

## Blocks head to market: Inflatable cushions help kids build, but toy faces hurdles

By Jennifer Heldt Powell

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Dick Liou was laid off and wondering what to do with the rest of his life when he got sidetracked by another problem - how to help his two children build a better fort.

The kids were often putting together structures out of anything they could find around the house. But the tunnels and huts were messy and not very durable.

The Lexington resident solved their problem and his own by creating a toy that has just hit the market.

After searching for appropriate building blocks, Liou decided they just didn't exist. Cardboard collapses and has sharp corners. Plastic is hard and can too easily become a weapon during squabbles. Both are too bulky to easily store.

His solution is colorful, thin inflatable blocks that can be put together with special Velcro latches. Called Aerobloks, they can be used to create houses, boats, castles and just about anything else a child can dream up.

Playing with them is a lot easier than creating them.

"This was a very, very hard road," said the inventor and entrepreneur. "If I had known all the things I would have to go through, I might not have gone on it."

Though it might not have seemed like it at the time, coming up with the idea was the easy part. He then had to find a manufacturer to turn the concept into a product, protect it from copycats and figure out how to get it in the hands of children.

Bill Stitt, a lecturer at Babson College, said the toy business is "a very crowded space."

## PHOTO GALLERY



Rachelle Liou crawls through a bright tunnel made with vinyl and Velcro-fastener. (Staff photo by Nancy Lane)

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“One of the keys is to not only have a good product, but to convince those retailers whose shelves you want to load with it that it will sell,” he said.

Currently, the blocks are only available on a Web site, aerobloks.com, but Liou has been making the rounds at trade shows hoping they'll get picked up by retailers.

“Awareness is a huge hurdle,” said Liz Miller, a professor at Boston College's Carroll School of Management. “It's great if you have this high-quality product, but it's not going to go anywhere if no one knows about it.”

With changes in the marketplace, it's gotten harder for individuals or small companies to break into the toy market, but it can be done, she said.

Liou said he hopes to market the product on his own, but he would be open to selling it to a bigger company if the offer were right.

He's also got some other ideas in the pipeline. Though he won't give too many details, he said one has something to do with offices.

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