



Is It Blocks for Boys and Dolls for Girls?

What About Blocks and Dolls for Everybody?

As an agency using the hashtag #IplayforJPA, one thing our therapists certainly know is that children express themselves, learn about, and grapple with the world through play. With March as gender equality month, it seems apropos to explore the intersection of play and gender.

Picture this: You walk into an early childhood classroom and see the familiar tableau of a block corner, a dress-up center, a section for dollies and strollers, and perhaps a train table or collection of Matchbox cars.

Now take a moment to think about the associations you may have for each of these sections. It is hard not to default to traditional conceptions of gender: a doll section for the girls and a place to build towers for that little boy energy. But if children learn through play, what are they learning and what are they perhaps missing out on when adults hold to the “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts” of the playroom, the “girls play with dolls” and “boys play with trucks” assumptions?

When we think of the capacities children develop in each area in the early classroom, it becomes crystal clear why we say that they learn through play. A great deal of evidence suggests that early construction play (block corner!) is linked to the development of visual-spatial skills. It’s not hard to see that time with the dollies may promote empathy and consideration of the needs of others. Or that when students skip around a train table diligently looping their steam engines over bridges and valleys, their brains are wiring the pathways that facilitate fine and gross motor capacities as well as hand/eye coordination. These skills are relevant and essential to both boys and girls. So why do we label things “boy toys” or “girl toys?”

I recently had the opportunity to speak with a concerned grade school teacher. During free choice time in her classroom, Mateo always

wanted to play house. Ms. Johnson confided that she had been thinking about the impact this choice might have for Mateo and how the other children might regard him. I asked, "What's the response from the other children when Mateo chooses to play house every day?" Ms. Johnson thought for a moment and said, "Well, the girls in the house are thrilled to have him. They make him run around driving the dollies off in the strollers all around the room. I think they have a good time." I wondered a little more, "What about the kids who aren't in the house center, what's their reaction?" Ms. Johnson thought for a minute and said, "Well they're so busy playing in their own centers I actually don't think they care or mind."

Ms. Johnson suddenly connected to the underlying question, which was about her own feelings concerning Mateo's playing in the house

every day. She had some anxiety of her own about what to do if the children were to tease him.

Ms. Johnson and I spoke about talking with children and parents about the centers in the classroom and teaching about the unique developmental benefits provided at each station, benefits that are important for all children.

As Ms. Johnson and I spoke, her anxieties lessened, and the educator in her sprang to the forefront. "Actually there's a lot to be gained for all of the boys in my class to be playing in the house center," she said. "And probably for all the children to be exposed to each of the centers." We sat for a moment quietly letting the revelation sink in. Then Ms. Johnson spoke, cutting through our silence. "The times they are a-changin'," she said quietly, with a slight smile. I sat, unsure if the change she was talking about was one in herself or if she was commenting on shifts in American culture, but it dawned on me that in either case, she was quite right. [JPA](#)

