, and what you want to achieve. The supermarket theme, for instance, also develops numeric skills,” she says. Michelle has also added cardboard boxes and incorporated them into drama and role-playing sessions – tall boxes are fortresses, or Rapunzel’s tower, or turned into boats, or Santa’s sleigh. Very often, the kids themselves suggest ideas.

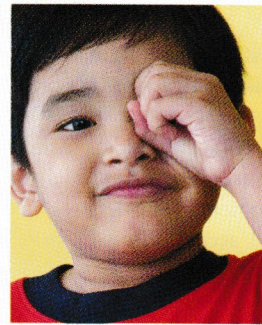
●●● **BOX PLAY, ROLE PLAY**

“A lot of the time, when children play, they’re trying on different ideas about themselves and social relationships. Repetition is the way children learn, so they repeat this game,” says child psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health’s Child Guidance Clinic, Carolyn Kee. “I see the box as a sort of open slate kids use to project their fantasies onto, be it a house, rocket ship, or car, they’re projecting their imagination onto it,” she explains.

Consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist at Raffles Hospital Dr Clarice Hong agrees: “Simple things like cardboard boxes, playing house in a tent and so on is the actual display of

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the child's imaginative mind at work. A cardboard box can be a house, a tunnel... turned upside down with the right height, it can be stove."

Simple toys grow with the child, she adds. "At different ages, they get different things from it, ranging from enjoyment, from sense of exploration, to fulfillment from deriving pleasure out from their make believe, and accomplishment from whatever they build."

But the box or tent doesn't just serve as an inspiration for role-play, active games, or the venue for kiddy tea parties. Michelle has noticed that the kids like to take their own quiet time in their tent. "They bring in games, books, pillows – it's different at each age – and they're quite happy to just sit inside and do their own thing. They sometimes don't like the adults being there."

This has struck a chord with Emelyn Tan, 26, whose usually chatty four-year-old daughter Matilda sometimes brings her things into her Ikea tent, plays by herself, and shuts out the adults. "Sometimes she likes to be on her own, just to play on her own," Emelyn describes, "She brings in things – one day it's her stuffed animals, one day her tea set, or her table."



Matilda in her Ikea tent

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●●● WHY THE BOX?

"Sometimes adults don't seem to have the kind of time to play with kids on their wavelength. Similarly, children do not always welcome adults when they want to enter into their imaginative world," Dr Hong explains. That is probably why kids seek small enclosed spaces like boxes and closets to play out their imaginative streaks.

In their book, *Why Motor Skills Matter*, authors and mothers Tara Liddle and Laura Yorke mention that between two and three years old, kids love to explore any cabinets and closets. One of them describes a resulting mildly harrowing experience: "I will never forget the time I opened my closet door, left the room for a moment, returned, and closed the closet door, and then realised that I could not find my daughter. After what seemed like a long time, I found her happily playing in the closet."

While experts prefer not to offer any reasons beyond imaginative play, Michelle reckons – especially in very small children – that, "it gives them a sense of security, where they're shut away

from the outside area, the outside world to do their own thing. Perhaps it's like being in the womb – when they were a foetus in the womb – it was an enclosure which they were in not long ago."

"The shy ones come out more – it seems to help them come out of their shell," she observes. Patrena agrees. The open-topped plastic Ikea crates she bought to store her kids' toys would often also 'store' the kids. "Once Chloe tipped out the toys and sat in the box, and spent half an afternoon there," recalls Patrena.

Even Isaac, at age eight, is still drawn to his enclosed space. He has his own one-man tent, and sometimes prefers it to his bed. "He asks, 'mummy, can I sleep in the tent?' even though half his body would be hanging out of it!" Patrena laughs.

"It gives them a definitive area or focus of what the place means," explains Dr Hong. This is particularly important for insecure children. "It gives them boundaries, which provide a safe way for them to express their emotions."

●●● NOT JUST CHILD'S PLAY

Parents, Michelle suggests, can encourage kids to tap into their imaginations by setting up their rooms accordingly. It can be as simple as hanging brightly coloured lengths of cloth, and making a circus tent canopy for their bed.

But first of all, parents themselves have to find their inner child and be curious, creative, and imaginative. That way, the parent becomes the child's guide through this journey of discovery, says Dr Hong. "Egg cartons can be made into insects, or bees. Those three-litre plastic milk cartons can be turned into a little Chanel bag, or the cereal box into a clock with a metal pin and hands to teach children the time."

Investing in imagination and creativity is also easier on the pockets of parents, obviously. After all, if kids are so easily satisfied with simple things, why spend large amounts of

money on toys which will be outgrown quickly?

"Go back to the basics," childhood educator Michelle advises, "any time spent with children can be turned into learning by play. A trip to the supermarket, for instance, can be fun and educational."

"It's very important that children be given simple toys to play with," says Dr Hong, "children learn and absorb like sponges so the earlier the imagination, and creativity is imparted, the better. You can then extrapolate this to other things in life."

She elaborates, "Creativity in children is almost second nature. Children can see when simple things can be complex and complex things simple, because they're not exposed to the relative difference."

So when junior abandons the fancy gadget under the Christmas tree and toddles off towards the box said gadget came in, don't wrest it from him and chuck it aside. It's a rare opportunity to escape with your little one into his or her refreshingly imaginative and creative world! **P**