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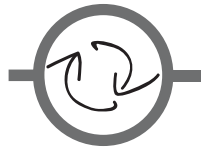
## PLAY AND GENDER

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This chapter explores how children develop their gender identity and discusses the extent to which this influences or is influenced by play. We consider some of the important milestones in gender development and the changes in play behaviours that accompany them.



## THIS CHAPTER WILL...

- Outline key milestones in gender development
- Discuss research regarding differences in boys' and girls' play behaviours
- Investigate whether adults have a role in gender-typing play
- Discuss the relationship between play and emergent gender identity
- Consider some possible implications of gender-typed toys and play.

## KEY TERMS

gender/gender identity, gender-typed behaviour, sex, stereotypes

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine that a family member or close friend calls to tell you that their baby has been safely delivered. Probably the first question you ask is whether they have had a boy or a girl. You may even have attended a 'gender reveal' party where friends and family gather to learn whether the coming child is male or female. Knowing a person's sex would therefore appear to be regarded as extremely important. Some would argue that it subsequently does much to shape expectations and behaviour towards the child, not just by those who are involved in the baby's upbringing but also by society at large. The suggestion is that society holds expectations regarding suitable male and female behaviours and that this even spills over into the conscious or unconscious management of children's play. Visit any toy store or watch a group of young children playing and you will probably notice a difference in what girls and boys play with and how they play. The question is whether the differences you observe in the playground are innate or learnt. Are toy manufacturers responding to demand or creating demand? This chapter will help you to formulate your own opinion by considering a variety of theories and research findings.

Throughout the chapter, you will notice that, over the years, gender research has come in and out of fashion (see Chapter 1). You should therefore critically consider the likelihood that older findings still hold true.

## DEFINING SEX AND GENDER

Before we move on, it is important to explore some definitions. The American Psychological Association (2015) offers the following distinctions:

*Sex*: the biological aspects of being male or female such as genitalia. It is connected to chromosomes, hormones and physical manifestations.

*Gender*: the psychological, behavioural, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female (i.e., masculinity or femininity). It refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that a culture associates with each biological sex.

*Gender identity*: a person's awareness of their identification as male or female and its implications.

*Gender typing*: the process of acquiring the values and behaviours considered appropriate for that sex.

*Gender role stereotypes*: ideas about what males and females are traditionally supposed to be like. Behaviour that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as *gender-normative*; behaviours that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute *gender non-conformity*.

As sex differences are easily explained, this chapter will largely focus on gender development and the emergence of gender identity.

Let's begin our investigation, as we did in the Introduction, with the birth of a new baby.



### TIME TO CONSIDER

Type 'nursery ideas for baby girls' and then 'nursery ideas for baby boys' into your search engine. What do you notice about the images that appear? What do they suggest about social expectations regarding gender-typed personality and behaviour? Try repeating the exercise to look at clothes for baby boys and girls.

## KEY MILESTONES IN GENDER DEVELOPMENT

### Gender recognition

As soon as they can visually track objects and focus their attention on what they see, babies begin to develop notions of similarity and difference. This gradually extends into an ability to categorise and recognise that certain things are the same or belong

together. One of the earliest categories to emerge is gender. Over the years, research has suggested that infants recognise the visual differences between male and female (Owen & Barnes, 2019):

- 6–9-month-old infants can distinguish male and female based on hairstyle (Intons-Peterson, 1988) and voice (Martin, Ruble & Skrybalo, 2002).
- 1-year-olds can tell the difference between photographs of men and women (Leinbach & Fagot, 1993).
- 2–3-year-olds use words such as ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ in their speech and can correctly identify their own gender (Thompson, 1975).
- 3-year-olds consistently designate particular colours, clothing and hairstyles as belonging to boys or girls (Picariello, Greenberg & Pillemer, 1990).
- 3-year-olds reliably separate given names into ‘girl’s names’ or ‘boy’s names’ (Bauer & Coyne, 2006).

Although recognition of difference is initially based on physical aspects such as height, facial hair and bone structure, young children believe that girls can grow up to be daddies and boys can grow up to be mummies if they want to. By the time they are about 5, children recognise that gender is fixed.

### Development of gender identity

Fagot, Lienbach & O’Boyle (1992) found that 2–3-year-olds who could correctly identify people in photos as being boys and girls were more aware of gender stereotypes. Awareness and acceptance of stereotypical ideas develop throughout the early years, and young children believe that boys and girls must behave according to their gender roles. Two-year-olds are therefore surprised by instances of gender non-conformity, such as men putting on lipstick (Poulin-Dubois et al., 2002). They will also reject other children who violate gender stereotypes; a boy who plays with girl’s toys will probably find himself being rejected by both boys and girls. Between 3 and 4 years old, three-quarters of girls exhibit what is termed ‘gender appearance rigidity’, often demanding to wear pink dresses and/or tutus, regardless of whether they are suited to the activity or weather conditions. This is particularly prevalent in girls who realise their gender is fixed for life (Halim et al., 2014). By the time they are 4–5 years old, children are aligning themselves with others of their gender. They report positive same-gender and negative other-gender attitudes, with both being based largely on gender stereotypes (Halim et al., 2016).

Recognition of sex differences therefore appears to stem from the observation of physical difference, whereas recognition of appropriate gendered behaviours is influenced by social norms. Let us consider some potential sources of cultural information.

## Parents and siblings

From the very beginning, the way parents talk to and about their babies varies according to their sex. For instance, baby girls are described as cuddly and cute and are held closely. Boys are more likely to be commended for the strength of their grip or kick and are held less frequently by their parents. Mothers talk more and use more supportive speech towards girls (Leaper, Anderson & Sanders, 1998), and both mothers and fathers use more emotion words with daughters than with sons (Kuebli & Fivush, 1992). In early play, reactions such as fear and uncertainty are condoned amongst girls, whereas boys are expected to be bolder. Parents generally give children gender-typical chores, such as cooking and cleaning for daughters and washing the car for sons (Leaper, 2002). Children also learn from observing their parents and siblings. Children who have a working mum or a stay-at-home dad are less aware of gender stereotypes than those who come from traditional families (Turner & Gervai, 1995). Children with same-sex siblings are more likely to engage in gender-typed activity than those who have opposite-sex siblings. Finally, parents comment more on their daughter's appearance, sending out messages that it's important for girls to look good.

## School and nursery

In Western cultures, teachers value stereotypically feminine behaviours such as sitting quietly and getting on with things. Assertiveness and aggression are not encouraged, so boys can suffer more criticism in the classroom than girls (Huston, 1983). However, research has also shown that boys dominate the classroom. Teachers are more likely to select boys to answer questions and boys receive more praise than girls when they give the correct answer (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Bian, Leslie and Cimpian (2017) discovered that, at age 5, children thought both girls and boys could be 'really, really smart' (children's version of adult brilliance), but, by age 6, girls were less likely than boys to believe members of their gender were 'really, really smart'. Subsequently, girls began to avoid activities for 'really, really smart' children. These findings suggest that gendered notions of brilliance are acquired early and have an immediate effect on children's interests.

## The media

Sexism in children's books and TV programmes has lessened in recent years. However, male characters are still usually leaders who make important decisions and respond to emergencies, whereas female characters are more passive and look after

the house or work in the caring professions (Signorielli & Leers, 1992). Research has shown that children who watch a lot of TV are more likely to prefer gender-specific activities, have highly stereotyped views of men and women (Signorella, Bigler & Liben, 1993) and believe people think that boys are better (Halim, Ruble & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012).



## SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

Golden, J.C., & Jacoby, J.W. (2018) Playing princess: Preschool girls' interpretations of gender stereotypes in Disney princess media. *Sex Roles*, 79, 299–313.

The princesses portrayed in Disney films provide clear and consistent messages regarding gender norms and roles. Golden and Jacoby examined how preschool girls interpret these messages through their pretend play and in their discussions. They recruited 31 3- to 5-year-old girls from a range of racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The participants all attended one of two preschools in rural New England. Data collection involved a variety of methods, including pretend play observations, semi-structured interviews and parent questionnaires. Participants held stereotypical beliefs about the princesses and demonstrated highly gendered behaviours when pretending to be the princesses. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and identified four themes that defined the participants' princess play: beauty, a focus on clothing and accessories, princess body movements, and an exclusion of boys.

### Reflective question

The authors conclude: 'Based on the outcomes of our study, parents and educators might reconsider the type and amount of media they provide for their children, acknowledging the effects of these images on their children's behaviours and understandings of gender' (Golden & Jacoby, 2018: 311). Do you agree that this is necessary?

It would appear, therefore, that from birth onwards, sex and gender have an impact on some of the ways in which children are treated, how they are expected to behave and how they view themselves.

## THE EMERGENCE OF GENDERED PLAY BEHAVIOURS

In this section, we shall consider research evidence regarding how emergent gender identity is manifested in play. This links to some of the developmental milestones discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

Considerable research has been conducted in this area, with numerous studies showing clear indications of gender conformism in children's play and in their toy selection (see Table 6.1; Kollmayer et al., 2018). As with gender identity and stereotypes, we need to consider whether these differences in play behaviours are part of an innate bias, or the result of the child's environment. Given that parents are generally the primary influence during early childhood, we shall begin by considering the influence of attitudes and behaviours within the home.

### Play with parents

Research has consistently discovered that parents tend to rate same-gender-typed and gender-neutral toys as more desirable for their children than cross-gender-typed

**Table 6.1** Toy choices and play behaviours by age group

Age in years	Toy choices and play behaviours
0–3	<p>Gender-typed toy/play preferences emerge.</p> <p>At 14–22 months, boys prefer to play with trucks, hammers and cars, and girls prefer to play with dolls and soft toys (Smith &amp; Daghish, 1977).</p> <p>At 18 months, children show greater involvement when playing with same-sex type toys than when playing with cross-sex toys (Caldera, Huston &amp; O'Brien, 1989).</p> <p>A significant proportion of 18–24-month-old infants refuse to play with cross-sex toys, even when there is nothing else for them to play with (Caldera, Huston &amp; O'Brien, 1989).</p> <p>Infants who show greater interest in a toy truck than in a doll at 6–9 months old, show significantly greater male-typical toy and activity preferences at age 4 (Lauer, Illksoy &amp; Lourenco, 2018).</p> <p>Between 2 and 2½ years old, 25% of children can sort photos into 'boys' and 'girls' piles and identify boys' and girls' toys (Campbell, Shirely &amp; Caygill, 2002).</p> <p>2½–3½-year-olds ascribe activities such as cooking, sewing and giving kisses to girl dolls, and playing with trucks, fighting and climbing to boy dolls (Kuhn et al., 1978).</p>
3–6	<p>Children are more aware of the types of toys, activities and achievements considered appropriate for boys and girls (Serbin, Powliishta &amp; Gulko, 1993).</p> <p>However, girls show more non-stereotypical responses than boys (Signorella, Bigler &amp; Liben, 1993).</p> <p>When offered a choice between a doll and a train, girls are more inclined to choose the doll and boys to choose the train. If the doll is pink, this increases the girl's enthusiasm and the boy's avoidance (Wong &amp; Hines, 2015). Once acquired, gender-typical colour preferences seem to influence toy preferences.</p>
7–11	<p>Children are more likely to accept girls engaging in cross-sex activities than boys. Boys judge other boys who engage in cross-sex activities particularly harshly.</p> <p>As they get older, children increasingly realise that gender discrimination is unfair (Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim &amp; Ardila-Rey, 2001).</p>

toys (Kollmayer et al., 2018). They respond more positively when they see their child playing with sexually stereotyped toys (Caldera, Huston & O'Brien, 1989), and choose gender-stereotypic toys when interacting with their children (Eisenberg, Wolchick, Hernandez & Pasternack, 1985). It is therefore no surprise that most parents also buy gender-traditional toys for their children (Etaugh & Liss, 1992). This means that girls are provided with more dolls and toys directed towards domestic activities, whilst boys receive more educational toys and items focused outside the home (Parsons & Howe, 2006). A parent's apparent approval does much to shape play, even amongst pre-verbal children. Toddlers continue or halt play according to parental response (Bandura, 1992; Feinman et al., 1992). Young children therefore have both the materials and the motivation to engage in gender-typed play.

During the toddler period, fathers initiate more play than mothers (Clark-Stewart, 1977) and whilst they encourage symbolic play, the themes fathers use differ stereotypically with boys and girls (Farver & Wimbarti, 1995). Indeed, parents show a general tendency to endorse gender-conformist play behaviours (Beresin & Sutton-Smith, 2010), particularly when playing with sons (Lynch, 2015). Parents' own levels of gender conformism predict children's attitudes (Dawson, Pike & Bird, 2015; Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). So, if dad refuses to play with the baby doll, his sons are also likely to refuse. Research suggests that play is less stereotypic and less dichotomised amongst children of lesbian and gay parents (Goldberg, Kashy & Smith, 2012). These children have less stereotypic attitudes towards gender, but still gender-type themselves in a gender-conformist fashion (Sumontha, Farr & Patterson, 2017).

During playful interactions with their children, fathers tend to engage in more physically rousing play (roughhousing, throwing infants in the air and run-and-chase games) than do mothers (Hughes, 2009). Instead, mothers' play tends to involve a teaching component and is more verbal than that of fathers. They spend more time naming objects, labelling and pointing than they do in physically active play (Hughes, 2009).

Parents are more likely to encourage daughters than sons to engage in pretend play (Gleason, 2005), with mothers being more likely than fathers to join in (Lindsey & Mize, 2001). Girls are therefore significantly more likely to participate in pretend play than boys (Gmitrova, Podhajecka & Gmitrov, 2009). Girls are also inclined to focus on family-related themes in their play (Anggard, 2011). Parents are more likely to condone risk-taking amongst boys (Rosen & Peterson, 1990), so boys engage in more play behaviours that are highly correlated with injury.

Thus, whilst the timing and intensity of gender-typing in children's play is probably mediated by a range of environmental factors (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006), parental attitudes certainly appear to play a role (Eisenberg et al., 1985).





## TIME TO CONSIDER

Make a list of toys you would consider to be gender-neutral.

Given that modern Western society expects fathers to help care for their children and men to be able to cook, should baby dolls and toy kitchens be considered gender-neutral?

### Choosing playmates

Who and what children play with changes according to their gender awareness (see Table 6.2). Leinbach and Fagot (1986) found that 2-year-old boys who could provide accurate gender labels for people in photographs rarely played with dolls, but boys who were unable to provide gender labels played with dolls as much as girls. Similarly, children who could accurately gender-label headshot photos were more likely to have same-sex playmates than those who could not (Fagot, Leinbach & Hagan, 1986).

Once children reach school age, they usually maintain gender group boundaries. Girls who attempt to join a boy's playgroup are generally ignored, whilst boys who

**Table 6.2** Attitude towards toys and playmates by age group

Age in years	Attitude towards toys and playmates
0–3	<p>2-year-old girls prefer to play with other girls and 3-year-old boys prefer to play with other boys (La Freniere, Strayer &amp; Gauthier, 1984).</p> <p>Preference for same-sex playmates is known as gender segregation and has been observed in several different cultures.</p>
3–6	<p>Young children believe that it is wrong to exclude other children from playing with toys such as trucks or dolls based on their gender, but they do it anyway (Killen et al., 2001).</p> <p>4-year-olds report greater interest in gender-typed and neutral toys than in cross-gender-typed toys. However, when observed, girls in particular play with both neutral and cross-gender toys (Dinella, Weisgram &amp; Fulcher, 2017).</p> <p>5-year-olds prefer social robots (such as ASIMO) to be gender-matched to them, but 9–12-year-olds show no preference (Sandygulova &amp; O'Hare, 2018).</p> <p><i>Gender segregation intensifies</i></p> <p>4–5-year-olds reject playmates of the other sex (Ramsey, 1995).</p> <p>6½-year-olds spend 10 times more time with same-sex friends than with opposite-sex friends (Maccoby, 1998).</p>
7–11	<p><i>Gender preferences are even more pronounced</i></p> <p>Children who have cross-sex friendships are likely to be rejected by their peers (Kovacs, Parker &amp; Hoffman, 1993).</p> <p>Gender-stereotyped preferences increase steadily throughout childhood, especially amongst boys, but decrease by age 12 (Kanka, Wagner, Buchmann &amp; Spiel, 2019).</p>

attempt to join in with girls' play are ridiculed by both males and females (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989). When children cluster into same-sex groupings, girls are usually more socially skilled than boys (Serbin, Moller, Powlishta & Gulko, 1991). As dramatic play increases during the preschool years, boys are more likely to focus on dangerous or heroic themes, whilst girls engage in more family-focused play (Anggard, 2011). However, we cannot be certain of the direction of influence here. Socially skilled children generally choose to play with other socially skilled children (Fabes et al., 2012) and having same-sex playmates may foster gender awareness and gender-typing (Ayres, Khan & Leve, 2006) It is therefore possible that segregated play is determined by factors other than personal toy or activity preferences. We shall therefore briefly consider some of the main non-physical differences between boys and girls, and the theoretical explanations as to their basis.

## SEX DIFFERENCES: ARE MALES AND FEMALES REALLY DIFFERENT?

Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) conducted a review of sex difference research and concluded that there are only four small and reliable differences between men and women: verbal ability; visual/spatial abilities; mathematical ability; and aggression. At first glance, these appear to support well-known gender stereotypes within Western society.

### Verbal ability

Girls acquire language earlier and have greater verbal abilities than boys (Schaadt, Hesse & Friederici, 2015). This advantage continues into adulthood and women are better than men at maths tasks that require some level of verbal reasoning (Gallagher, Levin & Cahalan, 2002).

However, research has shown that parents talk more to baby girls during play (Bornstein et al., 1999), and the amount of time parents spend talking to their child is a strong predictor of their later verbal ability. So verbal skills may be the result of increased interaction (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner & Goodman, 2000), or perhaps parents talk more to baby girls because they show a talent in this area.

### Visual/spatial abilities

Whilst there are some differences according to the task, boys generally outperform girls in visual/spatial abilities. This can be detected in 4-year-olds and continues throughout the life span (Halpern, 2012).

Spatial ability has been linked to computer game usage and, as such, children's visual/spatial capabilities have increased in recent years (Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield & Gross, 2001). Boys, however, tend to play computer games more than girls and traditional 'boys' toys' such as construction sets support the development of visual/spatial skills.

### Mathematical ability

For over two decades, boys have performed slightly better than girls in most tests of mathematical ability. When considering those who achieve highly in maths and science, males outnumber females by over 2 to 1 (Reilly, Neumann & Andrews, 2015).

### Aggression

Boys are more physically and verbally aggressive than girls (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). These differences occur across socio-economic groups and cultures, are observable in children as young as 2 and increase throughout childhood (Knight, Fabes & Higgins, 1996). Girls engage in more relational aggression than boys, excluding other girls from the social group or talking about them (Crick, Casas & Ku, 1999).

More recent research has suggested that the following areas should be added to the list of sex differences proposed by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974):

- Boys are more active than girls.
- Girls are more timid than boys and less likely to take risks.
- From conception, boys are more vulnerable and more prone to atypicalities such as autism.
- From toddlerhood, boys are more likely to display anger, whilst girls show greater emotional sensitivity.
- Girls are more compliant to requests made by authority figures such as parents and teachers.
- Boys have slightly higher levels of self-esteem, particularly as they get older.



#### TIME TO CONSIDER

What are currently the most popular toys for girls, and what are the most popular toys for boys? Looking through the lists, do you notice any correlation between the toys and the differences noted above? Do you think that manufacturers are responding to girls' and boys' innate abilities, or are the toys responsible for gender-typing children?

## ARE THERE OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEXES?

Before making our minds up, we should consider some theories that have been proposed to explain gender development and gender differences. These tend to either emphasise biological differences or social influence. We'll look at the evolutionary and biological explanations first.

### Evolutionary theory

Evolutionary theory is based on the assumption that sex differences can be explained by our evolutionary past. It is suggested that men needed strong visual/spatial skills in order to be good hunter-gatherers (Geary, 2004). Furthermore, men had to compete to attract a mate and so those who were aggressive, assertive and competitive were more likely to successfully reproduce. Through the process of natural selection, visual/spatial ability, aggression, assertiveness and competitiveness became more pronounced in men.

Women, on the other hand, have to put far more investment into raising children because they carry the child for 9 months. In order to successfully raise children, women need to be kind, gentle and nurturing. They also need strong relationships with other women who can help with childcare.

### Biological theories

Biological research indicates that there are small but consistent physical and structural differences between male and female brains (Cahill, 2005). These differences are believed to originate in the developing foetal brain and are affected by sex hormones. For example, the area of the brain associated with spatial ability is rich in sex hormone receptors, and so exposure to high levels of male hormones during foetal development may lead to this area of the brain becoming highly specialised (Cahill, 2005).

Further research has demonstrated that being exposed to the 'wrong' hormones in the womb influences gender (Berenbaum, 2017). This applies to female foetuses who are exposed to high levels of testosterone in the womb and children who have a congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). This leads to girls having an XX genetic endowment, but male genitalia. Money and Ehrhaart (1972) studied a group of girls born with CAH who had undergone 'corrective' surgery at a young age and were raised as girls. It was reported that these girls were tomboys with a strong preference for boy's toys and activities. They also outperformed women in spatial ability tasks. This suggests that hormones have an important role to play in deciding gender.

## Social learning theory

For social learning theorists such as Bandura, children learn about their gender role in two different ways:

- *Direct tuition:* Children receive rewards for acting in gender-appropriate ways and are punished or discouraged when they step outside of their gender stereotype.
- *Observational learning:* Children learn about their gender role from observing same-sex role models.

This links to our previous points regarding the encouragement children receive from their parents and peers to behave in a gender-conformist manner.

Developmental psychologists have reached two major conclusions:

- 1 Males and females are more psychologically similar than they are different.
- 2 Most gender role stereotypes are cultural myths that have no basis in 'fact'.

In this chapter, we have established that girls and boys differ in how they play and what they play with. Our final question is whether this is of any importance in terms of their learning and development.

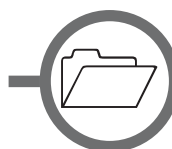
## DOES IT REALLY MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE WHAT CHILDREN PLAY WITH?

*Yes, it develops specific skill sets.* We have established that parents tend to select gender-stereotypic toys when interacting with their children. The toys, in turn, then shape the nature of the communication. Masculine toys generally evoke less conversation, less teaching and less physical contact (Caldera, Huston & O'Brien, 1989). Stereotypically female toys elicit higher levels of verbal and social interaction and more complex thematic play (Cherney et al., 2003). Consider playing with a train and some track as opposed to a doll and a tea set and the differences are clearly apparent. Girls' play is therefore liable to encourage social skills and empathy in the way we discussed in Chapter 2. It also encourages language, interaction and physical proximity. Boys' play encourages greater spatial awareness, self-reliance and risk-taking. Physical proximity is generally only achieved during play-fighting or relatively aggressive games.

*Yes, it promotes sexual stereotypes.* Murnen, Greenfield, Younger and Boyd (2016) analysed popular dolls and action figures and discovered that female characters were far more likely than male characters to be depicted with traditional feminine stereotyped cues

(e.g. decorative clothing) and sexually submissive, hyper-feminine cues (e.g. revealing clothing). Male characters were far more likely to be portrayed with traditional masculine characteristics like functional clothing and the body-in-motion, and they were often depicted with hyper-masculine accessories such as possessing a weapon.

*Yes, it shapes aspirations.* The types of toys children are provided with does much to influence their perceptions of both their present and future self (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Halim, Rubel & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). For instance, girls who played with Barbies in a randomised trial, regarded females as having far fewer career options than those who played with less stereotypical toys (Sherman & Zubriggen, 2014). Similarly, children who engaged with Disney princess media and products, showed more female gender-stereotypical behaviour one year later than those who had not played with the toys (Coyne et al., 2016).



## CASE STUDY 6.1

As a mother of two boys aged 4 and 7, I have reflected upon my sons' toy preferences and how their play has changed as they have got older. When my sons were very young (between the ages of 0–3 years) they were both very happy to play with a range of toys and their gender was never an issue. Their playroom was a wonderful mix of construction toys, dolls, pushchairs and a play kitchen that we used for creative role play. These toys were seamlessly incorporated into our spontaneous play. Once, for example, we were role playing being builders on a construction site. My son brought over his doll and set up a childcare area so the baby was safe whilst we worked. We then split our time between building and caring for the baby. When my elder son entered school at 4 years old, things started to change. He would tell me that girls were stupid (even though some of his closest friends were girls) and started to make a distinction between boys' toys and girls' toys. This perception shaped his toy preferences and his toy box was suddenly filled with action figures. He also started to reprimand his younger brother for playing with dolls and other 'girl toys'. I was quite shocked and wondered why this change had happened. I noted that other boys who had a sister demonstrated a very different attitude towards toys and challenged the notion of 'toys for boys' and 'toys for girls'. However, when I watched toy adverts, I could see very clear and consistent messages about the types of toys that boys should play with. When shopping for toys, there was a clear separation of boys' and girls' toys. It appeared that these messages were having a powerful effect in setting expectations surrounding play. Transgression from societal norms was seen as wrong. As my elder son has got older, I have noticed that he once again considers that 'toys are toys'. I have heard him telling his younger brother that if you like a toy then it's OK to play with it because toys are for everyone. However, he is still personally unwilling to play with toys marketed at girls.

Source: Jenny Hallam, chapter co-author

## FINAL REFLECTION

Whilst a child's sex is identifiable from the time they are in utero, their notions of gender identity emerge progressively throughout the first years of life. 'Influential others' such as peers, parents and teachers all affect the timing and intensity of this gender identification process and the incidence of gender-conformist play. This clearly has implications for children's future development. As adults caring for children, we need to consider whether there is a need to balance provision in order that children develop their own innate abilities rather than only developing those which are gender conformist.

## KEY POINTS

- From early infancy, children can distinguish between male and female based on physical characteristics.
- By the time they are 3 years old, children have clear notions of their own gender identity and the associated gender typing.
- Regardless of whether they agree or disagree, young children state a preference for gender-typed toys and same-sex playmates and ostracise those who do not conform.
- Gender typing in appearance, gender segregation and play behaviours is particularly marked between the ages of 3 and 4 years old (Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda & Shrout, 2013).
- Gender-conformist toys and play serve to establish gender-typed behaviours and abilities.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Think back over the factors we have considered. To what extent do you think that play in early childhood has a role in shaping children's gender identity and establishing the sex differences noted in the chapter?
- 2 How many explanations can you think of for the finding that young children generally have same-sex playmates? Which of these factors do you think is the most important?
- 3 To what extent do you think adults should intervene in order to make play more gender neutral?
- 4 Do you think toy manufacturers should reduce the gender segregation of toys?

## FURTHER READING

- Kollmayer, M., Schultes, M.-T., Schober, B., Hodosi, T., & Spiel, C. (2018) Parents' judgements about the desirability of toys for their children: Associations with gender role attitudes, gender-typing of toys, and demographics. *Sex Roles*, 79, 329–341. (An informative article covering the relationships between several different aspects.)
- Let Toys Be Toys campaign: [www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk](http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk) (The campaign is asking the toy and publishing industries to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys. The website contains information and ideas.)

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