

It's time to end all-girl or all-boy birthday parties

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With things returning to normal in regards to social gatherings, birthday invitations are coming back. I teach my children the importance of inclusivity, but when my six-year-old started discussing his birthday party plans, it made me realize just how programmed children are to accept and participate in gender stereotypes. It is not their fault. Most people perpetuate these gender stereotypes and don't even realize it.

My son asked me if he was allowed to invite his friend Darla, because she is a girl. I was caught off guard. As a professor and scholar of media studies, his question disturbed me. But I understood where it came from. Lately, he has been attending birthday parties where only boys were invited. And herein lies the problem.

Although innocent, as soon as parents start socializing children to hold gender-separate events like birthday parties, we might be teaching them to view either gender as superior when the other is left out. This, of course, is not the intent. However, there are more negative effects to this gender-specific invitation than meet the eye. Children, especially young children, may become accustomed to the idea of segregating due to gender.

This means that they too might adopt and participate in gender stereotypes that are already heavily embedded in our culture. However, if we want our children to grow into adults who are inclusive, we need to make conscious choices about how we socialize them, and children's birthday parties can be an important lesson.

When children attend an all-girl or all-boy birthday party, this might make them feel empowered to be included in the group, but in fact, it sets them up to perpetuate these gender-segregated attitudes. It goes further when an event is organized along a theme that could end up excluding girls or boys, for example, a "soccer party" or a "tea party." Either one should be open to either gender. The empowerment of being together with the same gender is not the type of empowerment we should be participating in.

These patterns must change, as we are now aware of not only the detrimental effects of gender stereotypes, but also that there are those in both groups who might identify more with the "opposite" sex. This could cause that child to feel inadequate, as he may not be into soccer but more into tea parties, and vice versa.

When I hold an event for my children, I invite the entire class. I never want anyone to feel left out. I've held events outside, where we can accommodate more people. Of course, I understand that inviting everyone is not always an option due to the cost, lack of space or other logistical issues. My point is for parents not to make assumed decisions for their potential guests, but instead give them the choice whether or not to attend a tea party, for example, regardless of sex.

We have the duty to ensure our children feel safe and accepted, no matter who is throwing the party, or what the activity is. This will teach children to try new things, accept new and different attitudes and get a full scope of the differences out there, rather than keeping them in a homogenized group.

Jack can go to a tea party and Sara can go to a soccer party. Children need to see one another on an equal playing field, so that as they get older, they will vouch for each other to be included when society has been set up to exclude them. Children need to understand the concept of being an “ally.”

Unfortunately, they will grow up socialized in a world of gender stereotypes, but we can start preparing them by setting an example of inclusivity and equality, and highlighting inclusivity on every level, not just gender. We know for many women, equality is still an idyllic fantasy, but when it comes to children’s birthday parties, we can make it a reality. It’s a start, and a very important one.