



## **Interview of the Month Let Toys be Toys August 2016**

### **1. GenderHopes: Can you explain more about the Let Toys Be Toys campaign, and what you are all collectively working on?**

Let Toys be Toys: Let Toys Be Toys is a campaign for gender equality when it comes to the labelling and marketing of toys and books for children. Based in the UK and Ireland, we're asking retailers and manufacturers to sort and label toys and books by theme or function instead of by gender. We believe we can leave it up to children themselves to decide what they want to play with and what they want to read instead of directing them towards particular books or toys according to gender stereotypes.

We are always working on many things which support this main aim including: petitioning stores to change gendered signage; raising it with manufacturers and publishers whenever we spot gendered labels and packaging; challenging the media about their representation of boys and girls and asking that both are included - both in the media products themselves and any commercial spin-offs.

### **2. Looking back, was there one particular experience that inspired you to create this campaign?**

The campaign arose organically in 2012 out of a discussion on a parenting forum in which a group of people were venting their frustration at the way the marketing of toys seemed to be increasingly gendered. In that moment, a campaign was born! Since then a small group of volunteers from all different corners of the UK have worked collectively (and without funding) to raise awareness of the issue and bring about tangible change from both the retail sector and the publishing industry.

### **3. What has been your biggest success so far? This is a very innovative campaign that will undoubtedly reshape our children's future. At what point did you know you were beginning to make waves?**

Our success can be measured in the number of prominent UK retailers that have agreed to change their store signage as a result of our campaign (fourteen) and the ten publishing houses that have pledged not to label their children's books as being for boys or for girls. Two years ago we surveyed toy retailer websites and found a 46% reduction in the use of 'boy' and 'girl'

gender labelling in website navigation, compared with our initial survey in 2012. In-store gendered labelling of all sorts of products such as 'boys' balloons' or 'girls' pencils' is seen far less frequently than even a few years ago. Through the power of social media and with wonderful support from the general public, we are finding that brands and retailers are increasingly receptive to listening to our message that no toy or book needs to be labelled according to gender. Regarding society as a whole, we hope we are contributing to a broader worldwide conversation challenging the way gender stereotyping damages both boys and girls, and therefore ultimately, all of us.

**4. What would be your best piece of advice to a parent who is already aware of the limitations on so many toys offered to their girls and boys? How can a parent counter the day-to-day sexist comments and limitations faced by a child?**

Awareness is the perfect place to start: by keeping their eyes and ears open to notice the signals that their children are receiving about their gender every day, parents can naturally counter them with strong and consistent messages of their own. It really is as simple as regarding children as individuals, listening to what interests them, and calmly countering any stereotyped or sexist ideas with another perspective - that being a boy or a girl really doesn't mean you can only like certain toys, read certain books, or play in certain ways.

This blog on our website contains ten great ideas for educators wishing to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom and most of them could be applied in the home too: <http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/ten-ways-to-challenge-gender-stereotypes-in-the-classroom/>

**5. What do you see as one of the greatest barriers against social change in terms of gender equality?**

One of the greatest barriers against social change in this arena of early childhood is a belief - which has come to be prevailing - that gender becomes all-important from the moment it is revealed at a pre-natal scan or at the moment of birth. Having a baby boy or a baby girl has become equated with particular colours of paint for a nursery, different kinds of gifts purchased for the new child, sleep suits chosen according to whether they depict blue sailboats or pink flowers. The idea that a newborn baby girl should already be defined differently in material ways from a newborn baby boy - and vice versa - lingers and begins to put children in boxes before they can even walk or talk. When behaviour has become such a social norm it can be hard for us to collectively remember that in fact, it really wasn't always done this way and thus, it really is possible for us all to effect change - even in small ways such as looking for new-baby cards that are free from pink or blue stereotypes. Starting from the idea that babies are far more alike than they are different and making material decisions accordingly is far more logical and a great foundation for raising babies who will become children and children who will become adults.

**6. What does the future look like for Let Toys Be Toys? Can you tell us more about what is in the pipeline?**

There are still so many things for us to work on! At the end of last year, we researched advertising on children's television channels over the Christmas period and we would love to follow this up with a campaign for change in the advertising industry when it comes to the stereotyped ways toys are being marketed. You can see the results of that research here : <http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/tvads/#more-5930>

Having had considerable success with many prominent retailers and publishers, we would now like to see more movement on this issue from manufacturers. We will also continue to campaign for inclusion of well-rounded male and female characters wherever they are being stereotyped, marginalised or erased in products aimed at children. This includes media merchandising which we believe is a growing conversation as seen in the 'Where's Rey?' outcry following the dearth of Rey merchandise after the release of the Star Wars film in which she was merely the main character.

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*Catherine Johnston is a campaigner for Let Toys Be Toys, a grassroots campaign asking the toy and publishing industries in the UK and Ireland to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys. We are on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.*

