

Children's Toy Preferences Revisited: Implications for Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT: A study of contemporary kindergarten children's toy preferences indicated that they were as rigidly stereotyped by sex as those of children of previous decades. In view of social and legal changes and growing professional concerns about sex-role stereotyping, the authors present implications of sex-typed play and offer suggestions for combatting stereotyping and sex discrimination.

Children's toys are commonly believed to be not only a source of enjoyment, but also a vehicle for cognitive and social learning. In fact, toys and the play behavior that accompanies their use have been traditionally considered to be a major source of learning adult roles (Todd and Heffernan, 1964). That children's use and preference for toys has tended to be highly stereotyped by sex is well known and has been largely assumed to be the normal manifestation of sex-role identification and preference (Rabban, 1950; DeLucia, 1963).

Several years ago, however, the sex-role stereotyping of toys and play began to be seriously challenged (Joffe, 1971; Lyon, 1972; Mitchell, 1973). These authors proposed that packaging and designating certain toys as appropriate for only girls or only boys and reinforcing or permitting their use by only girls or boys deprive both sexes of valuable cognitive and social experiences that have important implications for later development. Agreeing that toys provide children with a setting for the rehearsal of adult

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roles, these writers and their contemporary colleagues have argued that androgynous play behavior provides both sexes with a wider range of potential alternatives and better equips them to confront the realities of contemporary life (Robinson and Hobson, 1978; Sprung, 1975). Furthermore, it has been emphasized that the restriction or prohibition of participation in so-called "sex-inappropriate" activities may have harmful personal effects as well. In particular, the self-image of females may be negatively affected by their lack of competence in highly valued "masculine" activities and occupations that have their foundations in childhood play with blocks, trucks, tools, and other "masculine" toys (Chase, 1977).

A Study of Contemporary Toy Preferences

With nearly a decade of awareness of the potentially harmful effects of the stereotyping of toys and the potentially beneficial effects of removing their sex-typed labels, it is important to ask whether changes have occurred in children's traditionally sex-typed preference for toys. We attempted to answer this question with respect to the toy preferences of a group of kindergarten children in a suburban, middle class community.

We selected 12 toys that corresponded with those designated as sex-typed or neutral by early studies of sex-role preference (Rabban, 1950; Delucia, 1963). The feminine toys were a small baby doll, plastic high-heeled shoes, a purse, and a small set of dishes. Masculine toys included a fire engine, a plastic tool set, a racing car, and an airplane. The sex-neutral toys were a wooden puzzle, a plastic ball, a telephone, and Play-Doh.

These toys were displayed to 55 girls and 55 boys who ranged in age from 58 to 76 months and who were enrolled in three private kindergartens in the same community. The toys were scattered on the floor of a room in which there were no other toys and the children were asked to select the four they would most like to play with. In order to minimize peer influence, each child viewed the set of toys and made the selections individually.

Table 1 illustrates the number of choices each toy received from girls and from boys ($110 \text{ children} \times 4 \text{ choices} = 440 \text{ total choices}$). It is readily apparent from these data that our subjects' selections were highly consistent with the sex-typed choices of children from the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, after another child or an adult stated that all of the toys were appropriate for both girls and boys and described specific ways in which children of both sexes could have fun with any of the toys, 75 percent of the children did not significantly change their toy choices. These results suggest that current challenges to sex-role stereotyping have had little impact on these children's toy preferences.