

Fair Play for a Fair Future

Kodyann Kent

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Do you notice any difference between “girls’ toys” and “boys’ toys”? If so, what do you notice?
2. What does gender mean? How is it determined?

Gender Divisions Create Problems for Kids

Walk in to any toy store, and you’ll know right away which toys are for which gender. Pink and purple boxes line the shelves of one aisle, and blue and green boxes line the other. Barbies are in one section, and trucks are in the other. I volunteered at a preschool not too long ago, and the split between gendered toys was astounding. The “boy” toys were on one side of the room and the “girl” toys on the other. Rarely did I see a boy playing with a dollhouse or a girl playing with a train set.

Toy companies try to put children’s imagination in a box by making it look like some toys are only for girls and others are only for boys.

When adults create such strict gender divisions around toys, they create problems for children. For example, if a girl is seen playing with cars or trucks, she is labeled a “tomboy,” or people say her parents aren’t raising her right.

If boys play with “girl” toys, they get labeled, too, sometimes much more severely.



Children naturally gravitate to all different types of toys, but toy companies try to put children’s imagination in a box by making it look like some toys are only for girls and others are only for boys. This could deter them from pursuing a hobby or career they are interested in when they are older. For example, a little girl who wants to play with trains or trucks may end up being interested in the same things when she is older. But she might not pursue her interests because she has been told it’s not normal.

Gender Neutral Toys Break Down Barriers

Marketing plays a big part in creating this idea that gendered toys are natural and normal. For example, Lego has a specific line just for girls. “Girl” Legos include a narrower range of what girls can build – mostly houses. Meanwhile, boys have a much greater range of things to make, such as trucks, machines, cars, and spaceships. If the Lego Company made their packaging more gender neutral, it would help break down barriers between the genders. With fewer barriers, boys and girls



Two aisles in a toy store.

could be more free to pursue more opportunities in the future.

Why not organize the toys in the toy store by interest or age, instead of gender? It's 2019! Diversity and gender neutrality are important to many people. Children's toys should reflect the idea that boys and girls can do whatever they want. There should still be Barbies and trucks on the shelves of toy aisles, but they should be packaged to look interesting and attractive to anyone – boy or girl. Gender neutral marketing and packaging would benefit all boys and girls and would give them a fairer shot at a fair future.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, what is unfair about trying to direct girls and boys towards certain types of toys?
2. Look at and discuss the images that accompany this article. Describe in detail what you see. What are your reactions to the images?
3. Do you encourage your children to play with all types of toys? Why or why not?
4. Read the articles on pp. 22-23. What are other ways that gender affects our access to play?



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Write a Letter

Research several toy companies or toy stores. You can go online and find companies that sell toys, or you can visit a toy store to get information.

Take notes about the toys and the packaging. Are they designed to attract girls or boys? Or are they gender neutral? Take pictures or screen shots of products, and create a slide show to share your findings with your classmates.

Write a letter to the company that you researched. Describe what you think they are doing well or what they could be doing better in terms of how they market their toys.

Use a rubric to evaluate and improve your letter-writing skills. You can find one in “Issue extras” on our website.

Keep a portfolio of letters you have written. Note where you improve.