Playland

How gender-specific toys can negatively impact a child’s development

Some psychologists are applauding Target’s decision to remove gender-based labels in children’s bedding and toy aisles, but say more changes are needed

BY ALICE ROBB  08.12.15
A YOUNG GIRL PAINTS THE FACE OF A DOLL. (REUTERS/MICHAELA REHLE)

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, while women in the U.S. were closing the gap in education and employment and breaking into the top ranks of politics and industry, one sector was moving in the wrong direction. “The world of toys looks a lot more like 1952 than 2012,” Elizabeth Sweet, a sociologist studying children and gender inequality at the University of California, Davis wrote in a New York Times Op-Ed a few years ago. In the 1970s, according to Sweet, few children’s toys were targeted specifically at boys or girls; nearly 70 percent of toys had no gender-specific labels at all. Many toy ads seemed to deliberately flout gender stereotypes—depicting girls driving toy cars and airplanes and boys playing with kitchen sets and dolls.

By the mid-1990s, however, gendered advertising had returned to
1950s-levels, and it continued to grow in the 2000s. Critics blame the backlash on second-wave feminism, the nostalgia of gift-giving grandparents and shrewd marketers, who realized they could convince parents of boys and girls to buy two versions of the same product.

In the past couple of years, the tide has finally begun to turn. WalMart and Toys R Us have recently agreed to tone down their gender-specific children's marketing strategies, and in a blog post on the company's website last week, Target announced plans to get rid of gender-based labeling in the children's bedding and toy aisles: they'll phase out explicit references to gender as well as the use of pink and blue colored paper on the shelves. "As guests have pointed out, in some departments like Toys, Home or Entertainment, suggesting products by gender is unnecessary," Target said in the post. "We heard you, and we agree."

Pressure from customers, as well as the example set by its competitors, seems to have played a role in the retail giant's decision. In June, an Ohio woman tweeted a picture of a sign advertising "Building sets" and "Girls' building sets," with the caption, "Don't do this, @target"; it's been retweeted more than 3,000 times.

Some psychologists are applauding Target's move. "The decision to remove gender labels is a big first step in reducing gender stereotypes," says Lisa Dinella, a psychologist at Monmouth University. Several studies show that children prefer toys they believe are intended for their gender. Just last year, a paper co-authored by Dinella suggested that color can also be used to manipulate children's perceptions of what toys they should play with; Dinella and her co-authors, Erica Weisgram and Megan Fulcher,
showed that girls were much more likely to opt for traditionally male toys, like airplanes, if they were pink.

Girls' preference for pink is learned, not innate; cognitive research suggests that all babies actually prefer blue. (According to Jo Paoletti, author of *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America*, the association of boys with blue and girls with pink dates to the 1940s.) In 2011, Vanessa LoBue and Judy DeLoache undertook a study of a group of boys and girls between the ages of seven months and five years. Each child was tasked with choosing between two similar objects, one of which was pink, the other blue. It was around the age of two that girls began to select the pink toy more often than the blue one; at two and a half, the preference for pink became even more pronounced. Boys developed an aversion to the pink toy along the same timeline.

The impact of sex-specific toy choice has implications for children's learning and attitudes far beyond the playground. "Play with masculine toys is associated with large motor development and spatial skills and play with feminine toys is associated with fine motor development, language development and social skills," says Megan Fulcher, associate professor of psychology at Washington and Lee University.

"Children may then extend this perspective from toys and clothes into future roles, occupations, and characteristics," she adds. In 2008, she was part of a team of researchers who found that children with gender-stereotyped decorations in their bedrooms also held more stereotypical attitudes towards boys and girls.

Research suggests, too, that kids pay more attention to — and form more lasting memories of — the toys they believe are meant for their
gender. In 1986, psychologist Marilyn Bradbard presented children ages four to nine with unfamiliar toys in gender-specific boxes, and gave them six minutes to play. One week later, she and her team administered memory tests and found that the girls had more detailed recollections of the objects in the “girly” box and vice versa.

“Organizing merchandise by gender also acts as a barrier that prevents children from exploring the wide array of toys and activities available,” says Dinella. “Target is on the right track, but we still need marketing campaigns to stop gender labeling their products via color.”

FERNANDO SAYS:
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I dont think it has anything to do w/ toys! There are plenty of girls that love pink, makeup, tutus, and flowers. There are plenty of boys that love football, guns, blue, and playing with gross stuff. The problem is adults – if a boy wants to play with a “girls” toy or vice versa let them! Its a toy and plenty of market research has gone into making that toy be wanted and some kids want to play with regardless of who is actually suppose to be playing with it. A boy playing w/ dolls means nothing other than him liking that toy, means nothing if a girl wants to play with action figures or guns, just means you probably have a healthy active child.