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## Developing Understanding of Gender in Preschool Children: The Role of Toys in Gender Construction

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**Abstract.** The preschool period is the basis of building the character and personality of an individual. Many features built into this period remain unchanged throughout life. Even modern psychologists suggest that personality in general is relatively stable and permanent. In recent decades, special attention has been paid to the toys that children play with. The purpose of this paper is the theoretical and empirical treatment of the impact of toys on the development of understanding of gender in children. The research was based on consensual qualitative research (CQR) paradigm. Semi-Structured Interview (SSIs) was used to interview respondents. The research was conducted on a purposive sample. A kindergarten teacher, an economist, a private business administrator and an employee in a toy store in the Kicevo region of Republic of North Macedonia were interviewed. We used Constant Comparison Analysis (CCA) to analyze the data for this qualitative study. Research results show that children's toys are segregated according to gender, gender neutral toys are less liked by buyers, while girls more easily engage in games with typical male toys.

**Key words:** children toys, gender, gender construction

### Introduction

The family plays the most important role in the child's personality development. It represents the most natural environment for the development of the child, both in physical, intellectual, moral, and working aspects. Child development is a time-consuming process, and as Piaget (2003) states, child development should not be accelerated, but care should be taken that each stage is complete and fully integrated. In this regard, toys, and games in general play an important role in children's development. Regardless of the time, children have always played with toys, even improvised ones. Today, the development in all fields does not bypass the development and shaping of children's toys in the context of general interests and needs.

Numerous scholars (Martin, Eisenbud & Rose, 1995; Gjini, 2001; Siegler & Alibali, 2005) and in particular the movements that work and act towards equality between people, claim that toys are part of shaping the personality of an individual, without neglecting the gender aspect. Each toy that the child comes in contact with carries with it a set of messages, noting the actions, beliefs, and roles it must perform in accordance with the consent of parents, relatives, and social environment. The child at an early age does not

know how to make choices, so the first toys he/she comes in contact with are imposed depending on the likes of buyers, usually parents. Consequently, children begin to build gender by interacting, i.e., playing with toys, which in many cases are typified on the basis of gender and appear to be quite resistant to claims of change. In the last decade, the world brands that deal with the production of children toys, have worked towards the creation of gender-neutral toys. However, as Martin et al. (1995) point out, what is seen in practice proves that children are divided in relation to which toys they prefer. According to Todd et al. (2018), in general, dolls are favored by girls, while toys with cubes or machines are favored by boys.

### **Theoretical approach**

From a developmental point of view, games, interests, preoccupations, and roles refer to belonging to a certain gender from an early age with impressive accuracy. At the age of 2 or 3 children can define others and themselves, at the age of 4 years, they recognize the typical female or male characteristics for some professional activities and for some interests of adults, while knowledge about the features and attributes of a personality, which is considered to belong to a sex, develop later. They develop in parallel, in reference to others and oneself (Gjini, 2001, p. 84).

Children are aware of gender from a very early age. An 18-month-old child can associate the male voice with the male face and the female voice with the female face (Poulin-Dubois, Serbin, & Derbyshire, 1998). At the same time, in the visual preference test, boys focus longer on looking at cars, while girls more than boys focus on looking at dolls. These parameters are amplified much more at the age of 24 months (Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, Colburne, Sen, & Eichstedt, 2001). This is an indication that children possess sexual/gender categories from a very early age.

One of the important achievements in developing the understanding of gender is the understanding of sex as a biological category, and those changes in external characteristics, behaviors or desires do not change the individual's sexuality (Siegler & Alibali, 2005, p. 385). Manners of behavior and actions are not determinants of sexual identity, although children at an early age associate many things with actions or appearance. According to Kolberg (1966), children gain understanding on gender permanence in three stages. The first stage which marks sexuality is achieved by most 2- and 3-year-old children. At this stage, children accurately determine the sexual affiliation of other persons as well. At this age dressing and hair styling can change gender identity. They still do not understand that gender is permanent, they believe that such a thing is possible. In the second stage, gender stability is achieved by most preschool children. At this stage, children understand that male babies when they grow up will be boys and then men, while female babies will become girls and then women. However, they continue to believe that changes in superficial attributes and activities can cause change in relation to gender identity. The third stage involves children aged 4 to 8 years. It is now clear to children that gender remains constant, regardless of changes in external characteristics, behaviors, or desires.

Long before gaining the understanding of permanent sexuality, children want to play typical gender games (Wilansky-Traynor & Lobel, 2008) and the possibility of modeling behaviors according to gender is very high, compared to modeling according to the opposite gender (Bandura & Bussey, 2004). Also, strengthening trust in permanent gender is not associated with increased preferences for gender-specific roles and activities (Martin & Ruble, 2010; Theimer, Killen, & Stangor, 2001). Children behave in relation to gender even though they do not realize that gender is constant throughout life. Roles and characteristics related to gender vary depending on the culture, which means that they have a social transmission. Initially children imitate the behaviors of others around them and they memorize the behaviors acquired through observation. Observing behavioral changes made by men or women encourages children to codify these behaviors as feminine or masculine. Father and mother are different sources of behaviors for the child. Children learn that parental behaviors are welcomed and liked by others, and thus they are encouraged to

perform imitative behaviors. In addition, each person who comes in contact with the child represents a potential pattern of behavior related to gender. Through observation and interaction, children learn how others behave and what others expect.

In order to note how children learn about gender, Martin and Halverson (1981) proposed the Gender Schema Theory. According to this theory, children first acquire knowledge about gender identity, then build schemes through which they organize information on gender. These schemes include knowledge of gender stereotypes, behavior, and typical gender-based activity. Children use these schemes to shape their behaviors. They spontaneously classify and categorize their universe, depending on gender. They work to meet these categories with available information on the characteristics associated with men and women in their societies (Martin & Ruble, 2004). When a child comes in contact with an object, he/she first finds out that it is for men or women. If the child encounters the doll, then they find that it is for women, and if the child is male, he automatically rejects it. Schemes are not equally developed in all children, some of them have built more powerful schemes and appear to be more repulsive towards toys dedicated to the opposite sex. On the influence of social circle in teaching children gender, Bussey and Bandura (1999) claim that children learn about gender in three ways. The first is about learning through observation. In this case, children observe the models from their circle and from the media, then acquire information on gender roles and on the behaviors of the models. The second way refers to the results from the activities of individuals, for example, fathers often react negatively to their sons' play with toys dedicated to girls. Through these reactions, the child learns what is appropriate. Recognition of gender through direct learning is related to the third way, according to which, parents directly address their children on appropriate gender behaviors. Example, "Men never cry."

In the preschool period, children's games are played individually. They assign roles to toys, while committing them to the actions they expect to perform according to the previous scenario. Girls interact with dolls, sometimes treating them like babies, sometimes asking them to be quiet, feeding them and putting them to sleep, sometimes they play pretending to be friends with each other.

Toys play an important role in constructing gender roles (Gonzalez-Mena, 2013). If parents buy to their daughters dolls, dollhouses, high-heeled shoes and cosmetics, they give a host of messages. If they buy to their boys chemical kits, tool kits, doctor bags, construction bricks and steering toys, they give another host of messages. Before children display choices about toys, they have already spent the first period of childhood acquiring knowledge about the division and dedication of certain roles on a gender basis (Jadva, Hines & Golombok, 2010). It is the adults who choose the toys depending on the sex of the child, as they are the buyers. A Kollmayer, Schultes, Schober, Hodosi and Spiel's (2018) study results suggest that parents prefer girls to play with toys dedicated to boys, while boys should not use toys for girls. The authors also suggest that "the existing studies that examine parental toy choices are relatively dated which highlights the need for contemporary research on the topic" (p. 330).

## **Method**

The object of this research are parents' preferences of toys they purchase to their children. The research was based on Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) which uses medium-length, semi-structured interviews in which researchers do not interact with participants except during interviews (Szymanski & Shaff, 2013). A Semi-Structured Interview (SSI) (McIntosh & Morse, 2015) was used to interview respondents. SSI's predetermined questions were as follows: What toys do parents prefer for their children? Do boys and girls play with different toys? In your opinion, should boys play with girls' toys and girls play with boys' toys? The research was conducted on a purposive sample. A kindergarten teacher, an economist, a private business administrator and an employee in a toy store in the Kicevo region of Republic of North Macedonia were interviewed. During the analysis of the results their names were used as the 1<sup>st</sup> Respondent,

2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent, 3<sup>rd</sup> Respondent and 4<sup>th</sup> Respondent. We used constant comparison analysis (CCA) (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to analyze the data for this qualitative study.

### **Results and discussion**

1. The 1<sup>st</sup> Respondent has been working as a kindergarten teacher for 15 years. She said that her work focuses on children's effective interaction and the realization of joint activities. The groups consist of boys and girls. Children interact in daily activities, but in games with typical female toys, boys are shown to be more indifferent. They refuse to care for dolls, prefer not to dress and feed. If typical female toys are imposed on them, boys are ashamed. Girls more easily engage in games with typical male toys. They take on the role of a driver, an engineer, and a bricklayer, but these activities are rare and do not arouse much interest. In recent years, in kindergartens, work has also been done on painting walls, and on color choices of gender-neutral toys. Even in this aspect, boys prefer typical male color choices.

2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Respondent is a 32-year-old economist, employed in the hospital administration, mother of two children, 7-year-old boy and 3-year-old girl. Regarding her children's toys, she says that the son as the first child of the family has constantly shown interest in toys. Also, they themselves have not spared in terms of buying toys. Among the most popular are various vehicles, especially combat vehicles. They have never tried to buy gender-neutral toys, and that her husband cared more about the choices. The toys used by the 7-year-old boy are not used at all by the girl who has toy sets for the selection of which the mother herself takes more care. She thinks that girls should play with toys for girls, even though the cube boxes are part of the girl's sets, for which she does not show much interest, but neither does she completely reject them. Many times, when choosing toys, she claims that crucial are the toys that she lacked as a child. Now the boy plays with Play Station and his favorite games are those with male protagonists.

3. Her husband (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Respondent) has been working as a private business administrator for ten years. He stated that boys should play with boys toys, and any attempt otherwise would adversely affect the further development of the boy's personality. At the age of 6, they go to the children's toy store and find it difficult to choose a toy pistol because they already have all the models. He has the same opinion about girls' toys. They should play with natural female toys although cube toys, automobile toys are not harmful to girls.

4. The 4<sup>th</sup> Respondent is an employee in a children's toy store, at the same time the manager of three other stores. She claims that toys are not kept segregated by gender, but by model, and there is classification based on age. In her 12 years of experience, she does not know of a single case where someone bought a doll or household appliances for a boy, and she does not recall any occasion when parents chose military machinery for a girl. Many parents are determined about the type of toy, about its size, quality, or functionality. People who ask for help in choosing toys or when someone buys for children from another family on the occasion of a holiday or birthday, are most interested in toys to correspond to age, while for gender the choice is made by the buyers themselves. It is not uncommon for shoppers who are in a hurry and do not have many ideas for baby toys to show first the gender and then the age. In addition to toys, hats and bags are also required with photos by favorite characters, which have to do with gender. It would be horrible for a boy if he carried a bag with a doll sticker on his arm. The latest Barbie brand sets consist of girls and boys. Very few parents decide to make this choice for a male child. We have had occasion when a mother turns the Barbie doll, a new variant, as the reason for the colors of the dress and hair. They symbolize the colors of the LGBT community, she reasoned. In the last decade, world brands of children's toys, such as LEGO or JUMBO, have tried to include as many toys and neutral colors in their programs, but parents' choices for these variants, at the moment are very few.

## Conclusion

Toys play an important role in the development of interpersonal, cognitive, and creative skills in children. Through toys, children are involved in constructive games. Toys are diverse and include many professions that children imitate through play. If a boy or girl plays with doctor bags, this is not an indication that he/she will become a doctor when he or she grows up. On the other hand, through the toys that are bought to the children, parents give a series of messages. Toys can coincide with the tools of the parent's profession, with toys preferred by the parents themselves and with toys that are close to the favorite parents' professions. What they are less interested in is choosing toys based on gender. Parents do not prefer typical toys of the opposite sex, especially for boys. The evolution of toys is natural. Toy manufacturers are constantly following the technological, social, and cultural developments, adapting the toys as well. Although various movements tend to interfere in the production and dedication of gender-neutral toys, again the choice remains with the parents and other buyers, who make the choice of toys, among other things also on the basis of gender. This issue remains open and will be influenced by the development of cultural circumstances and worldviews on addressing gender role segregation. Girls and boys are involved in joint games, especially in nurseries and kindergartens, while individually, at home, they play with toys typical of the gender to which they belong.

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