

Note: This is the first chapter of *The Toybox Rewired: 40 Years After Turmoil in the Toybox* by Phil Phillips, with revisions and substantive editing by Ken Walker. Released January 2026 by Legacy Impact Publishing.

Chapter 1

The Toybox Rewired

“We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.”

— Canadian professor and media theorist Marshall McLuhan
(As paraphrased in John Culkin’s 1967 *Saturday Review* article)

The Silence That Shouldn’t Be There

It doesn’t hit you like an earthquake.
It’s more like walking into a room and wondering what’s missing.
That’s how it felt that day: two kids on the couch, each with their own screen, earbuds in, faces flat. No arguing. No interaction. No life.
Just quiet.
But it wasn’t the quiet of peace. It was the quiet of disconnection.
And that’s when it hit me.
The toybox didn’t vanish. It got rewired.

Back When Play Was Wild

When I was a kid, play was kinetic, weird, and glorious. We made up rules. We rewrote endings. We got dirty. We got loud. We got in trouble. Sometimes the toys we played with were broken. Sometimes they consisted of boxes and sticks. But the stories we built? Those were magic.

Play taught us how to struggle. How to lead. How to follow. How to fail. It wasn’t educational—it was formational.

Today, most play is pre-packaged. Predictable. Programmed by studios and monetized by platforms. And instead of being driven by a child’s creativity, it’s driven by a franchise.

Even the phrase “playtime” is fading. Now it’s “screen time.”
And screens don’t play. They perform.

Sidebar: “We Just Watched Him Fade”

We had a young family over for dinner. Sweet people. First-time parents. About six, their son was bright-eyed, high energy, and curious. At first, he was talkative and eager to share what he’d been learning. Then his mom handed him her phone so the adults could “have a real conversation.”

Within thirty seconds, he went silent.

Within two minutes, he was somewhere else entirely.

We watched him fade in real time. Not into a tantrum. Not into mischief. Just ... into the device.

He stopped talking. Stopped moving. His whole body posture changed. And in that moment, it wasn't rebellion we were watching. It was surrender.

That's when I realized: Children are not addicted to screens. They're exhausted by them.

Culture Changed When We Weren't Looking

This book isn't a nostalgia trip. It's a cultural intervention.

We didn't lose childhood in a single moment. We lost it one app at a time. One video at a time. One passive decision at a time.

Childhood didn't just evolve. Media moguls and toy companies engineered it to change.

And now, instead of imagination being the training ground for life, it's a casualty of content.

We've reached a point where:

- Children are being disciplined by YouTube algorithms
- Play is no longer open-ended, but product-driven
- Entertainment carries moral scripts—and those scripts are often anti-parent, anti-wisdom, and anti-truth

And we call this “harmless fun”?

Why This Book Exists

Forty years ago, I walked into a toy store and saw something strange. It wasn't just the toys. It was the mythology behind them. They were retelling the story of creation—but without God.

Instead of truth, they offered power. Instead of good and evil, they offered control and chaos. That realization led to *Turmoil in the Toybox*.

And that book started a conversation that reached more people than I ever imagined.

This book is a continuation of that mission.

Not a repeat. Not a retread. A resurrection.

Because the battle has moved from toy aisles to timelines.

And if we don't reengage now, we lose more than a culture.

We lose a generation's sense of wonder.

What You'll Find in These Pages

This is not a book about banning everything.

It's not a book of rules. It's a book of stories.

Real stories.

The kind that catch you off guard. That make you laugh. That make you uncomfortable. That make you look again at what you thought was “innocent.”

Some stories come from my life.

Some come from parents I've walked with.

Some emanate from culture itself—if you're willing to see it with fresh eyes.

Along the way, we'll name what's been hiding in plain sight:

- The spiritual messaging in modern media

- The rise of algorithmic parenting
- The loss of real identity in a curated, digital world
- The way childhood has been stolen—not with malice, but marketing

This Is the Wake-Up Call

If your child still has a spark in their eye, protect it.
 If they still ask weird questions, lean in.
 If they still want to *play outside* instead of *scroll inside*—fan that flame.
 Because you may be one of the last generations that remembers what childhood looked like before it got rewired.
 And if you're reading this ... you just might be the one called to help restore it.
 Let's begin.

Endnotes: Chapter 1: The Toybox Rewired

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964). McLuhan's famous quote, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us," appears in variations throughout his work. As I noted on page 1, this was a summation of his ideas coined by his friend and colleague, John Culkin, in a 1967 article for *Saturday Review*. The phrase has been widely (and often mistakenly) attributed to McLuhan, an influential observer on the impact of media on society and culture.

2. The phrase "screens don't play—they perform" reflects modern media research highlighting how digital platforms often encourage passive consumption rather than imaginative creation. See Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin Press, 2015).

3. Jonathan Haidt documents the developmental consequences of screen immersion in *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024), particularly in chapters 1–4.

4. Research on children's media and the shaping of worldview is covered extensively in Craig Detweiler's *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives* (Brazos Press, 2013), especially chapter 5.

5. The cultural shift from imaginative, unstructured play to content-driven digital entertainment is explored in Susan Linn's *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (The New Press, 2004).

6. For studies showing that YouTube algorithms disproportionately promote sensational and addictive content to children, see James Bridle, "Something is wrong on the internet," Medium, November 6, 2017, <https://medium.com/@jamesbridle/something-is-wrong-on-the-internet-c39c471271d2>.

7. The idea that entertainment now "carries moral scripts" aligns with Ted Baehr's findings in *The Culture-Wise Family: Upholding Christian Values in a Mass Media World* (Regal Books, 2007).

8. On the shift from analog toys to myth-laden, franchised media ecosystems, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006).

9. For discussion of algorithmic parenting and the outsourcing of child influence to platforms and devices, see Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Baker Books, 2017).