Request to Santa leaves mom a bit blue

Choice of blue bike exacerbates worries about gender roles and stereotypes

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Toddlers may be known for their fickle ways, but my 2 1/2-year-old daughter has not wavered on the one thing she wants for Christmas.

A blue bike from Santa.

The request started shortly after Thanksgiving, when we reminded her that Santa brings children toys from the North Pole. Last year, the concept was still a little over her head. But this year, when I showed Gracie pictures of her younger self sitting on Santa's lap and told her she'd see him again at her dadda's company Christmas party, she began her campaign.

"I gotta tell Santa I want blue bike for Cwiss-mas."

It was so early in the season that I didn't take her seriously. Surely I'd be able to talk her into one of the red Radio Flyer tricycles on sale at Toys R Us, I figured, saving the coupon under a magnet on the refrigerator.

Then came the holiday party. Gracie was so excited when Santa entered the room, she ran at him full speed and wrapped her arms around his legs. And when it was her turn to sit on his lap, there was still no hesitation.

"Please can I have a blue bike for Cwiss-mass?"

I'm ashamed to admit it, but her certainty brought out layers of uncertainty for me.

I didn't mind that Gracie didn't want a pink bike or a sparkly bike or one with princesses painted on the sides. Since day one, Shawn and I have tried to find a good balance that would allow Gracie to be as girlie, or not girlie, as she wanted, despite the gender stereotypes that seem to bombard children at every turn.

Her bedroom is a cheery mix of greens, blues, purples, yellows and, yes, pinks. She's never watched a princess movie or TV show but has a couple fairy tale books and dress-up tutus for when she wants to play pretend.
And I always take great care to pay her compliments that celebrate her intellect, decision-making skills and sense of humor, not just her cute looks or pretty dress.

But a blue bike? Really? The blue bikes I saw in a quick online search featured Power Rangers, pirates and Spider-Man, with boys depicted riding them.

I wondered if perhaps we'd gone too far in trying to keep Gracie away from princess-mania. I worried that soon she'll be made fun of on the playground for being a tomboy. And I questioned whether I was failing as a mother for not raising her to be dainty enough.

At the same time I also kicked myself for not just embracing my daughter's conviction. Wasn't this what we'd been striving for with all our gender-neutralizing efforts? My favorite color is blue, so why can't my little girl have the same preference? Was I a mommy hypocrite?

"You know, I think Santa's elves are more used to making red bikes," I attempted, desperate for a quick fix. "Are you sure you don't want a red bike?"

"Santa's elves make me a blue bike," Gracie shot back.

That's when I knew I needed professional help.

Diane Levin, a professor of early childhood education at Wheelock College in Boston, was not surprised to hear my dilemma.

"How old are you?" she asked immediately.

When I told her I was in my late 30s, she was not surprised.

In the mid-1980s, laws changed regarding the marketing to children. Up until that point there were limits to how many advertising minutes could be used to market to kids in every hour of programming. When those bans were lifted, it allowed for the creation of a new generation of TV shows — "He Man," "Care Bears" and "Transformers," to name a few — paired directly with merchandise, Levin said.

And with this shift, fueled by money, the divide between girls and boys intensified as boy programs encouraged violence and action, while girl programs focused on appearance, said Levin, author of the book, "So Sexy So Soon."

"This huge shift started happening, and it began to undo so much of what had happened to help children develop," Levin said. "It was sort of a corporate takeover of childhood and gender roles."

Levin suggested that I, like many parents over the age of 30, have an appreciation for how stratified gender roles have become in children because we grew up when programs were designed for both boys and girls without marketing influences.
She added, however, that because we've all been exposed to the same media in the decades since, it's hard not to feel its pull at times, the way I was resisting Gracie's blue bike choice.

And from a child psychologist's standpoint, this is unfortunate, she said.

"When children are young, what they need to learn is how to have caring, connected relationships," Levin said. "What they're learning now when they're young is (that) how they look, what they buy determines their value. It's how they learn to judge themselves and learn to judge others."

In counseling parents and teachers, Levin encourages them to keep children away from pop culture influences and pressures as long as possible and then deal with it when they arrive. Because they will arrive, she said.

At that point, the best thing parents can do is stay connected in a way that helps the child feel safe and confident in saying what they think despite outside influences, Levin said.

It was comforting advice for this parent, who gave Santa the go-ahead to order the royal blue Schwinn Roadster tricycle on Amazon.com before Levin had weighed in on the issue. Even Santa has to abide by holiday shipping deadlines. Shawn and I cannot wait to see Gracie's face when she discovers it by the fireplace.

Santa's also throwing in a matching blue-and-white basket for the bike's handlebars. The basket, which has a pretty flower on it, may actually be a gift for Gracie's mamma.

I'm glad Santa knows I've tried to be good.

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