

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology

Psychology, Department of

2001

Play Patterns and Gender

Carolyn P. Edwards

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, cedwards1@unl.edu

Lisa Knoche

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, lknoche2@unl.edu

Asiye Kumru

Ozyegin University, Istanbul, asiye.kumru@ozyegin.edu.tr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub>



Part of the [Developmental Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Edwards, Carolyn P.; Knoche, Lisa; and Kumru, Asiye, "Play Patterns and Gender" (2001). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 607.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/607>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Play Patterns and Gender

Carolyn Pope Edwards

Lisa Knoche

Asiye Kumru

University of Nebraska- Lincoln

- I. Play Companions
- II. Toy and Activity Preferences
- III. Types of Play
- IV. Play Location
- V. Socialization

Glossary

Agents of socialization Individuals or groups (such as parents, peers, media, school) who help guide the younger generation to learn how to behave appropriately, live well, and succeed as members of their social community.

Gender asymmetry Difference in the reactions of one gender group versus the other, for example, a more extreme reaction by boys to male peers who act "girl-like," than the reaction by girls to girls peers who act "boylike."

Gender segregation The physical separation, or drawing apart, of females and males for social interaction, work, or play. This is commonly seen in middle childhood play groups.

Gender socialization The process by which the older generation passes to the next generation the capacities to behave in ways deemed appropriate for males and females in a society.

Gender-typed Something that is associated more with one gender (female or male) than the other.

Mixed sex Involving both sexes, for example, when girls and boys join in play.

Sex-role attitudes Thoughts, beliefs, and values that people hold about their own gender group and how they think it is appropriate for males and females to think, believe, and act.

Sex-stereotypes Assumptions about behaviors and beliefs based on gender; for example, the belief that females and males differ in competent driving skill. Stereotypes are generalizations that may or may not be upheld by documented evidence from research.

PLAY is a culturally universal activity through which children explore themselves and their environment, test out and practice different social roles, and learn to interact with other children and adults. Early in life, children identify themselves as a girl or a boy, and this basic self-categorization lays a foundation for their developing beliefs about with whom, what, how, and where they will play. Children play an active role in their own and their peers' gender socialization (the process by which they come to acquire the knowledge,

values, and skills needed to behave "appropriately" as a male or female in their society). However, they are greatly influenced by the adult community, as represented by the institutions of family, neighborhood, school, and the media. These agents of socialization contribute to children's understanding of gender roles and expectations, and these in turn influence the developing play patterns of children.

I. *Play Companions*

Play companions are important for children because they influence social interaction, activities, and toy preferences. After the age of three, girls and boys tend to play separately rather than together, particularly when they are in large single-age peer groups. The pulling apart of girls and boys into separate play groups is one of the most striking, well-documented, and culturally universal phenomena of middle childhood.

Girls tend to show the preference for same-sex interactions earlier than boys do. At the age of three, girls are often seen in small group activities with other girls. By the age of four, boys begin to show a preference for large group interactions with other boys and even take an active role in maintaining the boys' separation from the girls. From preschool age continuing up until adolescence, children say they like children of their own sex better and want to play with them more. However, in most cases, children do not actively dislike or want to avoid totally the other sex, but instead, simply prefer their own. Patterns of gender segregation for play and leisure, seen in middle childhood, are found throughout the world and in all subcultures that have been studied.

There are multiple reasons suggested for the segregation of the sexes in play. Eleanor Maccoby, a noted psychologist who has written a great deal about this issue, has contended that boys and girls have different styles of play that are not attractive to each other. Boys tend to monopolize play space and materials and to use a confrontational and physical style intended to secure them access to what they want. Their rough play style, as they wrestle and chase, is not so congenial to girls. Same-sex playmates appear to be more compatible in the pacing and flow of their play. Girls seek a smoothly flowing style of play and interaction. They can be observed easily taking turns and incorporating one another's words and ideas into their play, and they readily adjust the noise and activity level of their play to the context they are in. Girls also have a better command of language at an earlier age, allowing them to express their ideas rela-

tively well and communicate their ideas to reach a common understanding. In contrast, boys seem to prefer an exciting even if more discontinuous flow of play. Boys can be seen using and responding to the more direct strategies of control, such as strong commands ("Come outside!"). They are less likely to appreciate and formulate indirect expressions, such as, "I wish we could go outside now." Boys also more frequently resort to physical forms of persuasion than do girls.

As a result of their different styles of play, Eleanor Maccoby believes that each sex comes to develop stereotypes about the other group that create separate worlds of meaning and friendship. The world of each sex is not well understood by the other. Friendship selection comes to be gender based, with girls and boys utilizing different criteria in the selection process. Boys select a peer group based primarily on shared interests and activities, such as playing soccer or riding bicycles. Girls tend to think about interests also, but in addition, consciously make their friendship selections considering liked and disliked personality characteristics.

Agents of socialization—peers, parents, and teachers—play an important part in shaping the play and friendship patterns of children. Both peers and adults tend to encourage children to play with others of the same sex, particularly once children are beyond preschool. Many parents feel it is their role to help their children form and maintain friendships, by helping them to make play dates or getting them together with family or neighborhood friends who have children deemed appropriate for their own to play with. Peers also play a role in shaping children's friendship patterns by expressing disapproval for cross-sex play. Boys do this most; they disapprove and tease other boys for being a "sissy" more than girls tease other girls for being a "tomboy." Boys may even experience the companionship and the play scenarios of girls as something "dangerous" to be avoided if they want to be accepted into the world of male peer play. Thus, from a fairly young age, children develop concerns and expectations about how peers might react to their own play and behavior by observing what children around them say and do to one another.

School structures and practices may reinforce these perceptions as well. Children separate by sex in the lunchroom, on the playground, in the hallway, and wherever they have freedom of movement. Same-sex preferences dominate children's school associations, starting about kindergarten, increasing through the middle school years, and then declining during early or late adolescence, depending on the cultural community.

On the other hand, girls and boys do play together at times. These mixed-sex play groups tend to include more than just two or a few children and may be focused around a large group game (such as a ball game) or dramatic and fantasy play. In addition, teachers often use activity settings and toys or materials to encourage children to play with a wider group of peers. For example, teachers sometimes use attractive novel toys or lessons to attract diverse children to play or work together. At other times, they assign children to activities to prevent them from gravitating to their usual same-sex friends. When teachers form mixed-sex collaborative groups, they provide girls and boys with opportunities to come close and understand each other better. As the children spend more time together, the girls and boys may develop some common play themes and learn to play together more cooperatively.

In some situations, boys can dominate mixed-sex play groups. Aggression, conflicts, and rejecting behaviors occur more frequently in mixed-sex than single-sex play groups. Perhaps these negative behaviors are simply another indication of the difficulty in merging girls' and boys' play styles and preferences. When a girl or boy does seek to join a cross-sex playgroup, that child is rarely considered a central member of the group. For example, when a girl attempts to join a male peer group, she may find herself ignored by the boys or left on the outskirts of events. When a boy tries to participate in female activities, he may fare even worse and receive negative feedback from peers, both girls and boys.

II. *Toy and Activity Preferences*

As they grow older, boys and girls differ not only in playmates but also in their preferred toys, games, and activities. The difference in regards to toy preference appears around the age of two and strengthens by the age of five, as children come under the socializing influences of peers, parents, and the media. Societal expectations and values can create powerful pressures for females and males to behave appropriately according to gender and cultural norms. While it is too simplistic to assume that children never like to play with toys and materials considered more appropriate for the other sex, nevertheless, there are overall patterns of preference and some commonly occurring themes specific to boys or girls. For the past 60 years, the literature on play has found distinctive pat-

terns of gender-typed preferences in childhood toys and activities.

Girls' play tends to center on themes related to family and domestic life. In many communities, girls can often be observed playing with dolls, household objects, dress-up clothes, and related materials for creative expression. The dramatic play of young girls, even when highly imaginative, tends to be structured by goals or "scripts" with a specific sequence and outcome in mind from the onset, based on discussion and agreement. When girls start a dramatic play script in the preschool, they are upset when someone interferes and prevents them from completing the sequence of events they have agreed upon.

The play activity of boys, in contrast, may be different in form and focus from that of girls. Boys are often found playing with transportation toys, weapons, and building materials. They are often noisy in their play, shouting out the "swoosh" of the sword or the "crash" of the car. As they grow older, boys engage in much large group competitive play, such as sports. There is a certain gender asymmetry in this, in that boys from kindergarten onward tend to be more concerned with selecting toys and activities that they consider appropriate to their sex than are girls. Boys may be quite concerned with not appearing "girl-like," and they may closely monitor each other's play.

Studies have found that not only do males' gender-typed preferences emerge earlier than do girls, but also their preferences are more stable and consistent. That is, girls may play with many different types of toys, but boys more predictably turn to the masculine stereotyped play items. These toy choices may reflect a desire for peer approval and the wish to avoid negative reactions. Indeed, playmates of the same sex are more likely to approach a child when he or she is using toys that are considered gender appropriate. However, how the children label the toys as "for girls" or "for boys" is a bit flexible and influenced partially by the children's personal inclinations and experiences. For example, certain boys may consider drawing and art as fine for boys, while many girls today judge computers and vigorous sports as equally appropriate for both girls and boys. Children can change their minds as to what boys and girls "like to do" when their experiences provide them good reason to believe that what is "okay" is actually different from what they used to think.

Children's toy preferences and activities are also influenced in many ways by parents. Parents provide gender-typed environments that may be subtle ways

of channeling children's preferences and their behavioral tendencies for activities and interests. Parents tend to present girls and boys with distinct social contexts. For example, even from birth, parents provide gender-typed environments by how they decorate their babies' bedrooms, using more soft colors, ruffled materials, and rounded, multicolor designs for girls and more bright colors and linear styling for boys.

Additionally, parents attempt to pass their own sex-role attitudes on to their children, along with the gender-typed environments they create. Those parents who hold particularly traditional sex-role attitudes have been found to gravitate most toward gender-stereotyped toys for their children. For example, at holidays and birthdays, they may be seen purchasing race cars and plastic guns for their sons and dolls and tea sets for their daughters. However, their reasons behind these choices may be complicated. On the one hand, parents may be buying children toys that adults consider gender appropriate and thereby guiding their children's emerging preferences. On the other hand, parents also respond to preferences that their children assert and to the requests that children declare. Thus, the direction of influence may go both ways.

Children's preferences about toys and activities are also influenced by the media and advertising. In fact, in much film and television programming, the sexes are portrayed in stereotypic ways, although lately there have been some improvements, particularly in educational television and some of the cable channels invented for young viewers. When young children gather in play groups, boys are more likely to enact fictional, superhero roles portrayed on television ("Power Rangers"), whereas girls are more likely to portray familial characters ("Rug Rats"). On the other hand, television also has the potential to soften or reverse children's gender-stereotypic attitudes. Research has found that when children receive exposure over time to nontraditional media portrayals of adult occupations, they may be influenced to realize, for example, that men can be nurses and women can be doctors or airline pilots.

The overall effect of commercial television is to promote children's preferences for gender-stereotyped toys and activities. Children not only watch many hours of cartoons and other programs, but also seem to use television heroes and animated characters as important symbolic figures to incorporate into their play. Manufacturers of toys, clothing, and food targeted for children know that children are very in-

terested in what they see on television. They therefore take advantage of children's interests to promote gender-stereotyped toys and other products in a direct and explicit way. Children thus come to consume not only the products but also the gender stereotypes but forward by the pervasive images seen in the media. Children may take in the ideas, attitudes, and values consistent with the rather simplified and extreme versions of gender stereotypes that the commercial media promote.

Additionally, children's play today is increasingly coming to be influenced by video games and the Internet. Many video games are highly sexist and limiting in the styles of thinking and acting that they foster, particularly in the way that they steer boys toward fantasy violence. These new media can come to create a highly gender-stereotypic play environment for children.

However, not all video games are gender typed, just as not all television programs promote gender stereotypes. Many learning-based computer games present nonstereotyped images, and many television programs, particularly on public television, seek to present alternative and expansive views of the world. Moreover, many toys and activities are gender neutral, that is, liked by both girls and boys. Wagons, roller blades, scooters, stuffed animals, puppets, and constructive materials such as water, sand, paint, and clay tend to encourage mixed-sex play. Also, activities such as dodge ball and hide-and-seek that do not involve choosing sides also encourage mixed-sex play. At school, many teachers try to plan, organize, and structure activities so as to sometimes minimize sex differentiation in play patterns.

III. *Types of Play*

Sex differences are seen not only in children's play companions, toys, and activities, but also in *how* and *where* they play. Children engage in many types of play, ranging from simple symbolic (pretend) play to complex games with rules.

A. SYMBOLIC PLAY

Children use objects in play in a symbolic way more and more during the second and third years of life. They begin to substitute different meanings for the same object, for example, pretending a wooden block is a race car or a scrap of cloth is a doll blanket. As

they develop stories and roles, their simple pretend play elaborates into sociodramatic, make-believe play, which is especially prevalent during the preschool and early primary years. Sociodramatic play has three elements: props, plots, and roles. Further examination of the elements highlights differences in girls' and boys' symbolic play.

Both girls and boys engage in sociodramatic play with equal frequency, motivation, and maturity. Thus, sociodramatic play is similar across gender groups, even if its specific content and themes are different. In many cultural communities, boys pretend to be heroic characters, warriors, monsters, and men who control or manage large animals. Overall, they show higher levels of noise and physical activity in their sociodramatic play than do girls. In their play, boys explore imaginative and realistic themes that make great use of the tools and vehicles they see in use in the masculine world around them. Girls, in contrast, more typically prefer to act out scenes from familiar settings, such as the home, school, and doctor's office, where they can rehearse and create domestic roles and helping themes that involve complex coordination and cooperation. Girls are focused on enacting "real" events during pretend play, like going to the doctor's office or to school. Interrelationships and nurturance persist in girls' pretend play throughout the primary grades.

In choosing roles, children often select a part to play that is consistent with their gender. Boys prefer the roles of father, brother, husband, or a traditionally male occupation, whereas girls often choose the roles of mother, sister, wife, or what they see as a female occupation. They may act out activities based on practices at their home, choosing, for example, cleaning chores or yard work in accordance with how these tasks are assigned in their extended family.

But children do not limit themselves exclusively to real-world constraints. Cross-sex role play can easily be seen in children, particularly at younger ages. Children often incorporate many disparate elements into their play, for example, pretending to be a repairman but carrying a vacuum cleaner in the tool kit, or wearing a hard hat but carrying a purse. If they choose, boys and girls can act out and vicariously experience traditionally cross-sex roles during their play. It seems that children are interested in the play of the other sex, regardless of whether or not they participate. They also often like to watch or be drawn into others' sociodramatic play and know about play themes that are good for mixed-sex play.

B. ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE PLAY

Rough-and-tumble play is more typical of boys than of girls in many cultural communities around the world. In this play style, children engage in what looks like aggression (hitting, chasing, pushing, name calling), but is in fact play. The behavior is accompanied by laughter, "play faces," and excitement that only sometimes gets out of control and escalates into hostile aggression and the intent to hurt. In rough-and-tumble play, children test out their strength and toughness and develop the capacity to compete and struggle for dominance without injury or lasting damage. Girls, too, sometimes engage in rough-and-tumble play, especially in cultural communities where girls and boys have a lot of freedom to play outside, in mixed-sex groups, away from direct supervision and the pressure to be neat, clean, and controlled.

Evidence suggests that girls are just as physically active as boys until age four or five. But girls are better able to moderate and tone down their activity levels in response to contextual cues (for example, whether they are indoors or outdoors or according to the social expectations). After the age of five, boys demonstrate more boisterous physical levels than do girls.

C. CONSTRUCTIVE/CREATIVE PLAY

Constructive play involves creating or constructing something using any of a variety of natural or synthetic materials. All around the world, both boys and girls engage in a great deal of this kind of play. Both sexes enjoy drawing, painting, puzzles, and making things of paper, clay, wire, and natural materials. Traditionally, building toys, such as plastic blocks, and scientific toys, such as magnets and motors, were marketed more for boys than girls, though today this is changing to some degree. Teachers actively promote constructive/creative play, because they believe that it is very important for children's learning and development. Therefore, they may seek to ensure that both girls and boys engage in constructive and creative activities, often side by side or in cooperation with children of the other sex.

D. GAMES

Games are a type of play based on rules and standards of performance. Competitive games, especially those involving physical testing, seem to be highly attractive to many boys beyond the preschool age. Today, in many societies, opportunities for sports

such as soccer, gymnastics, basketball, softball, volleyball, and tennis are also increasingly opening to girls of all ages. In addition, girls like games that include rhythm, whole body coordination, and chanting or singing (for example, jump rope, hopscotch, and clapping games), while boys select games involving the use of large muscles and skills of throwing and hitting targets (baseball, marbles, wrestling, archery). Boys' play is often congenial to a large group, whereas girls' games work well for smaller groups. Both girls and boys are interested in fairness issues and use conflict and argument to develop skills of negotiation and group dynamics.

IV. Play Location

Finally, sex differences can be found in *where* children play. In general, girls are more often found closer to home or indoors except when they are sent on a specific errand, such as fetching firewood or water. They spend more time in contact with supervising adults (usually mothers and other female relatives), doing responsible work or child care that they can often combine with pleasurable talk or moments of playful fun. In contrast, boys tend to play farther away from home, outdoors, away from direct adult supervision, less often involved in responsible work than girls. In cultural communities where children at a young age begin helping their families with significant chores, both girls and boys can often be seen integrating play into their work activities, for example, building a dam of mud and sticks in the stream while herding animals or combining songs, jokes, and a game of jacks with infant care.

In the school yard, where many children of a similar age and skill level are gathered, boys and girls often segregate themselves into separate play areas. Boys tend to take over a larger, more central space, leaving the girls to play along the periphery. Boys take up to 10 times the amount of space on the playground than do girls, and they often invade girls' activities. During the middle childhood years, both girls and boys often engage in a playful kind of "border work," where they tease, chase, and taunt one another, seeking the attention of the other group (and the teacher!) and exploring each other's world from the margins.

Gender segregation is most common on the school yard. It is less likely to be seen in the backyard and around the neighborhood, where children more commonly play in mixed-age and mixed-sex groups. Away

from the school yard, ancient games prevail, such as hide and seek, tag, card games, and ball games, that easily allow children to cross sex and age lines. In the neighborhood and nearby woods, lots, and fields, children like to build forts, castles, and houses and to act out elaborate fantasy scripts. Such activities are attractive to both mixed- and single-sex groups of children ranging from preschool age to the end of middle childhood.

V. Socialization

Children are active agents in their own gender learning and socialization, but the adults and the community around them are also influential shapers of their preferences and patterns of play. Many parents promote early learning of gender distinctions by providing toys and materials that encourage single-sex play or by drawing children into activities that are strongly gender typed in their culture. Research studies have found that children learn gender labels (such as "girl," "boy," "woman," and "man," and gender pronouns) at an earlier age when their parents use more traditional practices and encourage their use of gender-stereotyped toys in free play. Additionally, by encouraging particular activities, parents may influence children's learning of cognitive and social skills. For instance, when parents give girls dollhouses and encourage them to arrange the tiny furniture and figures, they support fine motor development and aesthetic values. When they encourage boys' constructive play with building blocks and mechanical toys, they may foster their greater skill at visual-spatial and logical-mathematical tasks and thereby contribute to emerging gender differences in these areas. Furthermore, when parents provide toys and materials according to gender, they may also indirectly influence their children's interaction styles. For example, toys such as wagons, fire trucks, and tricycles tend to encourage action play with less physical proximity and less intimate verbal interaction with peers than do toys such as small figures, stuffed animals, and toy dishes and clothing.

Children themselves may influence their own gender socialization by how they segregate themselves into single-sex groups. As we have said, in these groups children practice gender-typed play with toys and learn gender-typed interaction styles. Over the long-term, girls' and boys' experiences in separate play worlds may have enduring consequences. The social norms, skills, and expectations learned in peer groups may influence

children's aspirations and social achievements. Many girls may become comfortable in activities that emphasize cooperation, and boys may come to enjoy and seek out activities that emphasize overt competition.

Finally, schools and teachers perform an important and multifaceted role in gender development. Research has documented many ways in which schools and teachers subtly or otherwise direct boys and girls toward separate interests and to feel competence in different areas. On the other hand, in the school setting, children have many opportunities to observe and come close to the other sex and to engage in lessons that promote the same basic kinds of symbolic skills and interests in both girls and boys. Through school experience, children become more at ease with the other sex and are exposed to similar information about the outside world and the range of academic subjects.

Teachers with more traditional gender roles tend to have teaching practices that encourage greater sex segregation in children's schoolwork and play, and that reinforce different behaviors in stereotyped ways. Instead, however, teachers can choose picture books, textbooks, and software that may incline children toward either more or less gender-typed play. They can arrange the free play environment and children's placement at work tables so as to either encourage or discourage single-sex versus mixed-sex play and interaction. They can introduce children to computer games and educa-

tional television programming that encourages more open attitudes toward gender roles and play. Finally, they can engage children's families in dialogue about how to plan play spaces, join their children's play, and help children learn skills of conflict resolution that enhance less gender-typed play learning opportunities for children.

SUGGESTED READING

- Fagot, R. I., and Leinbach, M. D. (1991). Gender-role development in young children: From discrimination to labeling. *Developmental Review* 1.1, 205-224.
- Fromberg, D. P., and Bergen, D. (1998). *Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond: Context, Perspectives, and Meanings*. Garland, New York and London.
- Maccoby, E. (1998). *The Two Sexes: Growing up Apart, Coming Together*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Ruble, D. N., and Martin, C. L. (1998). Gender development. In *Handbook of Child Psychology* (W. Damon, ed.), 5th edn., vol. 3; *Social, Emotional, and Personality Development* (N. Eisenberg, vol. ed.), pp. 933-1016. Wiley, New York.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1979). The play of girls. In *Becoming Female: Perspectives on Development* (C. B. Kopp and M. Kirkpatrick, eds.), pp. 229-257. Plenum, New York.
- Whiting, B. B., and Edwards, C. P. (1998). *Children of Different Worlds: The Formation of Social Behavior*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.