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Toys Are More Divided by Gender Now Than They Were 50 Years Ago

By Elizabeth Sweet

When it comes to buying gifts for children, everything is color-coded: Rigid boundaries segregate brawny blue action figures from pretty pink princesses, and most assume that this is how it's always been. But in fact, the princess role that's ubiquitous in girls' toys today was exceedingly rare prior to the 1990s—and the marketing of toys is more gendered now than even 50 years ago, when gender discrimination and sexism were the norm.

In my research on toy advertisements, I found that even when gendered marketing was most pronounced in the 20th century, roughly half of toys were still being advertised in a gender-neutral manner. This is a stark difference from what we see today, as businesses categorize toys in a way that more narrowly forces kids into boxes. For example, [a recent study](#) by sociologists Carol Auster and Claire Mansbach found that all toys sold on the Disney Store's website were explicitly categorized as being “for boys” or “for girls”—there was no “for boys and girls” option, even though a handful of toys could be found on both lists.

That is not to say that toys of the past weren't deeply infused with gender stereotypes. Toys for girls from the 1920s to the 1960s focused heavily on domesticity and nurturing. For example, a 1925 Sears ad for a toy broom-and-mop set proclaimed: “Mothers! Here is a real practical toy for little girls. Every little girl likes to play house, to sweep, and to do mother's work for her”:

Remember the Little Girl

Girls can learn to sew on these Machines

These machines really sew

98c

Mother's Hand is a real practical toy for little girls. Every little girl likes to play house, to sweep, and do mother's work for her.

(1) A real mop with 22 1/2 inch cotton yarn duster. (2) A good grade 12-in broom with varnished wood handle. (3) Toy sweeper with revolving brush, round wood handle, 22 in. long. All four packed in box, Shpg. wt. 4 lbs. 7909162 98c All 4 for 7908310

Every Little Girl Loves to Sew

These machines would make her happy. Made by the best toy sewing machine manufacturers. No pieces would be lost leaving factory by actually sewing on a look-alike, heavy, durable decorated black metal. Heavy nickel plated tray on sturdy hand-operated, nickel plated sewing plate. 15000000

Our Finest for \$5.98

Really a handy machine about the house or when you are on a vacation or trip. Very popular with travelers. More perfect tension. Larger arm space than the smaller machine. Size 11 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches. Shpg. wt. 4 lbs. 7908310 \$5.98

A Remarkable Value for \$3.47

The best value we have ever offered in this price. For the same size and features, you can't find a better one. Automatic tension. Safe. 7 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches high. Shpg. wt. 6 pounds. 4908811 \$3.47

An ad from a 1925 Sears catalog (Sears)

Such toys were clearly designed to prepare young girls to a life of homemaking, and domestic tasks were portrayed as innately enjoyable for women. Ads like this were still common, though less prevalent, into the 1960s—a budding housewife would have felt right at home with the toys to “delight the little homemaker” in the 1965 Sears Wishbook:

Sears knows what little girls like . .

A complete dinner service for 6 including 14 serving pieces—styled to look like Mom's famous-name cookware

Corona Ware

Made of high-impact plastic so it's highly break-resistant

92-piece Set \$3.99

Dishes galore to delight the little homemaker. Modern coffee pot with cover and warming stand. Meals go right from stove to table . . 4 servers have clear plastic covers to show food "cooking." Server base, soup ladle, too. Other features for fine dining include 3 serving bowls, 6 casseroles and carafes; fruit bowl, plastic fruit; goblets, salt and pepper shakers. 49 N 946—Shpg. wt. 3 lbs. 4 oz... Set \$3.99

An ad from the 1965 Sears Wishbook (Sears)

While girls' toys focused on domesticity, toys for boys from the '20s through the '60s emphasized preparation for working in the industrial economy. For example, a 1925 Sears ad for an Erector Set stated, “Every boy likes to tinker around and try to build things. With an Erector Set he can satisfy this inclination and gain mental development without apparent effort. ... He will learn the fundamentals of engineering”:

The New ERECTOR The World's Greatest Construction Toy

The New Erector Is a Tremendous Success
Builds the Most Models—Has the Most Parts
The Only Construction Toy With the Square Girder

This new Erector last year proved to be the biggest success ever offered in construction toys. Many new parts were added, thus increasing the flexibility, and making possible the building of such new, interesting and complicated models. Every boy likes to tinker around and try to build things. With an Erector Set he can satisfy this inclination and gain mental development without arduous effort. He can use his own ingenuity and build according to his own ideas if he wishes. He will learn the fundamentals of engineering. Complete instruction books included.

All models built with Erector are true models, for the pulley gears, axle worms, etc., are duplicates of the actual parts used in construction work. You can build bridges, skyscrapers and thousands of other interesting models.

\$10.00 Erector \$8.98	\$5.00 Erector \$4.47	\$3.00 Erector \$2.69	\$1.00 Erector 89c
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Imagine the thrill of having a set with which you can build nearly 600 models. Includes many new parts not in other sets. Possible to build such models as an airplane, steam shovel, crane, derrick, and ferris wheel. A wonderful collection of girders, pulleys, bolts, discs, worms, etc. A powerful, already assembled motor to make your models work when completed. Assembled in strong, painted wood cabinet, 21 1/2" x 11 1/2" x 11 1/2".

7904716 \$8.98
 7804720 \$4.47
 4904715 \$2.69
 4904717 89c

An ad from a 1925 Sears catalog (Sears)

However, gender-coded toy advertisements like these declined markedly in the early 1970s. By then, there were many more women in the labor force and, after the Baby Boom, marriage and fertility rates had dropped. In the wake of those demographic shifts and at the height of feminism's second-wave, playing upon gender stereotypes to sell toys had become a risky strategy. In the Sears catalog ads from 1975, less than 2 percent of toys were explicitly marketed to either boys or girls. More importantly, there were many ads in the '70s that actively challenged gender stereotypes—boys were shown playing with domestic toys and girls were shown building and enacting stereotypically masculine roles such as doctor, carpenter, and scientist:



In the 1970s, Sears catalogues had a higher proportion of gender-neutral advertisements. (Sears)

Although gender inequality in the adult world continued to diminish between the 1970s and 1990s, the de-gendering trend in toys was short-lived. In 1984, the deregulation of children's television programming suddenly freed toy companies to create program-length advertisements for their products, and gender became an increasingly important differentiator of these shows and the toys advertised alongside them. During the 1980s, gender-neutral advertising receded, and by 1995, gendered toys made up roughly half of the Sears catalog's offerings—the same proportion as during the interwar years.

However, late-century marketing relied less on explicit sexism and more on implicit gender cues, such as color, and new fantasy-based gender roles like the beautiful princess or the muscle-bound action hero. These roles were still built upon regressive gender stereotypes—they portrayed a powerful, skill-oriented masculinity and a passive, relational femininity—that were obscured with bright new packaging. In essence, the "little homemaker" of the 1950s had become the "little princess" we see today.

It doesn't have to be this way. While gender is what's traditionally used to sort target markets, the toy industry (which is [largely run by men](#)) could categorize its customers in a number of other ways—in terms of age and interest, for example. (This could [arguably](#) broaden the consumer base.) However, the reliance on gender categorization comes from the top: I found no evidence that the trends of the past 40 years are the result of consumer demand. That said, the late-20th-century increase in the percentage of Americans who believe in gender differences suggests that the public wasn't exactly

rejecting gendered toys, either.

While the second-wave feminist movement challenged the tenets of gender difference, the social policies to create a level playing field were never realized and a cultural backlash towards feminism began to gain momentum in the 1980s. In this context, the model outlined in *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*—which implied that women gravitated toward certain roles not because of oppression but because of some innate preference—took hold. This new tale of gender difference, which emphasizes freedom and choice, has been woven deeply into the fabric of contemporary childhood. The reformulated story does not fundamentally challenge gender stereotypes; it merely repackages them to make them more palatable in a “post-feminist” era. Girls can be anything—as long as it’s passive and beauty-focused.

Many who embrace the new status quo in toys claim that gender-neutrality would be synonymous with taking away choice, in essence forcing children to become androgynous automatons who can only play with boring tan objects. However, as the bright palette and diverse themes found among toys from the ‘70s demonstrates, decoupling them from gender actually widens the range of options available. It opens up the possibility that children can explore and develop their diverse interests and skills, unconstrained by the dictates of gender stereotypes. And ultimately, isn’t that what we want for them?

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