

Gender stereotyping starts in the toy aisles

Could the reason why worryingly few women graduate in the fields of science, technology, engineering and maths be found in the toy aisles?



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Given that researchers have concluded that gender stereotyping which pervades society is largely to blame for the career choice imbalance, it's not a stretch to suggest that packing the girl aisles with pink princessy dress-up stuff and kitchen sets, and the boy aisles with science kits, cars and robots could be where the conditioning starts.

We're just asking retailers to say what it is, not who it's for

Jess Day of the *Let Toys Be Toys* campaign, which was formed in the UK in 2012 by a group of parents fed up with the way toys were being marketed, is reported as saying: "We believe that there is no such thing as a 'girls' toy' or a 'boys' toy'.

"Marketing toys by gender limits children's choices, limits their chances to learn and develop and it feeds bullying.

"Selecting toys by gender means that children will only be offered a limited range, and miss out on the chance to find and enjoy things that really interest them."

Companies tended to defend the decision to organise toys into boys' and girls' categories by saying that they are helping customers, the campaign said.

"The same arguments were made for signage in toy shops, but following a 60% drop in boys' and girls' signage last year, shoppers seem still to be able to find a dolly under 'dolls' instead of 'girls'.

We're just asking retailers to say what it is, not who it's for." And it seems the sentiment has found fertile ground among UK consumers.

Toys are still very much a pink or blue affair

A couple of weeks ago, Karen Cole tweeted a photo of her glum seven-year-old daughter Maggie holding an advert in a Dorset branch of Tesco. It featured a superhero alarm clock with the caption "Fun gifts for boys".

The photo was retweeted more than 10,000 times, prompting Tesco to apologise and remove the sign.

Here on the southern tip of Africa, toys are still very much a pink or blue affair, as a quick glance at any of the major retailers' lavish Christmas brochures reveal.

Woolworths summed up their separate pages of girls' and boys' Christmas offerings like this: "Little girls love dressing up and unwrapping sweet treats" and "Action packed toys and tricks are favourites of busy little boys".

Asked to comment, Woolworths went with the "helping consumers" response. While the company tried to avoid gender stereotyping in product development and marketing, a spokesman said, "Many of our customers have told us that they would like us to guide them to make decisions, especially around gifting products."

The Checkers Hyper catalogue features five very pink pages of girls' toys: prams, dolls, handbags, kitchen sets, and make-up kits, while the gaming consoles and kiddy computers are advertised on a green page, with boy models.

Shoprite spokesman Sarita van Wyk said the group's toy advertising reflected the shopping habits and behaviour of most of its customers.

"It is not an attempt at gender stereotyping young children... but it's interesting to take note of the UK campaign and it is something that will be taken into account in future planning."

Toys for everyone

Game's catalogue has the usual separate pages of girls' (Barbies, make-up, fantasy dress-up) and boys' (mainly cars) toys, as well as one page labelled "Toys for everyone", featuring Ninja Turtles merchandise, plastic scooters and sandpits.

"We are embarrassed to acknowledge that this important issue requires considerably more discussion in our business," said Massmart's group communications manager Annaleigh Vallie. "We will initiate discussion with our chains to identify and assess potential merchandising and advertising options."

Interestingly, the PnP Christmas brochure doesn't feature much gender labelling, and its small "Girls Will Be Girls" section has no dolls or make-up kits - instead a bow and arrows set, a "heartbreaker" gun, and a doctor bag set - albeit all in pinks and purples.

"Some toys appeal more to girls than boys or vice versa, and where we highlight this, it's simply to help customers navigate through what can be a large variety of toys.

"But we do understand the argument that children and their parents should be free to choose which toys capture their imagination, so we will look carefully to see whether we can provide helpful signposting on different types of toys, without saying that some are for boys, and some for girls."

And while Toys R Us organises its stores strictly along gender lines, on its website, it has created a third category of toys for "Everyone".

In there is a curious mix of merchandise: cars, games, science kits, a paint set, but also a plush pink Minnie Mouse, Barbie glam glasses, and a Lego monster.

"We understand that children have many diverse interests and are working to be more diligent and caring in gender portrayals throughout our stores and marketing," said Toys R Us SA marketing manager Michelle Burke.

It's not just about putting an end to little girls being socialised into thinking science and engineering-related activities are "boys' stuff".

I'm quite sure millions of women worldwide wish their men had played with non-pink kitchen sets as young boys.

Superheroes regularly cook dinner for their families, if you ask me.

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