

Play and Gender

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While children vary greatly in their play preferences, research has shown that gender differences in play tend to emerge fairly young. These gender differences may be influenced by a variety of sources. Parents, peers, teachers, and media all impact on children's play. Such gender differences have been documented in North American and European countries, including those that are fairly gender-egalitarian, including Sweden.

Children begin to prefer gender-stereotyped toys between 1 and 2 years of age. Girls are more likely to gravitate toward cooking toys and dolls, while boys often favor cars and blocks. Differences in dramatic play appear between the ages of 2 and 3. Girls' dramatic play tends to center around domestic circumstances. Boys, on the other hand, tend to act out adventures and action stories. Boys also exhibit more aggression in their play. With age, boys continue to be fascinated by aggression and adventure. This can be seen in their attraction toward violent or sports-themed video games.

Play serves as practice for practicing certain gendered behaviors. Over time, play behavior can strongly influence children's preferences, expectations, and even skills and abilities. Activities stereotyped as being masculine provide rehearsal for self-assertive behaviors, including competition and object mastery. Activities considered to be feminine, such as those involving collaboration and nurturing, allow children to practice behaviors that foster

both assertion and affiliation. Because girls are more likely to engage in both masculine- and feminine-activities than are boys, they tend to practice a wider variety of skills.

While children's play behaviors are impacted by various social influences, some young children strongly prefer certain activities over others. While some parents may, in fact, socialize them with and encourage them to explore a wide variety of toys, their children may gravitate toward certain gender-typed toys. Likewise, some children may exhibit intense interest in cross-gender-typed toys, even though their parents and peers may encourage them not to. It is important to note that for some children, disposition may trump other social and cognitive factors.

Media influences on children's play often come from television advertisements, which tend to display and encourage gender-typed play. Toys are marketed in commercials as being for either girls or boys. Aggressive and action play tends to be characteristic of boys in commercials. Girls in commercials, however, are often seen exhibiting interest in beauty and fashion or taking care of dolls. Such depictions reinforce gender-typed preferences and beliefs.

Parents tend to treat boys and daughters differently. This is most consistently seen in their encouragement of gender-typed play and activities. This begins fairly early as gender-stereotyped toys are purchased for children mere months after they are born, even before they exhibit any toy preferences. Children begin to request certain toys by 2 to 3 years of age, and parents reinforce the use of such gender-typed toys. However, in recent years, parents in some Western countries may be beginning to exhibit more flexible views about play and gender.

Parental gender typing of children's play may be affected by several variables. For instance, parents are more likely to be strict about enforcing gender typicality in their sons than their daughters. Additionally, parents with traditional views of gender tend to reinforce gender

conformity in young children than parents with more egalitarian attitudes. Furthermore, in families in with two, heterosexual parents, mothers are less likely than fathers to exhibit traditional attitudes toward gender and to reinforce gender-stereotyped play. In families with gay or lesbian parents, children are less likely to be encourage to engage in gender-typed play, than in families with heterosexual parents.

Peers' influence rivals that of parents. Children learn gender norms from their same-gender peers, who serve as role models. After seeing a same-gender peer play with a gender-neutral toy, children are more likely to choose such a toy themselves, than if they saw a cross-gender peer play with a gender-neutral toy. Moreover, many children seem to enforce gender-typed play in their peers, and exhibit disapproval of gender atypical behaviors. Such norms guide children's behaviors.

At school, teachers also influence children's play preferences. This is seen in their labeling of activities or toys as being for boys or girls. Gender differences in behavior are observed when educators assign boys and girls similar tasks. Additionally, like parents, teachers tend to be more accepting of cross-gender-typed activities in girls than boys.