



CHILD'S PLAY: It's Serious Business

A Fact Sheet Prepared for the
Council on Contemporary Families

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Have you ever asked yourself why children need so much time to play, not only during the summer but all through the school year? Play is a crucial aspect of healthy development. Children are active learners who acquire new knowledge by examining and exploring their environment. Play promotes young children's thinking, language and mathematics ability, problem-solving skills, memory, and attention. When children role play, they create new rules, negotiate roles and plans, substitute objects for other things, use their language and reasoning skills and imaginations, and learn to cooperate.

"Everyone knows" that girls and boys tend to differ in the way they play and the types of toys that they prefer. Boys are more likely to play outdoors, in larger groups, with different age groups, and in a competitive way, whereas girls are more likely to play inside, with two or three girls of similar ages, in a less competitive or formal way. Both boys and girls play with toys such as blocks, medical kits, bowling sets, and play doh, and most children cross over at times in their preferences. But in general boys more often play with vehicles, toy animals, sports equipment, computers, and "spatial-temporal" toys (e.g., shape-sorting toys, magnets, and outer-space toys), while girls are more likely to play with shopping carts, princess castles, dolls, and stuffed animals.

Researchers do not know how much of this is caused by innate gender differences and how much by the different socialization of girls and boys, but we do know that children's preferences are influenced, at least to some extent, by the messages they get from the adults around them. For example, numerous studies show that parents and teachers encourage girls more than boys to play with toys that foster collaborative role playing, such as food sets. By contrast, parents tolerate more expressions of aggression in boys' play than they do in girls (Maccoby & Jacklyn). Preliminary laboratory studies by this author revealed that when boys knew their fathers were watching them play, they were more likely to focus exclusively on "masculine" toys than when they did not know their fathers were watching.

Children are also influenced by exposure to adults' gender stereotypes. In one experiment conducted by this author and her colleagues (Cherney, McKillip and Villanueva, 2009) children were read brief vignettes about a child of their own age and gender. Some of the vignettes reinforced gender stereotypes, showing girls doing traditionally "feminine" things and boys doing traditionally "masculine" ones, while others played against stereotype (e.g., showing a girl building with dad or a boy cooking with mom). After each vignette, the child was asked to sort through a series of toys and decide whether they were "boy toys" or "girl toys." Exposure to the stereotyped story led children to assign the toys according to strongly polarized notions of masculine and feminine play. Children who

heard the counter-stereotyped story, by contrast, exhibited more gender flexibility, reassigning toys away from their own gender. Thus, children were influenced by the stereotype of the story, adapting their reasoning to match the story.

Creativity and complexity are better fostered by some kinds of play than others. In one study (Cherney, Kelly-Vance, Glover, Ruane, & Ryalls, 2003), we found that when boys and girls were observed playing with different toys in a playroom, those who played with feminine toys were more likely to display high play complexity. Children were able to sustain more numerous play sequences with feminine toys than with other types of toys. In a later study (2009), we found that for boys, the highest play complexity was achieved with the following predominantly masculine or neutral toys: Legos, a bulldozer, an airplane, a medical kit, a pirate ship, and play doh. The highest play complexity for girls was elicited by play with a Dora castle and shopping cart (predominantly feminine), a tool chest (usually defined as masculine) a bowling set (ambiguous), and block letters (neutral).

Despite these variations in findings, results consistently show that creative children tend to list more counter-stereotyped toys as favorites than non-creative children. For example, non-creative boys in our 2009 study did not list a single favorite feminine toy. Our studies suggest that creative children have more flexible notions of appropriate gender toys and gender play than children who are less creative (see note below for explanation of how we tested for creativity).

Creativity is also associated with spending more time playing with others and with playing outdoors. Children who spent more time in unscripted or unstructured activities engaged in more creative play, compared to children who listed scripted activities as their favorites and who spent more time playing alone at home or in sedentary activities such as watching television or playing video/computer games.

Child's play may be serious business, with important consequences for children's learning and socialization, but for very young children, it seems to work best when it is not scripted or organized by adults. Our data suggest that young children need a variety of activities that allow them to actively create and expand their play "scripts." Both parents and child-care workers should encourage more unscripted and outdoor play. Our research also suggests that adults should provide open-ended opportunities and a comfort zone for children to play with toys and engage in activities that cut across gender stereotypes.

Note: I tested two models of creativity: The quantitative one examined the number of blocks, labels, story elements, structures, and words children used to create the block structures; the qualitative one examined the flexibility of the design, the care and choice (planning/symmetry) that children used to create the block structures, as well as their explanations and reasoning about their structures.

For More Information

For more information on this and other research about children's play, please contact Dr. Isabelle Cherney, Michael W. Barry Professor and Director of the Honors Program and Professor of Psychology, Creighton University, 402.280.1228 and cherneyi@creighton.edu.

For information on the amount of time children spend playing indoors and outdoors, contact Sandra L. Hofferth, Professor, Department of Family Science, School of Public Health and Director, Maryland Population Research Center, University of Maryland; hofferth@umd.edu; 301.405.8501/405.6352.

On the history of children's toys and adult notions of appropriate play, contact Steven Mintz, Professor of History, Columbia University; 713.805.3384; smintz@columbia.edu. For information about patterns of girls' and boys' play on school playgrounds, contact Barrie Thorne, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies and Sociology, University of California, Berkeley; bthorne@berkeley.edu; 510.549.0803.

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