

2.27.00

The Way We Live Now



Little Boy Pink

My 3-year-old son wears a tutu. Take that, Toys 'R' Us.

Last fall, my 3-year-old son, Zander, fell passionately in love with a little girl named Marley, who wore a pink tutu every day. As his obsession increased, Zander developed a serious case of tutu envy. So a friend of mine offered to buy him one. "They come in blue, extra-manly," she said. "You don't mind, do you?"

Mind? I was charmed. I even figured it was healthy — what the books call developmentally appropriate — to allow Zander to play at being a girl. Besides, tutus are fun. They do for the body what new tennis shoes do for the feet.

So my friend gave Zander the tutu of his dreams, and some barrettes for good measure. We went to a sidewalk cafe for hot dogs, the kids pirouetting ahead in their pink and blue his and hers tutus.

I know sociological experiments have shown just how differently people treat little boys and little girls. But none of this was on my mind that afternoon in Berkeley, Calif. That is until someone told me that my "daughter" — who by this time had ketchup all over his face and was running around shrieking — was "precious" and "angelic." In the vegetable co-op a man with a foot-long gray braid stopped to tell me what a beautiful little girl Zander was. Since the little girl in question had bitten a graham cracker into the shape of a gun and was busy shooting out rows of organic bananas, I thought that this guy was hip to our scene. But when I laughed and said, "Isn't he a little though?" he did a double take, apologized and shuffled off.

I momentarily thought I had stumbled into some mysterious little anachronism, a bit of the 1950's gender stereotyping preserved in amber. I held onto my pretty little fantasy that these encounters were anomalous. Everyone else must have felt, as I did, that we

THE APPROPRIATE PLAYTHINGS

EToys.com, an online toy store, offers "great gift ideas" that vary depending on whether you're shopping for a girl or a boy. Here are some of the site's suggestions for 6-year-olds:

BOYS

Pro Pitcher baseball-pitching machine
Wild Planet wrist walkie-talkies
Fisher-Price pirate ship
Nerf Triple Strike arrow shooter
Hot Wheels' X-V Racers Daytona 500 Superspeedway Set

GIRLS

Patty Playground interactive doll
Barbie Dream Bed and Bath
My First Phonebook
Yoga Kit for Kids
Baskin-Robbins ice-cream maker

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were lucky to have gotten past all that strict pink-and-blue separatism that ruled the nursery schools of my parents' generation.

I came to my senses at the toy store.

After years and years of producing increasingly inclusive toys — the kind that boys and girls can covet, beg for, play with, get sick of and break with equal delight — toy stores have started the long march backward. Toys "R" Us, which used to be an ecumenical purveyor of sensory overload, even divided its wares into Boy's World and Girl's World.

A safe space in which to pursue one's birthday dream outside the pressures of male-female competition? Sadly, no; just an exercise in stereotyping. Boy's World had architecture sets and soldiers; Girl's World had Barbies and makeup kits. The annual toy fair, held recently in New York, confirmed that not just mega-retailers but the industry as a whole has rediscovered the joy of marketing its wares to Zander and Matley separately.

Don't tell yourself you can avoid this kind of nonsense by staying away from dolls and board games, either. Suddenly almost everything for kids — from computer software to books to knock-around clothes — is a strictly either/or affair. The teen and preteen movies that are powering Hollywood divide pretty neatly between those about romance and popularity and those about grit-filled adventures and getting to see a girl in her bra. It's no better on television, or anywhere else. I'm starting to believe that his and hers Junior Encyclopaedia Britannicas aren't far down the pipeline.

Toys "R" Us caught a lot of flak and killed its revenue. But unless the general trend reverses soon, there'll be no incentive for it to reverse at all. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy: give kids diversions that narrowly focus their understanding of themselves in the world, and after a while they'll stop wondering where the other toys went.

I love my son, and part of what I love about him is that he's a boy. That's part of what makes him him, and it will be a factor in his development at every step along the way. But I have no idea exactly how. And if I don't, I'm entirely certain that the people and companies who are marketing shiny interactive playthings (with flame-retardant materials and no parts that a child could possibly swallow) to him and his cohort don't have an inkling. I'm glad that Zander gets to be a boy. But I'd like him to figure out what that means for himself. And I'd like him to be able to do it in the presence of other boys — like him and unlike him — and, most important, girls.

Astonished that these issues have re-emerged on the dawn of a new century, I found myself starting to think of Zander as a valiant renegade, a role model for little boys and a crusader for the empowerment of little girls. What a great kid I'd raised, who even before his fourth birthday was working hard to rid our culture of injustice! Then I went to tuck him in the other night. "Tomorrow," he said, barely awake, "I want to wear something green." I waited. "With three horns. And . . ." Last year's dinosaur costume, I realized with a sigh — outgrown, hopelessly stained and perhaps the only garment less appropriate for winter attire than a tutu.

But what about the noble crusade, I thought? Still, if my son wants to be a triceratops, who am I to let my preconceptions stand in his way? Anyway, it's probably just a stage. I doubt very much that it means anything. ■

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