

The Limiting Influence of Gender-typed Toys

What To Do

by Lucy Rimalower, MA



"Barbies are for girls!" is a declaration heard on playgrounds and playdates across the country and across generations. But is our rigid adherence to gender roles in chil-

dren's toys impacting their development?

Gender stereotypes in children's toys and books span both explicit and implicit messages about traditional gender roles. Toys for girls often promote traits such as attractiveness or even sexualization, as with Barbie and other fashion dolls, or domesticity, as with play kitchen and tea sets. Traditionally, male traits such as competition and aggression are reflected in race cars and video games. Seeing conventional gender roles represented in toys is not inherently detrimental to child development, but it may be limiting.

Children make sense of their identities and the world by sorting things into categories (for example, naming themselves as members of groups: boy, brown hair, Smith Family, etc.). Beginning in toddlerhood, children construct their identities by defining themselves by their gender and they separate themselves from children not of their gender. However, many parents assign gender-typed envi-

ronments and influences from the moment they learn "It's a boy!"

From all blue or pink nurseries, we begin to align our expectations with those dictated by gender norms. As your child identifies with their own gender, they become less likely to choose toys labeled for the other sex, and they expect other boys and girls to follow suit, according to one study (Martin et. al., 1995). This becomes problematic when toys are designed to support gender-limiting behaviors. If boys are only steered towards toys that promote competition and aggression,

"...boys and girls have the right to play with all toys."

neglecting traditionally feminine traits such as nurturance, they may be missing out on critical emotional development, and likewise for girls, who

miss the opportunity to develop the skills associated with boys' toys such as understanding spatial relationships. According to one study, gender-typed toys are not as conducive to optimal development as neutral or moderately gender-typed toys such as building blocks or art kits (Blakemore & Centers, 2005).

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Further, another study pointed out that marginalizing children to gender-typed toys may restrict how they understand their place in the world, limiting them to roles typically associated with their gender, and narrowing their sense of opportunity as they become men and women (Freeman, 2007). In addition, rigid resistance to children's gender nonconformity may also reflect implicit and explicit homophobia in our culture. Allowing children access to age-appropriate toys for both genders may promote more expansive emotional development. Essentially, allowing children to embrace pink, blue and everything in between provides them with a fuller range of life's possibilities emotionally and developmentally.

What Parents Can Do?

Don't stigmatize! If your child is choosing toys typically assigned to children of a different gender, do not criticize him/her. Shaming your child may leave him/her feeling confused and anxious, and may limit his/her choices out in the world.

Encourage a dialogue about equality! Help your children understand that boys and girls have the right

to play with all toys. This will set a precedent for fairness that will impact your children from the time they enter school until they join the workforce.

Make a No-Teasing Policy! Do not allow teasing in your home and establish that teasing about toys or other gender-typed activities is not acceptable at school or anywhere else.

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