



Equal Play?

Analyzing Gender Stereotypes,
Diversity, and Inclusion in
Advertising and Marketing for the
Most Popular Toys of 2022

Geena Davis Institute *of* **Women** on Gender in Media
If she can see it, she can be it.™

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Executive Summary

Toys aren't just for fun. Toys and games help children develop cognitively and impart a broad range of social, emotional, and physical skills. Although it has varied over time,¹ children's toys have been coded in ways that clearly convey expectations about distinctive male and female interests, tastes, and preferences, and they are even segregated into separate and clearly identifiable aisles in toy stores. Recently, some parents have expressed concerns about the socializing power of children's toys and clothing, and questioned whether the messages the toys convey limit children's imaginations and expectations. For instance, a shirt pronouncing that "Desert Adventure Awaits" provides boys with active encouragement, whereas a shirt reading "Hey, Beautiful" conveys a more passive sentiment and reinforces expectations that girls' worth is measured against some kind of cultural beauty standard. Some toy and clothing companies strive to be more gender-inclusive with their products and advertising,² but it's unclear how much these industries are responding to evolving ideas about gender and changing consumer preferences. In this report, we investigated whether advertisements that market today's most popular toys continue to rely on gender stereotypes or move beyond the gender binary. We also examined representation in terms of diversity and inclusion based on what identities were featured in the advertisements and what role those identities played. We conducted a content analysis of 175 advertisements for toys listed as "best selling" by the top-three toy retailers (Target, Walmart, and Amazon) as of March 2022. The results suggest gender stereotypes remain very prevalent in popular children's toys. Most toys were clearly marketed toward girls or boys, with only about 23% of top toys falling into the gender-neutral category. Advertisements featuring toys marketed to girls (e.g., baby dolls) overwhelmingly focused on nurturing. Advertisements featuring toys marketed to boys were predominantly cars, sporting equipment or games, and toy weapons, with masculine music and language used in these ads more than in ads for toys marketed to girls. These results suggest that gender-inclusive products and marketing strategies for toys tend to be the exception rather than the rule.



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Key Findings

Who was represented in toy advertisements?

- Girls made up about 56% of actors in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022.
- About 52% of all child actors in toy advertisements were white, 20% were Black, about 9% were Latino, and 5% were Asian and Pacific Islanders.
- Children with disabilities were severely underrepresented. In all of the advertisements analyzed, only one child had a visible disability.
- Most dolls (including traditional dolls, human figures, and action figures) in toy advertisements were female (73.2%) and white (69.0%). All action figures were white and male. No dolls were shown with a disability.
- There was no significant difference between the race of a character and the race of the doll they were depicted with.

Who was playing with what toys?

- Cars and sports: Boys in advertisements for best-selling toys were 1.5 times more likely than girls to be shown playing with toys that were cars or related to sports. Cars or sports-related toys made up approximately 25% of the toys that children played with in the ads analyzed.
- Dolls: Dolls included traditional dolls, human figures, and action figures. Girls in toy advertisements were 7.2 times more likely than boys to be shown playing with dolls, which made up approximately 12% of the toys that children played with. No girls were shown playing with action figures, while 57.9% of boys playing with dolls played with action figures.
- Toy weapons: Boys in toy advertisements were 3.4 times more likely than girls to be shown playing with toy weapons, which made up approximately 6% of the toys that children played with.
- Boys and girls in toy advertisements were depicted playing with basic learning and STEM learning toys at more similar rates.

How were children shown playing with toys?

- Nurture: Toys marketed to girls were 18 times more likely to be shown demonstrating nurturing or domestic skills than toys marketed to boys.
 - ▷ Action figures were never played with in a nurturing way, while 66.7% of dolls and 29.4% of small human figurines were played with in a nurturing way.
- Violence: Seventy-five percent of toys that were played competitively or violently were played with by boys.
- Learning: When learning play was shown, it was never shown in an ad marketed to boys. But 63.5% of the time learning play was shown, it was in an ad marketed to girls. For the rest of the time, learning play was shown in gender-neutral ads (ads marketed equally to boys and girls).

How was “play” shown?

- Generally, male and female actors in ads were shown expressing similar emotions when engaging in play – with the exception of excitement (45.8% of female actors compared with 37.4% of male actors).
- Actors of color were more likely than white actors to show excitement (52.3% compared with 42.3%) and were less likely to be portrayed as calm (21.6% compared with 29.5%).

How did marketing techniques reinforce gender norms and expectations?

- Actors' clothing colors reinforced gendered norms. Of boys in advertisements for best-selling toys, 73.6% wore mainly colors like blue or green, and 25.3% wore mainly red. By contrast, 40.8% of girls wore blue or green, and 7.5% of girls wore red.
- Of girls in toy advertisements, 51.7% wore mainly pink or purple, compared with just 1.1% of boys.
- Boys were shown playing with blue or green toys 67.1% of the time and red toys 15.7% of the time. Girls were shown playing with blue or green toys 36.8% of the time and red toys 6.1% of the time.
- Girls were shown playing with pink or purple toys 57.0% of the time, compared with 17.1% of the time for boys.
- When a toy advertisement used a female narrator, the ad featured more female actors. When there was a male narrator, the ad featured fewer female actors.

Foreword

BY LAUREL WIDER, FOUNDER OF WONDER CREW, PSYCHOTHERAPIST
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GIRLS, AUTHOR, DEI CONSULTANT

As recognized toy industry thought leaders and social impact experts, we are thrilled to collaborate with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media on this groundbreaking research as it pertains to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in children’s toys, media, content, and advertising. By exposing children to toys and media that break down stereotypes and include and embrace diversity as it applies to gender, race, ethnicity, culture, ability, and more, we offer them the opportunity to authentically develop their talents and pursue their passions without limits.

Through an analysis of television advertisements for the top-selling children’s toys in 2022, this report offers the toy, media, and advertising industries strategies, including a recommendations checklist, as helpful tools to create more diverse and inclusive play. It’s our hope this research serves as a catalyst for industry conversation and action to expand play, perceptions, and potential for a more inclusive, innovative, and equitable world.

Introduction

Toys play an important role in children's gender socialization. Past research suggests that toys tend to be marketed to either boys or girls — not both — and this coincides with distinctive patterns of play.³ Marketing materials often employ gender roles and stereotypes through colors, characteristics of the actors using the toy, the way they play with the toy, and the type of emotional experience associated with play.⁴ Parents are responsive to this marketing and can reinforce gender stereotypes through both the toys they purchase for their children and the types of play they encourage and discourage.⁵

In this report, we look at gendered messages in contemporary toy advertising to see whether these trends persist. The advertisements we selected for this study represent the top toys of 2022 for children ages five through eleven, distributed by the top-three toy retailers. Given the popularity of the toys and size of the retailers' distribution networks, we expect these advertisements represent the types of advertising materials that the average child, parent, and other toy consumer are exposed to on a regular basis.

TOYS CAN REINFORCE GENDER NORMS

Previous studies have found that girls' play is typically associated with themes such as physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skills.⁶ Boys' play, on the other hand, is often associated with themes pertaining to violence, competition, and risk-taking.⁷ Even when boys and girls play with a broadly similar type of toy, they tend to participate in play differently. Take dolls for instance.

While girls are more likely than boys to play with baby dolls, girls also play with fashion dolls, which come with accessories like brushes to care for and groom the dolls. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to play with action-figure dolls, which frequently come with accessories like toy weapons and tend to be more active and mobile, with knee and elbow joints rather than fixed, static bodies (as commonly found on baby dolls).⁸ These specifications of each subcategory of toy further communicate *how* children should play with toys based on their gender assigned at birth, and this can further perpetuate ideas of *how* boys and girls should act in the social world.

Toys are also gendered through the use of color.⁹ Previous studies have



Indeed / ABSODELS via Getty Images

found that toys and clothes made for girls are in variations of pink, while toys and clothes made for boys are in variations of blue. However, toys and clothes made for girls have a wider variety of color than toys made for boys, meaning that toys and clothes marketed to boys have a more rigid color code.¹⁰ Since the 1990s, the color code has persisted as toy marketing uses it to separate “boy” toys from “girl” toys.

REPRESENTATION AND STEREOTYPES IN TOY ADVERTISING

Gender is not the only prominent stereotype in toy advertisements. For example, dolls are primarily white, often leaving children of color to play with and care for white dolls.¹¹ Similarly, it is uncommon for dolls to appear disabled.¹² And Black children are still tokenized in toy marketing, where a single Black child is included in a commercial otherwise featuring white children. Additionally, toy advertising portrays class-based identities through chosen locations for advertisements, such as through the “regal infant” that lives a life of luxury picnicking in a white dress at the tennis court — a setting in which a Black child would not commonly be portrayed. Advertisements also regularly show white children as active go-getters, while children of color are less likely to be characterized in passive terms.¹³ Given this information, some experts are urging parents to diversify their child’s toys with dolls and action figures of different skin tones, games and toys that incorporate acceptance of learning and using multiple languages, and by being more mindful of how toys reinforce negative power structures in the type of play those toys promote.¹⁴ However, it’s unclear whether toy manufacturers and marketers are trying to appeal to parents on these grounds.

WHY REPRESENTATION MATTERS

Toys are learning tools that communicate to children how they should move through the world and the kinds of things they might be interested in and aspire to. But if toy advertisements message that girls should be calm, nurturing, and beautiful, while boys are encouraged to be strong, aggressive, and competitive,¹⁵ then such advertising reinforces rigid, unhelpful gender norms. And if children of color and differently abled children are barely being spoken to or represented at all, then these kids are rendered invisible. Toy advertising that features accurate and inclusive portrayals of all types of children can reduce negative stereotypes and can also help children to see themselves represented in ways that positively contribute to their cognitive development and sense of personal identity.

Methodology

To assess the prevalence of gendered norms and other stereotypes in toy advertising, we conducted a content analysis of television commercials for toys ranked as best-selling for children ages five through eleven years old in March 2022, as identified by sorting toys on the websites of the top-three toy retailers for best- to worst-selling: Walmart, Target, and Amazon. We identified the toys that had commercials either on iSpot,¹⁶ a repository of television advertising, or on the manufacturers' website or social media channels.¹⁷ Across 175 advertisements, we collected data on 544 actors — 406 children ages infant through seventeen, and 138 adults. Data was collected on 528 toys, 351 of which child actors directly interacted with in the ad. For clarity and ease, when referring to “children,” the discussion is about those ages infant through seventeen. And for brevity, when we say “boys” or “girls,” we are referring to child actors of those genders.

We present findings according to the following topics: representations in toy advertisements (of people and dolls), who is playing with what toys, how children are shown playing with toys, how the act of “play” is shown, and marketing techniques used that reinforce gender norms and expectations.



FatCamera/E+via Getty Images

Findings

This section presents the findings of the content analysis, which assesses representations of gender and race. We discuss how these identities were shown on screen as well as the ways in which gender norms in design, type of play, actions, emotions, and marketing were present within toy advertisements. Overall, some improvements have been made since previous research studies, but there remains a lack of a diverse representation on screen.

Furthermore, there continues to be a reinforcement of gender norms in categories such as wardrobe color and toy color, nurturing and violent play, and interaction with dolls.

Comparing our findings with previous research, however, shows that the types of toys that girls and boys played with were less divided than in the past. Also, girls and boys were both shown as being social and playing in a variety of locations; previous research indicated that girls were less likely to be shown playing with other children and were more likely to be shown playing indoors in realistic settings, perpetuating the idea that girls were expected to stay inside doing domestic work, while boys were free to run around and enjoy leisure activities. Our findings indicate that there have been improvements in discouraging previously displayed gender norms in toy advertising.

WHO WAS REPRESENTED IN TOY ADVERTISEMENTS?

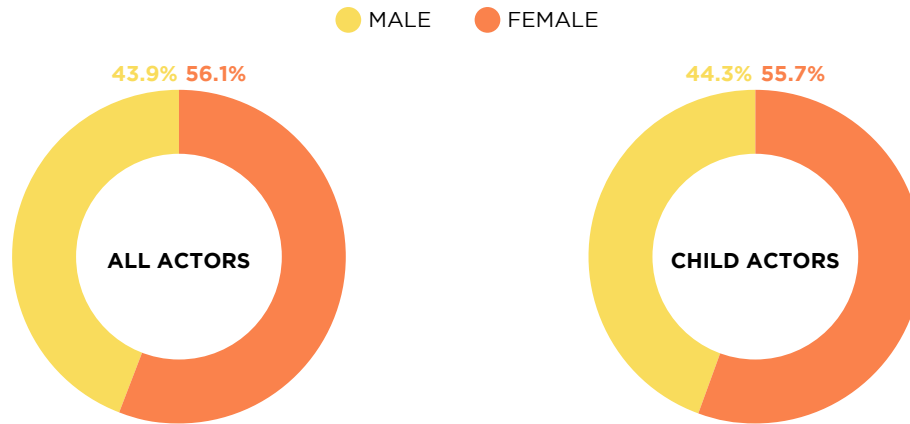
As shown in Table 1, 56.1% of all actors in advertisements for best-selling toys and 55.7% of child actors were female, and 43.9% of all actors and 44.3% of child actors were male. The vast majority of the actors on screen in toy advertisements were zero through seventeen years old (74.3%).



lisegagne / E+ via Getty Images

CHART 1 • Gender representation in toy ads (all actors and child actors)

More than half of the actors shown in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022 were female



A total of 544 actors are included in the sample. Of these, 406 were identified as children between the ages of zero and seventeen.

Although female actors outnumbered male actors, these actors’ intersectional identities lacked diversity. Looking exclusively at actors who were children (ages zero through seventeen), we find that the majority of boys and girls were white and that portrayals of historically excluded groups within other identity categories were uncommon (Table 1).

TABLE 1 • Intersectional gender representation (child actors)

Intersectional diversity was lacking among boys and girls in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022

	ALL CHILDREN	PERCENT OF GIRLS	PERCENT OF BOYS
White	65.8%	61.3%	70.4%
Black	20.0%	21.8%	17.9%
Asian and Pacific Islanders	5.0%	5.8%	3.9%
Latino	9.4%	11.1%	7.3%
Multiracial	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%
LGBTQIA+	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Large Body Type	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Disabled	0.2%	0.4%	0.0%

Were dolls diverse across gender and race? To answer that question, we collected doll demographics as well. Generally, most dolls were female (73.2%) and white (69.0%). Additionally, all action figures were white and male. No dolls were shown with a disability (Table 2).

TABLE 2 • Intersectional gender representation of dolls

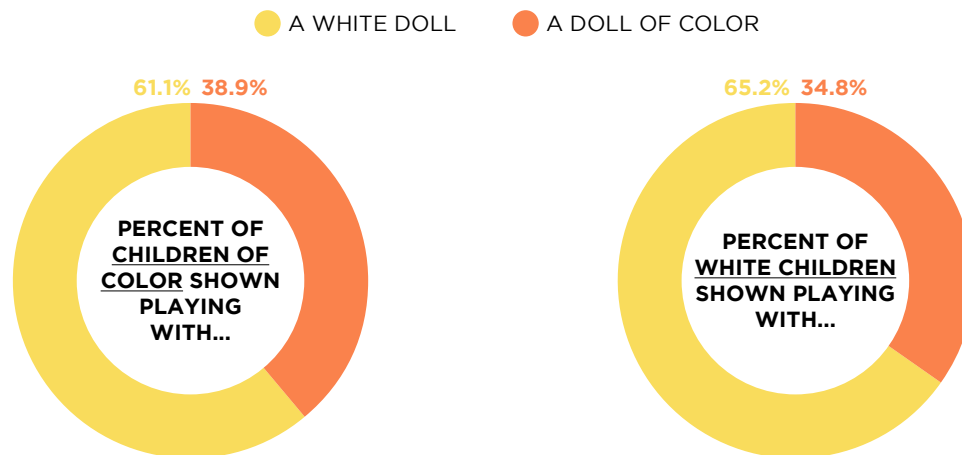
Intersectional diversity was lacking among dolls, especially male dolls, in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022

	PERCENT OF ALL DOLLS	PERCENT OF FEMALE DOLLS	PERCENT OF MALE DOLLS
Male	26.8%	N/A	N/A
Female	73.2%	N/A	N/A
White	69.0%	59.6%	94.7%
Black	19.7%	26.9%	0.0%
Asian and Pacific Islanders	4.2%	5.8%	0.0%
Latino	7.0%	7.7%	1.4%
Disabled	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

However, there is not a significant difference in whether white children played with dolls that were or weren't white, or in whether children of color played with dolls that were or weren't white. This is a considerable finding given the need for children to both feel represented in the dolls they play with as well as have a greater and more empathetic understanding of all races and ethnicities. However, children of color still played with white dolls more often than they played with dolls of color.

CHART 2 • Racial demographics of children and their dolls

White children and children of color played with dolls of color at similar rates (about one-third of the time) in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022



In total, just 18 children of color and 23 white children were shown playing with a doll.

WHO WAS PLAYING WITH WHAT TOYS?

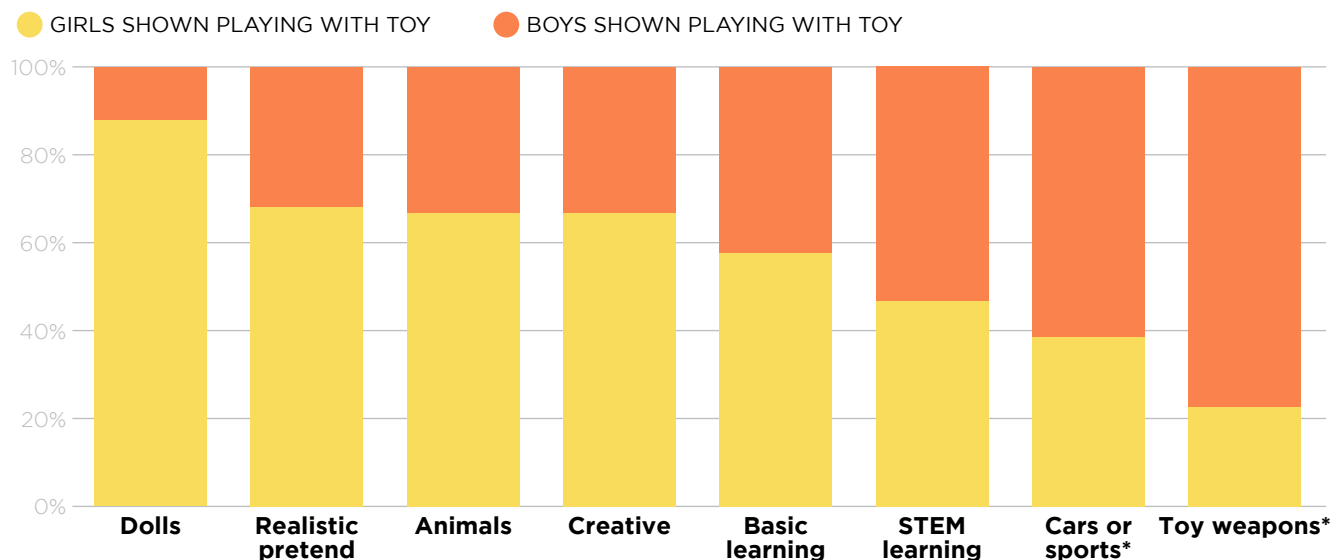
Toys in advertisements can be gendered based on who is shown playing with them. For example, if toy cars are mostly shown being played with by boys, they become associated with that gender. Similarly, if baking toys are mostly shown being played with by girls, they become associated with that gender. Are there toys that are more often played with by one gender? Our analysis found some types of toys to be gendered in this way (see Chart 3):

- **DOLLS:** Girls in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022 were 7 times more likely than boys to be shown playing with dolls. Dolls made up approximately 12% of the toys that children played with in these ads.
- **TOY WEAPONS:** Boys were 3 times more likely than girls to be shown playing with toy weapons. Toy weapons made up approximately 6% of the toys that children played with in these ads.
- **CARS AND SPORTS:** Boys were 1.5 times more likely than girls to be seen playing with toys that were cars or related to sports. Cars or sports-related toys made up approximately 25% of the toys that children played with in these ads.

Toys without statistically significant gender differences in who was shown interacting with them included: animals, basic learning toys (such as word games), creative or artistic toys (such as magnetic sand or molding clay), realistic pretend toys (such as domestic cleaning toys like a sink for doing dishes, or occupation playsets like medical kits or bakeries), and STEM learning toys (such as science kits or Lego blocks). Therefore, we characterize these toys as “gender neutral.” Gender gaps exist within some of these categories we define as gender neutral, but the differences did not rise to the level of statistical significance (see Chart 3). About 45% of the toys advertised were marketed to girls, 31% were marketed to boys, and about 23% were marketed equally to boys and girls.

CHART 3 • Who played with which toys?

Boys were 3-4 times more likely than girls to be shown playing with weapons, cars, or sports-related toys in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022



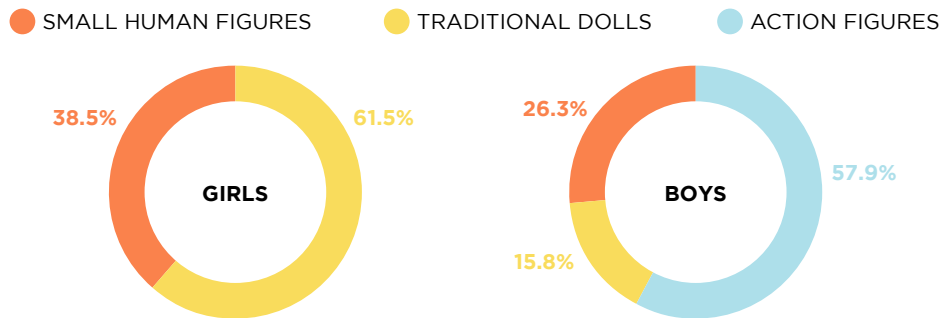
The percentage represents the share of the time each toy was shown being interacted with by a girl or a boy. Differences were statistically significant for “cars or sports,” “toy weapons,” and “dolls.”

*Indicates that the difference between boys and girls is statistically significant

Although interactions with dolls were just a small share of play shown, the types of dolls that girls and boys played with is notable. We break dolls into three groups: 1) action figures, such as superheroes; 2) traditional dolls, such as Barbies or baby dolls; 3) small human figures, such as small army men or women, or pocket-size people. When a boy was shown playing with a doll, 57.9% of the time it was an action figure. Just 15.8% of the dolls played with by boys were traditional dolls, and 26.3% were small human figures. Girls were never shown playing with action figures. Two-thirds of the time, girls were shown playing with traditional dolls, and one-third of the time, with small human figures.

CHART 4 • What kind of dolls were children playing with?

Girls were never shown playing with action figures in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022



HOW WERE CHILDREN SHOWN PLAYING WITH TOYS?

When nurturing or domestic play was shown in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022, 91.7% of the time it was in an ad marketed to girls. When competitive play was shown, 51.7% of the time it was in a gender-neutral ad. Only 10.1% of the time was competitive play shown in an ad marketed to girls, compared with 38.2% of the time in ads marketed to boys (Chart 5).



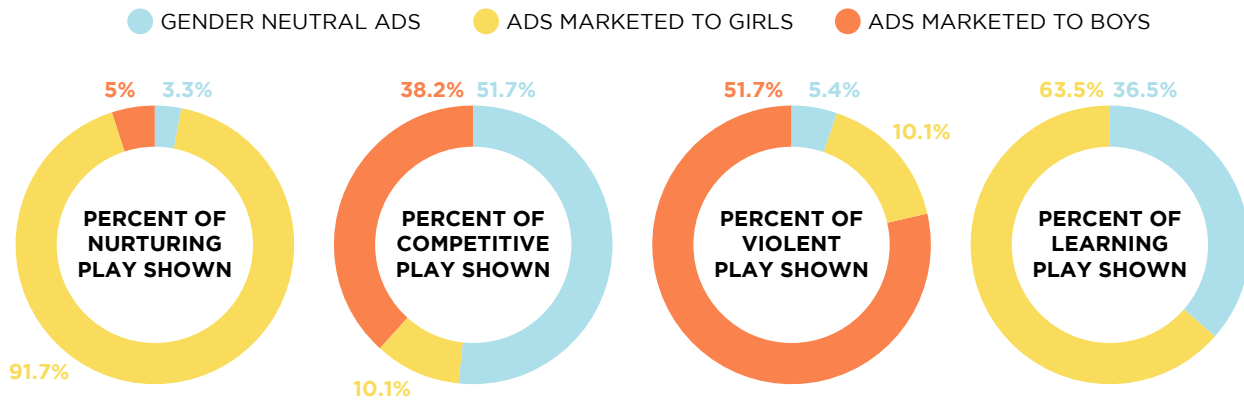
ONOKY - Eric Audras / Brand X Pictures via Getty Images

Additionally, toys primarily marketed to girls were played with in a manner for teaching or learning, with no toys marketed to boys were played with using teaching or learning actions. Notably, more than 75% of toys that were shown being played with violently were toys primarily played with by boys.

These findings show that toy advertising in 2022 still perpetuated the gender norm that girls should perform domestic duties and be more nurturing, while boys should act more aggressive and violent. It is also significant, though, that toys that promote learning were most often shown to be marketed at girls or were shown in gender-neutral ads, but such toys were never marketed to only boys.

CHART 5 • Types of play shown in ads marketed to boys and girls

Nurturing play was most common in toys marketed to girls, and violent play was most common in toys marketed to boys, in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022



Gender-neutral ads are ads where both boys and girls were shown. Ads marketed to girls are ads where more girls than boys were shown. Ads marketing to boys are ads where more boys than girls were shown. In total, there were 60 instances of nurturing play, 80 instances of competitive play, 37 instances of violent play, and 52 instances of learning play.

HOW WAS PLAY SHOWN?

What emotions do children in toy advertisements express when they’re playing with the toys? We looked at expressions of excitement, calm, and deviance. The most common of these was excitement, followed by calm and, lastly, deviance. Female and male actors were shown expressing similar emotions when engaging in play apart from excitement – 45.8% of female actors showed excitement compared with 37.4% of male actors (Table 3).

TABLE 3 • Gender and depictions of emotions while playing

Girls were more likely than boys to show excitement in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022

	PERCENT OF FEMALE ACTORS SHOWN	PERCENT OF MALE ACTORS SHOWN
Excited	45.8%	37.4%
Calm	27.2%	23.8%
Deviant	2.7%	4.2%

In total, 286 actors were shown as excited, 170 were shown as calm, and 22 were shown as deviant. Differences in excitement between boys and girls is statistically significant.

Actors of color were more likely than white actors to be shown as excited (52.3% compared with 42.3%) and were less likely to be shown as calm (21.6% compared with 29.5%). Differences in portrayals of emotions like these can perpetuate the stereotype that children of color are erratic and have trouble remaining calm.

TABLE 4 • Race and depictions of emotions while playing

Actors of color were more likely than white actors to show excitement and were portrayed as less calm in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022

	PERCENT OF ACTORS OF COLOR SHOWN	PERCENT OF WHITE ACTORS SHOWN
Excited	52.3%	42.3%
Calm	21.6%	29.5%
Deviant	4.0%	3.6%

In total, 286 actors were shown as excited, 170 were shown as calm, and 22 were shown as deviant.

We also looked at gender differences in social play, leadership play, and imaginative play. Previous studies have found that toys marketed to boys were more likely to stimulate social play.¹⁸ We did not find this difference in our sample, suggesting a possible positive shift in the encouragement of social play for boys and girls.

Were there gender differences in 2022 toy-advertisement settings? We considered the following advertising settings: 1) constructed studio spaces (i.e., spaces created by the production team such as plain white backgrounds); 2) imaginative settings (e.g., fairytale castles, a dragon's lair); 3) realistic indoor settings (e.g., the kitchen, living room, bedroom); and 4) realistic outdoor settings (e.g., the park, backyard, swimming pool).

Previous research has indicated that female actors were less likely than male actors to be shown playing outdoors and were more likely to be seen in realistic indoor settings than in imaginary or fantastical settings.

Our analysis found that female actors were slightly more likely than male actors to be seen in realistic outdoor settings (49.0% compared with 45.5%), and that male actors were more likely than female actors to be seen in realistic indoor settings (24.5% compared with 18.3%), contrary to previous stereotypes of the locations where boys and girls are expected to spend their time. Still, in alignment with previous studies, boys were 2.3 times as likely as girls to be shown in imaginative settings of play (2.2% compared with 6.6%).

TABLE 5 • **Were there gender differences in toy advertisement settings?**

There weren't large gender differences in settings in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022

SETTING	PERCENT OF GIRLS	PERCENT OF BOYS
Studio Space	30.5%	23.4%
Imaginative Settings	2.2%	6.6%
Realistic Indoor Settings	18.3%	24.5%
Realistic Outdoor Settings	49.0%	45.5%

In total, 310 actors were shown in realistic outdoor settings, 179 were shown in a studio space, 137 were shown in realistic indoor settings, and 27 were shown in imaginative settings.



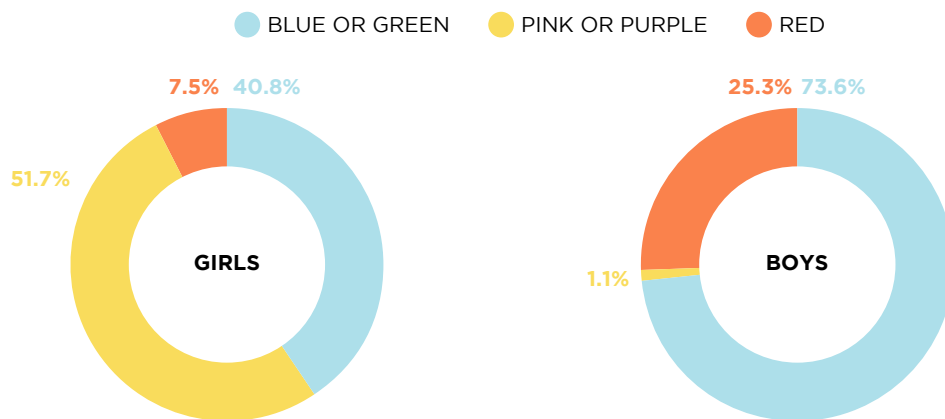
kate_sept2004/E+ via Getty Images

HOW DID MARKETING REINFORCE GENDER NORMS?

Did toy advertising reinforce gender norms with colors in 2022? Consistent with previous research, our analysis found that girls were more likely than boys to be shown wearing pink or purple (51.7% compared with 1.1%), and boys were more likely than girls to be shown wearing blue or green (73.6% compared with 40.8%). Boys were also more likely to be shown wearing red (25.3% of boys compared with 7.5% of girls).

CHART 6 • Do child actors in toy advertising wear gendered colors?

The majority of boys wore blue or green, and the majority of girls wore pink or purple, in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022



In total, 127 actors were shown wearing blue or green, 77 were shown wearing pink or purple, and 34 were shown wearing red.

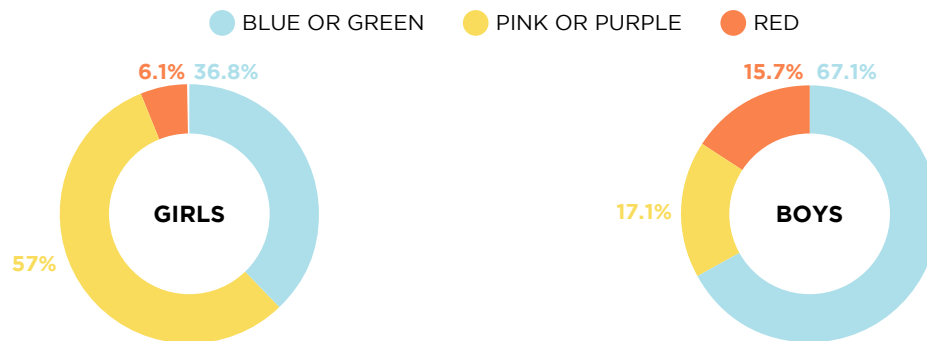
When observing the colors of the toys that children played with in advertisements, similar gendered patterns occur. Still, girls were seen with a wider color variety and were still shown playing with toys that were blue, green, and red, whereas boys played with toys that were pink or purple only 17% of the time. Therefore, we still see consistency in marketing techniques of defining what toys children should play with based on their gender.



Mike Kemp / Tetra Images via Getty Images

CHART 7 • Did girls play with pink toys, and did boys play with blue toys?

The majority of boys played with blue or green toys in advertisements for best-selling toys in 2022



In total, 89 actors played with blue or green toys, 77 played with pink or purple toys, and 18 played with red toys.

Additionally, when analyzing techniques of advertising music, language, and narration, we defined “feminine music” as calming and featuring gentle tones, “masculine music” as edgy and featuring extremely upbeat tones, and “neutral music” as featuring playful tones. Using logistic regression analysis, we found that the presence of female actors in an ad had a positive relationship with gender-neutral music and a negative relationship with masculine music. As the proportion of girls in an ad increased, the likelihood that the music was masculine decreased, whereas the likelihood that the music was neutral increased. The relationship between girls in the ad and the presence of feminine music was positive but not statistically significant.

We also found gendered differences in the proportions of girls presented with the use of imaginative and violent language, but found no significance in reference to educational and nurturing language. The language variable in our analysis was defined as: any language that may have been used in the packaging of the toy itself or spoken by the actors or narrator in the advertisements. Imaginative language were words like “believe” or “create,” while violent language were words like “destroy” or “crash.” Educational language is any verbiage that encourages learning, and nurturing language were words about care or compassion.

Using logistic regression, we found a positive relationship between the proportion of female actors in ads and an ad’s use of imaginative language, and a negative relationship between the proportion of female actors in ads and the use of violent language. We found no significant relationship between the proportion of female actors in ads and the use of nurturing or educational language.

Similarly, we found a positive relationship between the proportion of male actors in ads and the ad’s use of masculine music and violent language. We found a negative relationship between the proportion of male actors and the use of imaginative language. We found no relationships between the proportion of male actors and the use of feminine music or educational or nurturing language.

Lastly, we examined the relationship between the gender of actors featured on screen and the gender of an ad’s narrator. The relationship between the proportion of female actors in the ad and a female narrator was positive, as was the relationship between the proportion of male actors and a male narrator. Similarly, the relationship between the proportion of female actors in the ad and a male narrator was negative, as well as the relationship between the proportion of male actors and a female narrator. Thus, when a narrator of a particular gender described a toy, they were speaking to children of that same gender presentation in the ad.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our analysis of television advertisements made for the top-selling children's toys in 2022 suggests that representations of children should be more inclusive. And although boys and girls were nearly equally common in ads, the quality of their representation varied in ways that conform to traditional gender stereotypes. In terms of race and ethnicity, nearly 66 percent of children shown on screen were white, while 20 percent were Black. About 9 percent were Latino, and representation of children from other racial and ethnic groups, such as Native Americans or people from the Middle East, was even more uncommon. Although these figures may show improvements from toy advertisements of the past, the numbers fall short of mirroring the racial and ethnic diversity of young children in the United States today. Additionally, most dolls and action figures were white, suggesting limited opportunities for children of color to play with toys that look like them. Furthermore, there was no representation of LGBTQIA+ children or children with physical, cognitive, or communication disabilities. The lacking depiction of these diverse identities means that many children do not feel represented when they see children in advertisements.

Despite experts' calls for more gender-inclusive play, as well as parents' interest in expanded toy options, we find that contemporary toy advertisements have not evolved much over time in terms of the social messages they convey about gender. While 2022 toy advertisements showed girls and boys playing with a variety of toys, most toys had clearly gendered associations, with dolls targeted toward girls but sports equipment, cars, and toy weapons targeted toward boys. Marketing also continues to forge gendered associations in more subtle ways, such as through color, music, narrator gender, and the selective use of imaginative (for girls) and aggressive (for boys) language. Portrayals of toys in this manner reinforce stereotypes about girls' and boys' interests, and contribute to ideas that can hinder children's creativity and ambition.



FatCamera / E+ via Getty Images

The gendering of toys in advertisements also communicates rigid social norms surrounding how girls and boys should behave. In turn, this buttresses an outdated gender binary, defining boys and girls in terms of what differentiates them rather than what similarities they share. To help disrupt reliance on gender tropes and stereotypes, and broaden diversity and inclusion, use our checklist:

MAKE TOY ADS MORE RACIALLY DIVERSE

My toy ads feature characters that are racially diverse.

What is the racial diversity of the cast in your ads? Do the ads include numerous racial identities, and are your ads reflecting the racial demographics of the population? When children from diverse racial backgrounds are represented on screen, more children will see themselves reflected and feel a part of a community. Cast racially diverse actors from many communities.

My toy ads avoid tokenism.

According to recent surveys, the vast majority of consumers can spot tokenism.¹⁹ Tokenism is the practice of including a single individual (or small relative number of people) from a marginalized group as a stand-in for their perceived group's culture. When your ads depict people of color, are they expected to be a representative for their racial group? It is important to include diverse characters, but when a child is tokenized they may still experience isolation and loneliness. Collaborate with your team to ensure that your ads have adequate diversity while also refraining from tokenism.

If my toy ads feature dolls or action figures, they are racially diverse.

Are the dolls shown in your ads racially diverse, and do they represent the children playing with them? It is important that children from diverse racial backgrounds see that toys reflect their racial identities. When making an advertisement for any type of doll, assess the racial identities of the children playing with the dolls *and* the identities of the dolls themselves. Children should also play with dolls with other racial identities, but our study found most dolls were white.

REJECT OUTDATED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GENDER AND PLAY IN TOY ADS

My toy ads encourage kids of all genders to play.

Do messages in your ad signal that a toy is for girls and not boys, or vice versa? Consider the assumptions you make about what girls and boys might want to play with, or how they would play with toys. Does your ad assume girls are nurturing, and boys are aggressive and competitive? Consult with others to correct when these assumptions unconsciously arise.

Leaders and mentors to children in my toy ads are modeling positive social norms around gender and play.

How do authoritative voices in your ads model social norms? When watching ads, children can identify authoritative figures, such as parents, grandparents, adults in general, and narrators. Do those authoritative figures reinforce gendered social norms? For example, are adults in the ad teaching girls to be calm but encouraging boys to be wild? In the storyline, are female figures cleaning the house, while male figures are engaging in leisure? Be conscious that the scene can influence how children understand gender roles and their own ambitions and aspirations.

FLIP IDENTITY-BASED STEREOTYPES ON THEIR HEAD

My toy ads flip expectations about how children should play.

Do your ads assume who should play with the toy? Think of ways to show children with physical disabilities playing with toys that are assumed to need more mobility, such as vehicles or sports equipment. Brainstorm how to show Black or Latino children demonstrating occupational leadership, such as playing a doctor or a scientist. Consider showing boys playing with baby dolls and girls playing with action figures. Address identity-based stereotypes and then flip it or tilt it!

My toy ads show children expressing a variety of emotions.

We often make assumptions about how children act based on their gender, or their race. Persistent gender assumptions include the notion that girls are sweet, and boys are reckless, and there are racial stereotypes such as Asian children are studious, but not creative. Collaborate with your production team to ensure that children of all identities showcase a variety of emotions as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes.

USE MARKETING STRATEGIES THAT DISRUPT THE GENDER STEREOTYPES

Colors in my marketing materials for toys avoid pink and purple exclusively for toys marketed to girls, and blue or green exclusively for toys marketed to boys.

Are the colors used in your ads conveying overt or subtle messages about gender? Instead of reinforcing existing associations between gender and color, use pink or purple when boys are in scenes, and use primary colors when girls are in scenes; these choices expand social norms for boys and girls. Exclusively using gendered colors reinforces when objects are expected to be played with by particular genders. Recognize that bias and to push against it. Work with your production designer and art director to ensure you do not reinforce the gender binary through use of color. The gender binary defines certain actions, aesthetics, and ideas as male or female and prescribes how boys and girls should act, which is unnecessarily exclusive and limits creativity and expression.

Music and language in my marketing materials for toys avoid feminine tones exclusively for toys marketed to girls, and masculine tones exclusively for toys marketed to boys.

Our study found that soft and light music is often associated with girls' toys, while loud and edgy music is often associated with boys' toys. If an advertisement is for action figures, you might refrain from using overly aggressive language and music to reject the expectation that action figures must be played with violently. If these tactics are used, diversify the characters' genders. Do not use language such as "awww" and "cute!" exclusively with fashion dolls to reject the expectation that fashion dolls must be played with in ways that center their appearances. Talk with your post-production team about ways to resist choosing music and narration that complements a gendered expectation.

EXPAND AND CELEBRATE INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES IN TOY ADS

My toy ads feature many different identities.

Intersectionality acknowledges that everyone has unique experiences especially when considering gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and age. An intersectional approach to casting means recognizing the many facets of people's identities. Presenting this in the production processes means developing well-rounded characters with multiple identities which influence their experiences and actions. Increasing diversity among one identity isn't enough. For example, an equal share of boys and girls on screen should be celebrated, but to reflect their dimensionality, we should consider the broad spectrum of boys' and girls' identities. When casting, try to reflect the diversity among boys and girls, including their race and ethnicity, physical or cognitive abilities, body type, socioeconomic status, and whether they are LGBTQIA+.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP

I asked for help.

Advertising has a big impact on kids, so it's always a good idea to ask for help. There are many ways to ask for help, such as eliciting feedback, especially from diverse crew members. Seek out organizations that can provide feedback and assistance to make sure that the impact of marketing and advertising directed to children is a positive one.

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ABOUT THE GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE ON GENDER IN MEDIA

Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

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Jodi Bondi Norgaard and Laurel Wider initiated and chaired the first North American Toy Association DEI Committee. They are co-authors of a forthcoming children's book series addressing unconscious bias, and consultants helping brands and companies become more inclusive. Jodi and Laurel entered the toy industry breaking down gender stereotypes with their respective award-winning toy brands, Go! Go! Sports Girls and Wonder Crew. Jodi is a public speaker, author, and DEI consultant. Laurel is a psychotherapist LICSW in private practice. Her academic work and professional specialties include gender, family systems, and psycholinguistics.

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