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Parents Struggle to Find Gender-Neutral Toys



By MICHELLE R. SMITH Associated Press
PROVIDENCE, R.I. December 21, 2012 (AP)



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A 13-year-old girl's campaign to get Hasbro to make an Easy-Bake Oven that isn't purple or pink so it would appeal to her little brother is a fresh sign of movement in an old debate. Parents who hope to expose their children to different kinds of play — science sets for girls and dolls for boys, for example — can find themselves stymied by a toy industry that can seem stuck in the past when it comes to gender roles.

Hasbro wasn't the only target of criticism this year.

One of the year's hottest toys, the "LEGO Friends Butterfly Beauty Shop," specifically aimed Legos at girls, but turned to tired gender stereotypes with its focus on a beauty shop and inclusion of characters with curves and eyelashes. Barbie turned builder with a new construction set. But while some praised it, others criticized it for being too pink.

Toy experts say the industry reflects cultural norms, and toy companies are giving people what sells. Plenty of parents find nothing wrong with buying pink frou-frou toys for their girls and avoiding stereotypically "girl" toys for their boys in favor of guns and trucks. But other parents are sent into knots by an unapologetically gender-specific toy industry.

"There's a lot of pressure to conform to those gender stereotypes from the time you're pregnant," said Teresa Graham Brett, a higher-education consultant from Tucson, Ariz., and mother to two boys, ages 6 and 11.

Children naturally begin to identify themselves as boys and girls around the ages of 3 and 4, said Dr. Susan Linn, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, who cofounded the advocacy group Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

"When a child's environment is filled with rigid messages about, 'This is what boys do, this is what girls do,' it limits their ability to reach their full capacity," Linn said. "It's not like girls are born with the predilection to pink, but they're trained to it, so it becomes what they want and need. There are neurological differences between boys and girls at birth. But our goal should be to provide them with a range of experiences so they can develop all of their tendencies."

Gender Specific Toys.JPG

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In this Thursday, Dec. 6, 2012 photo, McKenna... [View Full Caption](#)

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Large toy stores and most large online retailers often divide toys up by gender. On Amazon, or on the websites for toy makers Mattel or Hasbro, for example, toys are sorted by age, category and gender. A person who wants to buy a baby doll on the Toys R Us website will find hundreds of choices categorized for girls and five for boys. Three of those are dressed in pink.



In recent years, Toys R Us was criticized for an ad selling three microscopes, silver, red and pink. The pink one was the least powerful.

"Toy companies are businesses, so they are responding to and making their products based on consumer demands. They're meeting with moms, focus groups. They're doing what makes sense," said Adrienne Appell, a spokeswoman for the Toy Industry Association.

Chris Byrne, content director for timetoplaymag.com, said the market ultimately decides what makes it onto store shelves and into people's homes.

"The toy industry is always going to reflect the culture at large, and it's going to reflect the market," he said.

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