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Toddlers' Favorite Toy: The iPhone - By HILARY STOUT - Published: Oct 15, 2010



Photo by Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Brady Hotz, now 2, has been playing with his parents' iPhones since he was 6 months; his mother, Kellie Hotz, lends hers for the 15-minute commute to school.

The iPhone has revolutionized telecommunications. It has also become the most effective tool in human history to mollify a fussy toddler, much to the delight of parents reveling in their newfound freedom to have a conversation in a restaurant or roam the supermarket aisles in peace. But just as adults have a hard time putting down their iPhones, so the device is now the Toy of Choice — akin to a treasured stuffed animal — for many 1-, 2- and 3-year-olds. It's a phenomenon that is attracting the attention and concern of some childhood development specialists.

Natasha Sykes, a mother of two in Atlanta, remembers the first time her daughter, Kelsey, now 3 1/2 but then barely 2 years old, held her husband's iPhone. "She pressed the button and it lit up. I just remember her eyes. It was like 'Whoa!'"

The parents were charmed by their daughter's fascination. But then, said Ms. Sykes (herself a BlackBerry user), "She got serious about the phone."

Kelsey would ask for it. Then she'd cry for it. "It was like she'd always want the phone," Ms. Sykes said. After a six-hour search one day, she and her husband found the iPhone tucked away under Kelsey's bed. They laughed. But they also felt vague concern. Kelsey, and her 2-year-old brother, Chase, have blocks, Legos, bouncing balls, toy cars and books galore. ("They love books," Ms. Sykes said.) But nothing compares to the iPhone.

"If they know they have the option of the phone or toys, it will be the phone," Ms. Sykes said

Brady Hotz, who will be 2 at the end of this month, was having a hard time getting out the door of his family's home near Chicago the other day. He'd woken up late — 6:45 instead of 6:15. His mother, Kellie Hotz, was in a rush. She got him dressed, gave him milk and cereal, and announced, "We're ready to go."

Brady, not budging from his position, dug in. "Mickey!" he said plaintively. "Mickey!" (Translation: I'm not going anywhere till I get to watch "Mickey Mouse Clubhouse" on TV.)

Ms. Hotz, a veteran of such standoffs, switched instantly to what she called her "guaranteed success tool."

"What about Mickey on the phone?" she suggested.

That's all it took. Mother swept up the now entirely cooperative toddler, cued up the show (via YouTube) on her little iPhone screen, and strapped him into her car, where he sang happily along with the video for the 15-minute ride to day care.

Then trouble began again. Brady wanted to stay in his seat with the iPhone. Finally he put it in his coat pocket and went inside — where Ms. Hotz was able to surreptitiously reclaim her gizmo and leave for work. But it's not always that easy. "Sometimes I'll need it because someone is calling, and he is not at all willing to give it up," she said.

Apple, the iPhone's designer and manufacturer, has built its success on machines so simple and intuitive that even technologically befuddled adults can figure out how to work them, so it makes sense that sophisticated children would follow. The most recent model is 4.5 inches tall, 2.31 inches wide and weighs 4.8 ounces: sleek, but not too small for those with developing motor skills. Tap a picture on the screen and something happens. What could be more fun?

The sleepy-eyed toddler who called for the iPhone from his crib is one of hundreds of iPhone-loving tykes starring in videos posted throughout the Internet, usually narrated by parents expressing proud wonderment at their offspring's ability to slide chubby fingers across the gadget's screen and pull up photographs and apps of their choice.

Many iPhone apps on the market are aimed directly at preschoolers, many of them labeled "educational," such as Toddler Teasers: Shapes, which asks the child to tap a circle or square or triangle; and Pocket Zoo, which streams live video of animals at zoos around the world. There are "flash cards" aimed at teaching children to read and spell, and a "Wheels on the Bus" app that sings the popular song in multiple languages. Then there's the new iGo Potty app (sponsored by Kimberly-Clark, maker of Huggies training pants), with automated phone calls reminding toddlers that it's time to "go."

Along with fears about dropping and damage, however, many parents sharing iPhones with their young ones feel nagging guilt. They wonder whether it is indeed an educational tool, or a passive amusement like television. The American Academy of Pediatrics has long advised parents not to let their children watch any TV until they are past their second birthday.