

## Was pink originally the colour for boys and blue for girls?

You're telling me that, once upon a time, the colour for boys was pink?

Let me put it this way — some people sure thought it was.

In the 1800s most infants were dressed in white, and gender differences weren't highlighted until



well after the kids were able to walk. Both boys and girls wore dresses or short skirts until age five or six. Differences in clothing were subtle: boys' dresses buttoned up the front, for example, while girls' buttoned up the back. Why no attempt to discriminate further? One theory is that distinguishing boys from girls was less important than distinguishing kids from adults. Childhood was a time of innocence, whereas adulthood typically

meant gruelling physical labour. Perhaps mothers decking out their little boys in dresses thought: They'll get to be manly soon enough.

By mid-century baby clothing in colours other than white had begun to appear, but gender-based distinctions were slow to emerge. In 1855 the New York Times reported on a "baby show" put on by P.T. Barnum, exhibiting "one hundred and odd babies" dressed in pinks, blues, and other colours seemingly without regard to gender. In a passage from Louisa May Alcott's 1868-'69 blockbuster Little Women, a female twin is distinguished by a pink ribbon and a male twin by a blue one, but this is referred to as "French fashion," suggesting it wasn't the rule over here. A Times fashion report from 1880 has boys and girls dressed alike in white, pink, blue, or violet, and another from 1892 says young girls were wearing a variety of colours that spring, including several shades of blue.



But from the 1890s onward, boys' and girls' clothing styles started to diverge, with boys dressed in trousers or knickers at progressively earlier ages. Jo Paoletti of the University of Maryland, a long-time specialist on the topic, reviewed more than 500 descriptions and images of children's clothing appearing in print between 1890 and 1920 and notes a rapid "masculinization" of boys' wear, for reasons that remain obscure.

As part of this differentiation, there seems to have been an effort to establish characteristic colours for girls and boys. But it took decades to develop a consensus on what those colours were. For

years one camp claimed pink was the boys' colour and blue the girls'. A 1905 *Times* article said so, and *Parents* magazine was still saying it as late as 1939. Why pink for boys? Some argued that pink was a close relative of red, which was seen as a fiery, manly colour. Others traced the association of blue with girls to the frequent depiction of the Virgin Mary in blue.

I'm not convinced, however, that there was ever a consensus that pink was for boys and blue was for girls. On the contrary, indications are the two colours were used interchangeably until World War II. Examples of pink as a mark of the feminine aren't hard to come by, one of the cruder being the use of a pink triangle to identify homosexuals in Nazi



prison camps. After the war the tide shifted permanently in favour of blue as a boy's colour. In 1948, royal-watchers reported Princess Elizabeth was obviously expecting a boy, since a temporary nursery set up in Buckingham Palace was gaily trimmed with blue satin bows. By 1959 the infant wear buyer for one department store was telling the *Times*, "A mother will allow her girl to wear blue, but daddy will never permit his son to wear pink."

How did pink get ghettoized as a girls' colour? Nobody really knows. Professor Paoletti thinks the choice was largely arbitrary, but others credit innate biological tendencies. Research on colour preference in monkeys has shown females prefer warmer colours like pink and red — supposedly an infant primate's pink face brings out its mother's nurturing instincts. A colour preference study of Caucasian and Chinese men and women showed both Caucasian and Chinese women strongly preferred red and pink, while Caucasian men strongly preferred blue and green. However, the Chinese men showed a broader range, with many picking red and pink — possibly because in China red is considered lucky. To me, that suggests the biology argument is pretty weak. Sure, my favourite colour is blue. But it's entirely possible I say that because I was always told I should.

— Cecil Adams

Adapted from <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/2831/was-pink-originally-the-color-for-boys-and-blue-for-girls>

### Are these affirmations true (T) or false (F)?

Children's clothes showed very little gender differences until the 1890s.

The differentiation on children-wear colours has a religious origin.

After WWII, pink started to be highly associated with the feminine.

Professor Paoletti thinks there is an innate biological tendency for women to prefer pink.

Most Chinese men preferred pink due to cultural reasons.

The writer believes he likes blue because he is a man.

