

WRITING WORKSHOP

1. Write an essay in which you consider the effects (including any possible future effects) of one of these inventions on the American family: the cell phone, e-mail, the microwave, the VCR, the Walkman, Nintendo, the telephone answering machine, the pager, the MP3 player.
2. Write a cause-and-effect essay in which you discuss the positive effects of television on American society.
3. Winn's essay, although recently updated for this book, is over thirty-five years old, and both television and viewers have changed considerably since she wrote "Television: The Plug-In Drug." Write a cause-and-effect essay about television in which you consider developments that Winn does not take into account—for example, the popularity of reality-based programs and the availability of satellite dishes.

COMBINING THE PATTERNS

Winn's essay relies on several patterns of development besides cause and effect. Where does she use *narration*? *Definition*? *Exemplification*? Why does she use each of these patterns?

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

- "Once More to the Lake" (page 175)
- "The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society" (page 229)
- "Whodunit—The Media?" (page 618)

KATHA POLLITT

Why Boys Don't Play with Dolls

Katha Pollitt (b. 1949) grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and now lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side. A graduate of Radcliffe College, she won the *Mademoiselle* undergraduate poetry contest in 1971. Pollitt has taught in the graduate writing program at New York University and the graduate program in liberal studies at the New School for Social Research, and she has published hundreds of book reviews and essays, as well as poetry, in a variety of periodicals, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Mother Jones*, and *Dissent*. A popular lecturer on feminist issues, she has also written the books *Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism* (1994) and *Subject to Debate: Sense and Dissents on Women, Politics, and Culture* (2001).

Background: In the following essay, which originally appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, Pollitt considers the effects of gender stereotyping as it is reflected in the different toys given to little girls and to little boys. While the twentieth century saw the introduction of many toys that appealed to both girls and boys—wagons, pogo sticks, board games, hula hoops, and video games such as Pokémon—the majority of toys were marketed either for boys or for girls: at the turn of the century, train sets and cap guns for boys, baby dolls and crayons for girls; ten years later, Erector sets and toy cars for boys, Raggedy Ann dolls for girls. The introduction of the Barbie doll in the 1950s was matched by a proliferation of cowboy gear for boys. In the 1960s, the must-have toys were G.I. Joe and Hot Wheels versus the Easy Bake oven; in the 1970s, action figures versus Holly Hobbie dolls; in the 1980s, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe versus She-Ra and My Little Pony. Among the more recent popular toys introduced for boys was the Bionicle series of biomechanical action heroes; girls got the Bratz dolls ("with a passion for fashion") and the Diva Starz fashion dolls.

It's 28 years since the founding of NOW,* and boys still like trucks and girls still like dolls. Increasingly, we are told that the source of these robust preferences must lie outside society—in prenatal hormonal influences, brain chemistry, genes—and that feminism has reached its natural limits. What else could possibly explain the love of preschool girls for party dresses or the desire of toddler boys to own more guns than Mark from Michigan.

True, recent studies claim to show small cognitive differences between the sexes: he gets around by orienting himself in space, she does it by

*BDS. NOTE.—The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966.

remembering landmarks. Time will tell if any deserve the hoopla with which each is invariably greeted, over the protests of the researchers themselves. But even if the results hold up (and the history of such research is not encouraging), we don't need studies of sex-differentiated brain activity in reading, say, to understand why boys and girls still seem so unlike.

The feminist movement has done much for some women, and something for every woman, but it has hardly turned America into a playground free of sex roles. It hasn't even got women to stop dieting or men to stop interrupting them.

Instead of looking at kids to "prove" that differences in behavior by sex are innate, we can look at the ways we raise kids as an index to how unfinished the feminist revolution really is, and how tentatively it is embraced even by adults who fully expect their daughters to enter previously male-dominated professions and their sons to change diapers.

I'm at a children's birthday party. "I'm sorry," one mom silently mouths to the mother of the birthday girl, who has just torn open her present — Tropical Splash Barbie. Now, you can love Barbie or you can hate Barbie, and there are feminists in both camps. But *apologize* for Barbie? Inflict Barbie, against your own convictions, on the child of a friend you know will be none too pleased?

Every mother in that room had spent years becoming a person who had to be taken seriously, not least by herself. Even the most attractive, I'm willing to bet, had suffered over her body's failure to fit the impossible American ideal. Given all that, it seems crazy to transmit Barbie to the next generation. Yet to reject her is to say that what Barbie represents — being sexy, thin, stylish — is unimportant, which is obviously not true, and children know it's not true.

Women's looks matter terribly in this society, and so Barbie, however ambivalently, must be passed along. After all, there are worse toys. The Cut and Style Barbie styling head, for example, a grotesque object intended to encourage "hair play." The grown-ups who give that probably apologize, too.

How happy would most parents be to have a child who flouted sex conventions? I know a lot of women, feminists, who complain in a comical, eyeball-rolling way about their sons' passion for sports: the ruined weekends, obnoxious coaches, macho values. But they would not think of discouraging their sons from participating in this activity they find so foolish. Or do they? Their husbands are sports fans, too, and they like their husbands a lot.

Could it be that even sports-resistant moms see athletics as part of manliness? That if their sons wanted to spend the weekend writing up their diaries, or reading, or baking, they'd find it disturbing? Too anti-social? Too lonely? Too gay?

Theories of innate differences in behavior are appealing. They let parents off the hook — no small recommendation in a culture that holds moms, and sometimes even dads, responsible for their children's every misstep on the road to bliss and success.

They allow grown-ups to take the path of least resistance to the dominant culture, which always requires less psychic effort, even if it means more actual work: just ask the working mother who comes home exhausted and nonetheless finds it easier to pick up her son's socks than make him do it himself. They let families buy for their children, without too much guilt, the unbelievably sexist junk that the kids, who have been watching commercials since birth, understandably crave.

But the thing the theories do most of all is tell adults that the *adult* world — in which moms and dads still play by many of the old rules even as they question and fidget and chafe against them — is the way it's supposed to be. A girl with a doll and a boy with a truck "explain" why men are from Mars and women are from Venus, why wives do housework and husbands just don't understand.

The paradox is that the world of rigid and hierarchical sex roles evoked by determinist theories is already passing away. Three-year-olds may indeed insist that doctors are male and nurses female, even if their own mother is a physician. Six-year-olds know better. These days, something like half of all medical students are female, and male applications to nursing school are inching upward. When tomorrow's three-year-olds play doctor, who's to say how they'll assign the roles?

With sex roles, as in every area of life, people aspire to what is possible and conform to what is necessary. But these are not fixed, especially today. Biological determinism may reassure some adults about their present, but it is feminism, the ideology of flexible and converging sex roles, that fits our children's future. And the kids, somehow, know this.

That's why, if you look carefully, you'll find that for every kid who fits a stereotype, there's another who's breaking one down. Sometimes it's the same kid — the boy who skateboards *and* takes cooking in his after-school program; the girl who collects stuffed animals *and* A-pluses in science.

Feminists are often accused of imposing their "agenda" on children. Isn't that what adults always do, consciously or unconsciously? Kids aren't born religious, or polite, or kind, or able to remember where they put their sneakers. Inculcating these behaviors, and the values behind them, is a tremendous amount of work, involving many adults. We don't have a choice, really, about *whether* we should give our children messages about what it means to be male and female — they're bombarded with them from morning till night.

The question, as always, is what do we want those messages to be?

COMPREHENSION

1. How does Pollitt assess the accomplishments of the feminist movement?
2. Who (or what) does Pollitt blame for the fact that the "feminist revolution" is "unfinished" (4)?
3. Why, according to Pollitt, do mothers continue to "transmit Barbie to the next generation" (6)? Does she think they are wrong to do so? Explain.

- How does Pollitt account for the fact that women do not discourage their sons from playing sports? Does she think they should?
- What is Pollitt's assessment of "theories of innate differences in behavior" (10) between girls and boys?
- What dangers does Pollitt see in encouraging girls to play with dolls and boys to play with trucks? Do you see any dangers in this behavior?
- What **paradox** does Pollitt identify beginning in paragraph 13? Why is this a paradox?
- In paragraph 14, Pollitt says, "With sex roles, as in every area of life, people aspire to what is possible and conform to what is necessary." What does she mean?

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

- What is Pollitt's thesis? Does she state it explicitly? Do you agree with her?
- In paragraphs 5-7, Pollitt relates an anecdote about a birthday party. What purpose does this anecdote serve in the essay?
- How does Pollitt expect her audience to react to her essay? Do you think she wants them to change their behavior or simply to reexamine their priorities? Explain.

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- According to Pollitt, what is the main cause of the gender differences in toy preferences? What other causes does she suggest? Can you think of others?
- Use a causal chain to explain why a female child might choose to play with dolls instead of with trucks.
- When Pollitt says, "A girl with a doll and a boy with a truck 'explain' why [...] wives do housework and husbands just don't understand" (12), is she guilty of *post hoc* reasoning? Explain.
- Pollitt ends her essay with a one-sentence conclusion. Is this an effective strategy, or should she have developed the paragraph further—for example, by suggesting answers to the question she poses?

VOCABULARY PROJECTS

- Define each of the following words as it is used in this selection.

| | | |
|---------------|-------------|-------------------|
| robust (1) | flouted (8) | hierarchical (13) |
| cognitive (2) | innate (10) | determinist (13) |
| hoopla (2) | chafe (12) | inculcating (16) |
- Throughout this essay, Pollitt uses the word *kids* rather than *children*. What different connotations do these two words have? Do you think she made the right choice?

JOURNAL ENTRY

In the essay's first sentence, Pollitt says that "boys still like trucks and girls still like dolls." Does your experience support this conclusion?

WRITING WORKSHOP

- Write a cause-and-effect essay titled "Why Girls Don't Play with Trucks." Support your thesis with information from your personal experience and observations.
- How do you think playing with Barbie dolls might actually change the way a young girl thinks or behaves? Write a cause-and-effect essay that explains the specific effects of various aspects of playing with this particular doll.
- What kinds of toys or games do you see as having a negative effect on young children? Write a cause-and-effect essay that identifies and accounts for these negative consequences. In your conclusion, make some recommendations on how to solve the problems these toys or games create.

COMBINING THE PATTERNS

Although this is a cause-and-effect essay, it also compares boys and girls (and, by extension, men and women). What specific differences does Pollitt see between the two genders? Do you think she should have spent more time on developing a **comparison** and **contrast** between males and females? What additional information would she have to provide?

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

- "My Field of Dreams" (page 77)
- "Sex, Lies, and Conversation" (page 407)
- "I Want a Wife" (page 505)

