

www.menshealthlibrary.com

You Gotta Jacques the Monkey

Boys, Toys, and Girls

By Malia Blom, JD

If you've never seen a stegosaurus fight a Disney princess hand mirror, then you've obviously never had your son receive the wrong gender Happy Meal toy. (And if your money is on the stegosaurus, I should warn you that the mirror is actually pretty vicious--and tenacious to boot.) It's interesting how politicized the entire notion of kids' toys can be--especially when you consider that there's pretty convincing evidence in the form of centuries of experience pointing to the fact that boys and girls generally have different tastes in toys and different styles of play.

Yes, I can hear the shouting now: "But it's all socialization! We program boys and girls to like gendered toys! I know a boy that loves dolls and a girl that loves trucks."

First off, I did say, "generally." We're talking about trends here, not what each individual child may do. Of course, there are always exceptions. As far as the socialization argument goes, it's just another rehashing of the nature versus nurture debate, and I think it tends to operate from an innate assumption that there's something wrong with being inclined to one kind of toy. (Or even that there's something wrong with girls' toys. Hey, I wasn't a big fan of Betsy Wetsy myself, but I'm not going to try to make my dislike of dolls that wet themselves into a grand sociological statement.)

Anyway, one of the funny things about the whole debate is how often actual scientific studies tend to support the idea that there's some biological basis to play preferences. Parents who have seen innocent dolls turned into weapons accessories or heavily armed GI Joes become stay-at-home dads who support Barbie's hectic career as a fashion designer know what I'm talking about. And we now know that male monkeys would rather play with trucks than stuffed animals¹. It's strange how these minor indicators that gender matters would be so threatening to some people, when in the end we're talking about toys and play. We seem to have no problem accepting that adult men and women have different tastes--unless there's a vast male fan base for "Desperate Housewives" that I'm unaware of.

Personally, I feel like this particular tempest in a tea party comes from the classic feminist double standard. It's fine (good even) to celebrate what it means to be a girl or woman, whether that means that we're breaking stereotypes or reclaiming them. But to point out that boys are different gets us into threatening territory, even if that difference is only about plastic trucks.

¹ Callaway, Ewen. "Male Monkeys Prefer Boys' Toys." April 4, 2008.
<http://www.newscientist.com/channel/life/dn13596-male-monkeys-prefer-boys-toys.html> (accessed April 15, 2008).

(From a blog dated April 15, 2008 found at www.boysandschools.com)