

Superheroes and Barbies; The Unconscious Gender Bias

In 2017, my class held a discussion about the jobs we would pick for men and women. The whiteboard was divided in half, and we, the students, would suggest jobs for the genders. By the end of the lesson, the side of the board that belonged to men was filled with jobs such as policeman, doctor, firefighter, lawyer, government worker, rugby player, and soldier. The women's side contained jobs like maid, teacher, and waitress. I put my hand up and said politician, one of few positions of power on the women's side of the board. This is an example of how society stereotypes the sexes, and how it rubs off onto eleven and twelve-year-old kids. We are teaching our children that women aren't supposed to be smart, or to lead. We are teaching them that men are the only ones who should represent our country, whether in war or sports.

Gender stereotyping is very much ingrained into our children; from the way we dress them to the games they play. Among the experiences kids have with gender stereotyping, the way we market toys is, in my opinion, one of the biggest influences. One of my personal experiences with gender stereotyping was with Lego. I hadn't played with Lego, because in my mind, it was a boy's brand. Then Lego Friends, a sub-brand marketed and targeted towards girls, was released, and I found that I liked building and constructing with instructions. However, until a set of toys marketed towards me was released, I wouldn't have discovered that. And it's sad that I needed toys with purple packaging and hearts all over the box to discover that.

That's what I mean when I say gendered toys limit creativity. According to online education site 'Learning Liftoff', playing with Lego, a stereotypically 'boys' toy, teaches kids creativity and problem solving among other STEM skills (What Kids Can Learn from Playing with LEGO Bricks, Jan 2017). But how many 'girls' toys teach children the same skills, and what are they teaching girls instead?

This also appears in the role model toys we give children; namely, Barbie's and princesses for girls and superheroes for boys. These role models teach children different things. Superheroes teach children to save the world, to be strong and fit, and make a difference. Yet these are typically given only to boys. Barbie dolls and princesses are a different story. They teach you that you need to be rich and famous to be successful, that clothes and money are the keys to happiness, and that to be beautiful you have to fit a certain body type. While Mattel, the makers of Barbie, are doing their best to embrace diversity in shape and skin tone, even making a doll that wears a hijab, the lessons taught to children through gendered toys is harmful. Gendered toys build ideas and messages that can affect our children's day to day lives when they grow up. Ideas that contribute to the gender wage gap, and put women in lower paying jobs. These toys build ideas that one gender cannot do something, while the other gender can, creating gender bias.

The New Zealand Ministry of Women describes gender bias as something that "occurs when we automatically, and often unconsciously, use shortcuts and stereotypes that distort information... bias makes it difficult for women to adapt and succeed in

workplaces”. Gender bias is closely related to gender stereotyping, and is one of the main contributors in the gender wage gap.

In New Zealand, the current gender pay gap is 9.2%; women are getting paid less than men for the same occupations. As a 12-year-old girl looking into my future, this annoys me. My future should be a bright place, where stereotypes shouldn't prevent me from getting a job in the field I want or thriving in my chosen career. It's great that our current government is taking steps to make sure they are paying all their employees in the same job position the same amount, regardless of gender.

Although, pay equality doesn't fix the stereotypes that exist in our minds. As long as there are still gendered toys being given to our children, along with messages that “women do this, men do that,” stereotypes remain. We have to learn to view people based on their abilities, instead of making judgements based on gender. We need to realise that even once we have equal rights for genders, we still need to take further steps to remove gender discrimination. From the toys we give our children to the jobs we encourage them to take, there are many steps to be taken to achieve gender equality.

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