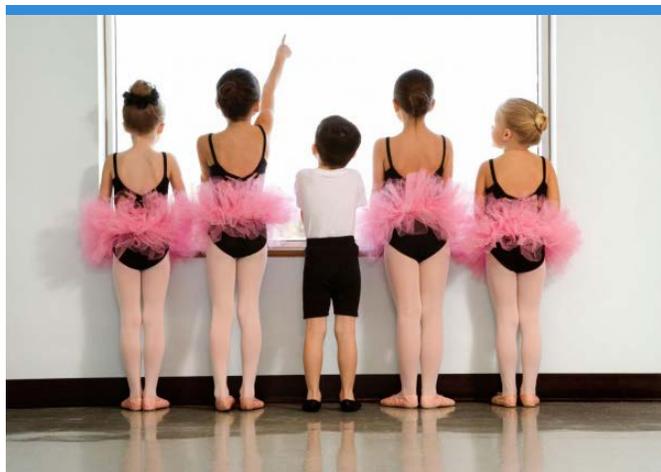


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## Gender stereotypes: Are we too hard on our boys?

Nicole Madigan asks why gender stereotypes see boys who like pretty things ridiculed, while girls who cross the fence into sports and cars territory are praised.



**Nicole Madigan**

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Like most four-year-old boys, my son loves airplanes, cars, space and monsters.

He also loves – as he so eloquently puts it – lovely things. Lovely things such as butterflies, fairies, flowers and anything that sparkles. He loves unicorns and mermaids as much as he loves helicopters and Stealth Bombers.

As a result my boys' playroom is a mixed bag of toys of every colour and type, from trucks and cars to babies and prams, blocks and legos, to animals and My Little Ponies. My husband jokes that I encourage my son's so-called feminine interests. I don't though. But I don't discourage them either. The same applies to his typical boyish interests. When he displays this side of himself in public – or perhaps the fact that I allow it – reaction is mixed. But there is always a reaction of some sort.

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## Double standards

Yet, when a little girl is seen playing with trucks or cars, climbing trees, or pretending to be Batman, society at large is generally full of praise and encouragement. But why is it so acceptable – even desirable – for girls to go against stereotype but the opposite applies to boys? Place any child without external influence in a room full of toys and you can be sure most would happily play with all of them. That is until they learn that pink is for girls and other such stereotypes ingrained into their minds from a very early age – both my marketing companies and we, their parents.

Take a walk through the toy aisle of any department store and you're left with little doubt which toys are for boys and which are for girls. Try finding a tea set, a pram, or a toy unicorn that isn't pink and covered in flowers. Yet few of the toys in the boys' section would look out of place in the hands of a little girl.

And it's no accident.

A study in the academic journal *Sex Roles* revealed that bold coloured toys and those that were action figures, building toys, weapons, or small vehicles typified toys for "boys only". No surprises there. Pastel coloured toys, pink or purple toys, and those that were dolls, beauty, cosmetics, jewellery, or domestic-oriented typified toys for "girls only". Again, no surprises. More telling though is that most toys for "both boys and girls", while gender-neutral in type, resembled toys for "boys only" in terms of their color palette, presumably to appeal to boys, who are less likely to cross gender lines than girls.

But why is this the case? Why do little boys feel from such an early age, that it's important not to be "girly"? And how do they know what *is* girly anyway?

## The answer is close to home

According to another study in the journal, boys' toy choices were most stereotyped if boys perceived their fathers would think cross-gender-typed toy play was "bad". It also showed that when provided with toys of either category by their parents with equal enthusiasm, children eagerly accepted them regardless of their category. So while I'm not about to buy my son pink shoes and a dress in some sort of protest against society, I won't be telling him that his sweet, caring and artistic interests are "not for boys". His dad is an artist after all.

My greatest wish for my children is that they grow up happy and confident and free to be themselves and indulge their interests, be they typical or unique.

Because if you can't be yourself at home, where can you be?

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What gender are your kids? Do you encourage or discourage them from playing with stereotypically 'girly' or 'boyish' toys?

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