



# Let Toys Be Toys

## Who's in the picture? Gender stereotypes and toy catalogues

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[lettoysbetoys.org.uk](http://lettoysbetoys.org.uk)

## Summary

The majority of toy catalogues represent children's play in very stereotyped ways, reinforcing to children and the adults who buy for them that certain interests and activities are more suitable for a boy or a girl.

However, there are some examples of good practice, showing that it's possible to present toys in a way that's appealing without excluding children.

Retailers' own photography contrasts with the much more stereotyped images provided by most manufacturers. Manufacturers need to up their game and respond to the changing consumer market.

Half the group shots showed boys and girls together - eg action/board games, arts and crafts, kitchen/home corner play, cars and transport play sets eg Thomas and Friends (Mattel), Brio. This is a great way of signalling to children and adult toy buyers that this is a toy that's fun for boys and girls alike, but only 12% of images overall featured boys and girls together.

Please see below for a selection of images to illustrate the points made in this report. Additional images available on request:

- [Single gender spreads \(eg vehicles, dolls, Nerf blasters, art/craft toys\)](#)
- [Good practice from retailers \(photoshoots commissioned for the catalogue and own-brand toys\)](#)
- [Good practice from manufacturers](#)

## Why catalogues matter

While paper catalogues might seem a bit old hat, toy retailers still distribute them in their thousands in the run up to Christmas. Two of the catalogues (Tesco and Toys R Us) included puzzles, stickers, activities and/or a 'list page', appealing directly to children to browse.

We know that children take very seriously the cues and nudges from marketing about what's suitable for a boy or a girl, and may be put off asking for a toy that interests them if the catalogue imagery make them feel they're not 'meant' to want it.

***"I know that's the girls' section because of all the pictures of girls... Mr Frosty is for boys, because there are boys in the advert." Ted, age 4***

***"The catalogues make it look like caring toys are not for boys." Charlie, 7***

A large proportion of Christmas toys though, are chosen not by children but by adult relatives or family friends, who may not know much about a child other than their age and gender. So if catalogues encourage adults to rely on gender as a guide to interests, adults too can end up feeling obliged to stick to narrow stereotypes about what boys and girls are 'meant' to like.

***“I often feel like I have to buy something that ‘fits’ - the packaging and presentation makes you feel like people will think you’re a bit odd if you give a boy a craft set or a girl a car or a helicopter” Jen, mum***

But teaching children early that there are ‘boys things’ and ‘girls things’ has long-lasting effects. According to [research from the Young Women’s Trust](#), younger women have more stereotyped ideas about jobs than older women - the stereotypes we learn in childhood take some time to shake off.

Treating boys and girls equally and avoiding emphasising difference has real educational benefits. The recent BBC2 documentary [No More Boys and Girls](#) drew on established research to ‘de-emphasise’ gender difference in the classroom, with measurable outcomes in terms of girls’ self-esteem and maths performance, and boys’ behaviour and ability to articulate their emotions.

## A changing context

### Changing approaches to advertising

There is growing recognition of the negative effects of gender stereotyping in marketing and advertising.

The Advertising Standards Authority’s 2017 report [Depictions, perceptions and harm](#) signalled the intention to develop much tougher standards on gender stereotypes in advertising to children and adults.

The ASA report did not shy away from the effects of ads: “advertising is one of many factors that contribute to unequal gender outcomes, alongside the role played by some parents, schools and employers, and aspects of particular cultures, communities and demographics. ...

“We heard a lot about the cumulative effect of ads that in isolation aren’t necessarily a problem, but build up a strong message over time about how children and adults should look or behave because of their gender. ... Overall, young children appear to be in particular need of protection from harmful stereotypes as they are more likely to internalise the messages they see.”

The ASA specifically highlights “An ad that suggests an activity is inappropriate for a girl because it is stereotypically associated with boys or vice versa” as a type of treatment that might be problematic, and images in catalogues are as powerful and as ubiquitous as TV and billboard advertising to children.

The ASA is due to report on progress towards new guidelines before the end of 2017.

Many businesses are already taking action and recognising that they have a social responsibility, as well as a need to respond to changing consumer expectations.

“Our industry spends billions of dollars annually shaping perceptions and we have a

responsibility to use this power in a positive manner," said Unilever's chief marketing officer Keith Weed when launching the brand's '[Unstereotype Alliance' commitment to avoid stereotyping women in marketing for Unilever brands.](#)

## A changing industry

With regard to toys, UK retailers have made real progress in this area. In 2012 over half the shops surveyed by Let Toys Be Toys used 'boys toys' and 'girls toys' labelling on toy shelves. In 2016 we found no explicit signage at all. (Though many stores still use colour coding or groupings to implicitly indicate gender.) [The use of boy/girl filters or navigation on websites dropped by 70% between 2012 and 2016.](#)

Developing and marketing toys separately for boys and girls is deeply entrenched in most toy companies, but this simply doesn't reflect the reality of how children play, and it's good that the industry is beginning to acknowledge this.

[President of Hasbro, John Frascotti, said in Fortune magazine:](#) "We want to be inclusive in our approach across gender and ethnicity. Instead of thinking, that's a boy brand or a girl brand, we see them as dual-gender... Star Wars, My Little Pony, Transformers — all of them have fans that don't fall into the legacy gender splits that occurred when those brands were launched. Our approach is we build brands for consumers."

Richard Barry, then Toys R US's global chief merchandising officer was [quoted in the New York Times, saying,](#) "What we're seeing is that there are different play patterns that appeal to different kids, and gender lines are not necessarily what drives that."

## Changing attitudes

A wide range of play is important for children's learning and development, and parents are increasingly recognising the importance of allowing children to follow their interests without fear of choosing the 'wrong' thing. [A survey of Australian parents](#) found that 92% of parents of 0-3 year olds felt that it was important that boys and girls should be treated the same, and that **79% wanted to take action to challenge traditional gender stereotypes.** [Another international survey of parents](#) found that **a majority thought that children should be raised in as gender-neutral a way as possible** to guard against stereotypes.

Toy retailers and manufacturers who rely on outdated ideas about what boys and girls are meant to like risk falling out of step with what parents want for their children.

## What do children think?

Children are keen to know how to fit in and do the 'right thing' and they can't distinguish between different sorts of social rules - so to a young child 'that's for girls', will be understood to have the same force as 'Don't hit'.

Children are given many messages about what it means to be a boy or a girl, from parents, from teachers, from other children, and often, most vividly and most colourfully, from marketing. Marketing is effective, otherwise companies wouldn't lavish huge sums on it.

In the real world, children's interests vary widely, and most children enjoy a wide range of play. But toy marketing sells children a world in which boys and girls' interests barely overlap. [Our research into toy ads](#) showed how TV ads featuring boys have a vocabulary of dominance, mastery, action and even violence, while ads featuring girls are filled with beauty, friendship and glamour.

We've collected some [parents' comments on how stereotypes in marketing affect their children](#):

Research suggests that girls in particular are [increasingly fed up with a patronising reliance on stereotypes in marketing, which can actively put them off](#).

According to [Girlguiding Girls' Attitudes Survey, 2017](#)

- When asked what makes people think gender stereotypes are true, 74% of young women aged 11-21 said toys and clothes made 'for girls' and 'for boys'
- 85% of young women aged 11-21 think the advertising industry should stop using gender stereotypes to sell toys

If 85% of young women aged 11-21 think the advertising industry should stop using gender stereotypes to sell toys then toy manufacturers need to get up to date: these young women will be buying toys for the next generation!

## Catalogues - what we found

### The bad stuff

Most of the imagery provided by manufacturers to promote their toys seems to stick to a pretty limited script.

While none of the catalogues we looked at had any explicit 'Boys' or 'Girls' labelling, some used colour as a cue to indicate toys stereotypically associated with girls or boys - eg pink hued dolls pages and blue backgrounds on vehicles.

Most catalogues had areas that were 'no go zones' for one gender or the other, eg whole spreads of vehicles or Nerf blasters featuring only boys, or whole spreads of baby dolls, collectibles or art/craft materials featuring only girls. The Smyths catalogue had 16 solid pages of dolls without a single boy to be seen.

All catalogues except Tesco showed boys with home corner toys, but **girls were still nearly twice as likely to be shown with kitchens or other 'domestic' play**.

Girls were nearly **7 times as likely to be shown in caring/nurturing play**

**Girls were 12 times as likely to be shown playing with baby dolls** (jumping to over 60x if you take out ELC!). Only 10 out of 128 images were of boys, 8 of them in the ELC catalogue. Only 3 of the 6 catalogues reviewed included any boys with baby dolls at all, but this is an improvement on last year, when ELC was the only one. (ELC had almost equal numbers of boys and girls with baby dolls, Tesco and Toys R Us each featured just one boy with a baby doll among many girls.)

**Boys were 4 times as likely to be shown playing with cars** (slight improvement on last year)

97% of children shown with guns and war toys were boys (same as last year).

Girls were twice as likely to be shown with art and craft toys (same as last year).

**Boys were almost twice as likely to be shown with construction toys.** In the Toys R Us catalogue boys were six times more likely to be shown.

Only one boy shown with a fashion doll - one more than last year. (Boy in a group playing with Barbie in the Tesco catalogue.)

26 children were shown with beauty/grooming toys - none were boys.

Broadly similar numbers of boys and girls were shown with other kinds of doll/action figure, but within that, boys were ten times more likely to be shown with superhero-themed 'action figures' and much less likely to be shown with other kinds of 'small world' play (except in ELC, where numbers were almost equal).

Girls were more likely to be shown in dressing up clothes, but boys got more variety. Over half the girls in dressing up were shown in princess or fairy outfits, mostly in passive, pleasing poses. 40% of boys were shown in superhero outfits, mostly in active poses.

## The good stuff

### Early Learning Centre

ELC's catalogue shows how well it can be done, with boys and girls shown playing together with toys right across their range, from kitchens, baby dolls and dolls houses, to transport playsets and vehicles.

Apart from one scene with boys and girls dressed in 1950s styles the children are dressed quite plainly in blue denim and white tops, which makes the children's gender less emphasised, and keeps the focus on the toys themselves.

ELC have a great record of inclusive catalogue images - last year they were the only retailer to show a boy with a baby doll. However, their promotional materials aren't always so good: this year's promo emails included [images of young girls dressed as 1950s housewives](#) playing with cleaning toys, and a ['dressing up story' which had girls as pretty princesses and ballerinas in need of rescuing by boys dressed as superheroes.](#)

[wizards or doctors](#). The effect in the catalogue is quite different, as the 1950s style image shows boys and girls playing together, and the dressing up images just show children playing together.

ELC are unfortunately one of the few retailers still using Boy/Girl filters on their website - our research last year found only a small minority still doing so.

## Toys R Us

Most of the catalogue is filled with pretty stereotypical images, but the photos taken specifically for the catalogue, and for their own brand toys do stand out for being more inclusive. Eg girl with Nerf-style blaster, with 'fast lane' vehicle play set, boys and girls shown together with 'just like home' toys.

## Tesco

Again, while the catalogue is dominated by stereotyped images, there are a few pictures which stand out, eg a boy with baby and pram, a boy with Barbie, and girls with Spider-Man toys.

## Other good practice

- Mixed group shots are a great way of encouraging kids to see that both boys and girls can enjoy a toy. Eg Thomas and Friends playsets, Brio play tables, Bosch workbench, Kinetic sand
- Great to see a boy with a 'Rey' doll and a girl with a Star Wars land speeder in the Toys R Us catalogue, following outcry from fans about a lack of products featuring Rey when 'Force Awakens' came out. (This is in contrast with the Star Wars spread in the Smyths catalogue which did not feature any girls at all.)
- The proportion of girls shown playing with vehicles is slightly up on last year.
- One boy with a doll isn't much, but it's great to see a boy with a baby doll in both Tesco and TRU catalogues.
- Nice to see a girl included in superhero play - Spider-Man (Tesco) and in images for the PJMasks.

## Baby steps?

It might be slow, but we're seeing progress compared with 2016's catalogues.

- In 2016 just 11% of children shown with toy vehicles were girls, mostly shown with pink versions of toys. This year it was 19%, with far fewer 'also comes in pink' versions.
- Last year only one catalogue featured a boy with a baby doll (ELC). This year three catalogues out of five did (though Tesco and Toys R Us included only one each).

- This year boys were just under twice as likely to be shown with construction toys. Last year it was more than twice.

## What we would like to see

**More mixed-gender groups** - this is a great way to signal to children and adult buyers that this toy is fun for boys and girls.

**More examples of children playing outside of narrow stereotypes** - there are still too many all-male or all-female spreads (eg Nerf spread, dolls spread).

**Fewer 'all-boy' or 'all-girl' spreads.** Retailers need to be mindful of the overall effect of a catalogue spread or section. If only girls or only boys are shown in a particular section, children will draw their own conclusions.

## About the research

Catalogues reviewed:

- Argos 2017 Christmas catalogue
- Toys R Us The Big Book
- Toys R Us Even bigger deals flyer
- Tesco 2017 Toys catalogue
- Entertainer catalogue
- Smyths Toys catalogue
- Early Learning Centre catalogue

Volunteers counted:

Number of images of individual boys/girls and number of group images of boys/girls/mixed

Number of individual boys and girls shown with toys in the following categories:

- Household/home corner
- Caring/nurturing play (inc baby dolls)
- Baby dolls
- Cars/ transport
- Guns and war
- Arts and crafts
- Pampering/grooming
- Boardgames/action games
- Construction
- Fashion dolls
- Other dolls
- Superhero/action figures
- Dressing up
- Science

- Scooters/Ride ons
- Sport/outdoor

For more information about the Let Toys Be Toys campaign please visit [lettoysbetoys.org.uk](http://lettoysbetoys.org.uk)