

Princesses and action heroes are for boys and girls

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Given the chance, young boys will try out dolls, and girls will play with cars and building blocks. It's even possible to encourage the two sexes to play together without too much moaning, says Lauren Spinner of the University of Kent in the UK, lead author of a study in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*. She believes that if children's magazines could use more diverse photographs and articles, this could help challenge and disrupt

many of society's long-held gender-typical choices about the toys and playmates that are appropriate for children of different sexes.

Spinner led an experiment that included 82 British four to seven-year-olds. One group of [children](#) was shown a photograph of a boy playing with a car, and a girl with a toy pony. For those in the other group, the scenario was reversed. Speech bubbles on the photographs and a sentence that the experimenter read out hinted that the children featured were playing with their favourite toys. The study participants were then given a set of toys to choose from, and asked who they thought should play with them. They were asked who from the photographed children they'd like to play with and why, as well as whether, and for what reason they would exclude certain children from joining in.

The researchers found that children exposed to photographs of counter-stereotypic peers were more flexible in their attitudes about who should be playing with which toy. They also more readily chose a playmate of the opposite [gender](#) to themselves. In the stereotypical scenario, the boys, for instance, shunned girls. However, in the counter-stereotypical condition, their attitude softened towards them.

"Play style was used as a guide, more so than the playmate's gender," says Spinner, who believes the findings suggest that it is possible to shift children toward more gender flexible attitudes and change children's views on gender-related play and friendships. This counters the general beliefs that gender segregation and gendered toy preference is inevitable in young children.

Spinner says that gender stereotypical media has an impact on the attitudes of children, and she believes that magazines in particular have the potential to encourage a more balanced society.

"Regular exposure to counter-stereotypic content in the media could be

an effective strategy to promote gender flexibility and combat gender-related bullying," says Spinner. "Presenting children with images of counter-stereotypic peers through magazines could be used to encourage children to play with a variety of toys, play in mixed-gender groups, and reduce gender-based social exclusion and bullying for both gender-typical and gender-atypical children."

The findings are also of value to educators, parents, and policy makers when considering exposing children to toys and ideas that are not always typically assigned to their sex. The fact that children consider both play style and gender when selecting a playmate suggests that mixed gender play can be encouraged by highlighting behaviour and interests that are similar between two children, rather than their particular gender.

However, it is important to highlight that this is a single cross-sectional study. More research is needed to examine the effects of counter-stereotypic exposure over time to determine how effective this strategy would be. "The experimental design is a strength," explains Spinner, "But we only included one dose of the exposure, and the results need to be replicated."

More information: Lauren Spinner et al, Peer Toy Play as a Gateway to Children's Gender Flexibility: The Effect of (Counter)Stereotypic Portrayals of Peers in Children's Magazines, *Sex Roles* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-017-0883-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0883-3)

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