

Gender Stereotypes- Alive and Well at My House

My seven year old daughter shrieked as she saw her two year old brother walking outside to play in the snow. "Mom!, how could you put those on him? Everyone in the neighborhood will make fun of him!"

It was the mittens. They were hand-me-downs from his sister and they were just the right size and covered his wrists just the right way so that the snow wouldn't get in. They were soft, warm, and well....pink. You would have thought by her reaction that I had dressed her brother in a shocking pink tutu complete with tiara and toe shoes, but to her the mittens were enough to send a clear cut message. The mittens belonged on a girl and I had put them on a boy.

Because we do not want our children to be limited by conventional gender roles, my partner, Barbara and I are always trying to counter society's narrow stereotypes. We hope this will empower our kids to follow their natural inclinations even when it might take them outside the lines.

"Everyone can play with everything; there is no such thing as boy or girl toys."

"Anyone can like any color. Pink does not belong to girls, and blue does not belong to boys."

Over and over, like mantras, I have repeated these and other, similar phrases to our daughter, with the goal of opening up all of life's possibilities to her.

So what are the results of my labors? The scene I recently witnessed as we were looking over her newly purchased school valentines says it all. "Most of these have hearts on them, so maybe I should buy some different ones for the boys." "Boys don't like hearts?, I asked, "they *have* hearts." I added, thinking I was pretty clever. "Hearts are girlish." was her honest response, and I spent a while after that telling her we were not about to go to the store again looking for heart-free boyish valentines.

Yes, gender stereotypes are alive and well and living at my house. Evidently, having two politically correct mothers does not protect our children -- society's message is strong and it will not be denied.

"If I had a dad, he would be the one to drive, because in families where there are dads, they do most of the driving." My daughter matter-of-factly informed her friend one day in the backseat on the way to the mall. How does a child with two moms even think of that?

But my daughter has taught me that gender and all the baggage that comes with it is not an all or nothing prospect, and with that I see some hope that our message is getting through. She consistently chooses to play her Gameboy over Barbie dolls and loves doing science experiments and making forts outside.

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She recently told me that maybe god is a girl, that boys can have makeovers, and she would like to take karate lessons. Although she is a traditional girl on some levels, that does not mean she can't also think independently and outside the box on other levels.

Our son is too young to know about gender roles, but we are already aware of what society expects of little boys. We make a big deal whenever we pass a construction site or a football practice, like we are grooming him for his future simply because he is male. Right now though, he is happiest when his sister is putting make-up and dance costumes on him.

I remind myself that just because as a girl I always preferred Barbie and baby dolls over baseball, I don't need to force my daughter to be the Barbie loving maniac I was.

And Barbara has learned to squelch her first inclination to push the gender neutral and traditionally male stuff on our daughter because that is what she preferred.

As a mom, I can realize that each of us is made up of many parts, some of which fall easily within the gender stereotypes and others which do not. I will remain flexible when entering the toy aisle, but I will not ignore the facts that not only are we all swayed by society's strong commitment to label things "boy" or "girl", but there is some truth in every stereotype.

As I wait for our newest child to be born, I still haven't purchased many baby clothes. Why? I have to wait to see if it is a girl or a boy so I will know whether to buy pink or blue.

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