

Dolls and trucks: Political right and left share some parenting beliefs

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Society appears deeply divided on how to parent with regard to gender.

For example, some parents throw "gender reveal" parties to announce

the birth sex and traditionally corresponding gender of an unborn baby, while others use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to their children until they are old enough to self-identify. School board members, legislators and the public continue to have politically charged debates on the rights of trans, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming kids.

But a new UCLA study titled "Following a Child's Lead and Setting Kids Up for Success: Convergence and Divergence in Parenting Ideologies on the Political Right and Left," authored by UCLA sociologists Mallory Rees and Abigail Saguy and recently [published](#) in the journal *Social Forces*, points out some areas of alignment between the political left and right when it comes to gender and parenting.

"The issue of gender and parenting has become deeply polarized," Saguy said. "Hopefully, this new research sheds light on areas where different political sides overlap, and can allow for more nuanced, and ultimately more helpful conversations about these complex issues."

UCLA researchers interviewed 85 activists with a range of political orientations, including feminists, LGBTQ+ activists and activists on the political right. The sample was diverse regarding racial and gender identity, geographical location within the U.S., and parental status.

Researchers asked interviewees questions about two different types of parenting. They were asked how they felt about allowing kids to play with both "girl" and "boy" toys, and about the practice of not assigning gender to a child until the child is ready to self-identify.

The open-ended questions helped the researchers draw some conclusions about how activists from different political ideologies think about parenting and gender.

Activists on both the right and left affirmed the value of avoiding gender

stereotypes by allowing girls—and to a lesser extent boys—to play with both traditionally "girl" and "boy" toys. Virtually all those on the left and over 75% of those on the right supported this idea.

For example, a policy analyst at Independent Women's Forum, a conservative think tank, said, "If your little girl picks up the fire truck Lego set, by all means, let her play with the fire truck Lego set."

Activists on the left went further, actively encouraging children to play with all types of toys.

Activists on the right supported the idea that girls should be able to aspire to traditionally male pursuits, a stance promoted by feminists in the '70s and still associated with the political left today.

A traditional conservative with Libertarian leanings said, "I don't get into this whole, like, we teach girls that they can only be mommies and stay at home and cook for their husband. That's a bunch of bulls—t ..."

When discussing future careers and professions, right- but not left-wing activists denied the existence of a gender pay gap and the idea that women still face sex discrimination today.

Yet, both left- and right-wing participants criticized feminist mothers who refuse to buy their daughters Barbie dolls or let them dress as Disney princesses. Both groups argued that this practice devalues objects and activities that are typed as feminine. Neither group acknowledged how such toys or representations reinforce gender stereotypes.

Moreover, conservative activists expressed ambivalence about boys engaging in stereotypical girl practices, saying they would not paint their son's room pink or allow him to wear a dress. Some said something is lost when boys are not taught "how to be good men," responsible for

themselves and others, such as their children and the mother of their children.

Activists on both sides referenced the idea of gender identity as innate, an idea traditionally associated with conservatives, but they conceptualized this differently, with distinct implications for attitudes about parenting.

Most left-wing activists supported while most right-wing activists rejected the idea of a child living in a way that does not align with their birth sex. For right-wing activists, birth sex determined interests and personality, while a majority of activists on the left said gender identity and expression could diverge from birth sex.

Left-wing [activists](#) tended to insist that kids have an innate sense of who they are and that parents must "follow a child's lead." They held to this view whether children behaved in gender-nonconforming ways or in ways that seemed to reinforce gender stereotypes.

"Our study suggests that we need a broader conversation about gender and parenting," Saguy said. "Right now, the conversation is focusing heavily on children's [gender identity](#) expression. There is much less discussion, even on the left, about how gender inequality is reproduced in childhood and how different parenting practices might contribute to disrupting that."

More information: Mallory E Rees et al, Following a Child's Lead and Setting Kids Up for Success: Convergence and Divergence in Parenting Ideologies on the Political Right and Left, *Social Forces* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soae069](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soae069)

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