Building Kits Shatter the Princess Playthings Myth

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff 1.08.15

**(1)** LOS ANGELES — For decades, toymakers believed that boys wanted to build things and girls wanted to play princess.

But women are now leading huge corporations, including Yahoo and General Motors, and more women are becoming engineers and mathematicians. Meanwhile, toy companies are realizing that girls want to build bridges and wire circuits.

Parents, too, are demanding toys that inspire a love of science and math in their daughters. This is driven in part by concern over a lack of interest in STEM careers. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and math.

As a result, construction toys, and the new demand for them from girls, are a bright spot in the toy industry, which sells $22 billion in toys each year.

**(2) Construction Sets Get A Makeover**

Eager to make building toys, Mattel in April acquired Mega Brands, known for its construction sets. Giant toymaker Lego has recreated its classic building kits for girls with a splash of purple and themes such as pet salon and beauty shop. New toy companies are designing girl-friendly toys that combine fun with science.

“It’s baffling that it took this long for toymakers to get on board,” said Jaime Katz of Morningstar, a business information company. “If you aren’t catering to the girls’ side, you are leaving half of the market on the table.”

Although sales of building set did not go up last year, they climbed 22 percent to $2 billion in 2012, according to NPD Group, a business research company. Sales were $1.6 billion in 2011. Over those two years, sales of action figures slid 2.1 percent and plush toys, like stuffed animals, fell 5.4 percent.

**(3) Gender-Free Didn't Sell**

Toymakers have challenged traditional gender roles in the past — especially during the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, women were pushing for more rights, and toys made during that time reflected that era.

That later changed. Manufacturers moved away from gender-free toys that either boys or girls could play with, and targeted their new toys more to girls and boys separately. The reason: Toys aimed at one gender sold better.

But toy companies have now begun paying attention to how girls like to build.

Lego spent four years researching the female market after realizing that girls were not demanding its toys as much as boys were, said the company's Michael McNally.

The Danish company debuted its Friends line in 2012. The sets have bright colors with lots of purple, and come with more human-like figures.

Lego’s switch has paid off. Prior to Friends, only about 10 percent of Lego sets were bought for girls. Within eight months of the line’s launch, that grew to 25 percent, McNally said.

**(4) Thoughtful Design**

To win over girls, toymakers say they have to walk a careful line: Avoid designing girls' toys that are just smaller, pinker versions of boys' toys, while also designing a product that is entertaining. While boys are often satisfied just by building something cool-looking, girls want more of a story behind their construction toys, experts say.

The first version of Maykah Inc.’s Roominate line was a car, said Bettina Chen, co-founder of the company. Chen and her co-founder, Alice Brooks, later scrapped that idea in favor of a dollhouse.

“The car kit was an educational toy first,” Chen said. “We really needed to integrate education and fun in a more seamless way.”

The Roominate dollhouse is anything but traditional. Circuits power lights and a working fan. Later sets let kids build miniature spinning windmills and elevators that go up and down.

**(5) Building Skills In A Box**

The growing popularity of construction toys for girls also reflects a shift in what is going on in families. Parents are increasingly more open to toys that cross traditional ideas of what boys and girls do. Nowadays, dads are taking on a bigger share of child-care duties.

“Parents are telling kids it’s OK to be different,” said Michael Swartz, a business analyst. He pointed to Hasbro’s introduction of an Easy Bake Oven with colors appealing to boys.

Toy seller, Toys R Us, said it is seeing more fathers buy building playthings for their daughters.

Dulce Aguilar said she would consider buying a girl-oriented construction set for her goddaughter, who is not interested in “princess gifts.”

The elementary school teacher said she has noticed that building blocks are a hit with both her male and female students. She is glad more toys are designed with girls in mind.

“It’s a great opportunity for girls to learn skills in terms of building and how to support a structure,” the Aguilar said.

**(6) Toys Make Engineering Cool For Girls**

Some of the biggest innovators have been women with science backgrounds who are tired of seeing fashion dolls and necklace-making kits dominate the toy store.

Chen and Brooks of Roominate met as engineering graduate students at Stanford University. Another Stanford grad with an engineering degree, Debbie Sterling, founded GoldieBlox.

Sterling said she got into construction toys after seeing the lack of female engineering majors in school. Her goal was to create toys that inspire an early interest in science and math in girls, the way that building sets have done for boys.

“Most in the toy industry told me the idea would never go mainstream and in order to appeal to girls, it had to be sparkly with ponies,” she said.

After raising money online on Kickstarter, GoldieBlox rolled out a pastel-colored construction set that came with a book featuring the adventures of Goldie, a girl inventor.

The sets ask girls to build belt drives and work with levers and hinges.

The company has enjoyed rapid growth, and sales are expected to triple from last year, Sterling said.

GoldieBlox has been working to add more diverse characters. One of Goldie’s new buddies, an African-American girl named Ruby, is a programmer and social butterfly.

“She really shatters the perception that all coders are guys in hoodies who don’t shower and have no friends,” Sterling said.