Toy stores are divided distinctly into separate gender-specified aisles filled with puzzles, science sets and action figures for boys, and baby dolls, kitchen sets and bleach-blonde Barbies for girls. It is finally an accepted fact that both men and women are the same, but made and viewed differently only by society’s standards. Toy guns and other violent action figures teach boys from when they are young to be aggressive and take control over the situation, no matter the costs. As they grow up into men, they still hold these actions, which can cause sexist and destructive acts toward women. Are toys really influencing how we grow and develop as different sexes? There is a definite division of the kind of toys each sex is intended to play with. Toy companies directly market certain toys to a specific sex and sometimes discriminate with what they develop and sell. Toys come in all shapes and sizes, and although they seem like harmless playthings, they are subconsciously shaping childrens’ thoughts and actions as they grow. Toy designers and companies need to be thinking of more unisex toys that both genders can strengthen the skills needed for their futures.

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. From birth, babies are usually only distinguished by the obvious difference in their outfits. Girls are usually snuggled within mounds of ruffles and pink with rhinestone headbands, where boys are dressed in navy blue jumpers covered in baseballs or other sports-related
appliqués. If the baby is not sporting a specific shade of blue or pink, the observers looking into the carriage may ask, “How cute, but is it a boy or a girl?” There is an age-old standard when it comes to how to dress your child or what items you give them to play with.

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. Why should boys get the upper-hand of developing necessary skills? Carmen Reid, a research manager for Hasbro Toys, not only has done extensive research, but also has a boy and girl set of twins that she has tried to raise with unisex toys. Reid believes that "boys get toys which require active problem solving, and they are encouraged to play and explore alone. Girls are kept closer to adults and encouraged to be obedient and conform" (Reid). Her study confirms that young boys are given toys that require deep thought processes and that coax hands-on learning, whereas girls are given tea sets and Easy Bake Ovens that nurture the idea that women need to be gentle homemakers. This type of toy marketing instills the idea that their role in life should only be to adhere to men’s commands, cook them dinner, produce babies and clean their house, and not to think about their own needs and wants.

Children change and grow so much every day, it is fair to question if the toys are in at least someway affecting their growth and ideas as they enter adulthood. We as humans feel the need to set two sides to everything. For some reason, women were given the domestic, passive role, perhaps because of their child birthing, and men were given the aggressive, protector role. The issue is not so much how each was decided, but more importantly, the way in which we extend these stereotypes.
In grade school when children are asked what they want to be when they grow up, answers range 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. According to Kathleen Alfano, manager of the Child Research Department at Fisher-Price, “children will play with everything from train sets to miniature vacuum cleaners until the age of three or four; after that they go straight for the stereotypes” (Shapiro). A research session for three-year-olds in the testing Playlab, the most sought-after toy of the morning was the fire pumper, a push toy that squirts real water. Alfano thinks, “It’s a toy for both boys and girls, but the parents are only buying it for boys.” (Shapiro).

Similarly, "Fun with Food," a line of kitchen toys including child-size stove, sink, toaster oven and groceries, was a Playlab hit; boys lingered over the stove even longer than girls, but mothers are only buying it for their daughters. Another interesting study performed by Alfano examined how both sexes responded to a nail polish center. After 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. 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. In conclusion with this study, it can be concluded that a lot of the shame and guilt is placed upon either gender by what their parents say about them playing with certain toys.
In a survey conducted by Stanford University, “toys were divided up into several categories, including two-dimensional toys such as puzzles and stickers, three-dimensional toys such as Legos and Tinker Toys and ‘proportional arrangement’ toys, such as toy tea sets and toy cars or trucks” (Fleming-Davies). It was determined that children who played with toys in the three-dimensional category had higher science scores, regardless of whether they were male or female and also regardless of whether they possessed a large number of stereotypically masculine or feminine traits. Stanford added, “It has been suggested that three-dimensional toys promote the development of spatial abilities, and that the majority of three-dimensional toys are aimed at boys” (Fleming-Davies).

Toys are geared for different sexes, and a large role of the upbringing is based on the parents’ decisions of what toys to put in their children’s toy box. Why is it offensive when a little boy joins in with his older sister when playing with Barbies? Fathers tend to overreact when their son is found playing with toys associated traditionally with girls. Parents have the largest effect on how children grow and develop, and they sometimes do not even realize the repercussions of the toys they place in their children’s toy boxes.

Young children of both sexes will usually play with toys that society associated with one specific gender, but they do not become ashamed or reject the toys until they are older or when adults scold them over their choices. Boys play with dolls, but they happen to call their dolls action figures. Yet, the nature of each gender’s play tends to differ. Observing a young girl with a doll, she will often rock and nurture it, whereas little boys will use the doll in battle scenes with other action figures. Some children are naturally inclined to play with certain toys than with others, but society’s stigma may make 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?

Adults then reinforce and reward these differences throughout development. A Topical Approach to Lifespan Development author, John W. 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 imitating 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 when they scold 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.

Although parents’ choices have a large part in the upbringing of their children, there is research that it can also be biologically based. Gerianne Alexander worked with vervet monkeys is challenging the notion. She and her collaborator, Melissa Hines of the University of London, found that the monkeys' toy preferences were consistent along gender lines with those of human children. Alexander states that, “though the monkeys had no concept of a ‘boy’ toy and a ‘girl’ toy, they still showed the same gender preferences in playing with the toys” (Garcia). Boy and girls may not choose toys based
on what society is pushing upon them. The implication is that what makes a "girl toy" and what makes a "boy toy" is not just human society or stereotypes, but rather something instinctive that draws boys and girls to different types of toys.

If a little sister is born into a family with five other brothers, her choices of toys may be limited to hand-me-downs of tiny army men and soccer balls as opposed to baby carriages and dollhouses, although society is much more accepting of girls acting like tomboys as opposed to boys acting like girls. It is common for children to go through gender issues while growing up. 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” (ABC News). 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” (ABC News). 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. Etienne’s parents were disgruntled with their young boy’s toy choices, but they did not want to take away his toys simply because they could be classified as a girl’s toy.

It boils down to the fact that toy designers need to be keeping in mind that both genders need toys that reinforce hand-eye coordination and other problem solving skills. When it comes to the field of technology, girls are often left out of the designing strategies. Recently, though, Mattel has released a new toy called “Ellos” that is a
building toy with artsy, curvy packaging and warm colors that allow girls to build mini houses, picture frames and even jewelry (Shapiro). Although this may seem to adhere to the stereotype of girls only wanting to play dress-up in pink satin dresses and use vanity sets, it allows them to develop hand-eye coordination and logical thinking.

Companies market along strict gender lines. Of course, children draw a majority of what they perceive about themselves through images they see and read about. The summary effect of children's social learning from television advertisements is that these ads show children how they should behave. Most modern children's advertisements depict traditional, stereo-typical images of boys playing with cars, trucks, and action figures while engaging in rowdy, loud, even violent game-play. Conversely, girls are most often shown playing with dolls of all sorts, dressing, and grooming them in relatively passive manners.

A study performed by Ayesha Shajahan documented her watching NBC from 8:00a.m.-10:00a.m. when cartoons are being broadcasted and children are the main audience. 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”(Shajahan). 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. 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.

The confusion or conflict that exists in our society over gender roles concerning toys is ever widening. Even from birth, infants are showered with gifts as well as stereotypes concerning what to wear and what toys to play with. Although toy companies have just recently been focusing on developing toys that can aid both males and females in expanding and strengthening their spatial abilities, an obvious difference in the toy aisles is apparent. It is, of course, no fairy tale as challenges only become more difficult to solve in the world, but overall, there is evidence of an evolution of gender stereotypes formed by toys.


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