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Gender-Typed Toys: Detriments and Drawbacks

Children, from infancy to early childhood, are one of the largest and most vulnerable demographic groups targeted by exploitative marketing. Owing to the fact that children this age can neither distinguish between noncommercial and commercial content nor fully comprehend persuasive intent in commercial content, advertising companies specifically isolate this demographic group and push their products on children, ignoring subsequent detriments to cognitive development and early personality growth.Drive to maximize profit has led to increased segregation in children’s markets, most notably in terms of gender, greatly shaping the identities and futures of young consumers. As such, it is not only imperative to minimize this exploitation but also necessary to generate products that foster individuality and challenge typical gender roles. Getting rid of such products as gender-typed toys, then, should be a priority due to the fact that they limit developing cognitive and technical skills, reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, and restrict the future of those who grow up with these products.

Limiting the products that children play with only serves to restrict the technical skills and cognitive abilities that emerge from toy usage. Differing skills are developed through different tools. As children grow and learn, the maturation of their minds and the formation of their technical strengths are directly tied to the products that they use. In her work “Dangers of Gender-based Toys,” Tracy Trautner states, “Strongly gender-typed toys that young children are exposed to and learn to prefer appear to be less supportive of optimal development. […] Play with masculine toys is associated with large motor development and spatial skills, while play with feminine toys is associated with developing fine motor skills (fingers), language and social skills” (par. 4). By marketing and giving kids gender-typed toys, parents and companies are only limiting children’s full potential. In order to balance the development of large and fine motor skills, social and linguistic aptitudes, and spatial skills, marketing instead should go towards the advertisement of more gender-neutral products, helping to equalize the distribution of cognitive and technical skills in young girls and boys. As such, gender-specific products only serve to restrict the optimal and complete development of young minds, stunting the full potential of children that interact with these toys typed by sex.

The gender stereotypes perpetuated by sex-typed toys are highly detrimental and implicate outdated societal roles. Though greater calls for gender equality in the workplace, in society, and in families have arisen in recent years, the market for children’s toys has only become increasingly more segregated. According to Isabelle Cherney and Kampala London, “Children’s everyday activities constitute important developmental opportunities. […] Time spent playing, talking, and interacting […] may be among the most important contexts of learning” (1). By insistently marketing gender-specific products, items that are interacted with regularly, to impressionable young consumers, restrictive notions about identity based primarily on sex and subsequent roles in society are formed. Though toys are important developmental tools when played with, helping to mold children’s views on the world and give context for their futures, the conscious propagation of traditional gender roles by companies that market gender-specific toys only leads to stagnation in the advancement of equality between both sexes. Toys, instead of being used to aid in learning about children’s individual personalities, are being sex-typed and stereotyped on the basis of gender, restricting children’s understanding of both themselves and the world.

Gender-typed toys also are highly restrictive to the academic and professional futures of young children and are decidedly injurious. These products do not only affect the immediate future of children but also impact long-term goals and aspirations. According to Campbell Leaper and Carly Friedman in the *Handbook of Socialization*, “From the moment of birth, a child’s gender influences the opportunities she or he will experience. Within a few years of life, children begin to form their own ideas about gender that will subsequently guide the types of activities that they practice, what they find interesting, and the achievements they attain” (4). These notions that are developed about gender and the implications about societal roles that these toys carry for young children only serve to affect later areas of academic interest, subsequently limiting the line of work that children would otherwise have the option to go into. As gender-typed toys impact not just the the “opportunities that [children] will experience”, according to Campbell Leaper and Carly Friedman (4), but also the academic and professional futures of young consumers, gender-typed toys play a major role in the continuation of both the disparities in academic interests and the later differences in lines of work between men and women. Gender-specific toys do not just foster differences between the sexes in early childhood but also widen the gap between genders that is found much later in life in academic and professional contexts.

 Some, however, may argue that children, regardless of the options given to them for toys, will naturally gravitate towards products that are gender-typed. Stereotypes, after all, must have originated somewhere and have at least some truth to them. In fact, according to the Nathaniel Givens, “…[G]ender roles were not invented. Like language and markets, they belong to a class of social mechanisms that predate history” (par. 3). As these roles of gender were formed quite early in human history, then gender-typed toys only serve to reinforce the innate inclinations of young boys and girls. By playing with toys that are gender-specific, children cultivate skills and mannerisms that are unique to their gender and aid in fostering the different, though connate, dispositions that boys and girls have. In arguing this, though, assumptions are made about what the inherent nature of men and women is. The meaning of masculinity and femininity has changed throughout history and is variant in differing cultures. If the implications of being a male or being a female are not consistent throughout time and throughout civilization, then perhaps gender roles are not so innate after all. In concession, biological differences are present between the sexes; however, variations psychologically between genders are much less pronounced and infinitely more important. As such, these roles for men and women that, according to Nathaniel Givens, “predate history,” actually are not as ingrained as some would choose to believe, but rather created in light of social interactions while growing up, making the necessity of gender-typed toys a detriment to the development of young children throughout the world.

 In conclusion, gender-typed toys, perpetuated by exploitative marketing, should be marketed in a more neutral way due to the fact that young children are negatively impacted by this form of consumer targeting. These products limit developing cognitive and technical skills, segregate children based on strict gender stereotypes, and place restrictions on children’s collective and individual futures. These unwitting consumers, instead of being allowed to foster their unique personalities, are separated based on an aspect of their lives that they have no say in: their gender. Children should be allowed to have easier access to more gender-neutral toys in order to protect and promote the inherent individuality of each and every child. Rather than splitting up the market by gender, stores and companies should strive to find alternative ways to classify toys, perhaps by separating products by genre instead of by gender. In doing so, the social disparities between boys and girls are minimized, allowing for more diverse identities and individual abilities to emerge, both bettering and improving future generations.

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