

Colour coded?

Gender stereotyping in clothes and toys is the subject of much debate, but it is vital to recognise why children use 'girly/boyish' signals and to give positive messages, *Kay Mathieson* explains

Q A three-year-old girl in our nursery is obsessed with all things pink and now wants a Barbie for her birthday. Her mother tries to persuade her to wear other colours but with no success. The mum is concerned about the gender divide in children's clothes and toys, and worries about any lasting impact this stereotyping may have on her daughter's self-esteem and self-perception. Is she right to worry and how can we reassure her?

A Since the early 19th century, the fashion for clothing babies has changed from all children, male and female, wearing white frilly dresses, to putting boys in pink and girls in blue, and to the opposite of that today. The strong identification of pink for girls and blue for boys is currently the focus of much debate.

Although there is little evidence of any biological basis for such colour preference, concerns are raised about stereotyping not just through colours but also choice of toys for young children. Both parents and practitioners in early years regularly voice concerns about how they should respond to 'girly' and 'boyish' choices. The anxiety for most is the longer-term effects on children's understanding and perceptions of gender and their roles in our society.

LEARNING ABOUT OURSELVES

Developmentally, we know that at around three years old, children are particularly aware of gender – their own and that of others. As they are establishing their identity as an individual, they also recognise their affiliation with particular groups. Cognitively, children are engaged in working out ways in which they are similar to or different from others.

Gender is the most obvious categorisation: 'As a girl, I am the same as



Today the custom is to dress girls in pink and boys in blue, but it used to be the other way around

other girls and, therefore, different from boys – but I am still working out how to tell the difference between male and female.

It is likely that the child knows through experience that there are physical differences between boys and girls, but how do they know the difference when someone has their clothes on?

At this early stage of understanding gender identity, children are often unsure whether, for example, your gender changes depending on what you wear, what colour you wear, what you play with or what you do. Typical conversations at this stage demonstrate how children are trying to put together information and make sense of its meaning:

*'Mummy, are you a boy?'
'What makes you think I am a boy?'
'You are wearing stripes today and boys wear stripes.'*

At this period of exploration and understanding of gender and identity, it is important to recognise that children are using a range of ways to confirm their understanding. The



MORE INFORMATION

- *Delusions of Gender* by C Fine (2011)
- *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America* by JB Paoletti (2012), Indiana University Press
- *Pink Brain, Blue Brain* by L Eliot (2012)
- *Pink Frilly Dresses (PFD) and Early Gender Identity* by D Ruble, LE Lurye and M Zosuls (2014), Princeton Report of Knowledge. Available from www.princeton.edu/prok/issues/2-2/pink_frilly.xml

complicating factor, I would suggest, is the marketing potential that this has offered to clothing and toy manufacturers. Consumerism is a strong social influence and children are as susceptible as the rest of us, if not more so.

HELPING CHILDREN MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD

So, at around three years old, we have a cocktail of children trying to work out the social signals indicating gender and their own identity, parents with often strong views about stereotyping and the 'marketing machine'.

Thinking from the perspective of the child in order to make sense of their developmentally appropriate preoccupation with identity and gender, adults need to respond sensitively to their enquiries and support their thinking.

The gradual realisation that, although there are physical differences in boys and girls, there are wider differences in the 'girlness of girls' and the 'boyiness of boys' is hard to decipher as a three-year-old. But it

is important to remember that, by around seven years old, children have learned a lot more about being an individual, including similarities and differences between boys and girls.

Adults who recognise that questions and conversations like the example given are about working out this thinking will respond by helping the child to build their understanding gradually. This needs to include the fact that girls are able to play with the trucks, climb and run fast, and boys are able to play with dolls, be on the swing and sit quietly, and that engaging in these activities does not 'change' your gender.

Supporting children to recognise characteristics other than gender is also important. For example, those who enjoy and are good at climbing, reading, pretend play and so on are demonstrating their own skills, abilities and enjoyment, none of which are dependent on their gender. Importantly also, adults in the child's life should not be suggesting that particular activities are more acceptable for boys than girls, or vice versa.

JUST A PHASE?

The 'pink' phase seems to be a temporary time when the developmental need to understand identity gets linked with the marketing machine that offers anything pink as a signal of being a girl. Rejection of pink by boys is a similar response.

As we have seen, it has not always been and may not continue to be so. Importantly, there is no evidence to suggest that girls who focus on pink as three-year-olds necessarily go on to have particularly stereotypical views of either their own identity or those of other girls.

As parents and practitioners, the crucial thing is to understand why colour and 'girly/boyish' signals are so important at this time. Based on this, we can ensure that the messages we give on a day-to-day basis highlight positive attributes, skills and engagement in activities regardless of gender.

This means a compromise: enabling children to use the gender signals they perceive as important in a context where they are also learning that girls who like pink can also be great climbers, risk-takers, fast runners, skilled readers, creative and caring; and that, equally, boys who reject anything pink can also be caring, creative, skilled readers, fast runners, risk-takers and great climbers. ■

WORKING MUM

The great outdoors

'Fair weather' settings are depriving children of the joy of being outside

I walked past a nursery the other day and loved seeing children playing outside despite it raining. They were obviously well set up to play because even the staff were wearing uniform waterproofs. During winter, there were some days when one of my daughters said she hadn't played outside at nursery because, according to the staff, it was too cold or too wet. I do wonder whose judgement that was.

Both of my girls love jumping in puddles.

Isn't there a popular saying that there's no such thing as the wrong weather, just the wrong clothes? The children have wellies at nursery, extra layers and spare clothes, so what's stopping them from venturing out, even for a short time?

Of course, it isn't just reluctant practitioners who stop children going outside – I also know parents who are anxious about their child getting too cold or too tired. A friend's toddler had a runny nose and she queried whether it was because she had got wet during water play outside at nursery. Another mother used to grumble to me that she didn't like her three-year-old son walking alongside the pram twice a day on the school run. She thought that the ten-minute walk was too much for him.

NOSEY PARENT

We live in a city where land is at a premium, so I feel very fortunate that my girls attend a nursery where there is a large outdoor area. Most of the time it is imaginatively used. A new nursery (with higher fees than ours) doesn't have any outdoor space.

Being a nosey parent, I rang them to question this and was told that they have an 'indoor garden' with climbing frames and that they go out every day 'if the weather is good'. There is a small play park nearby that they visit.

The nursery is open from 7am-7pm, and it seems so sad that some children may be indoors for all that time and may even be returning to small flats. Those children will not experience the fun spontaneity of nipping outside and playing freely.

PROUDEST MOMENT

I think one of my husband's proudest moments was signing an accident form for one of our daughters – she had scraped her knee while climbing a tree in the nursery grounds. It's great that the staff are allowing her to take risks and explore.

They have given thought to the outdoor area. There is a mixture of grass, bare land and safety surface. It isn't just regarded as a place where the children can 'let off steam', as one nursery I visited referred to the boring

Tarmac yard outside.

The children can investigate their environment – grow vegetables in the allotment area, simply pour water onto the mud, or dig, hunt for

worms and watch the squirrels running across the fence. There are ride-on toys and climbing frames, but also easels for painting, a construction area and books for the children to look at while outside.

Both girls were playing outside when I went to collect them yesterday and I was told that one of them had been outside for most of the day. She was grinning while riding on a two-seater trike with a little boy. Her big sister was jumping around tyres. Neither of them wanted to go home.

