Early years practitioners can do a lot to challenge gender stereotypes and avoid limiting the choices for both girls and boys, says Phoebe Doyle.

The Pink Stinks campaign, protesting at the culture of pink that now pervades young girls’ lives, hit the headlines when it called for a boycott of stores selling gender-stereotyped toys. Now the twin sisters behind the campaign (www.pinkstinks.org.uk) are working on another website, www.cooltobe.me. This is aimed at girls AND boys, but with the primary purpose of offering positive female role models to the younger generation. Together, the sites raise important questions for early years practitioners about gender, resourcing, the principles of the EYFS and our expectations of children.

Launched by Emma and Abi Moore, the Pink Stinks campaign sought to highlight and start a debate about gender issues as part of its wider goal to encourage marketers and the media to promote more positive gender roles to girls.

Among its main targets are stereotypical toys, the abundance of pink clothes for girls and the media’s celebration of unobtainable beauty over real achievement for women.

On cooltobe.me, the Moore sisters plan to post films and information celebrating the skills and achievements of ‘real’ women from all walks of life. Among them is Maggie Aderin-Pocock, who overcame dyslexia and her teachers’ limited expectations of her, to become a space scientist and engineer.

Limiting children’s choices limits their thinking and ambitions, the sisters believe, and part of their argument against many of the toys now marketed at girls is that they’re ‘more limited, and limiting,’ than those for boys.

It’s not only colour that announces the gender that a toy is aimed at. Girls’ toys are more likely to suggest domesticity and nurture, whereas toys aimed at boys usually involve construction, action and transport.

A 1981 ad for Lego featuring a girl shows just how much attitudes can change. As a staff team, ask yourselves:

- Are ‘boys’ toys also stereotypical?
- To what extent do toys fail to mirror modern gender roles?
- Do your resources reflect a broad spectrum of interests?
- Do the resources denote by colour which gender they are for?
- Do your expectations of boys and girls differ? Why?
- Are you equally likely to suggest that a style or type of play is acceptable for one gender but not for another?
- Do you encourage both boys and girls to engage in a diverse range of activities?
- Do the activities on offer to children challenge stereotypical notions of gender roles?
- Does your nursery book collection include stories that challenge gender stereotypes?

As a study by Alexander and Hines (2002), which found that monkeys made the same gender-biased choices generally witnessed in human boys and girls. However, this alone does not determine choice and we must ensure it is not adult expectations, nor tangible resources, that are determining children’s preferences.

The Early Years Foundation Stage states ‘Providers must actively avoid gender stereotyping and must challenge any expression of prejudice or discrimination by children or adults’ (page 6).

The pertinence of the Pink Stinks campaign to early years education lies largely in its call for reflection on the nature of the toys that we offer children, our own attitudes to gender and our expectations of boys and girls. The old Lego advertisement (right) shows just how much attitudes can change.