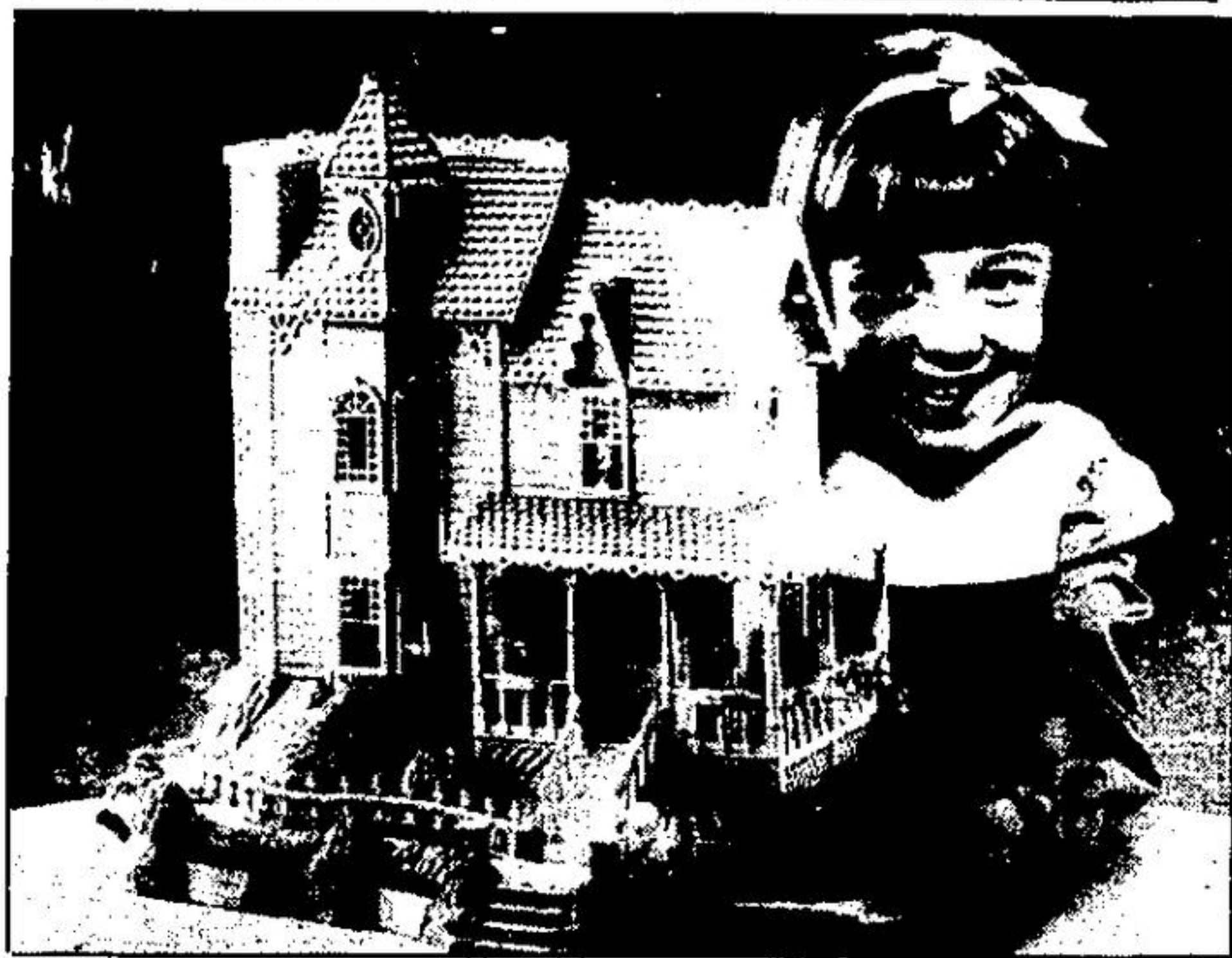


Children can learn from their Christmas gifts



NEW FOR Christmas is the Bible story board game Noah's Ark (about \$10), for those 7 and older. Ages 3 and up will enjoy My First UNO with Sesame Street characters (about \$6).



MAGIC KEY Mansion is a three-story doll house by Fisher-Price. This six-room Victorian house is part of a miniature village (about \$70).

How old should your child be before learning how to compete?

It's something to think about if you choose a game for a Christmas gift.

"Game playing is a healthy part of childhood," says Jeff Conrad, a designer for International Games. "But competition, by its very definition, requires both a winner and a loser. You have to be sensitive to your child's readiness to win — and to lose."

International Games has done extensive research on child development, which three years ago resulted in the award-winning "Games for Growing" series.

More recently, it has led to My First UNO, a new game for preschoolers. This game combines the characters of Sesame Street with the basics of the game UNO. This Christmas, the product is available in toy stores for about \$6.

Conrad makes the distinction between simple activities and games:

"If you roll a ball to a toddler and he rolls it back to you, that's an activity because there is no competition involved. Children as young as 6 months can respond to and participate in activities. But it's usually not until they're around 3 years old that they can play games."

Very young children have a strong ego, which often translates into stubbornness over sharing or taking turns, elements integral to playing games.

"One indication that your child is ready to start playing games is when his vocabulary shifts from 'mine, mine, mine' into 'ours,'" says Conrad.

Many parents feel that the day-to-day pressures of life are already enough for their youngsters, and the last thing their child needs is the additional stress of competition.

But Conrad notes that life is full of victories and losses both great and small, and it's important to introduce children to that as gently as possible.

"Penalties can be devastating to a child," he notes, "so when developing games for preschool children, we've worked hard to introduce positive reinforcements into the game play. The worst thing that can happen to a

young player in our games is that they must wait until their next turn to resume play."

The complexities that make games fun for adults often frustrate children. So, when developing My First UNO, International Games eliminated the 'reverse' and 'skip' cards found in UNO. They were replaced by a 'free turn' card, which adds to the game's fun without confusing children.

"Concepts and characters familiar to children also ease the transition from activities to games," says Con-

rad. "We frequently employ characters from Sesame Street, as we did in My First UNO, so that children feel comfortable with the game."

After the age of 3, children are much more capable of grasping the concept of sharing and are more eager to be part of a group.

Says Conrad: "Games are a wonderful way to teach children not only how to handle competition, but also how to interact socially with their peers, both vital to a child's happiness."

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