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### From dressing up a child to building up a strong person

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**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

SIETAR Europa Journal

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, M. (2019). From dressing up a child to building up a strong person. *SIETAR Europa Journal*, June 2019(June - August 2019), 10-12.  
<https://www.sietareu.org/seu-journal-june-2019/>

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# From dressing up a child to building up a strong person

by Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai

Don't you think like I do? "Great pic, flying in the face of stereotypes: A little girl in blue, unisex clothes, and (gasp) aliens print of some sort. Who needs princess and fairies?"

A few years ago, Facebook CEO's daughter turned one. I couldn't help but notice a consistent message from Mark and Priscilla. Baby Maxima often wears blue (stereotypically a boy's color), unisex style, without gender abiding prints - aliens, in this picture. When Maxima was born, she was photographed with the book "Quantum Physics for Babies."

We are all influenced by subconscious stereotypes, and in turn, project them onto our children. How often do we buy dolls, cooking and nursing toys for girls but cars, building blocks and superman costumes for boys? What really makes us praise girls as "pretty" and boys as "smart"? Why do we chastise daughters for being "unruly," but feel that "active" sons as nothing short of natural?

How often that girls are taught to do chores while son are free to play videogames? Why do we overprotect daughters to the point of near captivity but let boys roam around to gain experience? Why girls can't be girls but "boys will be boys"? How often do we expect



mark Zuckerberg/ Facebook

our girls to focus on raising family and boys on becoming breadwinner?

We say: "everyone makes a choice", but can we face the fact that all choices are influenced by the social environment, and the very choices of parents, friends, celebrities, and everyone else? Go to the very bottom of that question, is it a baby's own choice to be born, to be raised in a certain family and culture, to get the first toy, go to a certain school, read a certain book and uphold a certain value?

Upbringing and education are often characterized by cultural values and subconscious bias that will influence and weigh on children for life. Even when parents are conscious of stereotypes, it is hard to escape them from a society full of gender biases. Children take role models from friends in kindergartens, television, grandparents, and every single other adult around them.

Humans are social animals. When a child sees boys playing with cars, girls playing with dolls, their mother busy with housework and their father with driving...etc., the child would slowly change their thoughts and behaviors accordingly.

The media surrounding children is full of biases and

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## From dressing up... — continued



*An image to counter gender bias?*

stereotypes. In movies and fairy tales, young pretty girls wait for their princes to come so their life can be fulfilled. Men should be rich, royal, or warriors to stand any chance to mate (!). Turn on the TV and most advertisements take advantage of lazy stereotypes to find way into consumers' brain. If an ad for detergent features a husband, consumers may have a slightest chance of cognitive dissonance. And so, let's avoid it.

Children are much more insightful. In a viral video, a girl points out the blatant gender bias. T-shirts for boys have "Be a hero" and for girls' are "I need a hero"

However, companies are increasingly aware of this social change. Campaigns have been based on progressive values of equal opportunities to attract highly educated and liberal parents.

For example, *Toy 'R' Us* now has catalogues with girls playing soccer and boys cooking. In "Frozen," both princesses are strong and confident women. A prince is not even the final goal of life, and the ultimate power is sisterhood.

The dangerous thing about gender bias is that it creates a terrible gap between being men and being women,

so much that these two seem like completely different species. Popular books such as "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus," or "Why Men don't listen and women can't drive", or the whole gaga of "male brain" and "female brain,"... etc. completely miss the latest advance in neuroscience and the idea of "brain plasticity". It sells the simplified idea that biological gender identities are hardwired from birth, and if a girl grows up in forest, she would still like pink clothes and wait for a prince to come (fairy tale shows it).

Well, truth is, if left in a forest, her best scenario is to be rescued by wolves, and to end up being a feral child who crawls in all four. Culture is the driving force of humankind. It is stronger than genes when it comes to behavioral adaptation.

In fact, the only thing that separates human and animal is that animal is guided by genes, and humans are mostly guided by a culture. A great book on this subject is *Wired for Culture* by Mark Pagel, praised by Nature to be the best book written on culture so far.

Evolutionary biology and neuroscience have shown us that there is no such clear biological borderline for gender. Male and female are only two lazy labels we put on

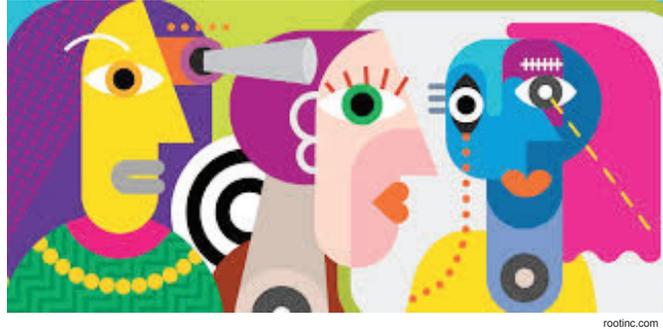
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# From dressing up... — *continued*

*Overcoming bias starts by becoming aware.*



to simplify a very dynamic interaction between biology and social environment. In fact, everyone has the potential to become a very complex being, with both male and female stereotypical traits.

Back to our story: So if humans are mainly guided by a culture, why don't we create a culture that has fewer stereotypes and prejudices for children? Instead of letting subconscious biases control us, we can consciously minimize the consequences.

A child can play with dolls and learns to care for others, play cooking and learns to help parents with chores, play teacher and learns how to share knowledge and communicate effectively, or play superhuman to understand the value of compassion when having power. These qualities are gender-less. And progressive parents will understand that toys are crucial to carve personality.

Of course, our children will grow up and stereotypes-ridden societies will continue to influence them, just like us and everyone else. No one can escape subconscious bias totally, but we can definitely become AWARE of the fact that we are all under its spell. From then on, we would pay more attention to our words and habits. It can all start with the kind of clothes we dress our children up, or the first toy we put into their hands.

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*In the last few years, she has taken interest in cultural neurosciences together with her study at King's College London in a Master program on Applied Neuroscience. In May 2017, she published a book with Amsterdam University Press titled "Intercultural Communication – An Interdisciplinary Approach: When Neurons, Genes, and Evolution Joined the Discourse".*

*This is the first text book in the field of IC that incorporate some basic insights from newly emerging disciplines. It advocates a fundamental change from seeing culture as static to a more responsive paradigm of seeing culture as dynamic. It challenges the dominant school of static culture with scientific foundation in neuroscience. Since the date of release, she has been invited to keynote at multiple conferences. Her up-and-coming book with Routledge in August 2019 is another attempt to enrich the field of cross-cultural management with insights from brain science.*

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