

TOYS AND GENDER

Holiday season is a time of year when children and families think about buying toys for children. In our society, very few toys are free of gender packaging and most toys are either associated with girls or boys. Often, those associations are stereotyped, so that “girl toys” tend to focus on domesticity, nurturing and appearance whereas “boy toys” emphasize building, action and aggressive play. This lesson will give students the opportunity to learn about and reflect on how toys are influenced by gender stereotypes and how children and their families are impacted by those messages.

See these additional ADL resources: *Curriculum Connections* “[Moving Beyond Gender Barriers in Our Lives](#)” and [How Can I Prevent Gender Bias in Young Children?](#)

Grade Level: grades K-3, PreK*

**Subsequent adaptations of this lesson have been included for PreK students. Be sure to read through the entire lesson to determine the age appropriate activities you will conduct throughout this lesson.*

Common Core Anchor Standards: Writing, Speaking & Listening, Language Arts

Learning Objectives:

- Students will reflect on how toys are categorized as “girl toys,” “boy toys” or both
- Students will develop an understanding of gender stereotyping
- Students will explore the concept of gender-neutral toys
- Students will re-create packaging for their favorite toys to make them gender-neutral

Material: [Is This Toy for a Girl or Boy or Both?](#), *Riley on Marketing*, (2 mins., YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CU040Hqbas#t=43)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s “[Glossary of Education Terms](#)” for definitions of gender, sexism and stereotype.)

- Assumption
- Gender
- Gender-neutral
- Packaging
- Petition
- Sexism
- Stereotype

[PreK adaptation: Only review the words gender, packaging and stereotype.]

Note to Teachers:

Reflect on the language you use with the children. Be sure to use terminology such as firefighter instead of fireman, police officer instead of policeman, trash collector instead of garbage man, flight attendant,

humankind, etc. When singing nursery rhymes, change the lyrics to make verses gender neutral (i.e. For “Wheels on the Bus,” use “parents” instead of “mommies”). In addition, when there are both boys and girls in the group, avoid referring to the children as “guys.”

Use the activities as an opportunity to talk with children about other areas of their lives where gender stereotypes play a role such as play areas in the room, books, clothing, occupations, etc.

WARM-UP: MY FAVORITE TOY

1. Have each student share their favorite toy and say what they love about it. Record the attributes on the board. Ask: *What do you notice about the words on the board?*
2. Then ask students to either close their eyes or not and picture themselves in a toy store. Ask them to visualize their favorite toys.
3. Ask the following questions:
 - What are your favorite kinds of toys?
[PreK adaptation: Ask only the above question. Record their responses in large print then read them aloud to the children.]
 - What section do you like to go to first?
 - Are there certain colors that you would like to see in each section?
 - What kinds of toys do you see?
 - Is there a section that is supposed to be for boys? A section for girls? How do you know?
4. Ask students to open their eyes. Repeat the questions, this time asking a few students to share their responses.

IS IT A “GIRL TOY” OR “BOY TOY”?

1. Distribute the handout *Is This Toy for a Girl or Boy or Both?* Instruct each student to look at each toy and record whether they think it is a toy for a girl or a boy or both by writing B (boy), G (girl) or BT (both) next to the picture.
[Pre-K adaptation: Instead of the handout, use real toys from the classroom or toys you bring from home or borrow. Find some toys that are gender-specific like dolls or princesses (with lots of pink) and superheroes as well as toys that are more gender-neutral like a teddy bear.]
2. After they have completed their sheets, have students get into small groups of 3–4. In groups, have students compare their handouts, but be sure to tell them not to change what they wrote. Instruct them to take a few minutes to share with each other the reason they gave for putting toys in the categories they did (boy, girl or both).
[PreK adaptation: Instead of using the *Is This Toy for a Girl or Boy or Both?* handout and children working in small groups, have a whole group discussion where you pass the toys around so each child can look at it. Ask them if they think the toy is for a girl or a boy or both. End this portion of the lesson using the discussion questions below with more simplified language.]
3. Have students come back to the large group and ask a few students to come up to the front of the room and talk about their sheets, sharing the categories they chose for each toy and why they chose that category.

4. Lead a whole group discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Why did you put certain toys in certain categories?
 - Is there anything that the toys you thought were for girls have in common? How about what the toys you thought were for boys have in common?
 - What toys did you chose that both boys and girls like? What do those have in common?
 - Do you think there is such a thing as a “boy toy” or a “girl toy”? Do you think there should be?
 - How do people get their ideas about what boys vs. girls are “supposed” to like and play with?

NOTE: In age-appropriate language, explain to students that people in our society, including toy companies, hold “stereotypes” (oversimplified generalizations about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences) about people and in this case, specifically girls and boys. For example, if a student stated earlier that doll strollers are more of a girls toy, challenge that assumption by asking why that is, explaining that both boys and girls can take care of dolls in the same way that both men and women can take care of babies. Use other examples based on what they said during the activity.

5. Point out that there really is no such thing as a girl’s or boy’s toy, that all children can potentially like dolls, toy soldiers, strollers, teddy bears, baseball and Legos. Ask students: *Why is it important that children feel comfortable playing with whatever they would like to play with?* Explain that stereotyping impacts children’s ability to explore different parts of themselves and it can limit their opportunities. Play is a critical component of young children’s development and in how they make sense of the world. It has a strong impact on their interests, social interactions, skills, academic pursuits and how they see themselves as workers and family members in the future. Therefore, it is important not to place any limitations on them and allow them to explore as much as possible.
6. If it doesn’t come up from the students, explain that toy companies use colors, packaging and photos to try to tell children (as well as their parents and society at large) what girls should like and boys should want to play with. Ask students: *Do you see on either the toys we talked about today or the ones you have at home different packaging, colors or photos based on the toys? Why do you think toy companies do this?* Explain that often toys intended for girls are pink or purple (light colors) and toys geared towards boys are blue, black and green (dark colors) or the toys will have photos of only girls or boys depending on who it is geared to.

WHAT ARE GENDER-NEUTRAL TOYS?

1. As discussed earlier, tell students that there is no such thing as a girl or boy toy, but that often the packaging, advertisements, photos and colors convey the idea of who should like what toys.
2. Tell students that last year, a 13-year-old girl named McKenna Pope from New Jersey, was upset because her 4-year-old brother wanted an Easy Bake oven because he loved to cook. She wanted to buy one for him, but when she went to the store, she found that the packaging was geared towards girls (i.e. pink and purple). She created a petition to get Hasbro, the toy company, to make a more gender-neutral (explain what “gender-neutral” means) Easy Bake oven. She collected 45,000 signatures on her petition, saying that she found it “quite appalling” that “boys are not featured in packaging or promotional materials.” She added, “The oven comes in gender-specific hues: purple and pink. I feel that this sends a clear message: women cook, men work.” Hasbro decided to make an additional oven in black, blue and silver.

NOTE: You can read more about this story and view photos in *The Daily Beast* articles "[Eighth Grader Tells Hasbro: Man Up the Easy-Bake Oven](#)" (November 30, 2012) and "[Easy-Bake Oven Mans Up: Hasbro to Manufacture Boy-Friendly Design](#)" (December 17, 2012).

3. Ask students: *Why did the girl not want to get the pink Easy Bake oven for her brother? What did she do about it? Why do you think Hasbro decided to make the oven with different colors?*

[PreK adaptation]

1. Ask the children how they would make some toys differently so that both boys and girls would like to play with them.
2. Explain to the children that there are two ways to help children feel comfortable playing with any toy they want. One way is to have children understand that girls and boys can play with all sorts of different toys like a doll, a superhero or truck. The other way is for toy companies to stop trying to convince/persuade girls and boys to play with certain toys by using certain colors (pink and purple for girls, blue and green for boys) or pictures on the packaging.
3. Show images of toy packaging or print advertisements. Ask the children: *What can toy companies do to make children feel more comfortable playing with anything they like?*
4. Using the images, discuss further by asking the following questions:
 - What colors and images do they notice?
 - Why do you think that toy companies use certain colors and images to draw children to certain toys.

ART ACTIVITY: CREATE NEW TOY PACKAGING

1. Brainstorm a list of toys that students like and that are in need of new packaging. Remind them about the Easy Bake oven and how it was only available in pink.
2. Ask: *What did Hasbro (the toy company) do to make it more comfortable for a boy to play with an easy bake oven? What other things can companies do to make toys that all kids feel comfortable playing with?* If they don't say it, point out that having pictures on the toy with boys and girls and using different colors can help with that.
3. Pick 4–5 toys from the list generated above. Have students pick which toy whose packaging they want to re-create. Have the students work in small groups and create a new box and "package" for the toy that makes it gender-neutral as opposed to it being associated with one gender or the other. Give students different art materials (markers, crayons, paint, magazines for cutting out pictures) as well as cardboard or poster board paper.

[PreK adaptation]

1. As a whole group, identify a toy that is very gender specific such as a hula hoop or a toy workbench. Ask the children: *If we were to re-make this for both boys and girls, what would it look like? How would it be different?*
2. Have the children draw a picture of the toy reimagined.
3. When finished, hang the pictures around the room and have each child explain their picture. As they share, record each child's description to display under each picture.

WRITING ACTIVITY (Optional)

Have students write letters to one of the toy companies for a toy they “repackaged” during the art activity. In the letter, students should explain what they have learned about gender stereotypes and toys, how they created gender-neutral packaging for the toy and request that the company re-thinks their current gender identification of the toy.

[PreK adaptation]

As whole group, work on a group letter addressed to the maker of the toy reimagined in the previous activity. Ask the children: *What should we say to the toy company that would convince them re-make the toy? What changes should we ask them to make?* As the children share their ideas, record them onto chart paper, creating a group letter to the company. Enclose copies or photos of the children’s artwork and mail along with the letter. If and when the company responds, share the letter during a group meeting.

CLOSING

Show the YouTube video, [Riley on Marketing](#), a 2-minute video which features Riley, a five-year-old girl who discusses her thoughts about gendered toys. The video went viral in 2011, having more than 4 million views. After viewing ask students: *Do you agree or disagree with Riley? Why or why not?*

[PreK adaptation]

Read aloud a story that gets the children to think about gender roles and stereotyping, such as *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, *The Basket Ball* by Esmé Raji Codell, *Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores* by James Howe, or *William’s Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow. Click [here](#) for additional books ideas. Note that the list is for grades Pre K–3 so preview the book in advance to make sure it is age-appropriate for your group.

ADDITIONAL READING

- [What the Research Says: Gender-Typed Toys](#) (National Association for the Education of Young Children, [naeyc.org](#))
- [In Sweden, Playtime Goes Gender-Neutral for Holidays](#) (*The Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2012)
- [Guys and Dolls No More?](#) (*The New York Times*, December 21, 2012)
- [Kids’ Toys: More Gendered Than Ever](#) (*Ms. Magazine* blog, June 5, 2013)
- [When Kids Play Along Gender Lines](#) (CNN.com, August 28, 2013)
- *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* by Peggy Orenstein
- [Lisa Eliot](#) website (author of *Pink Brain*, *Blue Brain*)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

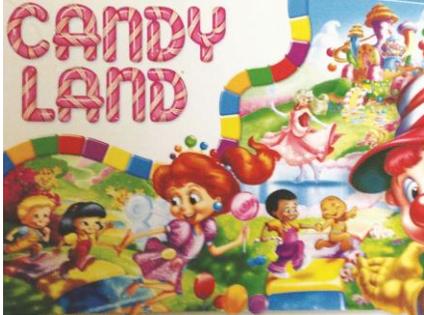
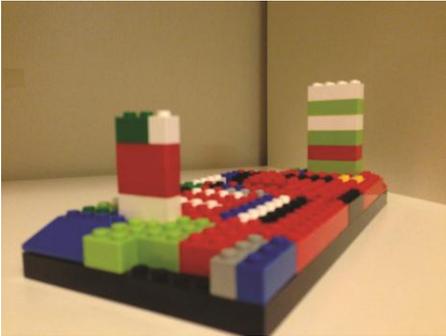
[W.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[SL.1](#) Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[SL.2](#) Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

[L.1](#) Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

IS THIS TOY FOR A GIRL OR BOY OR BOTH?

TOY	For a Girl (G), Boy (B) or Both (BT)?
	
	
	
	

TOY	For a Girl (G), Boy (B) or Both (BT)?
	
	
	
	