Pink for girls, blue for boys? Author says clothing’s not so black-and-white

University of Maryland professor looks at history of children’s outfits in new book

by Holly Nunn, Staff Writer

Wendy Rittman was so frustrated with the clothing options available for her 8-year-old daughter that she opened her own online boutique in 2011.

“We just couldn’t find the right mix of clothing for her,” said Rittman of Mitchellville, who founded My Bougie Baby. “The clothes I sell now say, ‘I’m a girl, but I don’t need to be in pink and tulle to be a girl.’”

Jo Paoletti of University Park, a professor in American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, had similar concerns about gender stereotypical clothing while raising her daughter and son, now 30 and 25.

She spent the past 30 years researching why people in the U.S. typically dress girls in pink and boys in blue, and her research now has been published in a book, “Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America,” which is part academic research, part history and part personal narrative of Paoletti’s own experience with children’s clothing.

During her research, she met other Prince George’s parents who had similar concerns and were looking for ways not to dress their children in gender stereotypes.

“There are girls who are tomboys. There are boys who are not macho men,” Paoletti said. “Kids that are gender-non-conforming, like the boy who wants a pink shirt, interpret the clothing in ways of being a boy or a girl.”
mismatch between what they feel inside and what they see as the cultural choices given to them through clothing, and they can be really uncomfortable with those choices. Giving him that pink shirt doesn’t magically turn him into a girl.”

Dressing girls exclusively one way and boys exclusively another sends children the message that there is only one way to be a boy and only one way to be a girl, Paoletti said.

Lara Payne of Brentwood has a 2-year-old daughter and has stopped shopping at children’s clothing stores or department stores because she can’t get away from all of the pink, she said. She shops mostly at thrift stores and looks for purple, green or orange clothes, trying to stay away from too much pink in her daughter’s wardrobe.

But worse than the selection in stores, Payne said, are the expectations of people who say her daughter isn’t girly enough.

“One person, who I don’t know, stopped me in a store and thought my daughter was a boy,” Payne said. “When she realized she’s a girl, she said I should pierce her ears so that people would know. But I don’t mind if people think she’s a boy.”

Before 1900, Paoletti explains, most babies in the U.S. wore white clothing, often with pastel accents that did not signify gender. Pink and blue were considered nursery colors for both boys and girls until the mid-20th century, when colors came to be code for gender, though for decades there was disagreement on whether blue was for girls and pink for boys or vice versa.

Paoletti’s own daughter, Maria, was born in 1982, at the tail end of what Paoletti called “the unisex time,” during the 1970s and early ’80s, when children’s clothing widely was available in plaids and stripes and earth tones, without the frills or embroidered trucks that have come to characterize girls’ or boys’ clothing, respectively.

She attributed this period to a push in American culture partly because of the women’s movement and Marlo Thomas’ children’s book and record, “Free to Be ... You and Me,” to raise children free of gender and race stereotypes.

But, Paoletti said, something had changed by the time she gave birth to her son, Danny, in 1986.

“Everything suddenly had trucks on it;” Paoletti said of shopping for her son. The unisex time ended for many reasons, she said, including prenatal imaging to reveal sex and parental anxiety about their children’s sexuality.

Maria Paoletti of Mount Rainier, Paoletti’s daughter, has an 11-year-old stepdaughter, and recalls going into a Target store about five years ago to purchase a lunchbox to send with her stepdaughter to day camp.

“There was a terrible selection,” Maria Paoletti said. “I mean, there were a lot to choose from, but it was all highly gendered. All the primary-colored ones had like a basketball on them, or there were pink ones with butterflies and flowers.”

But not all parents out shopping for children’s clothing want to see gender-neutral options.

Suzette James of Laurel, shopping at a Target on March 22 for toddler-sized shorts and T-shirts for girls, said she’s tired of seeing pink when she’s shopping for her three granddaughters, ages 7, 18 months and 6 months. She’d like to see more vibrant colors available. But that doesn’t mean, she said, that she wants her granddaughters dressed like boys.

“I don’t like the idea of the girls growing up with unisex clothes,” James said. “If you have a girl, dress her like a girl.”

Making a clear distinction between boys and girls, said University of Maryland, College Park, sociology professor Philip Cohen, is to many parents a sign of success in parenting, and clothing marketers are responding to parents’ desire to be successful.

“Clothing is just one of the social mechanisms we use to differentiate men from women and boys from girls,” Cohen said. “Enacting your gender is a socially competent behavior, and we want to be socially competent. Marketers took advantage of this.”

But Maria Paoletti sees a sinister result of the extreme gendering of clothing in the bullying of children who are
perceived by their peers to be gay.

“It’s not just annoying, but it can be harmful,” Maria Paoletti said. “If we taught our kids from an earlier age that it’s OK for a boy to wear pink or be into dolls, there wouldn’t be this sort of alienation and abuse of children whose gender presentation is outside the norm.”

In the past couple of years, Jo Paoletti said, she has seen some changes in children’s clothing — especially with Internet shopping making a wider variety of clothing available — while most department stores still are gendered in their offerings.

Jo Paoletti is working on her next project, a book about the unisex trend in the 1970s.

For more information, go to www.pinkisforboys.org.

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