

TOYS AND GENDER

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Doll or dump truck? It's not hard to guess what most little girls and boys would choose. But is it an instinctual preference? An early childhood expert gives her views about whether nature or nurture is the more powerful influence over boys' and girls' toy choices.

Barbies, Barbies, Barbies. If you have a little girl in your family, chances are she wants one in every hair colour and fashion trend. If there's a little boy around, he's likely to be devoted to his Thomas the Tank Engine or dinosaur collection.

But what if you did the old switcheroo occasionally and presented the young offspring with toys usually marketed for the opposite sex? How would Jack feel at getting a doll in a pram? And would Jemma squeal in delight upon opening a collection of dinosaurs – or maybe just scream in horror?

There's no denying a stark divide between the girls' and boys' sections in toy stores. Stroll into the little girls' section and you're swathed in pink. Most of the things are fluffy and/or sparkly, and they're soft, oh so soft and cuddly. (OK, the Bratz dolls have bucked the trend but they're aimed at slightly older girls.)

Then dare to enter the boys' section and you're assaulted with blazing primary colours and snarling monster faces. There are uber-transport vehicles that you can either go “*brmmm brmmm*” with or else they do it themselves. (Actually, boys' toys seem far more likely to require batteries.)

Of course there are some gender-neutral items, but when it comes to toy marketing there's often a great chasm between male and female. Is it based on a natural attraction? Most parents will swear there are huge natural differences between their female and male children's taste for toys.

Megan Gibson, Lecturer in the School of Early Childhood at Queensland University of Technology, (Australia), acknowledges that a child's “maleness” or “femaleness” can certainly influence toy choices, but she also cites the clear differentiation between marketing girls' and boys' toys as having major sway.

“I'd encourage parents to look for toys that aren't so gender-stereotyped and that can be used in multiple and flexible ways,” says Gibson. “Construction materials or wooden blocks are good – it's important to look for toys with that kind of open-endedness.”

While several studies have concluded that parental and societal influences play a big role in a child's choice of toys, a 2005 study by University of London psychologists documented in the journal, *“Evolution and Human Behavior”*, found that young

female monkeys preferred playing with dolls while their male counterparts chose model cars.

Gibson doesn't think the answer is so clear cut for humans. "I don't think generalisations can be made based on that study. . . I can recount many instances where boys have preferred to play with things such as dolls and tea sets. My two year-old son has a very high interest in trucks and diggers, but he adores playing with dolls and he's really interested in babies. And as a parent I really encourage him, and I provide materials to support that thinking and exploration."

So, is there any value in giving a child a toy aimed at the opposite sex? Or should we accept that the different tastes of our male and female children are as marked and ingrained as the toy manufacturers' creations imply?

"I think it's about balance," says Gibson. "It's not good if the only toys a girl or boy have are very gender-stereotyped. We should be looking for diversity and giving children the opportunity to play with a range of toys so that there isn't an overload of a particular type of toy."

Gibson also wants parents to remember that the most expensive or trendiest toy isn't necessarily better than the simpler things in life. "It's easy to go out to a department store and buy the latest fad, but not so long ago children played in back yards and created their own games. There's so much within the environment to play with."

MEGAN GIBSON'S TOP TOY SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

- Construction materials, e.g. wooden blocks, Mobilo or Lego
- Good quality art materials, e.g. pencils, felt pens, paints, charcoal, pastels
- Sand, water and gardening toys
- Sporting toys e.g. balls, cricket sets
- Books

ENDS

WORD COUNT: APPROX. 700 WORDS