

## Toy Company Aims to Nurture Girls' Skills and Interest in STEM

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Last week a video enthusiastically made the rounds in social media and the news. It featured young girls designing an elaborate Rube Goldberg-esque machine, set to a parody of the song "Girls" by the Beastie Boys. The video was actually an advertisement for a product called GoldieBlox -- an engineering-inspired toy for girls designed to "disrupt the pink" in the toy aisle and encourage more girls toward science, technology, engineering and math disciplines. Its creator Debra Sterling, a Stanford engineering graduate who raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the endeavor on Kickstarter last year, told The Los Angeles Times that the video was not just a commercial for a toy, but rather "a power anthem for little girls." Some bloggers applauded the toy's intent; others called it a marketing ploy. Whatever GoldieBlox's impact, the viral ad generated a lot of discussion about the state of women in STEM fields, and how, precisely, to bolster their numbers.



Though women now constitute a sizeable share of the American workforce, [studies suggest](#) they remain widely underrepresented in STEM degree programs and, in turn, careers. There are a number of theories about why women tend to not pursue STEM careers, including the suggestion that young girls are simply not encouraged to do so, which is precisely what GoldieBlox was designed to address. Dr. Ann P. McMahon--a former rocket scientist in the aerospace industry turned teacher, education consultant, and university-based STEM outreach program director--suggests there is credence to this theory.

"Girls naturally indulge their curiosity about how things work, exercise their creativity, and excel at social learning and problem solving - all traits of excellent engineers - until they get the message that engineering is not for them," McMahon, who is the founder of Custom K-12 Engineering, told CityTownInfo.

Samantha Fowler, Ph.D., who is an associate professor of science education at a university in Florida, tends to agree, and even experienced this bias first hand.

"When I was a young girl in elementary school, some of the boys and one (female) teacher made comments about how I'm not supposed to be good at math and science," Fowler told CityTownInfo. She said that even when parents and educators make a conscious effort to encourage these skills in young girls, society at large doesn't. "Just look at the toy aisle in stores. They are full of dolls, princesses, and Barbies, while the science types of toys tend to be shelved near the traditional boys' toys and games."

GoldieBlox suggests it was designed to combat this type of stereotyping, though as Slate Magazine's The XX Factor points out, the fact that the toys are still pink and princess-g geared has drawn criticism. Nonetheless, the toy represents a push to draw more women into STEM right from the start, which matters, because, according to McMahon, the world would benefit from having more female engineers and scientists.

"Women's contributions to STEM are important because men and women experience our world differently, and women make up half the population that benefits from what engineers create," McMahon told CityTownInfo. "Women's voices are vital influences on the innovations that will help shape the future."

McMahon notes that women themselves stand to benefit from such a trend, too.

"In addition to providing women with creative and meaningful work, stimulating collaborative relationships, and financial security, a career in engineering fulfills each of these emotional needs as well," said McMahon, noting that members of engineering teams form communities that value contributors for their unique perspectives. " Their collaborative efforts bring something entirely new into existence, which evokes powerful feelings of influence and accomplishment"

It may be years before we know for certain whether makeover children's toys and educational initiatives designed to encourage more women in STEM are effective, and, as Fowler notes, there are other factors that can drive the gender gap -- including the idea that STEM fields are competitive and can make it difficult to achieve a "healthy balance between work and home, especially for mothers of young children." She encourages girls who are interested in the field to not be dissuaded by any of this.

"Have confidence in yourself and go for it," said Fowler. "Life is too short to limit yourself because you happen to lack a Y chromosome."

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*Compiled by Aimee Hosler*

Sources:

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Interview with Samantha Fowler, November 24, 2013

Interview with Ann McMahon, November 26, 2013

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