

Michigan may require kiddie meals to stop dividing toys by gender

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Popular toys are shown at the Marketing Store in Chicago, Illinois, which has been involved in McDonalds Happy Meal promotions for more than three decades. Some are now questioning toys meant specifically for girls or boys. Photo by: Chris So/Toronto Star via Getty Images

Some people believe the color blue isn't only for boys. They also think pink isn't only for girls. Likewise, a resolution, or proposed law, in Michigan is trying to end the division of toys by gender.

Some members of Michigan's government want to say goodbye to gender-specific toys in fast-food kids' meals.

Gender is how culture or society defines being a boy or girl. It's different than being biologically male or female.

Leslie Love represents Detroit in her state's lawmaking body. She introduced the resolution in November that urges change in the restaurant business. She wants restaurants to stop the gender categorization of toys in kids' meal items.

Trying To Erase The Divide

The aim is to erase the divide between boys' toys and girls' toys. Boys' toys often lean toward action figures or building toys. They are usually primary colors, like bold red or blue. Girls' toys lean toward stuffed animals. They come in pastels, such as light pink or purple. The solution would be to instead ask young customers which toy they want without citing a gender characteristic.

"This is a significant issue, as billions of these meals are sold every year and this practice can influence and limit children's imaginations and interests," reads the resolution. It also says the practice reinforces that some toys are only suitable for girls and others only for boys. "While some food establishments claim to have abandoned this practice, many stores in Michigan continue to offer gender-classified options to customers."

Some fast-food chains choose to include small toys in their kids' meals. For example, McDonald's has the Happy Meal. Burger King has King Jr. Meals. These meals usually come with a small toy.

Love is among the 14 sponsors of the resolution. She was inspired to support it in part because she often orders kids' meals. Workers have asked her if she wants a boy or girl toy with her meal. She didn't name the restaurants where this has happened.

Labeling Items By Gender Is A Bad Idea

"I just want you to give me a toy, whether it's a Power Ranger or a My Little Pony. Just put it in the bag," she said. "It's a new day, and it's time for us to stop using that kind of language and setting those kinds of limits on our children... We would never want to gender-identify careers, but we still do it with our toys."

McDonald's didn't respond to requests for comment.

Burger King replied by e-mail. "We are committed to giving our guests the best possible experience in all our restaurants, including the toys and promotions we offer to our youngest guests," it said.

Christia Spears Brown is a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Kentucky. She studies how people's thinking changes as they grow over a lifetime. Brown agrees labeling items boys' toys and girls' toys is a bad idea. She thinks it ignores children's own feelings and thoughts about gender.

Target Stores Are On Board

"It forces kids into stereotyped boxes when it's really unnecessary; there's no value added," she said. "Children develop skills and interests through play, so if you funnel kids into one type of toy, you're limiting what kinds of skills and interests develop."

Target, for example, stopped gender-identifying toys in 2015. Over the years, there have been grassroots campaigns to rid fast-food kids' meal toys of the "girl" and "boy" descriptors, too.

The resolution calls for copies of its wording to be sent to the CEOs of major fast-food chains in Michigan. The Michigan Legislature makes state laws. The legislature's website said the resolution has also been sent to the state House's Committee on Commerce and Trade. The resolution may soon become law.