

Advertising Gender Based Toys to Children

A North Carolina pastor wrote an outraged message to over 100 parishioners regarding the release of Logan, American Girl's first ever boy character. He stated that the decision to create the doll would, "emasculate little boys and confuse their role to become men" ([Lindsey Bever, Why this pastor believes American Girl's boy doll is 'a trick of the enemy', The Washington Post](#)). American Girl has launched a new line of characters to better connect with a diverse range of personalities and backgrounds. Consumers have requested adding a boy character for some time. This is one of many instances in which toy manufacturers are not only changing what they advertise but also how they advertise to children.

Studies have shown that commercials are presented to fit into sex stereotypes and ultimately impact children's behaviors ([Diane N. Ruble, Terry Balaban and Joel Cooper, Gender Constancy and the Effects of Sex-typed Toy Commercials, Society for Research in Child Development](#)). Therefore, toys should advertise to children as a whole rather than advertising to gender specific stereotypes.

For instance, a girl's preference to the color pink is learned and not intuitive to their sex. In fact, it seems that color has manipulated children's ability to freely choose what type of toy to play with. In commercials the use of color indicates if the toy is for a boy or a girl ([Dr. Monica Brasted, Care Bears vs. Transformers: Gender Stereotypes in Advertisements, SocJourn](#)). At around age 2 1/2 girls develop a strong preference for pink and boys begin to avoid pink ([Vanessa LoBue and Judy DeLoach, Pretty in pink: The early development of gender-stereotyped colour preferences, British Journal of Developmental Psychology](#)). In a study done in 2013 exploring gender typed colors, they found that toy manufacturers have begun

highlighting color preference ([Erica S. Weisgram, Megan Fulcher and Lisa M. Dinella, Pink gives girls permission: Exploring the roles of explicit gender labels and gender-typed colors on preschool children's toy preferences, Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology](#)). Toys like cooking ware, cleaning supplies and anything associated with looks are labeled pink. Cars, sports, science/math and intellectual toys are labeled blue. Colors are linked to gender differentiation. Labeling toys to fit into a contained gender category limits a child's cognitive ability, future career goals, social interactions, behavioral tendencies, and physical and psychological development. Girls learn that they can't play with cars because they are boy toys and boys learn they can't play in kitchen sets because they are labeled girl toys. Therefore, the stereotype that men like cars and women like being in the kitchen becomes more than just what was once a cute toy to play with but ultimately a cultural stereotype.

There is also a lack of gender diversity in toy advertisements. Toys that we would assume are for boys and girls usually portray only one sex. Take for example the Project Mc2 Ultimate Lab Kit commercial ([Yolmar Toys](#)). This commercial features two girls conducting science experiments. It ends with the display STEAM which endorses females to study science, technology, engineering, art and math. However, what is the main reason to only advertise to girls when boys can also enter the scientific field? Research indicated that boys who view advertisements with male and female actors are more likely to label the toy appropriate for both genders ([Richard H. Kolbe Ph.D. & Darrell Muehling Ph.D, Gender Roles and Children's Television Advertising, Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising](#)). Understandably this commercial was trying to highlight the idea that girls can become scientists, but ultimately missed the mark by creating an environment mixed with glitter and no male colleagues.

Opening up the option to have commercials and toys be gender neutral, would give companies the option of entering a much larger market by broadening the scope of their target rather than narrowing it just to “girly” girls or “masculine” boys. Toy brands could just market to children's ages rather than their gender.

Toy commercials also tend to heighten stereotypical gender behavior. Advertisements show children how they should behave. Theorists believe that despite adult influences in their life, children often remain firm in their judgments about the gender appropriateness of behaviors (Phyllis A. Katz, The development of female identity, Sex Roles), They gain this this firm belief learned from surroundings and also from t media consumption. Children create a standard by how they see sex roles played out on television. Research shows that aggression (being the most common featured behavior) was found more in commercials advertisements with boys than girls ([Michele Bailey Deloney, Polly Pocket & Ninja Turtles: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Advertisements, Theses/Dissertations from 2015](#)). Commercials also often feature boys being physically active, and needing to win while girls are presented as sensitive and submissive.

Children are attentive to the items deemed by society appropriate for their gender. They actively engage with these items and are more likely to have a vast knowledge of them. Therefore, the idea of breaking these limitations may worry some parents who aren't happy with the one- size- fits- all approach. They believe that the idea of gender neutral blurs the lines between what is female and what is male. For example, in 2015 Target made the decision to remove the labels “girl toys” and “boy toys” from its toy section because guests raised questions about a handful of signs in their stores that offer product suggestions based on gender. They

began trying to strike a balance where they phased out gender-based signage. They were met with backlash. Angry customers began protesting the decision and even took to the retailer's social media pages to express their disapproval of Target's announcement. Yet others were very receptive to the idea. Amanda Marcotte, a popular mommy blogger and writer for Salon who covers American politics, feminism, and culture, wrote in an article titled *Gendering Toys Isn't About Nature or Tradition. It's About Ideology*, "What they're defending is neither nature or tradition, but an ideology—one that doesn't reflect the diverse desires of kids, who should be treated like individuals instead of as little boxes marked "Boy" and "Girl". The idea of not selling stereotypes is not to blur lines between sexes, it is to broaden the scope of young minds and let them just be kids.

During WWII many women had to step up and fit in the roles that had previously been reserved exclusively to their males counterparts. Women began doing much more than taking care of the kids, having a clean house and cooking. They entered the manufacturing workforce and became the breadwinners of their home. Thus... TIE this historical example back to your point

In conclusion, advertisers should restructure the way they advertise toys to children. Children are heavily impacted by what they see. Advertising to gender-specific roles limits a child's play and inevitably impacts society when that child grows up. They should be more consciously aware that even though some may be correct in not trying to confuse a child in an already confusing world, limiting a child's ability to grow intellectually and emotionally by forcing them to conform to narrow social labels of gender identity can have its own ramifications.