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Selecting the Best Toys for Your Kids

Forget boy toys and girl toys. Here's how to find the best ones to inspire your kids

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A purple toy castle for Emily, a remote-control car for Jacob—do these sound like familiar toy choices in your household?

Even in 2008, if you look at what some major toy manufacturers are producing, gender stereotypes are in full force, observes Dr. Daniela O'Neill, a professor of developmental psychology at Ontario's University of Waterloo and director of the University of Waterloo Centre for Child Studies. "It's just so pervasive in the marketing, and kids are very perceptive, so they pick up on the cues being constantly fed to them from the outside," she says. Even if parents try not to dictate gender-specific toy choices, kids see toy packaging and ads that depict boys racing cars and girls grooming dolls, and gravitate towards those gender-specific choices, explains Dr. O'Neill, who is also an early language and cognitive development expert.

monkey see, monkey do?

By school age, it's pretty common for kids to migrate towards more gender-specific

choices. "In school, kids are usually socialized by their peers pretty quickly, as segregation of the sexes typically happens," says Dr. Warren Eaton, a developmental psychologist at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. "Kids four-plus choose toys more according to gender than according to whether the toy is good for active versus quiet play." In fact, 78 percent of children participating in a study led by Dr. Eaton chose toys according to their gender.

what you can do

"We've always purposely gone out of our way to choose gender-neutral toys, such as building blocks, tactile touch toys, nothing pink or blue," says Hamilton, Ont., dad Don Mallory, of his 20-month-old son, Rhys, and five-year-old daughter, Bronwyn. "We also choose toys that they don't typically play with, just to give them a different experience." Those are good moves, says Dr. O'Neill. "The hallmark of a good toy is one that offers limitless possibilities for play and that can be used in different ways. So choose toys that aren't too highly structured."

top toy tips

If you want to choose toys that kids will love and learn with that have little to do with gender, there are a few things you can keep in mind, suggests Dr. O'Neill:

- **Focus on creativity** Puppets, stickers, non-gender-specific arts and crafts, puzzles, building blocks, tub toys, books on cooking with children and outdoor toys all offer imagination-based play.
- **Choose quality** What makes a bad toy? If it's too hard to play with, too breakable, or just boring, it's not a winner. Good toys, on the other hand, tend to last in terms of durability

and enjoyment. If you don't know what to buy, choose an award-winning toy—they usually win votes from parents and kids alike, so they're a good bet. The Canadian Toy Testing Council publishes its top picks annually in its Toy Report, available online at toy-testing.org.

- **Select age-appropriate toys** “You don't want to turn kids off a potential interest by giving them something that's too difficult, or simple, for their age,” suggests Dr. O'Neill. The age recommendations on toy packaging do help, because toy marketers do a lot of research to find out what appeals to which age group.
- **Don't shy away from lots of pieces** What makes parents cringe helps kids' minds grow. Dr. O'Neill says those zillion-piece building-block kits offer kids endless possibilities for constructing and deconstructing the world around them, and sharpening fine motor skills—as any adult who has helped to assemble small Lego pieces probably knows.
- **Encourage boys and girls to play together** Combine neutral toys such as board games with traditional boy and girl toys in play areas.

Writer Angela Pirisi's four-year-old daughter is pretty gender-neutral about her toy choices, but still loves to wear pink.

Check out our [toy guide](#) for our top toy picks.