

Taking the Offensive Against Offensive Toys

LEONORE GORDON

Inspired by an article from the Council on Interracial Books for Children, I took up the issue of biased toy packaging with my 5th-grade class. At the time I was teaching at a small private school in Brooklyn, N.Y. The class was racially mixed, with an equal number of boys and girls. Economically, students ranged from lower middle class to upper middle class, with a large number living with single working mothers.

Their consciousness about racism and sexism had been raised through studies of Native Americans, working people at their jobs, and—on occasion—television commercials. They had gained some insight into class issues by discussing Studs Terkel's book *Working*. And they had furthered their knowledge by conducting interviews with working people.

Thus the group was primed for action when I brought up toys and the political implications of their packaging. Some of the questions I asked to stimulate this discussion included: If you're a boy, what kinds of presents have you gotten on holidays? What do people expect you to be like? What have girls gotten as presents? What are you expected to be like? How many girls have wanted trucks? How many boys have wanted dolls? Tell me about the TV commercials you've seen. What kinds of kids are they about?

The first products the children discussed were sneakers and jeans. When one child noted, "You wear Jordache and Pumas if you're poor," other students added: "It's because of status. It's the only way to show you have something." Status, said one student, means "belonging—it means you're part of the group."

The students then discussed the manipulative techniques of corporations, including how advertisements try to make consumers think they need a product even if they can't afford it or how they make people think they have to "belong" to larger groups.

By the end of our discussion, we had begun to plan our next step: a visit to a local branch of Toys 'R' Us.

We created a checklist and I suggested that each child carry a clipboard with a copy. The list had such items as: Describe the picture on the package. Is it racist?



Why? Is it sexist? Why? Is it classist? Why? What does the toy cost? Is it sturdy? Are people of color shown in the picture on the package? Is it a stereotypic picture? Do the kids on the package look real?

They were also asked to note the name of a toy, its manufacturer, and the firm's address.

When we arrived at the store, the students set to work enthusiastically. Some of the products they found to be the guiltiest were, of course, the kitchen toys (with pictures of little white girls), most science toys (only boys shown experimenting), and the sports equipment. I also found that although girls were being increasingly included on previously male-designated toys, the issue of racist packaging was barely being addressed.

When we returned to school, we discussed what we had seen and analyzed the students' checklists. Reporting on their experiences, they spoke of the noticeable absence of African Americans.

As part of this examination of toy packaging, I encouraged students to share

One child noted, "You wear Jordache and Pumas if you're poor."

their complaints with toy manufacturers. Following are samples from two of the letters written by the children.

Dear Kenner:

Your product, the X-Ray Stretch, is racist and sexist because your toy only has whites on the toy but no blacks. The toy is sexist because there's a boy in it but not a girl. I advise you to change the appearance of this toy.

Dear H-G Industries:

One of your products [an archery set] is very badly stereotyped of a Native American. The facepaint, headdress, and clothes are all stereotyped. Another thing, your toy is so badly built everything in the package is warped, so get it together and put together your toy.

The project helped make the children more aware of negative corporate mentality. They also felt more capable of judging that mentality and of identifying the tactics of some of the manufacturers. I hope they will be able to recognize similar tactics in other sectors of society.

Most important, they have become children who are less gullible targets of corporate advertising. ♦

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Leonore Gordon is an educator, writer, certified family therapist, and social activist. Before Parkinson's forced her retirement, she taught poetry as a teaching artist in the New York City public schools with Teachers & Writers Collaborative. She is a congressional coordinator for the Parkinson's Action Network. Her poems and articles about education have appeared in numerous books and magazines.