

From the time we're able to distinguish colors, tone of voice, and touch we begin our journey becoming individuals. Yet we receive certain cues that tell us how to act, how to talk to others, what we're supposed to look like, how we should present ourselves, and what those around us expect us to be depending on if we are male or female long before we ever get around to figuring out who we really are. With this role so clearly defined from outside influences and such a fuzzy uncertainty inside, it's a wonder we ever define those boundaries on our own.

On a field trip to the mall to see where these outside influences begin, some of my assumptions were confirmed and I found some pleasant surprises too. My first stop was a toy store. The first thing I noticed when walking into the store is that one is absolutely bombarded with a variety of every color. You might think it would be difficult to distinguish between toys for boys and toys for girls. I walked straight to the back of the store trying not to notice what was on the shelves because I wanted to take an objective approach. However when I turned the corner intending to start at one end and work my way across, my eyes were blasted with a sea of pink. There was absolutely no way any little boy could wander into that section and have any doubt that it wasn't intended for him unless he had grown up influence free or colorblind. It took my breath away a little to see how blatant the defined line between boys' toys and girls' toys had become. Without a single word spoken, little girls are being told you will play with dolls, you will wear pink, you will love babies and act out a mother's duties with these dolls and pseudo kitchens and appliances; you will be soft, you will be dainty, you will aspire to be Barbie because Barbie has everything and everybody wants her. Well, at least for the boxes they are marketed in that was the message I *heard*.

The toys for boys weren't drowning in a sea of blue like one might expect in contrast, instead there was sort of a sub division in their section. There were the action figures, heroes, and wrestlers and then there was the machinery or weapons. Regardless it was obvious that the toys were confirming the probably personal external influence that boys receive; you must be strong, you must be a hero, and you will not be soft or sensitive; you will play fight, you will build things, you will pretend to conquer the world and take no prisoners. Again, this was the marked message I heard. There were some other sexless toys on the end caps between the sections, but even they were somewhat divided between the softer toys on one end of a shelf and the rougher toys on the other.

My visit to the music store only tipped those scales toward the objectification of women more than they had been before. It is very difficult for me to obtain an unbiased stance let alone maintain one when I have spent my whole life rebelling against playing the roles that were expected of me physically (appearance) and interpersonally, so I have to admit that the music store ruffled my feathers a little. On the CD covers the general depiction for male artists was 'anything goes'. They were all attractive and they were all well staged, but their attire varied widely. There was a certain sex appeal in the way they were posed; either the sexy bad boys saying, "look at me, I'm bigger than life", or showing the sensitive, thoughtful side with some far off look in his eyes or that smoky gaze right at the camera saying, "look at me, I'm loveable". I fear this is a very mixed message for boys and young men. Portraying that they can rebel and still be highly successful versus pointing out that there is a certain amount of tact and finesse that needs to be acquired before the rebellion can be beneficial to them. And the other message, and underlying one, "Dude, you have to be sensitive to get the women, but you know I would never

look at my boyz this way." -- the mixed up part being that they have to act instead of just being themselves.

The covers with women followed too closely to the cliché' *Sex Sells* motto in marketing. Scantily dressed, all beautiful, all thin and loudly whispering, "show the skin, give the sultry looks, twist yourself into a position that will show off your booty and tiny waist, get the cleavage in there for a bonus, who cares what the message of your music is." It's just more pressure on girls and young women that they must reflect or mimic how these women look if they plan to be loved or if they want to get anywhere in life. Unrealistic as the message be, this is one of the messages that can be seen; if nothing else the power of the same message constantly bombarding them from every other message may be seen here because they're used to hearing/seeing it everywhere else.

I breathed a sigh of relief and felt a moment of freedom and a slight weight off my shoulders when I lastly visited the bookstore. There really weren't any distinct lines drawn for boys and girls. It was a happy little mixture of *just books*. Sadly everyone knows that everyone can (is allowed to) read, so the obvious open boundaries may not even be seen. The characters on the books' covers were widely general or not human at all in books for younger children. You had to open the book and examine the content looking for references to *him* or *her* for many of the characters. The topics for the youngest kids are addressing moral (doing the right thing) topics and how to treat others. Once the readers reach 4th and 5th grade ages there is a bit of a transition into clearer gender roles and the topics address the 'how to get along' issues. By 6th grade to 8th grade ages the topics begin to address age appropriate issues. In my review of a select section of books this is when the gender specifics books become most obvious, although

there are some role expectations defined subtly in books for earlier ages e.g. Strawberry Shortcake and Bob the Builder series'.

Male characters are policemen, firemen, crime investigators, and sports stars for the younger readers; super heroes, extravagant explorers, builders/architects, construction workers, and wrestlers/fighters for the older readers. Female roles in these books tended to focus more on the 'softer' side of life. Feelings, how to treat others, self-esteem build for the younger readers; more adventure but focusing on the brain power versus the brawn in the main characters for the older readers.

The instructions and expectations are clear for boys and girls starting from the first time mommy coos in her softer higher pitched voice to her new baby girl, or the first time daddy wipes his son's tears away and tells him that "big boys don't cry". Clear enough that it plants the seed that are fed and watered by everything children encounter from then on through the rest of their lives. There is no instruction manual or policy book for males and females to refer to or rely upon when they have ideas that differ from the 'code of conduct' written for them by what everyone else around them. There has been some relaxation over the years, but I don't see how these set rules could be eliminated without changing the very core of how our society perpetuates the thought process from day one.