

TOYS FOR GIRLS AND BOYS

The debate as to whether the difference in toy choices is innate or socially constructed rages on. But does it matter?

As long as both genders get the opportunities to develop their full potential, should we mind whether they play with Barbie or Thomas?

There are recognised differences between genders throughout and it is worth investigating whether toys can exacerbate or could minimise some of these differences.

One of the biggest challenges for toy makers, I believe, is to provide toys that help narrow the gap between the social skills of preschool boys and girls. It is well-documented that boys generally develop social skills more slowly than girls. This puts them at a significant disadvantage as they enter formal education.

It is therefore worth discussing whether there are toys that exist that parents should be encouraged to give to their boys to encourage social development, or whether the toys that encourage social development don't really appeal to boys, and if that's the case, whether a toy could be produced that does really appeal to young boys, but that also promotes social skills.

Role play is very sociable and develops skills such as imagination, communication and cooperation, but most role play is biased towards more feminine activities (mummies and daddies etc). However, recently products have been launched that might help boys engage with this traditionally 'girly' type of play. Farm toys and military role play products are likely to be beneficial in helping boys to play cooperatively and develop the social skills that will level the playing field for them at school.

The problem lies in whether parents, teachers and childcare workers are willing to allow the boys to play with these toys in their own (often energetic and sometimes aggressive) ways in order to enable them to develop the social skills that this type of play facilitates.

Another area of imbalance is in the number of girls entering science- and mathematics-based careers. As with the role play and social development, this could be either a nature or nurture thing, but if toy manufacturers could develop construction/strategy toys that appeal to girls, there might be less of a gender division here too.

Again, there are toys that challenge the stereotypes - pink sparkly construction toys e.g. lego and geomag, 'creative' construction e.g. wammys and science kits to make cosmetics and bubble baths etc all help girls develop an interest in science and maths that will keep their options open for future careers.

The key is for parents to find a variety of toys and playthings to ensure their child has every opportunity to develop the skills they need for life. Adding some toys you might not have necessarily thought of for your child - and helping them to see play value by perhaps initiating the play yourself could lead them to develop skills they may otherwise miss. The toys could be incredibly valuable and become part of a well-balanced toy box.

It is worth looking in more detail at these non-gender-stereotyped toys to see how children play with them and whether they not only help balance out the play opportunities for the genders but also to see if they encourage more cooperative play between the sexes.