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Theme - A Toy for the Twenty-first Century

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PLAYING WITH ESSENTIAL SKILLS — A TOY FOR THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY

A toy originally designed to help the visually impaired navigate their way through unfamiliar territory, is being put into practice in the sighted community as a fun way to learn the foundational skills of empathy and thoughtful communication. The Empathy Toy is a collaborative puzzle game that can only be solved when players learn to understand each other, and it has something to teach us all.

Text by Steve Jarvis Photographs by Twenty One Toys

THEME Creativity and interpersonal skills are looked to as a foundation to future-proofing students in an unknowable job market. But how do we go about learning a new skill set more suited to the demands of life in the twenty-first century?

Empathy Toy

Before entering school, children learn an important set of skills by playing with each other. As is life itself, play can be a messy, insensitive, rough and tumble activity. However, it is precisely this process that gives children a foundational understanding for how to interact with each other, and builds skills of communicating

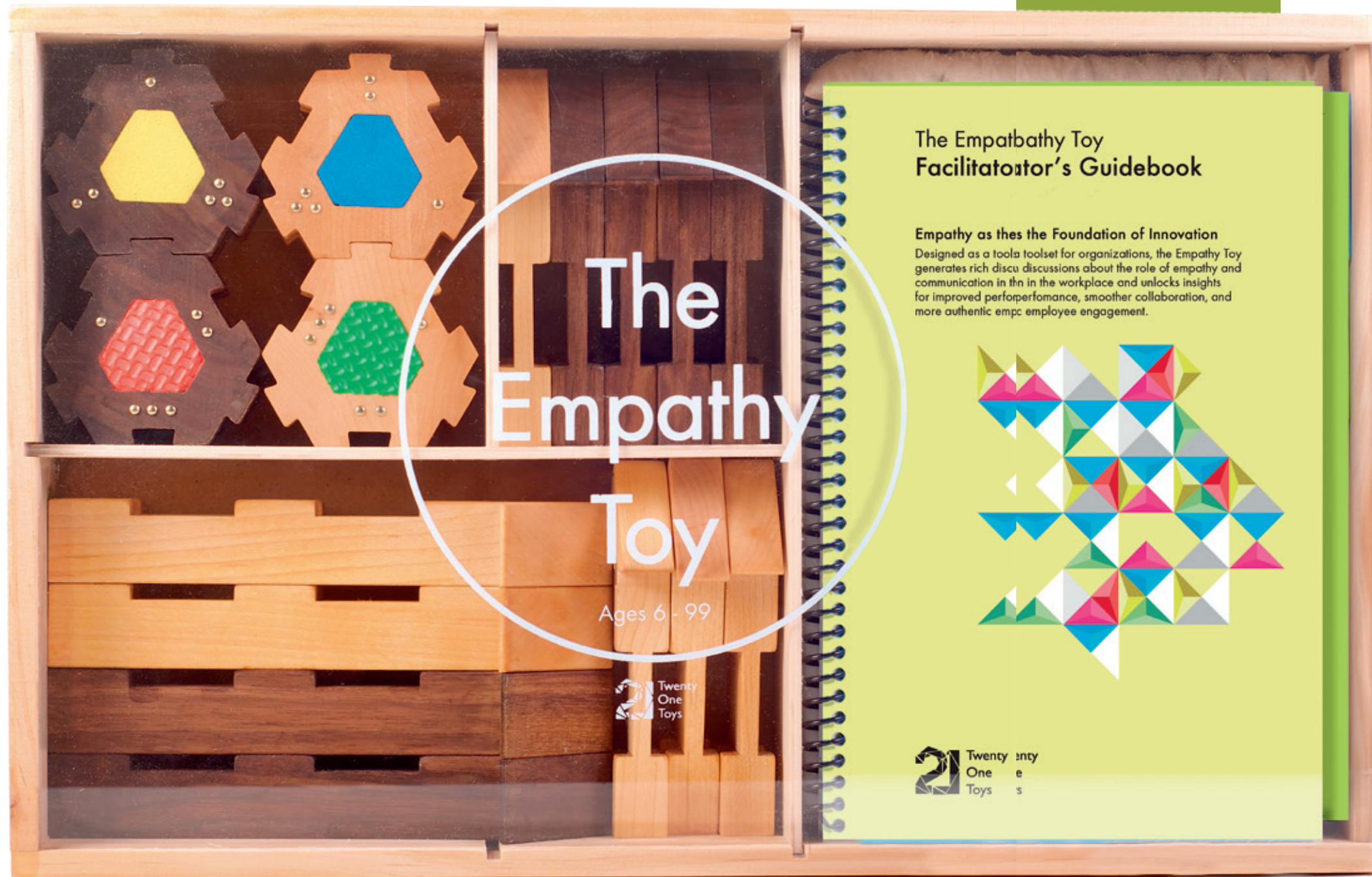
what they want, and how to organize and participate. Ilana Ben-Ari, a Canadian toy designer, is convinced of the need to reintroduce play to schools to teach the soft skills necessary for children to succeed in the future. Her company Twenty One Toys is on a mission to do just this.

Ben-Ari created the Empathy Toy while studying design at university. It started out as a navigational aid for the visually impaired, and was built on a set of design principles. Going beyond the research literature, she spent time with people living with visual impairment, as well as with

their friends and family. "I immediately recognised that there is actually a huge social and emotional gap between the visually impaired community and the sighted community." Struck by how compromised the educational situation for visually impaired was, she decided to create a game that would help bridge the experience of students with sight and those without. Based on an orientation and mobility exercise called Where Am I? Where Am I Going? How Do I Get There? she developed a game that visually impaired students could play with sighted students to break down the barriers of communication.



There are no age limits on the benefits of playing this game.



From project to product

The toy she developed from her thesis project was well received, even winning a 'Best In Show' award at a national-level design competition, but her efforts to sell her work to a toy company failed to generate interest. Ben-Ari knew that what she had made could change education for the better, but if there was not a suitable company to sell her toy, she would have to create a company to do just that. In 2012, after quitting her day job, she founded Twenty One Toys. The goal was to prove her toy's educational merits, not just as a way to facilitate understanding and empathy between sighted and visually impaired, but to help anyone that wanted to heighten their sense of awareness, creativity, and empathy.

The game itself is quite straight forward. Two players are given identical sets of distinctively-shaped wooden blocks that can be fitted together in any one of hundreds of combinations. The task of the game is for one player to create a configuration using the distinctly shaped components, and then describe to the other player how to recreate that particular shape using their own components. The trick is, they have to do it blindfolded. "Playing the game well means having to imagine another player's position, and requires participants to work together in developing a common language to solve problems," explains Ben-Ari. "In the span of 5 to 10 minutes, you're

dealing with patience, frustration, but most importantly, how are you going to creatively communicate this abstract thing that you can only see with your hands so that another can recreate it."

The Empathy Toy is a crash course in refining the skills of socially and harmoniously interacting with people. It has proved effective in helping increase communication and for empathy building in education, including reducing racial discrimination incidents in schools. While it may have started life as being for children, it has found a valuable role in the adult world, and it is proving a useful tool with much wider application and deeper significance. The toy is helping to build better communication and teamwork, being used in job interviews as a condensed insight into a candidate's ability to work under pressure, deal with frustration, and assess people skills. It can now be found in hundreds of schools and businesses around the world helping teach group work, communication and leadership, and its players cover all levels of business from new entrants to CEOs.

THEME

Empathy Toy

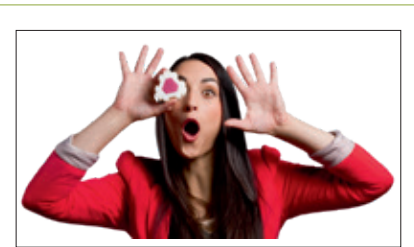


A better way to learn

Ben-Ari believes that play drives learning and that toys can be the new textbooks, fostering a style of learning that is far more suited to the demands of the 21st century. "The long-term vision is to create a toy-based curriculum. If we are going to be teaching creativity, innovation and social and emotional skills, that is something we can't do with textbooks," says Ben-Ari. Her company's next toy, the Failure Toy, is an important step toward this goal, and promises to help players better understand the processes and importance of not succeeding at everything you do. Something we inevitably all have to deal with, and the more practice we get the better for our wellbeing.

It is not that often that a project originally designed to help disabled people, finds itself being enthusiastically taken up in the mainstream able-bodied market. Empathy Toy is one such product. One where success is not so much about completing the challenge,

but acquiring the skills you hone while explaining something you can't see, to someone else who can't see. While the saying "the blind leading the blind" evokes images of hopelessness, in the case of The Empathy Toy it is the blind bonding with the blind where the true power of the toy can be found. It is this type of human connection that is overwhelmingly positive and essential to creating a better society together.



Name: [The Empathy Toy](#)
 Location: [Canada](#)
 Contact: www.twentyonetoy.com



The sets for each player are identical except for colour.