

# ‘Dolls are for girls and lego is for boys!’

**Stephen Lambert** *looks at how sexist toys contribute to the gender gap in education and in the workplace*

Although girls are doing better at every stage of the education system than boys, there remains a ‘gender gap’ when it comes to choice of subject at GCSE and A-level.

Young women are still more likely to take arts, humanities and social science subjects, like English, foreign languages and sociology, and young men are more likely to take scientific and technology-based subjects such as physics, engineering and IT, especially at A-level, in our schools and colleges.

Even within the supposedly ‘gender neutral’ national curriculum, there are marked gender differences. For instance, girls are more likely to take home economics and food technology (cookery), while boys are more likely to opt for woodwork and electronics.

Newcastle MP Chi Onwurah has called for an end to sex-specific toys, which, she argues, has contributed to the gender gap in education, and deters young women from jobs in technology and science. There’s a wealth of evidence which supports Chi’s claim. An aspect of parental upbringing which sociologists term ‘gender role socialisation’ means that, from an early age, boys and girls are encouraged to play with different toys and do different activities in the home. This process of socialisation through the family and early-years education may encourage young men to develop more interest in technical and scientific subjects and careers, and discourage young women from taking them. It’s not simply about ‘pink for girls’ and ‘blue for boys’.

The latest study by Becky Francis, *Gender, Toys and Learning*,

found that, while parental choices for boys were marked by toys that involved action, construction and machinery, there was a tendency to steer girls towards dolls and perceived ‘feminine’ interests such as hairdressing and beauty therapy. As Francis notes: ‘The clear message seems to be that boys should be making things, using their hands and solving problems, and girls should be caring and nurturing’. Gender stereotypes when it comes to play and toys have a clear impact on youngsters’ future subject choices and career prospects. It’s true that young women are outperforming young men at GCSE and AS/A-level, but the problem remains with the curriculum, which is ‘highly gendered’ as noted earlier.

Boys are pushed into a world of action as well as technology, and their play is designed to be exciting and stimulating. Like Onwurah, Francis observed that Hamleys toy shop in central London was colour-coded when it came to toys – floor 3, highlighted in pink, was for girls, while the top floor was designated blue for boys. Her findings are backed up by Sue Palmer’s book *Toxic Childhood*. She maintains that toy makers are cornering children into gender roles from a very early stage. ‘Pink is endemic for girls’, she argues in her book. Big toy manufacturers are sending out a clear message to girls and boys about how they should behave, and parents are subtly colluding with them. The decision of Morrisons to ban ‘sexist toys’ is to be welcomed.

However, can the gender divide in school and in employment be simply blamed on choice of toys and the nature of play in the early stages of childhood? Some writers believe

there are other factors to consider. According to the equal rights watchdog, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, subject and careers advice, in schools and outside, may also be to blame. In providing this type of guidance, teachers and careers officers may be reflecting their own upbringings and expectations, and reinforcing the different subject options according to their own gender stereotypes, particularly when it comes to the age of 16 to 19.

Other experts focus more on the classroom itself. Science labs are still seen as mainly ‘masculine’. It’s been found that boys tend to monopolise science classrooms – grabbing equipment first and answering oral questions directed at girls, which all helps to undermine girls’ confidence and intimidate them from taking up these subjects at A-level and beyond at degree level. It’s still the case that gender stereotyping is found in the delivery of these disciplines, with the invisibility of women in maths and science textbooks. This consolidates the misplaced view that these are ‘male’ subjects.

To break down gender stereotypes, more needs to be done. Toy producers need to scrap sexist toys, teachers need to be more aware of gender-related equality issues, book publishers need to be more ‘gender-neutral’, and more needs to be done by government agencies to encourage more women into technology and science careers, and, likewise, more men into the female-dominated caring professions.