

Thank you for joining me. My name is Elizabeth Wynn, I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute and today I'm going to be talking about gender stereotypes and toys. I'm going to talk a bit about gender stereotypes and the harm they can have, then how toys play into this before finally moving on to what individuals can do to make changes in this area. Please be aware that I'm going to be very briefly touching on issues of mental illness, including self-harm and suicide, and domestic violence.

I expect everyone in this audience is familiar with gender stereotypes, but I'm just going to start by going over a couple of examples, some information around this. Gender stereotyping starts very early. Adults will make assumptions about babies' gender based on their cries, saying that babies with higher pitched cries are girls and babies with lower pitched cries are boys. This is despite the fact that there is no significant difference in the pitch of children's voices until they reach puberty.

And adults will treat newborns and toddlers differently based on the clothes that they're wearing, making assumptions about their gender based on that, because we do seem to love advertising children's gender through their clothing. The BBC did an interesting programme on this a couple of years ago that you might have seen where they had toddlers dressed in clothing of the 'opposite' gender, and then had adults who didn't know them go and interact with them. And the adults made assumptions based on how the children were dressed and that affected how they interacted with them, what personality traits they ascribed to them, and what toys they offered them to play with.

Children absorb this information and start acting on it. Children will show gender stereotyped behaviour as young as two years old, reinforcing the way that they are treated by adults. And by at least age nine, children recognise that they're treated differently based on gender by adults and by other children. They might have unconsciously been acting on this for years, but they also become consciously aware of it as young children.

So gender stereotyping starts early and does have harmful and long lasting effects. The first I'm going to talk about is on career aspirations. This is the results of a study done on Year 3 students, so that's children around ages seven and eight, and they asked them what they wanted to be when they grow up and already at that age there were strong gender differences in children's career aspirations.

The harmful effects of this are twofold. First of all, it limits children's potential. You could have a girl who could potentially be a brilliant scientist, but because she doesn't see that as a job she could do, she never goes into that field. And vice versa. You might have a boy who would be a fantastic teacher, but doesn't see that as a male role. The other harmful effect of this is on potential earnings later in life. If you went to my talk on gender pay gaps, equal pay and all sorts of pay gaps, (which was two months ago and the recording of that is available if you want to catch up on it), one of the things I talked about as being a driver of gender pay gaps is occupational segregation. Careers which are female dominated become less valued. That is valued by society less, and also financially less valued. So this sort of occupational segregation, which children are already exhibiting at a young age, can have really negative impacts on their future earnings.

I have a personal anecdote about this. I was a Brownie leader for several years, that's girls ages 7 to 10. And they all knew the 'right' answer when we talked about careers. They knew that there was no such thing as a girl job or a boy job, they knew that anyone could do any job. But when we asked them what careers they were personally interested in, the top answers were teacher, vet and artist. So even though consciously they knew that no such thing as boy jobs and girl jobs, subconsciously, they clearly already absorbed messages about what jobs were more appropriate for boys and girls.

Moving on to other harmful effects of gender stereotypes, it can have a real negative impact on mental health and wellbeing. Children ages 10 to 14, who believed more strongly in gender stereotypes have lower wellbeing and more symptoms of depression, even that early on. Emphasis on beauty in young girls, and very young girls will report that they are, that they feel an emphasis to be beautiful, that emphasis leads to eating disorders. Anorexia is the most deadly mental illness, and it's much more prevalent in women and girls than boys and men. Emphasis on being a breadwinner, and not talking about emotions contributes to male suicides. Losing a job is a risk factor in male suicides but not female ones.

Another harmful effect is the likelihood of experiencing or participating in violence. Gender stereotype 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.

Boys and girls aren't the only ones affected by gender stereotypes. I'm talking in a very gendered way throughout this, talking about a gender binary, because most studies are done along those lines. And when we talk about gender roles, it really is binary gender roles and gender stereotypes. So strict attitudes around gender stereotypes have very negative effects on people who don't fit that binary. So, trans, genderfluid, non-binary and gender non-conforming people experience negative effects which leads to higher rates of mental illness, self-harm, and suicide.

To sum up, gender stereotyping starts early and causes real lasting harm. Children receive many messages around gender stereotyping. And as I said, they absorb and reflect those attitudes. Toys are just one part of it, and the reason I'm talking about toys right now is because we're in the run up to the holiday period. A lot of people are going to be buying toys for children for Christmas or other holidays. So how do toys play into this?

Toys reinforce gender stereotypes. Children will show gender preferences in which toys they play with and this only increases with age. I don't think this is due to a natural or inborn preference or inclination. It's a self-reinforcing cycle. As I said earlier, adults will make assumptions about children based on their gender, based on their perceived gender, and offer them different toys to play with. If a young girl is often given dolls to play with, and she associates them with fun and has favourite dolls, it's going to reinforce, she's going to want to continue playing with dolls. And the same with boys and diggers or racecars, something like that.

This actually has direct impact on children from the get go. Not interacting with a variety of toys can hinder learning skills, like spatial reasoning for girls if they don't get a chance to play with Lego and Scalectrics, and developing empathy for boys if they don't engage in nurturing play.

One thing to note around gender stereotypes and toys is that girls will play with boy toys and read books with male protagonist, but not vice versa. And this reflects adults attitudes towards this. Most adults, and especially men, feel that it's more acceptable for girls to do boy things than for boys to do girl things. And boys do report facing more negative feedback, being sort of punished socially, if you will, for breaking gender stereotypes than girls do.

How did toys become gendered in the first place? The answer has a lot to do with advertising, which is a driver and a reflection of gender stereotypes. The sociologist Elizabeth Sweet did a study on the Sears catalogue. Sears is an American company which has existed for almost 150 years and they annually put out catalogues. They sell all sorts of things, including toys.

In 1905, she found that there were no gendered toy adverts in the catalogue. And in fact, there were very few toys at all. By 1935, dolls and homemaker style toys, so like kitchen sets, were advertised for girls, but very few toys were advertised as being only for boys.

By 1955, there had been a major shift and most children's toys were advertised in a gendered way. But not so many toddler toys were. As I was saying about advertising being a reflection of societal attitudes, this is in the post war period, post World War Two. During World War Two, with so many men being soldiers, many women went into jobs that they hadn't before and after the war ended, and men came back to work, there was a much stronger drive, a sort of bounce back, to very traditional gender roles.

There was also the economy improved, and so families were much more affluent. And one thing advertisers and toy and clothing companies realised was that if they could convince families, these newly affluent families, that boys and girls needed separate toys and clothes and bedding and you know things in their room, then they would be able to sell twice as much stuff if it was no longer okay for you to give your daughter's hand-me-downs to your new baby boy. It's also around this time, post-war, that the association of pink for girls and blue for boys really became fixed in the public consciousness.

By 1975 less than 2% of toys were advertised in a gendered way. And this is because in this period in America, also in the UK, second wave feminism was at its height and the Women's Liberation Movement. There was an emphasis on rebelling against traditional gender roles, and this was reflected in toy advertising at the time. By 1995, we're back to about 50% of toys being advertised in a gendered way.

Looking at some more modern examples, in 2012, all toys which were sold on the Disney Stores website were categorised by gender, even though there were some toys which appeared on both lists. This is no longer the case: Disney no longer has boys and girls sections on its website, I don't believe.

There is a campaign called Let Toys Be Toys, and this is their entire thing, get rid of gendering of toys, and they monitor this sort of thing. They found that in 2017, in adverts, 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.

The Fawcett Society recently put out a very comprehensive report called Unlimited Potential, which was all about gender stereotypes and children, and one aspect they looked at was toys. And they found that in major retailers, stores on the high street, explicit segregation of toys is lower but implicit segregation by colour and by toy type was still frequent in stores.

A 2021 study by the Geena Davis Institute found that three quarters of parents would encourage their boys to play with Lego, but only one quarter would encourage their daughters to play with Lego. And as a result of this, just last month, Lego has committed to removing all gender stereotypes from its products.

So we're seeing some positive steps in removing gender stereotypes in toys and toy advertising. But this is an image from 2020, from Let Toys Be Toys, and you can see that there is still a lot of pink and blue stuff out there, a lot of things advertised just to boys or just to girls.

It's interesting to note, I think, that a lot of this is still driven by capitalism. The Fawcett Society study said that about half of parents prefer to buy toys which were not advertised in gendered ways. And I'm sure one of Lego's motivations in removing gender stereotypes was because they understood

that if only 25% of girls are being bought Legos, there's a lot of room for improvement in that area for them. So no matter the reasons behind it, it's still positive to see a reduction in gendered stereotypes in toys.

Finally, I'm going to move on to making changes in this area. What individuals can do.

First things first, if you are buying toys for children for Christmas, for their birthdays, don't rely on lazy stereotypes. Don't think, 'well, this child is a girl, so of course, they're going to want that pink thing'. Think about what the individual will enjoy, what their interests are.

Give children all the options for toys, clothes, and self-expression. Don't direct them to the pink bit of the store or the blue bit of the store.

It's also important to note that bans can backfire. As a personal example, I wasn't allowed to have Barbies when I was a kid, my mum thought they promoted an unrealistic body image. And I agree with her now, but at the time, I loved going over to my neighbour's house and playing with all the Barbies that she had. So what is forbidden has an added appeal, so bans can backfire.

It's not just about what the toys are, it's how they're played with. So even stereotypically boy toys or girl toys can be played with in a way which doesn't conform to gender stereotypes. So a little boy could have a set of diggers but if he says, 'well, this is the daddy digger, and this is the baby digger and the daddy's gonna help the baby', that's an example of nurturing play.

On this topic, it's important to encourage mixed gender friendship and play. By the time they reach school age, children already self-segregate by gender. It's very clear to see this on the playground. And that self-segregation leads to that sort of occupational segregation, which as I mentioned earlier, perpetuates gender pay gaps, as an example.

Provide toys and media that counter stereotypes. Even if you are the primary caregiver for a child, you're only going to be one portion of the messages they receive. And as I said earlier, by as early as age two children have already absorbed gender stereotypes that they are reflecting in their behaviour. So I think don't be subtle about this as well. Be explicit about toys and media that counter stereotypes, and talk about stereotypes with children when you encounter them.

Get involved in campaigns. I mentioned Let Toys Be Toys, this is their entire thing. The Fawcett Society report on Unlimited Potential had many suggestions in it. One example around toys is that they are calling for changes to advertising standards, so that's another campaign you could get involved in.

One final thing I want to talk about is make sure that gender neutrality isn't just male coded. It's very easy to say, 'oh, of course, you know, any toy, any colour is appropriate for any gender'. And I think a lot of people are very happy giving the, you know, blue digger to a little girl. How many people are really comfortable giving, you know, the pink ironing board to a little boy? As I mentioned earlier, it's a lot more socially acceptable, among adults and also children, for girls to break gender stereotypes than for boys to break gender stereotypes. And if we're only going one way with breaking gender stereotypes and challenging them, then what we're unconsciously doing is suggesting that feminine coded things are lesser than male coded things. And that isn't an avenue that we want to go down. We need to promote traditionally feminine coded things to children of all genders, to recognise that there is nothing lesser or wrong with liking pink, liking nurturing, liking sewing, anything like that.

So those are my suggestions on how individuals can make changes. And these aren't limited to being a parent or primary caregiver. I think anyone who has children in their lives in whatever capacity can

get involved in these activities. That's everything I wanted to talk about today so thank you very much for joining me.