Girl toys and boy toys: Breaking the stereotypes

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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

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Harmful effects of gender stereotypes

Year 3 students' career aspirations

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

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

Table: The Conversation · Source: Author provided · Embed · Created with Datawrapper

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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."
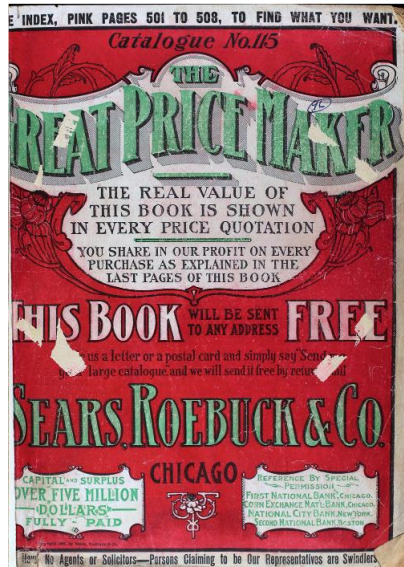
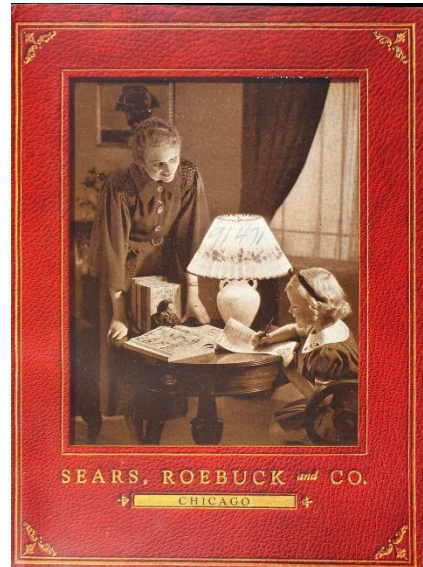□ Young boys ■ Young girls

All adults	64%	
	76%	
Men	56%	
	72%	
Women	71%	
	80%	

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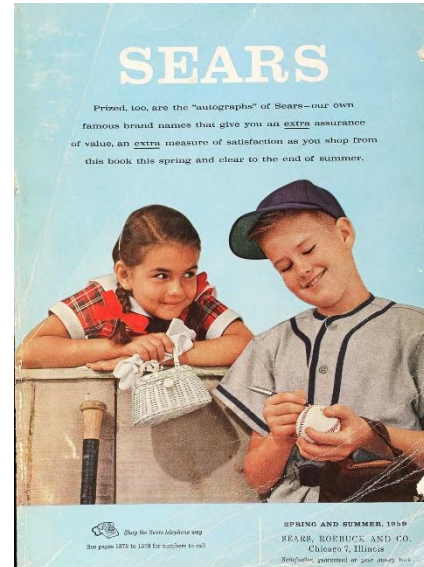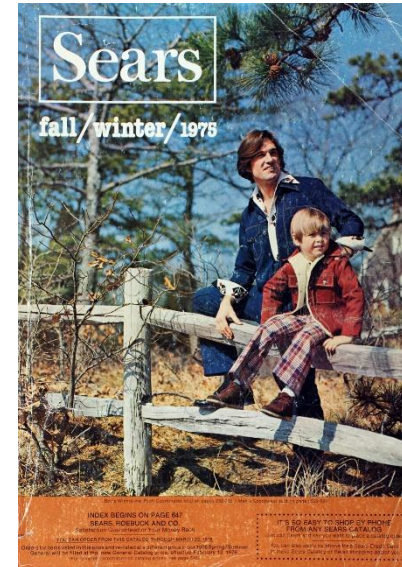
Gendered toy advertising
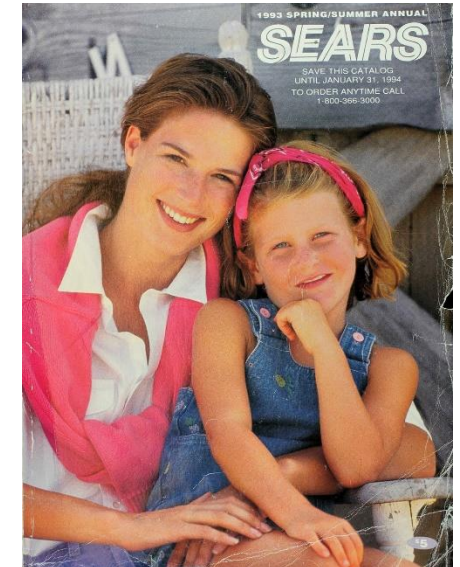

1905
No gendered toy adverts

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

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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