

The Hobby That Forgot Children

SRS asks how a child's railway play can continue into physical craft through robust parts, compatible interfaces, and digital help that ends at the table.

2026.07.14 02:48 DENNIS HEDEGREEN OPEN V1.1 [HTTPS://HEDEGREENRESEARCH.COM/ARTICLES/SRS/](https://hedegreenresearch.com/articles/srs/)

Model railways do not need another toy. They need a bridge from play to craft.

At a model railway exhibition in 2025, I watched my son move toward the one train he immediately recognised as belonging to his world.

It was behind glass.

He could see it. He could not touch it.

Model railways have many entrances for adults. There are scales, standards, track geometries, control systems, clubs, specialist shops, planning tools, exhibitions, magazines, layouts and decades of accumulated knowledge. There are also many train toys for children.

What is harder to find is the bridge between them.

A child can have a wooden railway, a plastic railway or a simplified train set. An adult can build a technically precise miniature world. Both can be good. Both can produce attention, imagination and care. But they often behave like separate universes. The parts, knowledge and building decisions from one do not necessarily continue into the other.

The serious hobby begins too late.

The field is not empty. FREMO, Free-mo and T-TRAK already standardise how independently built modules meet, and AnyRail already turns track libraries into fit-checked plans and shopping lists.

The adult hobby has built real answers to interoperability and planning. What remains discontinuous is the path for a child who does not yet know how to enter it.

A toy is not necessarily a bridge

One response is to make a starter product.

Make it cheaper. Make it brighter. Make it stronger. Remove the fragile parts. Simplify the controls. Put a familiar character on the box. Lower the age label.

Those choices can make a better toy. They do not automatically create continuity.

Continuity means that what the child learns, owns and builds can remain useful. The track does not have to become waste when the child becomes more capable. The first module does not have to be discarded when the family wants a larger railway. The early language of curves, connections, signals, landscapes and stations

should become a foundation rather than a temporary imitation of the real thing.

This is harder than producing a beginner set because the problem is not located inside one box. It sits between product categories, knowledge levels, physical scales, budgets and generations.

It also sits inside the materials.

Fine-scale realism depends on small tolerances, thin details, precise couplings and parts that reward careful handling. A track piece that survives being pulled apart by young hands may need thicker geometry, looser interfaces or more expensive engineering. A locomotive designed to survive a fall is not simply the same locomotive with a friendlier colour. Robustness and precision are not moral positions. They are partly competing physical requirements.

A bridge cannot wish that conflict away. It has to decide where robustness matters first, where precision can arrive later, and which interfaces must remain compatible so that early play is not a dead end.

The conflict explains why the bridge is hard to build. It does not absolve the hobby of designing an entrance through it.

The child needs something robust enough to touch. The hobbyist wants something precise enough to trust. The parent needs to know what can actually be built, what the family already owns, what is missing, and whether the next step costs ten kroner or a thousand.

Most systems choose one of these readers.

A bridge has to read all three.

Begin with what the family already has

A bridge fails if every design choice becomes a purchase recommendation.

The better order begins with what the family already has.

These are our tracks. These are our trains. This is the board that fits in the room. This is the time we have on Saturday. What can we make from that?

Only after that question has been answered should the system describe what is missing. Even then, a missing list does not have to mean a purchase. It can mean use a shorter plan, make a landscape piece instead, build the module base, repair something, substitute a material, or save the larger idea for another time.

The child should be allowed to own the fantasy without being made responsible for the economy. The parent can hold the budget without becoming the person who only says no.

That is a design problem, not a parental-control setting.

The digital layer should end at the table

Adults often speak about children and screens as if the screen itself were the whole question.

It is not.

A bad physical system does not become good because the interface is made of wood. A useful digital system does not become harmful because it contains a screen. The more important question is what the interface trains the child to do next.

Does the screen ask for more screen?

Or does it produce a physical next step?

For a model railway, a digital plan could end with something concrete: put this curve here, move the station twelve centimetres, use the four straight pieces already in the box, ask an adult to cut the baseboard, test the train before building the tunnel, make three trees while waiting for the missing turnout.

The screen would not be the railway. It would be a translation layer between imagination and matter.

That distinction matters beyond model trains. Digital technology is often praised for removing friction, but some friction is the activity. Measuring, choosing, fitting, repairing, painting, waiting, failing and trying again are not defects around the hobby. They are the hobby.

The digital layer should remove the confusion that prevents the work. It should not remove the work.

The hobby is larger than the object

Model railways are often described through the things that can be bought: locomotives, wagons, track, controllers, scenery and buildings.

But the hobby is not contained in those objects.

It is also geometry, electrical understanding, landscape observation, local history, patience, repair, woodworking, painting, storytelling and the quiet cooperation required to keep a complicated physical world running. It can teach a child that systems have interfaces, that tolerances matter, that a plan can be revised, and that something slow can remain interesting because it is becoming more real.

The child is offered a toy until the toy feels too simple. The serious system remains expensive, fragile or difficult to understand. The gap between those experiences is then described as a demographic fact: young people moved on.

Some did. But when there is no next piece that still belongs to the same world, discontinuity begins to look like disinterest.

Not every child will love model trains. Many will not. A bridge is not a guarantee that people will cross it.

It makes crossing possible.

What the bridge has to prove

I have started sketching a working standard for this problem. For now, I call it SRS.

There is no finished app, no engine, no shop, no product line and no published standard. The first test is smaller: given a module, a simple track plan and the pieces a family already owns, can the system explain what can be built and what is missing?

A truthful system has to be able to say:

Out of bounds.

Two endpoints do not meet.

Five curves required, three owned.

Those lines are where the translation layer becomes physical. A child's picture of a forest railway becomes a family-scale decision: build it now, change the plan, use another material, or wait.

The child chooses the world. The system translates the constraints. The family decides what becomes real.

SRS may fail that test. Families may not want it. Children may enjoy designing but not building. The material compromise may become too expensive or the geometry too complicated. Existing clubs and products may already solve more of the problem than I have seen.

That is the one useful reason to begin with a standard and a test instead of a launch.

A hobby does not inherit itself

Hobbies survive because knowledge passes between people.

That passage is not automatic. A club can preserve standards for decades and still fail to make the first hour welcoming. A manufacturer can produce extraordinary models and still have no answer for the child who wants to touch. A parent can love the idea of building something together and still be defeated by incompatible parts, uncertain geometry and the feeling that every mistake will be expensive.

The answer is not to make the adult hobby childish. It is to make the path into it continuous.

That path can begin with stronger pieces, clearer interfaces, smaller modules and digital help. It can continue through clubs, shops, museums and experienced builders who already know how much of the hobby cannot be placed inside an app. It should let detail arrive gradually without treating early roughness as failure.

A hobby does not inherit itself.

— Dennis Hedegreen, still checking

RELATION MEMORY

NEARBY [The Hand That Knows How to Knock on the Melon](#) · Both pieces protect embodied knowledge from being flattened into a digital substitute.

NEARBY [The Tool Learned to Say Not Yet](#) · Both treat truthful constraint messages as part of a useful system rather than as product failure.

