* Toys-R-Us and Gender Misguidance *

**Preface**

Toys come in all shapes and sizes, and although they seem like harmless playthings, they are subconsciously shaping children’s thoughts and actions as they grow. Parents shower their newborns with specific colors according to their gender without even realizing that it is just a stigma placed upon us by society. In grade school when my classmates and I were asked what we wanted to be when we grew up, answers ranged from doctors, veterinarians, school teachers and even garbage men. Each chosen profession usually had a gender-specified stigma, being further proven by the names policemen or firemen. The thought never really crossed my mind until I was reading in my Sociology 101 book about how toys influence gender decisions and even shape the way we think and grow as children into adulthood. It is not a hidden fact. As you wander down the toy aisles, you will see they are divided distinctively to appeal to either sex.

Puzzles, science sets and action figures fill the section for boys as baby dolls, kitchen sets and bleach-blonde Barbies overflow the pink and fluffy aisles for girls.

As a little girl, I always played with dolls and nestled them into their pink-laden bassinettes and ruffled cribs. I did this without knowing that it was the “socially accepted” thing to do. I prepared fake meals in my play kitchen and had tea parties with my teddy bears. But I also loved to climb trees, play in mud puddles and build forts. I was never assumed to be a tomboy, but these typical rough and tough activities are generally thought to be enjoyed only by little boys. Growing up, I always wondered why
items made for girls were usually curvy and covered in glitter and rhinestones. When my
girl cousins and I would play dress-up in my old dance costumes why would my other
boy cousins separate and play with their GI Joes and crash our party.

Later in life, I always thought it was interesting how it was not acceptable for girls
and boys to play with toys meant for the opposite gender. Why? When I chose this topic
for my paper, I wanted to discover the statistics concerning gender confusion and how
much toys really do influence who we grow up to be later in life. Girls are given baby
dolls to care and nurture, which could instill a subservient role later in life. While boys
are encouraged to play war and take on leadership positions while playing. With this
paper, I could even touch upon the homosexual aspect of playing with toys, but I did not
want to get too much into detail, since I do not know how much research there is out
there about that subject. Some children are naturally inclined to play with certain toys
than with others, but it I believe it is society that makes the children feel ashamed or
wrong. Boys enjoy eating just as much as girls do, so why can’t they whip up some fake
eggs and bacon in their sister’s pink kitchen set? I also would like to know what toy
companies are doing to shorten the gender gap with toys manufactured to appeal to both
sexes.

Through my research thus far, I have discovered that puzzles and science games
are usually marketed toward boys with their colors, shapes and objectives. Puzzles
strengthen hand-eye coordination that is needed for many things in life and enhance
problem-solving skills needed in school. I would like to find out why such toys are not
marketed more widely to girls. Why should boys get the upper-hand of developing
necessary skills? I have already discovered a few companies, such as Mattel, that are
starting to design toys with artsy, curvy packaging and warm colors that allow girls to build mini houses, picture frames and every jewelry that can reinforce logical thinking.

Annotated Bibliography

Cowley, Geoffrey. "Toys influencing the widening gender gap."

*Newsweek, WVU Libraries Database. 17 Nov 2002*

An article in *Newsweek* hit my interest when it went into great detail about multiple research trials they have performed with children and the toys they play with. This was a hands-on investigation headed by Kathleen Alfano, manager of the Child Research Department at Fisher-Price. It observed the natural actions of children playing together in an unsupervised playroom. I thought this article was valuable, because it did not assume the outcomes of the toys on children, but it was a first-hand account of the reactions of the children themselves, not a writer’s opinion on the matter. The piece brought up the point that some children will play with certain gender-specific toys until a parent shows concern, and then they reject the toy. The most interesting thing I read was a research project that investigated 7-year-olds testing nail polish with both genders involved. The observers left the polish out, and after the girls were finished fancying up their nails, the boys came over and started painting their own nails. They even noticed that they were more careful when applying the polish and had took more patience and care when letting them dry compared to the girls.

I will definitely be able to apply a lot of information in this article to my final paper, because it relies on actual experiments to back up their theories. Boys are thought to be rough and tough and not take interest in girly activities. This research study proved that if left alone boys will actually take longer to paint their nails and will allow a more patient drying process as compared to girls. This backs up my point, again, that a lot of the shame and guilt is placed upon either gender by what their parents say about them playing with certain toys.

Dunavan, Matthew. "Sex roles stem from biological, historical factors."

*University Daily Kansan via U-Wire, WVU Libraries Database. 11 April 2003*

This article takes a biological approach to the gender issues in toys. He believes that we are all born with certain factors that make us choose toys based on our human nature, not necessarily culture and stigmas presented to us at young ages. He conducted an experiment with the help of the famous toy company, Hasbro. They allowed young children to interact with a playhouse that was generally marketed to both boys and girls,
but found that either gender did not play with the toy the same way. They found that the
girls dressed and cared for the dolls. The young boys catapulted the toy furniture from the
roof of the playhouse. The physical activity of the young boys’ reaction is a natural part
of what most young men are constructed to do: engage in physical life or death
competition against opponents. “Our different brains were formed by the same
evolutionary forces that shaped our different bodies, and it does not imply any superiority
or inferiority to a half of the species to hold this position.” The article goes into more
detail explaining why women and men react differently to certain events.

I think this piece of writing will provide me with a different biological view of
research than some of the other resources I chose. It seems that it is a very reliable
source, because it examines the research done by Hasbro, which is a very well-known toy
company. This also goes briefly into the fact that some toys are actually marketed to both
sexes but ultimately it’s up to the parents to decide if they want to buy it for their child or
not. For example, a fake fire hydrant with water pumper was marketed for both boys and
girls but parents were only buying and giving it to their sons. Parents’ attitudes have a lot
to do with what toys children play with, and this article explains that.

Gould, Lois. “X: A Fabulous Child’s Story.” Women Images and Realities A
Multicultural Anthology. Kesselman, Amy, McNair Lilly D., and

The story begins by briefly outlining an experiment concerning a baby that
wouldn’t be revealed to the world as either a boy or a girl but as an X. Only the parents
would know what gender the baby was so this way, friends and relatives couldn’t say,
“look at her cute dimples!” or “look at his husky biceps!” (82). The parents received an
instruction manual that sketched out what to do about X’s clothing, toys, even starting
school and preparing for Other Children’s reactions to X. Friends and relatives were
quickly angered when X’s parents wouldn’t release the sex of the baby. Aunts and uncles
that had sent either football helmets or lacy rompers soon cut off contact with X’s
parents. The parents had to be careful when playing with X. They knew that if they
overly bounced it and saying how strong and active it was, they’d be treating it more like
a boy. If they cuddled and kissed it and told it how sweet and dainty it was, they’d be
treating it more like a girl than an X (83). X’s parents bought it equal amounts of pink
and blue clothes as to expose it to both kinds of clothing. Growing up, X was introduced
to sports and dolls as well as countless other typical boy/girl activities. When school
started for little X, it wore a pair of red-and-white checked overalls and its hair was just
passed its ears not allowing people to know if X was a boy or a girl. The Other Children
tried for awhile to confuse X into telling them what gender it was but no one could figure
it out. The Children became angry but after awhile wanted to become just like X. The
girls scoffed at their pink dresses and wanted to wear the red and white overalls just like
X. The captain of the football team even pushed around a stroller to be like X. Soon the
parents were in an uproar about the “confusion” that X was causing their children and
soon didn’t allow their children to be around it. The Parents’ Association insisted that X
was a misfit and needed to be psychologically tested. X ended up passing the test and the Psychologist revealed that he was the least mixed-up child he’d ever tested.

This ties into my paper, because it examines how we automatically assume how we should treat a baby based on its gender. Coo-ing and snuggling baby girls and quietly rough-housing little boys. Parents drape their newborn children in pink or blue depending on the sex but don’t think about how this is shaping them later. X played with girls and boys toys and ended up liking both. Its parents never made it feel ashamed if it chose a doll over a football helmet. He liked all and excelled at all activities not just ones meant for specific gender. This backs up my point that if you consistently hand a girl baking sets and Barbie dolls, she could learn to fit into the typical subservient woman mold. This mock “research” could be used to show that if you expose a child to both gender toys, it will sculpt them into a more equal and well-rounded child.

McGinty, Derek. "Excerpt from "20/20" about double standard for boys being caring, loving, and feminine." World News Now, ABC News. WVU Libraries Database. 22 Nov 2001

This was actually a transcript from a World News Now broadcast where they interviewed parents of children that were concerned with the toys they were choosing. Eight-year-old Etienne Melese was taken into a toy store where he could pick out any toy that he wanted. He breezed past all of the swords and trucks and went straight for the dolls. Little Etienne was quoted saying, “They think that a real boy has to be really tough, and you can't do anything that's not tough.” The news show is then interviewing Dr. William Pollack when he says that masculinity is very well-defined in society and parents fear that if their young boy strays from that classification, then he will won’t grow up to be a healthy adult. When Dr. Pollack presents dolls and other girl play toys to a panel of other little boys, they all reply that they “don’t play with that stuff” and one boy even proclaimed that he’d shoot the doll. The piece then goes on to interview parents of their double standard thoughts concerning boys playing with girl toys versus girls playing with toys that are deemed only for boys.

I think this seems like a great source for my paper, because it involves real life interviews as well as children’s’ views. It doesn’t appear to be biased, because it is the direct thoughts of parents of children that don’t like typical toys. It will help me tie in all the research studies on the toys themselves, and this allows me to look into the lives of people that confirm that toys do shape how children act and grow.

This section is from a developmental psychology book on social influences on gender. They emphasize the importance of cultural influence on growing up and how we learn the actions and ideas we carry into adulthood. The only factors that differentiate between infants are the pink and blue items that adorn their bodies and soon afterward, the only differences are hairstyles, clothes and toys that become obvious. Adults then reinforce and reward these differences throughout development. Santrock believes boys and girls learn gender roles through limitation or observational learning by watching what other people say and do (383). The social cognitive theory of gender emphasizes that children learn maleness and femaleness by observing and imitation masculine and feminine behavior, as well as through rewards and punishments for what is considered appropriate and inappropriate gender behavior (383). For example, parents subconsciously teach behavior when they praise how cute their little girl is when she braids and cares for her doll’s hair or scolding their son for crying. Santrock later theorizes that parents do shape the beginnings of their children’s attitudes but they later are more influenced by peers. Therefore, when boys are outside playing war with fake guns, they are learning to become more violent and meet parents expectations of being masculine. Even when starting school children show a clear preference for same-sex peers.

This will be a great source for my paper, because it focuses on the direct studies of the development according to many leading psychologists such as Piaget, Freud and others and professional experiments. This is the book issued for the Developmental Psychology 241 class, so it has some scholarly merit behind it. There are more chapters on gender roles and other related topics as well. I haven’t focused much on the cultural aspect of toys and developing, so this piqued my interest and will influence my research for the future of my paper.


This is an interesting article about a study performed by Ayesha Shajahan when she watched NBC from 8:00am-10:00am when cartoons are being broadcasted and children are the main audience. The article is an examination of the gender influencing components concerning the commercials that are directly marketed towards children. She believed that, “when such gender stereotyped commercials are viewed by the general public, not only do they serve their purpose by raising the demand for the products in the market, but they also affect the viewer's attitude of his or her own sexuality and expected role in the society.” Compiling all of the statistics of the 26 commercials in the two-hour research period, she determined that 40% of commercials dealt with food products, another 40% on toys and the remaining commercials focused primarily on family events and other assorted products. One example of a gender stereotype concerning a food
product was a commercial involving Kraft Cheese singles. A young boy was eating cheese and playing with baseball cards, and the company was giving away baseball cards in every pack of Kraft singles. These cards are thought of to be a hobby for boys, but why wouldn’t they offer something both sexes could enjoy? Both genders can enjoy cheese. Typically, the toy commercials were very gender-based dealing with whatever toy they were marketing. The commercials for game systems such as Nintendo, Sega, etc were primarily focused on the typical boys’ attitude: rough and tough. This stereotypes that boys should be noisy and aggressive. On the other hand, commercials selling dolls or other girl items were presented with pink and purple colors as well as having delicate and soothing voices in the background instilling to a little girl that she should be dainty and caring. The child might blindly follow the stereotype mapped out for them in the commercial and shape their ways to form what they see on television.

I found this article when looking up “gender misguidance” on google.com. Before finding this, I’d never thought to incorporate toy commercials into my research, but I think that it could emphasize the fact that it might not only be the parents who are influencing the children’s ideas about toys. The marketing and advertising agencies play a large role in thrusting gender-stereotypes into children’s minds at a young age. Being exposed to this type of gender-based media, they might be susceptible to shaping ideas of their own abilities and capabilities in the form of gender, not as a person. I think this article will be a great source for my final paper, because it brings up another way that these ideas are getting to young children.