

Do children really need to be gender-free?

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It used to be that you banned Barbie from the house and you were doing your part in the gender-stereotyping wars.

Now, the array of tactics is dizzying. Recently, there was the story of the Toronto parents who are concealing the sex of their baby for as long as they can. Then, there was the preschool in Sweden that has scrubbed “he” and “she” from its programming, using an invented gender-neutral pronoun instead, among its other aggressively gender-free policies.

Sure, they may both be extreme cases. But they are earnest attempts to address vexingly persistent questions: How can parents reduce the number of male-female stereotypes their children face? How can they navigate a middle ground between the equally powerful pink princess and tough superhero juggernauts aimed at their families?

While many experts say engineering gender out of children’s lives isn’t the answer, there are actually a number of other, more mainstream, ideas worth considering.

One issue that everyone seems to agree on is that starting early is crucial. By the age of two, children have a rudimentary idea of which activities are typically ascribed to men and which to women, says gender researcher Rosalind Barnett.

Parents and educators shouldn’t worry so much about which pronouns kids are using - they should focus instead on the ideas they represent. “Get into the child’s head more and explore [stereotypical notions] from the child’s perspective,” says Prof. Barnett, a senior scientist at the Women’s Studies Research Center at Brandeis University, from her home in Cambridge, Mass. “That’s where I think you can have some powerful effects.”

If a child says all doctors are men, for instance, ask them why they think that – and point out that it’s not true.

Researchers like Prof. Barnett call parents, caregivers and teachers “early socializers” for a reason – gender is widely considered to be flexible and socially learned from birth (unlike sex, which is, in most cases, fixed.)

“Like it or not - even those versed in these things - we carry these stereotypes. We can’t not do it,” says Prof. Barnett, who is also the co-author of an upcoming book, *The Truth about Boys and Girls*, which takes aim at the educational trend of same-sex schooling based on supposedly innate learning styles.

But if we’re more conscious of them and check our own behaviour, “we have a chance of affecting our behaviour positively and having a positive impact on kids.”

Prof. Barnett says research has illustrated the subconscious attitudes of parents. One study asked mothers to rate how steep a playground slide their child would choose. When they set kids loose, the girls chose slides that were much more steep than those their mothers predicted, suggesting that moms consider their daughters more fragile and risk-averse. There was no difference between the slides the boys and girls actually chose, either.

“These stereotypes affect children’s behaviour at a very primitive level early on,” Prof. Barnett says. “When a boy goes down a steep slide because he wants to and his mother lets him, now he’s got confidence. And he’s going to do more of these things.” And girls, if they’re nudged toward less risk, may come to fulfill the stereotype of being more cautious than boys.

Another study found that the way parents speak to their children at a science museum differed by gender: Boys got preliminary scientific explanations and cause and effect; girls got descriptions about such things as colour. “That was true for kids as young as 1,” she says.

Other research has shown that children will narrow their toy choices if they think a parent will disapprove of a cross-gendered choice.

So, in addition to being clear that tea sets can be for boys and trucks for girls (and correcting family and friends who blurt out these stereotypes in your home), Prof. Barnett says she’d also like to see adults loosen their definitions of boy and girl playthings in general.

“What’s a doll? The doll seems to be a trope for so many other things,” she says. “Boys and girls are very nurturing beings. If a child is crying, they’ll go soothe them, They’ll share.”

These and other theories are already in play in many daycares. There, some experts say, one of the most powerful, yet subtle, ways educators can address gender issues is by simply encouraging boys and girls to play together.

Arizona State researchers Carol Martin and Richard Fabes are known for studying how small children come to play in same-sex groups and how it reinforces many gender differences and stereotypes. They are developing a staunchly co-ed curriculum for children from pre- to middle-school.

While he understands other efforts being made to address gender, Prof. Fabes says that he and Prof. Martin “believe that a better bang for our buck is to begin to bring boys and girls together in positive, co-operative activities early in life and sustain this throughout school.”

They’re drawing on a body of literature that suggests contact with people who are not part of your “in group” promotes better understanding and relationships, and hoping their program will help “boys and girls learn how to relate, respect, and interact together and build positive relationships going forward into adolescence and adulthood.”

Like Prof. Barnett, Prof. Martin and Prof. Fabes are critics of the recent trend of separating boys and girls in classrooms due to biologically different learning styles.

“Differences between boys and girls are widened not narrowed when they separate into boy and girl groups and this separation increases not decreases stereotyping and negative attitudes towards the other gender,” writes Prof. Fabes, the chairman of Arizona State’s department of family and human development.

It’s a compellingly long view that links kids’ play in preschool to future adult behaviour. If it works, “Relationships will be more positive, marriages will be strengthened, and productivity and the work climate will be enhanced.”

For now, Prof. Barnett says any parent or caregiver can ask simple questions along the way. “Ask, ‘Who are you standing next to? Why are you standing next to Johnny and not to Janey? What’s Janey doing? She seems interested in what you’re doing, why don’t you share your interest with Janey?’”

At the Edleun chain of child care centres in Alberta and British Columbia, director of education Clare Terry says she trains her staff to see, say, a boy’s interest in being a nurse as a way to encourage literacy.

“We’ll capitalize on that interest and play with him in that setting. He’s going to get a world of new vocabulary talking about nurses,” says the Calgary-based Ms. Terry. “Stethoscope, heart ... That’s our goal – to really help children develop rich vocabulary based on their interests.”

“So the notion of boy-girl becomes less important than ‘here are all the kids who like to go swimming, here are all the kids who like to play ball.’ Then the groupings can become about interests and activities and not gender,” Prof. Barnett says.