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LIFE & STYLE

## The Sum of the Parts of STEM Toys Can Equal a Giant Mess

A new generation of knickknacks meant to inspire a love of science and math can become a headache for parents; Legos aren't the only floor hazard



Viahart's Brain Flakes, left, come in a 500-piece set for \$15. Plus Plus construction toys, right, come in a 600-piece set for \$35. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Alina Dizik

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After baking a batch of cookies with his three grandchildren, Melvin Albright realized something was amiss.

Mr. Albright and his wife, Markeeta Albright, didn't notice the magnetic block Magformers from the kitchen counter were now attached to the bottom of the baking sheet. Then came the chemical smell.

"It was these icicles of stuff dripping down," says Mr. Albright, 71, from Shoals, Ind. He turned one of the melted swirls into a fridge magnet for fun. "I felt a little responsible."

Toys for young children that claim to build a love of science and numbers are all the rage. But there's one problem: the mess. With some sets selling as many as 1,000 pieces per box, these toys labeled as STEM (the term for science, technology, engineering and math) have created a generation of parents stepping on far more than Legos.

The road to household chaos is paved with good intentions about STEM learning, not to mention tiny, sharp, easily lost pieces. And pricing in the \$15

to \$20 range for hundreds of pieces of slotted discs, interlocking plus signs and other toys “really opens the gateway” for more clutter, says Richard Gottlieb, a toy-industry consultant.

Karen Sturgis has more than 10,000 tiny puzzle-shaped blocks for her two school-aged children—enough to fill a standard kitchen trash can. “That sounds like a ridiculous number, but they always ask, ‘Mom, can we get another pack? We have another idea,’ ” she says of the building blocks from maker Plus-Plus.

Ms. Sturgis sometimes finds them in the washer or under a bed. If the children find more than three at a time, “it’s a huge Eureka moment” They create an extra farm animal or weapon for the ships and barns they build. “We tried keeping them in one place...but my daughter’s horses need to gallop around the house,” says the 40-year-old engineer based in Greenville, S.C., who now stays at home with her children.

Some parents have implemented ironclad systems to contain the fallout. Psychology professor Meghan Owenz keeps what she calls a toy library to keep her Reading, Pa., home in livable shape. Each week, 4-year-old Sullivan and 7-year-old McKenna can play with a limited number of items.

“If everything from the library was checked out, it would become overwhelming,” she says. A building section of the closet includes hundreds of magnetic, wooden and curved blocks, in addition to recycled cardboard boxes. A weekly home cleanup helps the siblings collect any lingering pieces.



Plus Plus creations at the Sturgis home in Greenville, S.C. PHOTO: STURGIS FAMILY

To stress organization, companies are launching new options. Magformers started selling a \$15 branded plastic box for magnet block fans searching for ideal storage, says the company's Canton, Mich.-based senior marketing manager Freddie Jordan.

With demand for even more pieces, Viahart, the Wills Point, Texas-based maker of Brain Flakes, is now considering selling a set that goes beyond its current largest offering of 1,400 pieces, founder Molson Hart says. Since the toy's flat discs may be hard for adult fingers to pick up, the company wants to help with cleanup for any larger sets. "Maybe we'll put a dustbin shovel thingy in there," Mr. Hart says.



Constructions of Brain Flakes inspired by floral arrangements. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Despite potential cleanup issues, the plastic discs are now a best seller in

Amazon's building toy category. After sales took off, Mr. Hart realized that the flat, harder-to-gather shape is a major perk for when they're scattered all over the floor: That's because they hurt less when parents step on them. According to one Amazon reviewer: "I bought these because stepping on Legos hurt like hell. These things are flat and have the same level of fun."

In the past six months, 90% of building toy sales took place on Amazon, according to Jumpshot, a research firm that collects anonymous shopping data from 100 million devices.

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#### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

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*What's your strategy for cleaning up especially messy toys? Share your thoughts below.*

But early-learning experts generally agree that the ability for a STEM toy to arrive at the doorstep in two days isn't always a good thing. Having too many sets can fatigue would-be builders and inhibit creativity, says Douglas Clements, professor of early mathematics at the University of Denver.

Instead, he encourages a little boredom when playing with what he says are actually old-fashioned manipulatives. "You don't need them all," he says. "It's more important for kids to go back to the [construction set] and think: What do I do now?"

To help parents, professional organizer Rachel Rosenthal recommends that households with young children set aside display space for projects made with building toys, even if it doesn't go with the home's overall aesthetic. "We use the bedroom and the playroom to incorporate these pieces—if parents can let go a little bit," says Ms. Rosenthal, who is based in Washington, D.C. She reminds parents to keep this work out of the reach of younger siblings.



Sarah McGinnity's children Clark, 4, and Lucy, 3, play with Plus Plus pieces. PHOTO: MCGINNITY FAMILY

In some instances, children just don't fall in love with STEM toys. When

Sarah McGinnity's middle son, Clark, received a 100-piece Plus-Plus set for \$10, the 4-year-old never got into the spirit of linking the 3-D puzzle pieces together.

Instead, they've turned into art supplies and sit "on a shelf of messy toys," along with volcano kits and kinetic sand, says the 36-year-old Ms. McGinnity of Overland Park, Kan., who runs a local parenting site. Rather than building with them, "Clark glues them onto cards and other art projects as if they are sequins," she says.

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