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Gabrielle L. Branciforti

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Gabrielle Branciforti
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Professor Moras

Gender Stereotypes of Toys in Target

When looking in a department or toy store, it is easy to identify the separation between the boy and girl section. Children's toys have always reflected society's typical gender roles. That is, young girls should play with Barbie dolls, while boys play with trucks. When walking into a local Target, or old Toys-R-Us stores, one automatically walks to the socially appropriate side of the stores to buy their young child a toy. Is it because they are afraid of what others will say, because their child is playing with different toys from their peers? Or is it because society is so brainwashed that they do not think of how their child's actions and play toys will develop their personality and character? I find that society places people into categories and that people are too afraid to go against gender norms, especially at such a young age. If people can choose their occupation, then children should have the capability to choose what toy they want to play with.

Research has identified that family life and interactions directly impact their growth and development. A past study was designed to develop the interaction between adolescent prosocial behavior and temperamental characteristics (Hastings, Rubin, & DeRose, 2005). Adolescent prosocial behavior is inflicted by the style of parenting that they were raised with. Children with authoritative parents were shyer and less likely to interact with other children, while children with authoritarian parents were more outgoing and played with other children in the classroom. Due to parental attitudes and personalities, it directly impacted the child's gender socialization strategies (Hastings et. al, 2005). Similarly, a 2015 study explored parental behaviors and

attitudes and their influence on their children over a 15-year period. It was found that a mother's attitude promoted womanly roles and occupations. Similarly, when spending more time with a father and following the gender stereotypes of man, the sons were more likely to take on male occupations (Lawson, Crouter, & McHale, 2015).

Not many people realize that there are extreme gender differences when it comes to the toys they pick out for their children. The toys they choose, or the choices that are available to buy, all reflect what either a masculine, young boy and feminine girl should be playing with. More importantly, their toys reflect how a child should behave, and what things they should be interested in. A 2018 study found that the toys young girls and boys play with ultimately affect the physical, cognitive, and social development (Dinella & Weisgram, 2018). The type of toy a child plays with is directly associated with the level of play a child deems necessary. Their actions may be subtle but will continue to progress as the child develops and will shape their personality. On the contrary, there is moral controversy on whether the parent is deciding how they want their child to grow, because they have the power to choose which toys the child can and cannot play with. When observing the toys available for young girls and boys, it can be found that girls are individuals who are empathetic, nurturing, and sympathetic. They should demonstrate characteristics that a mother would. Specifically, for real-life doll babies, children are expected to feed, take care, and change the baby, as if it really is alive. It teaches the young girls that they need to be gentle with a baby and display acts of love and care, which young boys typically do not have the option to. A recent British study identified that the reflection of children's toys in both advertisements and media directly impacts their preference to play toys. When advertisements do not display gender flexibility, meaning that boys and girls are playing with the same toys, then children and parents are exposed to the acceptance of what is socially

correct (Spinner, Cameron, & Calogero, 2018). Additionally, the study found that the values of gender-skewed toys promote the expected characteristics that both males and females should have. When exposed to the culturally-normalized toys, both researchers and parents found their child to be exhibiting actions, such as rough-housing and/or caring for younger siblings, more consecutively than when they played with gender-neutral toys (Spinner et. al, 2018).

When I first stepped into the Target in Trumbull, I noticed that the isles were all socially appropriated by gender. One could easily see which toys were meant for boys, and which were for girls. For the boy toys, I found that the toys and logos were darker in color and had a harsher font, for it was large and bolded. On the other hand, when looking at the toy section for the girls, I found that those toys were either all pink, red, purple, and even rainbow colored. The packaging font was in bubble-letters, or in cursive. Additionally, the language used to describe the toys were completely different. I found that boy toys used words and phrases like, “cool, strong, tough,” and “Ready to rock!” Why is there a stigma that girls cannot be cool or tough, or that they also cannot rock? For the girl toys words like, “cute, soft, fluffy, and loving” were used – automatically making the association of an empathetic nature with females. Not just packaging, but the advertisements for both boy and girl toys are completely different from one another. I found there to be more explosive and outdoor play for boys and they were more wild, while the girls were inside and all sitting, playing appropriately.

To focus on the toys, I found there to be almost an equal number of toys for boys and girls; however, I feel like this is a more recent concept, because toy companies have expanded their take on feminizing toys that were usually for boys. For example, the only similarity between the toys is that companies have begun to make separate colored Legos for both boys and girls, rather than keeping them multicolored. Nonetheless, I found Target’s selection to be almost

equal. I was not really surprised with what toys I saw in the boy section, for there were: cars, trucks, Legos, dirt bikes, and figurines. What did surprise me was that the only figurines in the store were masculinized professions, like those of police officers, construction workers, pilots, and doctors. For the girl section, I found that there were a lot of stuffed animals, Barbie dolls, real-life baby dolls, kitchen equipment, chalkboards, and dress-up clothes. The separation between the two different toys was absolutely ridiculous. I would think that by now, society and companies would come to terms with that women and men are biologically the same and their gender does not define who they are as people. Males and females do the same types of jobs, and work just as hard as each other. So why not give children the option to play with the same toys as one another – better yet, why even separate boy and girl toys?

The one thing that people still fail to realize is that no one is forcing them to buy these gender-specific toys. Rather, people choose to buy their children these toys, because it is out of habit. Gender stereotypes and socialization have manipulated people to buy items that are what some consider normal and acceptable. Companies continue to sell these gender-specific toys, knowing that adults will continue to purchase them. Looking at the toys available for males and females, it shows that American culture is gender-specific and ultimately unequal.

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