

## How Today's Toys May Be Harming Your Daughter

Natasha Daly, *National Geographic*, Jan 2017

### PART ONE

For adults, play is a break from life. For children, especially in the earliest stages of childhood development, play *is* life, and toys are the tools of early learning.

That includes lessons about gender. American society has made significant strides towards gender equality over the past century, but children's toys seem to be moving in the opposite direction, reinforcing traditional roles rather than expanding them. [...]

There's a long history of marketing toys by gender. Sociologist Elizabeth Sweet, at the California State University, Sacramento, analyzed more than 7,300 toys in Sears catalogs from the 20th century. She discovered that gender-based toy ads from the 1920s to the 1950s pushed traditional roles: the "little homemaker"; the "young man of industry." In 1925, about half the toys in the Sears catalog were marketed explicitly to either boys or girls. Many toy advertisements appealed to boys as "young entrepreneurs," with a sales pitch to use on their parents. In 1945, with World War II winding down and many women leaving factories for domestic life, Sweet says toys were "overwhelmingly targeted at girls in a very explicit way: Your little girl will love this dish set<sup>1</sup>!"

It was not always this way. With the second-wave feminist movement in full swing, the 1970s saw a near-elimination of gendered toys.

But in the 1980s, gender distinctions resurged in children's goods, especially clothing. Marketers may have seen an opportunity as ultrasound technology became widely available, says Sweet, and parents could learn the sex of their babies before birth. [...]

The onslaught<sup>2</sup> of gender-based marketing has only become more pronounced. A 2012 study by Carol Auster, a sociologist at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania, examined the retail website of Disney, one of the most powerful children's tastemakers, and saw that every single toy was categorized as either "girl toys" or "boy toys." Disney now cross-lists<sup>3</sup> all its toys under both girls' and boys' sections, but at the time Auster conducted her study, only 91 out of 410 toys appeared on both lists. Those that were cross-listed were all of a color scheme more traditionally associated with boys: blue, green, red, gray. Even for ostensibly gender-neutral children's toys, masculine gender coding seems to be the default.

This is because girls have leeway<sup>4</sup> in American society that boys do not. "We've really defined a much narrower role of what counts as masculinity," Auster says. " 'Tomboy' can mean anything from neutral to great. 'Sissy' is not meant in a positive way among kids." Children and parents alike often police masculinity in ways that can magnify gender distinctions in toys, she explains; it's hard to sell a boy a pink and purple play kitchen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dinette*

<sup>2</sup> *Assaut*

<sup>3</sup> *Apparaît dans les deux listes*

<sup>4</sup> Freedom, flexibility

## **PART TWO**

40 Targeting toys by gender has consequences beyond socialization. A 2015  
study found that boys are more likely to play with toys that develop spatial intelligence—  
K'Nex, puzzles, Lego bricks—than girls are. Marketing can certainly play a role, says study  
author Jamie Jirout, a developmental psychologist at the University of Virginia. The girl-  
oriented product line Lego Friends focuses on playacting rather than construction; aisles in  
45 some toy stores distinguish “building sets” from “girls’ building sets.”

Boys also appear to play differently. According to a 2012 study by Susan Levine, a  
professor of education and psychology at the University of Chicago, boys opt to play with  
more complex puzzles—and get more spatially related encouragement from their parents.  
Parents are more likely to use words that foster spatial thinking—tall, big, edge, top, and  
50 bottom—when their children play with more challenging puzzles.

These distinctions may shape later life: “Spatial skills are a piece of the explanation  
for the underrepresentation of women in science and tech,” says Jirout. Informal activities  
like play are key to developing spatial skills, which, she says, are “not only important for  
math and science but for what we call ‘executive function’—higher-level thinking.” Being  
55 comfortable with certain types of toys may also shape kids’ confidence in specific subjects,  
adds Auster.

There are signs things may be changing. Major toy retailers from Target to Walmart  
to Amazon are de-emphasizing gender labeling of toys. Even the oldest toy store in the  
world—Hamley's in the U.K., which dates back to 1750—dropped gender labeling in 2012.

60 Yet the toys themselves remain heavily split, the gender roles reminiscent of those  
pushed on kids in 1925, but more fantastical: The homemaker is the princess; the  
carpenter, the action hero. “You take the pink backdrop down, but it's still a pink aisle,”  
Sweet says of the toy sections of retail stores.

Ultimately, it may be up to parents to bridge the gender divide. “Their biased views  
65 and their stereotypes might be influencing children,” says Jirout. “Girls don’t necessarily  
care about the color of their toys.”

## **Read PART ONE**

1. From the study of the Sears catalogs we can understand that:

- A. Toys have always promoted traditional gendered roles
- B. Before World War II, there were no toys for girls
- C. Toys have always reinforced gendered roles, except in the 1970s
- D. After the second world war, toys have become less and less gendered

2. We can understand that

- A. Boy toys are the norm and are easier to sell
- B. We find more girl toys and boy toys
- C. Girls cannot be tomboys
- D. Boys can be anything they want

