

Should the World of Toys Be Gender-Free?

NOW that the wrapping paper has been relegated the toy industry is gearing up — for Christmas 2012. And its offerings have ignited a new debate over nature, nurture, toys and sex.

Hamleys, London's 251-year-old toyshop, recently dismantled its pink "girls" and blue "boys" sections in favor of a gender-neutral store with red-and-white signage. Rather than floors dedicated to Barbie dolls and action figures, merchandise is now organized by types (Soft Toys) and interests (Outdoor).

That free-to-be gesture was offset by Lego, whose Friends collection, aimed at girls, will hit stores this month. Set in fictive Heartlake City (supported by a \$40 million marketing campaign), the line features new, pastel-colored, blocks that allow a budding sexy girl, among other things, to build herself a cafe or a beauty salon. Its tasty-sounding female fictional characters are also taller and curvier than the typical Legoland ones.

So who has it right? Should gender be systematically expunged from playthings? Or is Lego merely being realistic, earnestly meeting girls halfway in an attempt to stoke their interest in engineering?

Among the "10 characteristics for Lego" described in 1963 was that it was "for girls and for boys,". But the new Friends collection, Lego says, was based on months of anthropological research revealing that — gasp! — the sexes play differently. While as toddlers they interact similarly with the company's Duplo blocks, by preschool girls prefer playthings that are pretty, exude "harmony" and allow them to tell a story. They may enjoy building, but they favor role play. In order to be gender-fair, today's executives insist, they have to be gender-specific. Human boys and girls not only tend to play differently from one another but, when given a choice, usually prefer hanging with their own kind. Score one for Lego, right?

Not so fast.. According to a neuroscientist, author of "Pink Brain, Blue Brain," preschool age is also the age when their brains are most malleable, most open to influence. Every experience, every interaction, every activity — when they laugh, cry, learn, play — strengthens some neural circuits at the expense of others, and the younger the child the greater the effect. Consider: boys from more egalitarian homes are more nurturing toward babies. Meanwhile, in a study of more than 5,000 3-year-olds, girls with older brothers had stronger spatial skills than both girls and boys with older sisters.

At issue, then, is not nature or nurture but how nurture becomes nature: the environment in which children play and grow can encourage a range of aptitudes or foreclose them. So blithely indulging — let alone exploiting — stereotypically gendered play patterns may have a more negative long-term impact on kids' potential than parents imagine. Promoting, without forcing, cross-sex friendships as well as a breadth of play styles may be more beneficial. There is even evidence that children who have opposite-sex friendships during their early years have healthier romantic relationships as teenagers.

Traditionally, toys were intended to communicate parental values and expectations, to train children for their future adult roles. Today's boys and girls will eventually be one another's professional peers or co-parents. How can they develop skills for such collaborations from toys that increasingly emphasize, reinforce, or even create, gender differences?

Abridged from *Should the World of Toys Be Gender-Free?*

By PEGGY ORENSTEIN in The New York Times December 29, 2011