Girl toys and boy toys: Breaking the stereotypes

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She/her
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Gender stereotypes and children

- Adults assume babies’ gender based on their cries
- Adults treat newborns and toddlers differently based on the clothes they are wearing
- Children start showing gender stereotyped behaviour as young as 2 years old
- By age 9 children recognise they are treated differently based on gender by adults and other children
## Harmful effects of gender stereotypes

### Year 3 students' career aspirations

Responses from 176 girls and 156 boys, across 14 schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 3 Girls' top 10 jobs</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Year 3 Boys' top 10 jobs</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sports person</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with animals/Vet</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Police/defence</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports person</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical (doctor)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>IT (YouTube)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled/retail</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Unskilled/retail</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade (e.g. hairdresser)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional (insurance assessor, lawyer, architect, politics)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Medical (doctor)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical (nurse)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professional (architect, politics, lawyer)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table: The Conversation • Source: Author provided • Embed • Created with Datawrapper*
Harmful effects of gender stereotypes

- Children who believe more gender stereotypes have lower wellbeing and more symptoms of depression
- Emphasis on beauty in young girls leads to eating disorders
- Emphasis on being a ‘breadwinner’ and not talking about emotions contributes to male suicides
- Gender-stereotyped behaviour in early childhood is linked to physical aggression in adolescence, dating abuse and sexual harassment by young men, and experiencing or perpetrating domestic abuse
- Strict attitudes around gender stereotypes have negative effects on trans, genderfluid, non-binary and gender non-conforming people, leading to higher rates of mental illness, self-harm and suicide
Gender stereotyping starts early and causes lasting harm
Toys reinforce gender stereotypes

• Children show gendered preferences in which toys they play with and this increases with age

• Not interacting with a variety of toys hinders learning skills like spatial reasoning for girls or empathy for boys

• Girls will play with ‘boy’ toys and read books with male protagonists but not vice versa

A 2017 survey shows a greater share of adults think it’s okay for girls to do ‘boy things’ than for boys to do ‘girl things.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young boys</th>
<th>Young girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All adults</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: The Pew Research Center
Gendered toy advertising

1905  No gendered toy adverts

1935  Dolls and ‘home-maker’ toys advertised for girls but few toys are advertised for boys

1955  Most children’s toys are gendered but fewer toddler toys are

1975  Less than 2% of toys are advertised in a gendered way

1995  About 50% of toys are advertised in a gendered way
Gendered toy advertising

• 2012: all toys sold on the Disney Store’s website were categorised by gender, though some appeared on both lists
• 2017: in ads, boys were nearly four times more likely to be shown playing with cars and girls seven times as likely to be shown in nurturing or caring play
• 2020: explicit segregation is lower but implicit segregation by colour and by toy type is still frequent in stores
• 2021: Lego committed to removing all gender stereotypes from its products
Making changes

- Don’t rely on ‘lazy’ stereotypes – think about what the individual child will enjoy
- Give children all the options for toys, clothes and self expression
  - Bans can backfire
- It’s not just about the toys, it’s how they are played with
  - Encourage mixed gender friendship and play
- Provide toys and media that counter stereotypes
  - Talk about stereotypes with kids when you encounter them
- Get involved in campaigns
- Make sure ‘gender neutrality’ isn’t just male-coded
Discussion time
Further reading

- Unlimited Potential | The Fawcett Society
- What the Research Says: Gender-Typed Toys | NAEYC
- The “Gendering” of Our Kids’ Toys, and What We Can Do About It | New Dream
- How toys became gendered – and why it’ll take more than a gender-neutral doll to change how boys perceive femininity | The Conversation
- Lego to remove gender bias from its toys after findings of child survey | The Guardian
- Let Toys Be Toys