

Gender roles seen in toys

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Gender Roles and Toys By Shawna Robb English 101 Professor Solomon One room has pretty pink wallpaper with a princess border; the other is blue with monster trucks on one-wall and sports pictures on another. It is not hard to tell which room is female and which room is male. Male and female are used in this instance to define genders. Gender, unlike sex, is a universal guideline upon which individuals are placed. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behavior, and activities that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women.

When the pressure of gender stereotypes is open to debate some say there are prenatal influences that are gender based. What is obvious is that gender plays a significant role when it comes to the toys people select for their children and the way that toy companies market them. "Toys-R-Us" is a United States based toy company who has been taken to task for marketing designs that reflect or promote gender specific toys.

It is wrong that toy stores, like "Toys-R-Us", clearly divides the toys by gender in stores and in toy advertisements because it teaches children how they are supposed to be in order to be accepted by society, promotes aggressive behavior for males and a passive attitude for females.

Stereotypical boy toys are things like action figures and toy cars. These are both active and aggressive, which is "masculine" representing how men are supposed to be in society. Girl's toys are often dolls, dress up, and toys that mimic household duties. That is stereotypical because its saying girls are passive, not active.

It is setting standards that girls belong in the home for their future while boys get doctor kits or chemistry sets that give them higher goals. Introducing children to these gender role ideas this early is shaping them for the rest of their lives. The world's leading fast food franchise has an interest in the gender of its young customers. At McDonalds a very popular child's meal is the happy meal. When a Happy Meal is ordered the worker always asks if the child is a boy or a girl. This lets the worker know what type of toy to put in with the meal.

The McDonalds worker could ask if the customer wants a hot wheels or a mini Barbie but instead they learn the gender of the customer and stereotypically provide the toy. Toy stores separate their store by toys for girls and toys for boys. The girl isle has stereotypical girl colors like pink, purple, and yellow. All of these colors are light when the boy's section has colors like red, blue's, black, brown and green. All of the boy's colors are darker and less "pretty". Just from that quick look down the isle one can notice which is for girls versus boys. The dark colors are less soothing and action oriented.

The girl colors, are lighter making them much more calm and subdued. This same pattern can be seen in advertisements on television. Female directed commercials are light colors, with softer music usually having lyrics that explain the toy and giving passive examples for what can be done with the toy. Boy's commercials however have the message that they are going to go out and do something active with the toy. The music for masculine toys is generally uplifting and motivating, which makes a boy excited to play with

the toy. Commercials cannot be avoided and they reach almost all boys and girls on a day-to-day basis.

One interesting area in looking at the influences of toys and gender is the advertising of toys relative to levels of aggression. The television airwaves are filled with toy advertising. Is there a relationship between this advertising and levels of violence, does this relationship show a gender bias? For example a parent might wonder if the purchase of "boy oriented" toys for their child might increase the child's risk for becoming violent. The parent might also wonder if merely watching the advertisements themselves increase children's risk for becoming violent.

In 2001 Kilinger, Hamilton and Cantrell offered the observation that the use of commercials to sell children's toy products could have a socialization impact on children similar to that of television programming. Bandura's Social Learning Theory says, "human behavior is transmitted, whether deliberately or inadvertently, largely through exposure to social models"(Bandura 1). When a child thinks that a behavior will be punished versus rewarded but instead is not even acknowledged they will perceive it as a reward. Children usually continue rewarded behavior to receive more praise.

Television is seen as a "super tutor" to Bandura, the child will model what they see on television, not knowing if it is good or bad. For those children whose parents are not good role models, the television becomes the behavioral role model. If violence and aggression is viewed on the television, it is more likely that children will engage in violent and aggressive behavior. While television can model appropriate behavior, there is a well-documented

tendency for violence and aggression. Advertisements are difficult to avoid since they are interwoven in shows and they tend to emphasize violent and aggressive behavior (Kilinger 13).

In the study by Kilinger, Hamilton and Cantrell they observed “ children’s perceptions of aggressive content, stereotypic sex-role behavior, and appropriateness of television toy commercials”(Kilinger, 11). The results of the study support the notion that there is a gender bias in terms of aggressive content and consequently aggression potential. The results did show that toys and the advertisements for them aimed toward boys were more aggressive than that of the toys that are gender neutral or aimed toward girls. The commercials shown were clearly sex role stereotyped.

This is consistent with other research that has supported the idea that boys are more socialized toward aggression. Boys may be more desensitized to aggression as a result of gender stereotyped toy commercials as well as their toy selections in the past. Again, this is a reason for concern since commercials are unavoidable while watching television. While the promotion of aggression is certainly an adequate reason to exercise great care when it comes to toy and gender, it is not the only reason. Parents do support gender bias toys from the time the child is born.

More often than not, a boy will receive toys that are focused towards boys and girls will receive stereotypical girl toys. The children do not go out and buy this themselves; their parents will pick out their toys until the child is already taught what they should like. Parent’s will find out they are having a boy or a girl then base everything around that detail, like the room color

example, children and baby clothes are also gender biased as well as their toys. When the girl is playing with girl toys she will be rewarded for the “right” interests, as would a boy playing with a boy toy.

They will then continue this behavior to get their parent’s approval. If a father see’s their son playing with a Barbie doll or asking to be a princess, their father might redirect them saying those are girl things urging them to play with a male biased toy. One thing Social Learning Theory has assumed is that reinforcement and punishment is the means by which parents socialize children. The study named “ Parental Socialization of Young Children’s Play”, done by Eisenberg, Wolchik, Hernandez and Pasternack, observed the parent’s involvement with enforcing gender stereotypes.

This study found that parents do reward their children for same-sex toy play. It is not only the toy companies that enforce gender roles in toys; the people raising the child are also responsible for teaching stereotypical thinking. The idea that cross-sexed interests are wrong does come from society and children start learning this from the time they are born. (Eisenberg, Wolchik, Hernandez and Pasternack 1506). A thirteen-year-old Swedish boy, Hannes Psajd, spoke out about the gender focused toys in “ Toys-R-Us”. Hannes said that the 2008 “ Toys-R-Us” Christmas Catalog showed boys playing with different toys than girls do.

The boy said that he and his sister always play with the same toys and there is nothing wrong with that. Psajd said that it sends the wrong message to girls, since they are playing with only passive toys. Hannes stated “ boys want to be princesses sometimes”(Landes 1), demonstrating that this store

does not only discriminate against girls. When the claim was looked into by a regulatory committee they stated that, "Toys-R-Us discriminates based on gender and counteracts positive social behavior, lifestyles, and attitudes"(1).

This shows that children do recognize this problem if it is brought to their attention. The problem of toys defining gender roles does not completely rest rest with "Toys-R-Us" but is a societal problem. Society has created the gender roles we now have and these roles are often strict. While it will take time to make fundamental changes in gender bias a starting point could be the creation of more gender-neutral toys. These toys would have to find their way into homes and that could be a function of the advertising that is currently part of the problem.

Parents need to be educated to nurture more flexible gender roles and allow children to explore their interests, even if this interest violates stereotypical norms. Boys and girls should have equal opportunity to play with a doll or a monster truck. Children are taught gender roles from the time they are born, toys are one way that this is taught to them. In a toy store like "Toys-R-Us", it is clear to see which aisle is for boys and which one is for girls. The colors and stereotypical gender bias toys show the clear division in the store between feminine versus masculine toys.

Television advertisements depict females as being passive while they promote aggressive behavior for males, this can lead to boys acting violently in the future. Parents sometimes scold children who play with cross-sex toys, which will teach the child not to repeat this behavior. Gender roles teach a child what they are supposed to be, feminine or masculine, and toys to play

a part in enforcing these gender stereotypes. Works Cited Bandura, Albert. "Psychological Modeling: Conflicting Theories". Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971. Print. Eisenberg, Nancy, Walchik, Sharlene A. Hernandez, Robert, Pasternack, Jeannette F. " Parental Socialization of Young Children's Play: A Short-Term Longitudinal Study. " *Child Development*56. 6 (1985): 1506-13. ERIC. EBSCO. Web. 5 Apr. 2011. Klinger, Lori J. , James A. Hamilton, Cantrell, Peggy J. " Children's Perceptions of Aggressive and Gender-Specific Content in Toy Commercials. " *Social Behavior and Personality*29. 1 (2001): 11-20. PsycINFO. EBSCO. Web. 5 Apr. 2011. Landes, David. " Toys' R'Us Scolded for GenderDiscrimination. " *The Local: Sweden's News in English*. 6 October 2009. Print.