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It's Just a Toy

A newly-wed couple is ready to have a baby. They find out it's a boy and immediately begin painting the baby room sky blue and add toys such as trucks, tractors, dinosaurs, and zoo/jungle animals. Sounds typical right? It seems normal to us to have those types of toys for a boy because that has been societies' preconceived way of telling us what should be considered for a boy and what should be considered for a girl. Generation after generation, we continue to repeat these actions because they're so normal to us. It seems odd if they aren't perceived in this same way, newborn after newborn. Will society ever break this chain or continue to follow the "rules" of gender stereotypes? Through the use of a popular television series, the issue of gender and masculinity is portrayed to further explain the societal views of gender-typed toys that have been established throughout our lives.

Most people have heard of, if not seen, the popular 1994 television show series "Friends." With six friends trying to make something of themselves in New York City while figuring out how to be an actual adult, it's a comical and somewhat relatable show to the fan-crazed viewers. A particular character, Ross Geller, always had lady problems, in a sense that he had multiple divorces. One of these divorces involved his ex-wife Carol, who expressed to Ross that she was a lesbian and could no longer be with him. Prior to this, they had a child together

who they named Ben. Little did he know he would immediately be exposed to quite the divided life.

With two moms and one dad, there were destined to be conflicting views, and we see this happen in season three episode four, “The One With the Metaphorical Tunnel.” In this specific scene, Carol and her wife Susan were bringing their two-year old son Ben over to the apartment for Ross to watch him for the weekend. Although, when Ross sees Ben, he also notices that he is holding a Barbie doll. Ross’s reaction, like any other father would probably do, was to question why he was holding a Barbie doll. Ross stated, “What’s uh, what’s my boy doin with a Barbie?” (“The One With the Metaphorical Tunnel”). Carol then proceeds to tell Ross that Ben picked it out at the toy store without the two of them helping him. At this point, Ross is still irritated and continues to question once again why Ben has it. Then Susan says to Ross, “So he’s got a doll, so what? Unless you’re afraid he’s gonna grow up to be in show business!” (“The One With the Metaphorical Tunnel”). His ex-wife Carol then says, “This wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that he’s been raised by two women would it?” (“The One With the Metaphorical Tunnel”). With the opposing comments made toward Ross, he begins to defend his views on what he thinks is acceptable stereotyping since his views on this topic are more traditional than the women’s.

Although the views between Ross, Carol, and Susan are conflicting, there is much importance behind it for Ben. The situations he encounters as a child can affect how he will view certain issues in the future. Research suggests that “Gender typing can be useful because it provides meaning and structure to novel information. However, it is also often associated with memory distortions that reflect gender stereotypes (Martin & Halverson, 1983), and at later stages of development may lead to gender stereotyping and prejudice (Martin & Halverson,

1981) and preferences for careers that are consistent with gender role expectations (Ji, Lapan, & Tate, 2004)” (Hupp, p. 390). Perhaps Susan’s statement to Ross about Ben going into show business was something that he was afraid of and didn’t want Ben to grow up being more feminine. Since Ross thinks that Ben has to play with something “meant for a boy,” his thoughts and perception of “a boy’s toy” are clashing with the views of the women who have a more modern way of accepting non-traditional ways.

Growing up, our parents help guide us and play a major role in how we think and the decisions we make. We see this happening in Ben’s life with Ross, Carol, and Susan parenting him. When Carol stated that Ben picked the doll out himself right after Ross questioned her with much confusion, that was showing how much more lenient the two of them were about Ben having a Barbie doll than Ross was. “The information that surrounds the child and which is internalized comes to the child within the family arena through parent-child interactions, role modeling, reinforcement for desired behaviors, and parental approval or disapproval (Santrock, 1994)” (Witt, p. 253). Ross demonstrates reinforcement for desired behaviors when he was sternly asking Ben to give him the Barbie and pick another toy to play with. Another aspect of this is the parental approval or disapproval. Carol and Susan represent the approval aspect and Ross represents disapproval. If the two moms hadn’t let Ben pick out the doll himself, but instead just chose one for him, they would’ve been modeling for Ben what was acceptable and what was not. Instead, they didn’t disapprove but were rather supportive of his decision. “...While both mothers and fathers contribute to the gender stereotyping of their children, fathers have been found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than do mothers (Ruble, 1988)” (Witt, p. 253). In this scene, Ben was conflicted about what toy to stick with since he was just

praised earlier for picking out the doll and then daddy came along and laid down the law. Shocking.

If you really think about this whole idea, it's quite an interesting concept. It seems like it's a topic that doesn't get much thought put into it because those are just the normal ways that people have generally always followed. But where does that come from? Who decided that dolls had to be for girls and trucks, dinosaurs, etc, had to be for boys? Relating to Ben's case, "Around age 2, most children have an established gender identity, and environmental influences (e.g., familial role models) may have a substantial impact on children's developing understanding of gender (Fagot & Leinbach, 1995; Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006)" (Hupp, p. 390). In this particular situation, this statement relates to Ben because for starters, he's at the typical age for a child to think in this manner. The environmental influences also play a major role in his knowledge since he mostly lives with his two moms. "...In married households much of the family activities and chores are divided according to gender-stereotyped roles (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Thompson & Walker, 1989), and given that single parents (or even mothers with a live-in partner) tend to have fewer gendered roles (Ruble et al., 2006) ..." (Hupp, 392). Even though Carol said that Ben picked out the Barbie doll himself, the fact that two women are for the most part raising him may have a decent amount of reason behind Ben's pick of the doll.

As the episode keeps moving along, Ross tells Carol and Susan if they are okay with him having a Barbie doll, then he was too. But the next scene Ross contradicts what he just said. He sits down with Ben and tries to persuade him to pick another toy to play with. He brings out a monster truck, then a dino-soldier, and a little later on, he tries again with a G.I. Joe doll as well as some role playing to give a little more emphasis. Towards the end of the episode when Carol

and Susan come back to pick up Ben, he tells them how Ben “chose” G.I. Joe over Barbie. Talk about persistent gender-stereotyping.

When going to purchase toys for kids, it’s quite obvious what is more suitable for a girl and vice versa. Companies definitely have a way of trying to sell toys to certain crowds, or in this case, genders. Typically what occurs when looking for toys, or in this case a “doll,” to purchase for a boy is that, “...The packages show the figures themselves, often more human-like than the actual doll, acting in various complex and highly colored illustrations. Language on the packages includes terms such as “kill” and “destroy.” The packages for girls’ dolls use pastel colors, and show real girls playing with, holding, grooming, or gazing at the dolls” (Blakemore, p. 621). Does all of this mean that girls and boys have to stick with a certain toy just because one is more masculine in appearance and the other is covered in pink? According to Ben, he was more attracted to the pink Barbie, which in a lot of seller’s eyes, is not their intention. When a guy has pink clothing, accessories, or whatever else, they are usually seen as “less of a man” because that’s a girl’s color. Some people, like Ross, just don’t stray away from that society-based stereotype.

It seems as if toys have always been gendered and for some reason, hardly anyone has broken the stereotypes that have been in our society for so long. A study done of 1-6 year old’s bedrooms by Rheingold and Cook suggested that there were more vehicles in the boy rooms and there were none to be found in the girl rooms. “Girls’ rooms contained more dolls, doll houses, and domestic items (e.g., sinks, dishes, stoves). Boys almost never had domestic toys. Although dolls were more common for girls, it depended on the kind of doll. Girls had six times as many female dolls and nine times as many baby dolls as boys did, but boys and girls had about the same number of male dolls. In the boys’ rooms, however, “dolls” were usually in such categories

as cowboys and soldiers, probably comparable to today's action figures" (Blakemore, p. 619).

This evidence all makes sense, mostly because those are the toys that we tend to notice in each of the genders' rooms. But maybe this leads to another aspect of how gender-typed toys are perceived and why we are the way we are today.

The perfect family living the American dream is, first of all, not an accurate depiction of our lives, and second, is a reasonable factor of why people have always been stuck in the mindset of a father working and supporting the family while the mother stays home to take care of the chores around the house. In addition, another study was done that resulted in extreme gender stereotypes. It was concluded that "Boys' toys encouraged more fantasy play that was symbolic or removed from daily domestic life, whereas girls' toys encouraged fantasy play that was centered on domestic life" (Blakemore, p. 619). Who said that women are strictly responsible for doing the dishes, laundry, and cooking? And that men are "supposed" to work for a car dealership, fight for our country, and build things? It's interesting to see how such toys at a young age may have shaped who we all are today, even though they are just toys.

As we have seen, there are different reasons as to why we think we have followed societies' perception of what should be masculine and what should be feminine. At a very young age, we are exposed to gender stereotyping with the toys we either choose to play with or are just given to play with. Year after year, baby after baby, gender stereotypes don't seem to budge too much and may seem like they're never going to be broken. Although, it is 2017 and people have fallen away from traditional ways and have explored the modern. "A recent study of children's letters to Santa showed that girls were as likely as boys to ask for real vehicles, sports equipment, and male dolls, and boys were as likely as girls to request clothing and educational or art toys (Marcon & Freeman, 1996)" (Blakemore, p. 620). Even though this is just one experiment done

to find out more about how children are exposed to gender stereotypes, maybe society is slowly making improvements and breaking apart from what we've always known.

As we move forward into the future, it's important that we stay mindful of all the gender stereotypes in our daily lives that start in our childhood with our toys. Whether we're the ones being parented or the parents ourselves, knowing that our decisions will influence our kids and generations after that is what we need to make sure we're aware of. Why stick to the ways we've always known when we all know women are capable of doing "manly things" and it's okay if men want to be a little more "feminine." Times have changed and they will continue to change, but it's societies' choice to decide the effect they have on our young, inexperienced minds.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCTRYIIo7Uk>