COMMERCIALS ARE TEACHING OUR CHILDREN THE WRONG THINGS

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[Assignment: In a short essay, make a point about television or other forms of popular culture. You may either respond to our readings and discussions or discuss a related topic that interests you.]

Wouldn't it be nice to turn on the television and see a commercial in which a boy was oohing and ahhing over a Cabbage Patch doll? Wouldn't it be nice to see a commercial where a girl was putting a Matchbox car through the Matchbox car wash? For years toy manufacturers have been making and marketing gender specific toys. Barbie, G.I. Joe, My Little Pony, and many other toys are produced and marketed with the intent of selling them specifically to boys or girls. By doing this, manufacturers are re-enforcing the stereotypes that women, and some men, have been trying for years to eliminate. These toys, and the commercials that sell them, are teaching children that there are certain things that only boys can do and certain things that only girls can do. They teach boys that only girls should be interested in taking care of babies, and they teach girls that only boys should be interested in fixing cars. Why do these commercials still exist despite changing attitudes?

The reason these commercials still exist is that manufacturers are selling toys with them. Despite changing attitudes, Americans, for the most part, still believe that a beautiful woman has a large bust and a small waist. That is why there are at least fifty different kinds of Barbies on the market if not more. Barbie is often seen as the picture of what American women should look like: tall, thin and blond. However, if she were a real woman, she would not be able to stand up straight due to her misproportioned figure. When Mattel wanted to sell Barbie in Japan, they had to make her figure more like that of a Japanese woman in order for Japanese girls to buy her. This proves that it is possible for Barbie's appearance to change, if only consumers would complain.

Some advertisers use stereotypes simply for the sake of selling things. One of the ways that McDonald's makes their Happy Meals appealing to children is by putting a toy in with the food. Most of the toys are generic and meant for either boys or girls, but when there is a toy supposedly appealing to only one sex, another toy "appropriate" for the other sex is provided. The commercials for these toys are split into two parts. The first part usually shows a group of girls playing with their toy and the second part shows a group of boys playing with their toy. Other advertisers are more subtle in their stereotyping. In a commercial for sparkling Play Dough, the girl is making rainbows and jewelry while the boy makes a race car and a rocket ship.

Children are very susceptible to advertising because they do not understand that commercials are only trying to sell the toys they are showing. When girls see other girls their age playing with a doll in a commercial and boys see other boys racing cars through hoops in another
commercial, they want to have that doll or that car because they want to fit in with children their own age.

I babysit two children, Christopher, age three, and Haley, age sixteen months, who are not allowed to watch "regular" television. Therefore, they are not subjected to the stereotypes of commercials. Christopher has many trucks and trains to play with; however, he also has a Fisher Price kitchen with which he loves to pretend to cook. When Haley was born she did receive some dolls to play with, but she spends most of her time playing with Christopher's trucks and trains. These children are for the most part unaware of the stereotypes that are presented on television. They are learning their modeling from their parents and not from a toy manufacturer or advertiser.

Children learn more from watching television than most people realize. They do not see the children in commercials as actors being paid to enjoy the toys, but as the same children with whom they play and go to school. If people want to change the attitudes of Americans as a whole, then something needs to be done to stop manufacturers from producing and advertising such stereotypical toys.