

# Boys and girls

Boys are fighters, girls like to shop. Or so marketers would have them believe

written by KATE SIDLEY

**M**aybe it's approaching 40 that does it, but I suspect the source of my concern is the growing divide between boys and girls, the way they are portrayed and the products that are marketed to them.



Of course there are differences between boys and girls, which will affect the way they play, the activities they enjoy and the toys they favour. But there should be plenty of common ground, too, and that's certainly not reflected in our stores. There seems to be less and less crossover between the toys, games and books designed for girls (pink, lots of bling) and those designed for boys (ugly, scary, lots of monsters and wizards). Only in a few categories – certain board games and construction toys, some outdoor toys, for instance – are there toys that are clearly marked as suitable for either boys or girls, and carry an expectation that boys and girls might actually play together.

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Book shops are the same. If you're the parent of a young girl, you'll know to bring your sunglasses when you go book shopping. There's hardly a book published for the 5-9 year old market that does not feature metallic ink, glitter and spangles, usually in combination with a unicorn, mermaid or fairy (the closest you'll get to gritty realism in young girls' fiction is a kitten or a pony). Wizards, magic and pirates are the domain of boys. Sure the kids love these books, and great that they're reading, but still ...

I should add that I'm not a fanatic. I am happy for my daughter to play with Barbie and my son to obsess about rugby. She can have a whole wardrobe of pink, if that's what she fancies; he can dress as a pirate. I ask only that they be given a chance to explore other choices. The blatant and pervasive gender stereotyping of boys as macho fighters and girls as pretty shoppers stifles individuality and imagination. It forces children into particular roles before they've had a chance to explore and experiment and establish just who they are and who they want to be. It does no favours to our sons and daughters. ■

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