

Shopping between the gender lines

I want to buy a child's winter coat. A red one. Spare me the heart-shaped buttons or camouflage

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submissions: facts@...

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It's cold out and my oldest child needs a new coat. And now that I'm down to only one child in diapers, I'm in the market for kids' underwear, too.

I head out on my lunch break to find both. "Where can I find children's underwear?" I ask the salesclerk.

"For a boy or a girl?" she responds.

For a child, I think. A small, human child. Two leg holes, an elastic waist, nothing fancy.

I have the same luck with the winter coat. Walking into the store I'm forced to make an immediate left-or-right decision. One side is all pink and lavender. The other is all blue, black and plaid.

I'd like a red coat. I scan the aisles, deliberately avoiding the boys' side or girls' side choice inherent in the store's layout.

I find one red coat but it has a frill around the hood and heart-shaped buttons. This seems almost reasonable amid all the fur-lined cuffs and camouflage (don't we want our kids to be visible to oncoming traffic?).

But in the end I can't be reconciled to the frill. I leave with nothing and turn my search to the Internet.

I try the websites of several popular kids' clothing stores. Here my refusal to shop along gender lines is thwarted - each website demands I make the choice among baby girls, baby boys, toddler girls or toddler boys before I can search for outerwear.

The coat I'm looking for is simply for a toddler - for my daughter this winter and for my son next winter. It seems ridiculous and wasteful to buy separate sets of gendered clothing for each child every year. I just want a red coat. A warm one. And red underwear would be cool, too. Or orange, or green. Maybe something with bright stripes would get my little one excited about getting dressed in the morning.

I end up buying a yellow winter coat online, but I had to lie and declare that my toddler girl was a toddler boy. Anything approaching gender neutrality in clothing is found in the boys' section.

The underwear presents a different challenge. I may well indulge each child with his and her own new underwear each year. So I'm prepared to give in and head for the girls' section until my son is out of diapers.

But which character would I like? Nearly all the underwear has someone's smiling face on it. I don't want my daughter's adorable bum populated by Dora, Diego, Curious George, Barbie, the Bratz or any of the Disney Princesses. And you can forget about bright colours - it's all pale and minty and terrible.

In desperation I head to the boys' section to find that Spider-Man, SpongeBob, Shrek and Bob the Builder have infiltrated the undergarments there. Not a pair of unfrilled, unbranded, solid-coloured underwear to be found. I finally settle on a three-pack of orange, blue and brown boxers. She'll love them.

What's wrong with a little fluidity in gender? Children's toys, games and clothes don't need to be sexually segregated at all, much less at infancy. If my children's clothes are traced back to their source (usually from the boys' section, via my two nephews) then it can be said that my daughter dresses like a boy.

As far as I'm concerned, she dresses like a child - blue pants, red shirt, striped sweater, running shoes. And my son dresses like a slightly smaller child - T-shirts and overalls or sleepers of various colours (including pink).

There are days when my daughter insists on wearing tights, but she's just as likely to pull a pair of pants over them as she is to wear them under a dress. Her favourite T-shirt right now is bright green and reads "Ithaca is Gorges." Her daycare teacher once remarked that she was the most gender-neutral dresser she had ever seen. I took it as a compliment.

My kids are close in size so they share many items of clothing. They share their toys, too, although not always willingly. An evening in our living room is spent piling, toppling, cradling, dressing, driving, kicking and assembling blocks, balls, dolls, trains and puzzles, with no regard as to which toy is for which child.

My daughter often announces that she's a "big boy." And sometimes she's a "big girl." When her little brother pulls himself up on the couch and giggles, she observes "Leo's laughing, she's laughing!" We say, "Yes, because you're funny!" and leave it at that. I'm in no hurry for her to sort out the sexes and align her vocabulary accordingly.

I first noticed the extent of the boy-girl split in clothing stores when one of my nephews was a baby. I ranted about it to my sister and brother-in-law while we browsed the mall looking for ways to spend the gift cards the baby had received.

Walking into one baby clothing store holding his days-old son, my brother-in-law was approached by a salesclerk who asked, "Boy or girl?"

He winked at me and answered, "A boy, but he's very effeminate."

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