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# INSIGHT

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# WHY I BOUGHT MY SON A TOY KITCHEN

Stop being so paranoid over your kid playing with items targeted to 'wrong' gender

By JEFF HARDER

I was at the gym speaking with another father, our sons both occupying the same wide-eyed, exploratory years before their third birthdays. The conversation veered unexpectedly to this father's latest source of irritation: His son liked to play in his older sister's toy kitchen, and he wanted to toss the kitchen in a dumpster and get his son a set of plastic tools. "Guy toys," he added.

I was ready to judge him — the phrase "guy toys" echoes with insecurity — until I remembered



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Nearly three years of raising children has

challenged most of my parenting assumptions, from when to lift prohibitions on screen time to how many tears I can tolerate before I buy that torchlike in the checkout line. In light of that, I'd like to offer advice to every parent who winces when their son plays with a baby doll or their daughter starts pig-piling G.I. Joes: Stop being so paranoid over your kid playing with toys targeted to the "wrong" gender.

Toys endure as proxy conflict because the culture war never takes a holiday. When Target ceased separating boys' and girls' toys in its stores in 2015, Billy Graham's son invoked Matthew 19:4 to condemn the practice. But gender-specific toys are a relatively recent, marketing-driven phenomenon that only truly emerged in the 1980s. Since then, toy sellers' quests for profits have left consumers with misapprehensions about what it means when girls pick up Tonka trucks and boys dive into their older sisters' makeup kits.

Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, professor emeritus at Eastern Connecticut State University's Center for Early Childhood Education who's studied children at play for more than 30 years, said young children don't consider gender in the toy selections — and no, playing with gendered toys won't make your son gay.

"What kids (do during) play is what they see, what they know about, what they want to know about, what they're concerned about," he said. "If there's a causal relationship, it's that society inspires certain kinds of play — not the other way around."

At his research center at ECSU, Trawick-Smith said, the children who visit largely consider toy dolls, dishes, blocks and trucks to be gender-neutral playthings. And when you're closer to the ground, play serves higher purposes that our adult-sized biases miss: playing in a kitchen helps kids



JEFF HARDER PHOTO

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The author's son is hard at work at his "kitchen." Gender-specific toys are a relatively recent, marketing-driven phenomenon that has left consumers with misapprehensions about what it means when boys dive into their sisters' makeup kits.

# TOY

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learn language and social skills, release emotional stress and develop other qualities that transcend anything having to do with gender roles.

"And it's the same whether it involves a toy stove, or pretending to be a pirate," he said.

In recent years, Trawick-Smith has seen parents begin to back off their gendered-toy worries, though they still exist — most often, he adds, the worriers

are fathers. He has bigger play-related concerns these days, like the fading of run-and-jump outdoor play in the age of tablets and "Fortnite." And when you spend a few clear-eyed minutes thinking about what really matters — and the fact that the line from the childhood toy box to self-actualized adult is never as straight as parents bend it to be in their minds — fretting over your child's toy collection clarifies into stupidity.

Maybe the parents among us who still harbor antiquated, toy-based anxieties need to examine their own pasts. As a kid, I obsessed over die-cast jet planes in elementary school and wouldn't eat grilled

cheese because I thought it was called "girl cheese."

Plot twist: I didn't join the Air Force and now I love grilled cheese. And even if the connection was direct, would it be so bad for a boy who plays in a plastic kitchen to grow into a man who can cook a family dinner? Or a daughter whose fondness for a Fisher-Price power drill led to a student-loan-free career in the trades?

Last Christmas morning, after I set aside my insecurities, my son walked down the stairs, strode past the chimney, saw a shoddily assembled play kitchen next to the tree, and his smile opened from cheek to cheek. For months, he cooked pizzas,

eggs, kiwis, and bacon in a fake frying pan with a surprisingly large collection of real spatulas.

These days, though, he doesn't use the kitchen as much. Without any influence from me beyond swiping my debit card, he's gravitated toward Superman and race cars.

But still, after I put the kettle on in the morning, my son will stomp to his kitchen, produce a plastic wooden cup in his tiny hand, and ask, "Dad, you want a coffee?" Of course I would.

*Jeff Harder is a member of The Courant's Voices board. He lives in Old Saybrook.*