

Boy Toys? Girl Toys? You Bet!

by Nancy Zwiers

Well-meaning adults often have strongly held opinions about what is best for children and their play. They have plenty of ideas about the purpose of play—everything from preparing children for academic success to preparing them for a specific career.

The phrase “purpose of play” suggests that these adults are misguided in their attempts to craft a rationale for what toys kids “should” play with. True play is not meant to be purposeful; one works to achieve a goal, but one plays for the pleasure.

ORIGINS OF PLAY

Children live to play. They don’t stop playing unless someone forces them to stop (or they fall asleep). This inner drive to play is natural in the young of all higher species—humans as well as other mammals. Because play patterns within species are fairly universal, evolutionary biologists believe play is designed by nature to help the young prepare for their adult roles in perpetuating the species.

Children are programmed by nature to play the way they do; they are programmed for success. Therefore, inner-driven play is inherently healthy for children—even when it looks “wrong” to adults. Nonetheless, parents and activists sometimes point to toy companies and criticize us for the toys we sell to kids, telling us we should make toys that are “good” for kids—good being defined as reflecting their adult values.

CONCERNS ABOUT GENDER STEREOTYPES

One common adult complaint about toys is that many are stereotypically gender-based. Adults worry that toys that reflect strong gender stereotypes are sexist and will erroneously influence children in a way that will not serve them as adults. Some of these concerns include:

- Toys that let boys play out fighting encourage violence.
- Toys that reflect fashion and beauty themes are superficial and don’t prepare girls for important careers.
- Dolls that look grown up make girls grow up too quickly, or worse, give children unrealistic standards to live up to.
- The distinction between boys’ toys and girls’ toys is harmful because it will limit a child’s self-concept.

But children play from the inside out, and they choose how they play. What these critics don’t understand is that the toy industry is motivated to sell what children most want to play with. We are responsive to children’s wants and needs versus being active influencers of how children play.

History is littered with examples of failed toys that were launched with an adult agenda, but my personal favorite example is the “Happy to Be Me” doll, touted as the antidote to Barbie (she had proportions that were more realistic than Barbie). Never heard of it? Hmm, I wonder why.

DEVELOPING GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is an important developmental task for children and obviously a requirement for the perpetuation of the species. This kicks in at about age 3, when children begin to respond to gender cues, especially those that are exaggerated. Boys love superheroes with their hyper-masculine cues (strong, ultra-muscular), and girls love Barbie and princesses with their hyper-feminine cues (curvaceous with super long hair). Furthermore, boys love fighting play patterns and girls love nurturing. While this doesn’t mean there aren’t girls who fight and boys who nurture, the numbers are relatively small.

When I was about 4 years old, I remember my favorite play pattern was to wrap my blankie around my waist as a long skirt, calling out to be rescued—I was role-playing a damsel in distress! How I played at that age had little bearing on my sense of self-sufficiency as an adult. I am a feminist who believes in my own power, a self-supporting business owner hardly waiting to be rescued. I didn’t get stuck in my fantasy identity back then, and neither will children today playing with princesses or superheroes.

As an industry, we shouldn’t be defensive about the gender-based toys we sell, because there is a good reason why children want to play with them most: it’s natural! ■

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