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### **Expanding Vocabulary through Reading**

#### **Pre-reading:**

1. Read the title of the article below and think about the terms "tomboy" and "girlie-girl." What do they mean and what connotations or associations do they each have? Which type is more valued in our society? How so?

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2. Read the first 2 paragraphs and the last one. What is the writer mentioning so far?

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3. Now, please read the rest of the article.

## **Like Tomboys and Hate Girlie Girls? That's Sexist**

### **We need to stop maligning femininity, in both girls and boys.**

By Lisa Selin Davis Dec. 19, 2018 *The New York Times* Opinion

Is Barbie topping your daughter's Christmas list? If so, do you say no, because she traditionally represents the worst of stereotypical femininity? Or do you give the kid what she wants?

I grapple with these questions regularly. My 6-year-old daughter is desperate for Barbies, but what she wants most is makeup. Recently, we ran into a friend of mine at the library.

"Is she wearing *lipstick*?" my friend asked. Indeed, my child had a faint stripe of fuchsia across her lips.

My cheeks colored. "I don't know what to do about it," I said. I was referring less to the lipstick than to her affinity for the traditional trappings of femininity, like frilly dresses and long hair. Her embrace of those things confounded me, a proper feminist raised to eschew princess paraphernalia and question the patriarchy.

"You could not give it to her," my friend said, matter-of-factly.

To me that was not an option. It was a matter of parity. I had allowed my older daughter to embrace the traditional trappings of masculinity, like baseball gloves and sweatpants. In fact, I had often been congratulated for facilitating her self-expression as a tomboy (her word) or a gender-nonconforming girl (the world's words, and increasingly mine).

But this exchange made me wonder: Why are some of us so disapproving of feminine girls and so approving of masculine ones?

The answer is that we have internalized a kind of sexism that values masculinity in both boys and girls, just as it devalues femininity in them.

Notions about masculinity and femininity are relative, of course, and rooted in culture. A Texan pal of mine pointed out that a lipsticked 6-year-old would be told how adorable she looked in her hometown and perhaps offered a complementary set of high heels, while a masculine girl might be scorned.

But perhaps my culture of lefty liberals has a problem. While there is a proven and troubling connection between preferences for traditional femininity and girls' low self-esteem, liberals' hand-wringing over girlie girls could be an overcorrection, a backfired strain of third-wave feminism.

Maligning girlie girls is nothing new. Consider the number of children's books, films and TV shows in which tomboys are protagonists, while feminine boys and girls are problematic characters. Tomboys, from Jo in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" to Jo on Norman Lear's

1980s sitcom "The Facts of Life," are heroines. Girlie girls, like the golden-ringleted Nellie Oleson in "Little House on the Prairie," are often villains.

Of course, femininity is even more reviled in boys. "'Tomboy' was generally considered a positive label," the authors of a study called "Sissies, Mama's Boys, and Tomboys" wrote, "as opposed to the 'sissy' who was described as having negative feminine traits." Notice the inherent link between *feminine* and *negative*.

Such is the case in life, as well as literature. As the psychology professor Ritch C. Savin-Williams noted, "Considerably more leeway is usually given to girls than to boys for expressing cross-sex behaviors and interests, which reflects in part the elevated prestige masculinity is given in our culture."

And the trans writer Julia Serano has noted the "preference for trans men over trans women," which "simply reflects the societal-wide inclination to view masculinity as being strong and natural, and femininity as being weak and artificial."

While some scholars have argued that masculine women are lowest on the social totem pole, with their inherent lack of power in the world and their failure to live up to impossible standards of beauty, masculinity still carries prestige and femininity carries the whiff of subjugation, regardless of the gender it's applied to.

In our attempt to free ourselves from the history of women's oppression, we may have internalized a sexism that makes us want to shut off whole strains of items and experiences — to steer clear of pink or ballet or lipstick — and to associate the feminine with the bad. Some of that is because we do not want our kids to pick up on the messages usually cleaved to those things, that a girl must be a decorated object, pleasing to the male gaze. The original Barbie, after all, is anorexically thin, white, blond and literally unable to stand on her own two feet. But some of it is unexamined.

So let's examine. First, we must stop using "girlie" as an insult. Second, we must strip gendered associations from lipstick, dresses and glitter, soccer balls, sweatpants and short hair. There is no reason any of those things should be strictly for boys or girls, or the genders in between.

The friend who questioned my lipstick latitude and I had a lovely exchange afterward. Makeup is complicated, we acknowledged — that's why my daughter is usually not allowed to wear it outside the house. It can be sexualizing, and connected to the idea that what a girl looks like matters more than anything else.

But it can also be a fun and creative form of self-expression. The problem is not lipstick. The problem is the way we devalue anything that's associated with women and girls. All children are better off when we don't stand in the way of what makes them happy because of our own gendered prejudices.

Lisa Selin Davis is at work on a book about the history and future of tomboys.

**For Further Reading:**

<https://www.newsweek.com/my-parents-failed-experiment-gender-neutrality-69487>

**Post Reading:**

4. There are a lot of \$5 words here!
- Go back and circle all the words you'd like to know more fully.
  - Look at the first three examples on the chart and then try to do the same for the other words. Go to a dictionary site: Merriam Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, Dictionary.com. You can try one of these or even a couple to get more on a particular word.
  - You will take notes on not only the definition of the word but also the word form—the part of speech—the word comes in so that you can use the word more accurately.
  - **Don't forget to use the sound button to see how the word is pronounced as well!**

**VOCABULARY WORDS:**

<b>WORD</b>	<b>WORD FORM</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>
<b>maligning</b>	Verb but can use as an adjective or adverb	Speak evil of, say things about someone or something that is harmful and usually not true
<b>Grapple</b>	Verb here but also a noun	Engage in a close fight, struggle with or work hard to deal with
<b>Trappings</b>	Noun	The outward signs, features, objects associated with a particular situation, role or thing
<b>Affinity</b>		
<b>Eschew</b>		

<b>Parity</b>		
<b>Internalized sexism</b>		
<b>Notions</b>		
<b>Scorned</b>		
<b>Inherent</b>		
<b>Subjugation</b>		
<b>Cleaved</b>		

5. Finally put these important words to use. Answer the following questions and compose some sentences using these words you've worked hard on. You can even throw them around while at your next party! **Answer in a sentence or two, using the vocabulary word in bold.**

- Who is being **maligned** according to this article and why?
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- Write another sentence about someone who was **maligned** because of society's gender codes or someone who was maligned recently on social media. Explain why the harm was caused.
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- **Internalized sexism** can take many forms. What kind of internalized sexism does this author find common and do you believe she's accurate, why or why not?
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- What gender codes/expectations might **subjugate** males? Discuss one code, e.g. males can't show emotion, and how it may be overpowering for males to deal with.
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- Gender codes have become an **inherent** part of our society, but what if an individual is nonbinary, a person who expresses a combination of masculinity and femininity, or neither, e.g Miley Cyrus?
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