

Family Matters: Toying with the idea of children's toys

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By **Chloe Learey**

Playing is one of the main ways children learn about how the world works, including social norms like what it means to be a girl or boy, as well as how we treat people who are different than us. These are lessons that are learned very early and can broaden or limit not only the possibilities children imagine for themselves but the very skills they develop.

The debate about toys that are for boys or girls is long-running. Perhaps you remember the song, "William Wants a Doll," from Marlo Thomas' 1972 children's entertainment project, "Free to Be You and Me," which was based on a book by Charlotte Zolotow. Many well-meaning parents strictly enforce gender-typical toys (e.g. "no dolls for my son") or do the opposite (e.g. "my daughter will not get a Barbie"). The problem in either scenario is limiting the toys. If we want our children to be open and accepting, have good relationships with all kinds of people, and develop a depth of both social and academic skills, allowing them to play with a broad range of toys is important.

A New York Times article, "Breaking Gender Stereotypes in the Toy Box" (Feb. 5), highlighted research that demonstrates how a child thinks about gender is not limited by the toys to which they are exposed. Images of others playing with toys shapes their views of what is OK to play with as well as who they want for playmates. For example, seeing and hearing about a girl who likes playing with cars did not necessarily make girls want to play with cars. However, they were more likely to think it was OK for girls to play with toys typically thought of as "masculine" and more likely to be open to playing with boys themselves. It is important to avoid assigning toys to a gender in order to help children see an expansive world of possibilities that is not limited by what and who they are allowed to play with.

Additionally, limiting toys can narrow the scope of a child's world in the skills they develop. For instance, traditional masculine toys like blocks and puzzles help develop spatial and visual skills, while more traditional feminine toys encourage social and communication skills. This can ultimately impact educational goals, academic ability, career choice, and ultimate success. Well-rounded skill development is important for all of our children.

Allowing children to play with a diversity of toys and people is critical.

The day after the Times article was published, CNN published a story, "More US teens are rejecting boy or girl gender identities, a study finds." It is interesting to think about what toys and type of play these teens were exposed to when they were developing their ideas of gender identity between the ages 2 and 3 years old. Whether or not you appreciate the idea of gender fluidity, hopefully the fact that we have young people who can think critically about our social constructs is heartening. The skills for curiosity and engagement, for critical thinking and self-awareness, for empathy and understanding are all developed in these earliest years of a child's life. The toys they play with shape that development. If we limit their experiences, we undermine their chances of being the best person they can be.

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