The War on Pink: GoldieBlox Toys Ignite Debate Over What's Good For Girls

As shopping season heats up, a viral video about an engineering toy for girls has parents questioning whether more toys should be gender-neutral Source: Eliana Dockterman *Time* Nov. 27, 2013

Nestled in the aisle of pink sparkles dedicated to girls in most toy stores, this seasons' shoppers will find a small collection of engineering toys called GoldieBlox packaged in sequin-free yellow. This earnest educational toy might have gone unnoticed amidst the babies and Barbies if it weren't for a hit viral video ad campaign showing little girls getting bored with a princess show and leaping up to create a giant Rube Goldberg machine out of toys.

The ad — which earned over eight million views on YouTube before a new version was posted due to a legal dispute over music use — has reignited a simmering debate: are playthings that encourage girls to become moms and beauty queens to blame for the dearth of women in the sciences? And if that's true, what's the best way to create toys that encourage girls to develop engineering and science skills? Some think building toys appealing directly to girls like GoldieBlox is the answer, while others want a more gender-neutral approach. And there are those who want to blow up the current pink-and-blue aisle segregation of toys altogether.

Most experts agree that the pink aisle does have a negative impact on girls' interest in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) subjects. "Wanting to be a doctor or architect or cook, that really begins when you're young and walking around with a stethoscope or playing with an Easy Bake oven," says Richard Gottlieb, CEO of toy industry consulting firm Global Toy Experts.

Gender identification begins around preschool, when children's brains are most susceptible to definitions of gender according to Lise Eliot, a neuroscientist and the author of *Pink Brain, Blue Brain.* And when youngsters enter the aisle labeled for girls, the only STEM options they're really offered are chemistry sets that help create makeup or building blocks to construct pet grooming shops. (By contrast, boys' chemistry kits usually allow them to create anything from icky goo to things that blow up to food.)

By the time kids reach third grade, there's a real divide between boys and girls when it comes to STEM-related ambitions. A 2009 poll by the American Society for Quality of children 8 to 17, 24 percent of boys said they were interested in a career engineering, but only five percent of girls said the same. And that gap continues with adults: Just 11% of engineers are women—a fact that GoldieBlox's creators note prominently on their site—and only about a quarter of STEM degrees go to women and it's not about aptitude. Several international studies have shown that the gender difference in math and science are a by-product of culture, not biology. But quantifying cultural influences is complicated. The United States has one of the biggest gender gaps in math and science scores, but it's impossible to know how much of an effect changing the toy aisles would have. In parts of Asia for example, there are plenty of dolls in the stores, but there's a much smaller math gender gap for a host of other cultural reasons, like a better gender balance of teachers in schools.

True, as toy stores have gotten pinker, women have made more progress in the workplace. All those cute little vacuum cleaners and mini baby bottles haven't discouraged girls from going to college or excelling in academic fields other than science. Women make up the majority of undergrads and are entering law school in equal numbers to men. So it's clear that gendered toys aren't entirely to blame for the dearth of female engineers—a myriad of reasons from lack or mentors to childhood development contribute as well. But the lack of STEM role models for young girls in popular culture is something that experts say is an issue when it comes to changing girls' attitudes toward math and science careers in the first place.

"There's Bob the Builder, Bill Nye the Science Guy, Jimmy Neutron—they're all boys with IQs off the chart. That's intimidating for all kids, but particularly for girls who suffer from this thing called math anxiety where they have really, really high standards for themselves when it comes to math," says Debbie Sterling, creator of GoldieBlox who thought of the toy after graduating from Stanford, frustrated with how few women there were in her chemical engineering program there. "If they don't get an A+ on something, then they think they're just naturally not inclined or born with it."

Sterling's solution to this problem was to create a toy designed for the way girls think. Goldie is a female role model who neither fit the born-genius trope (Goldie makes mistakes and learns from them) nor the nerdy anti-social brunette girl with glasses—a stereotypical character found in many kids' shows. (Think Velma from *Scooby Doo* or Gretchen from *Recess.*) Another set of Stanford grads has also gone that route. Their invention, Roominate, offers girls the experience of building a working circuited dollhouse in pastel colors.

But why make science and engineering toys girly at all? Why not just make all of them gender neutral? "I love the GolideBlox toys. I think they're really smart," says Elizabeth Sweet, a doctoral candidate at the University of California Davis, who has studied gender coding in toys. "But I think that by sort of highlighting and simplifying the differences between boys and girls, these things may have the unintended effect of further reinforcing the stereotypes that girls are inherently less capable and need extra stimulation."

But there's no shelf for such gender-neutral toys in American toy stores. Any Toys 'R' Us, Target or Walmart is divided into girls and boys sections, the latter filled with macho "action figures" and various faux weapons in addition to the STEM based

toys. Boys may have it even harder than girls—though girls labeled tomboys are allowed to play with footballs and light sabers, boys are endlessly bullied if they want to try on a tiara (as illuminated in a *New York Times Magazine* cover story from 2012).

Toy stores weren't always so gender-divided. According to Gottlieb, pink was not considered a girls color until the 1950s. Women's journals in the 1940s wrote that parents should dress their boys in pink because it's a hot, expressive color; girls, they said, should be dressed in the calmer, cool blue.

But at this point, toy stores have been gender-coded for so long, that retailers now claim that changing the layout of the store would confuse and deter shoppers. "That's pretty stupid," Gottlieb says of that argument. "It's habitual. We're chained to a retail system that was developed in the late 19th century—dividing girls and boys. I was in a Hong Kong department store, and the underwear department was co-ed. We in America assume those things must be separated by gender, but that's simply not true."

A few toy stores in England are leading the way in eliminating the pink and blue aisles. London toy store Hamsleys replaced blue and pink signs with red and white ones last year. Most recently, Harrods—one of the largest department stores in the U.K.—reformatted its 26,000-square-foot toy store in July, killing the pink and blue aisles and instead sorting the store by theme. (Though the themes are still pretty gender-specific: the Enchanted Forrest filled with fairies and arts and crafts is targeted at girls, while the Odyssey section features space rockets, aliens and gadgets obviously aims at boys.) The true success of the project won't be put to the test until this Christmas season, but large American stores haven't indicated any willingness to change their layouts like those in England.

Which is why many toy companies, including GoldieBlox, insist that they must make gender-specific toys. Someone needs to compete with Bratz in the girls' aisle. "We need to recognize that at the end of the day, it's about locating product at retail stores that makes it easiest for the shopper to find what he or she is looking for," says John Frascotti, Global Chief Marketing Officer of Nerf's parents company Hasbro, which came out with *Hunger Games*-inspired Nerf toys for girls this year. "Frankly, when you look for any product in a store—from cosmetics to apparel—they're laid out according to shopping habits and where people expect to find things."

Plus, big toys companies' motivations for creating a male and female version of the same toy (blue and pink soccer balls, building blocks, etc.) rather than a gender-neutral version are suspect. "Making a blue and pink version of a toy does increase sales," says Gottlieb. "The economic incentives have been towards dividing by gender."

According to Sweet—who has looked at Sears catalogues over the years, noting the changes in gendering of toys—Lego marketed multi-colored bricks to both genders in the 70s but in the 80s and 90s began incorporating licensed characters like Star Wars into their sets and thus began marketing more heavily towards boys. "I'm not sure that Lego had a gender problem to begin with," she says. "But as a result of marketing these toys to boys, surprise, surprise, girls weren't playing with them anymore."

"The Lego Friends line has definitely been getting girls to play with Legos," says GoldieBlox's Sterling. "But I don't think it's been inspiring girls to want to be engineers. It's continuing to inspire girls to look pretty and decorate."

GoldieBlox hopes that its courting of girls will be more successful in engaging their scientific interests. Despite the idealistic aspirations of a gender-neutral world of toys, the their argument is that girls and boys do play differently. In order to engage girls in science, toy makers need to take a different approach than they traditionally have with boys. According to Sterling, girls develop verbal skills more quickly than boys do, which gives them greater confidence in reading. Related to that is a love of characters and narratives.

"When I spent time with families to observe how boys and girls played, I found that with construction toys, girls were asking, 'Why are we building it?' or 'Why should we care?'" says Sterling. "So my aha moment for how to appeal to girls was to kind of toss out the instruction manual and instead write stories about this girl engineer. She builds things to solve problems and help her friends."

Sterling says she is on a mission to recruit more female engineers, and the toy is a means to an end. "By using KickStarter we were able to show that there actually was a market demand for this engineering toy for girls that initially I had been warned was very niche and wasn't marketable," she says. With $286,000 from its humble beginnings on the business fund-raising website KickStarter, a viral video sure to boost Christmas sales and now the chance to win a 30-second Super Bowl spot though fan votes on the site Intuit, GoldieBlox is well on its way to accomplishing that goal.

But even in its mission to disrupt the pink aisle, GoldieBlox isn't a total revolution. In its newest toy, Goldie must build a parade float for her friends competing in a princess pageant — proving once again that princesses rule, even in world designed by female engineers.

After notating the article, write a 1 page, multi-paragraph response where you consider the following:

What is the author's purpose and what does the author use in her writing to support this purpose? Do toy companies have a responsibility to children the play with their products, if so, what is it? What do you think of this issue? Why?