Children are active learners who acquire knowledge by examining and exploring their environment. Because this environment is gendered, it influences us to investigate how children think about gender and how it affects their behavior. The current study examined the play patterns of sixty-four children aged three to five and their categorization of forty gender-stereotyped, neutral, or ambiguous toys. Specifically, we examined the role of familiarity on children’s toy selections and behavior and the reasoning and categorization of toys by gender. We found that overall children spent more time playing with novel toys, but they spent longer playing with each familiar toy that they chose. Children are more likely to categorize toys as their own gender, but as they grow older, they start to recognize gender stereotypes more and are more likely to allow both genders to play with a toy. Children are more flexible with assigning gender stereotypes for novel toys and will assign a greater percentage of novel toys to the opposite gender than familiar toys. Lastly, children are more likely to assign a gender for reasons that they cannot explain. They will ascribe gender roles based on a gender association from viewing children of a specific gender playing with the toy or “like” the toy and specific characteristics and play patterns that are attached to the toy. Since the world around them affects the toys with which children play, even in a new, gender-balanced environment, it is important to pay attention to the experiences children have everyday and the gender stereotypes that they experience.

### Introduction

Preschool-aged boys tend to receive criticisms from peers and teachers for cross-gender toy play, whereas girls receive less criticism for cross-gender play and behavior (Fagot, 1977 as cited in Raag & Rackliff, 1998). Preschoolers are aware of the perceptions that their peers and adults have in regards to gender (Muller & Goldberg, 1980 as cited in Raag & Rackliff, 1998). Boys typically perceive that cross-gender play would be considered “bad” by their fathers. Conversely, girls typically perceive that playing with cross-gender-type toys was “good/don’t care” (Raag & Rackliff, 1998).

Three-year-old children display knowledge about gender stereotypes (Edelbrock & Sigsworth, 1978 as cited in Raag, 1999). From the ages of three to four, children categorize their peers’ likes and dislikes according to sex roles (Eisenberg, Murray, and Hite, 1982 as cited in Stack, Dobson, Colborne, Sears & Dichtelmuller, 2001). 12 month old infants that are habituated to toys spend longer playing with novel toys, rather than those that they had become familiar. Infants who are interrupted during the initial habituation period spend a longer time playing with familiar toys (Hunter, M.A., Amsel, E.W., & Ross, H.L., 1982).

Boys, more than girls, identify neutral and ambiguous toys as masculine justifying their choice with egocentric reasoning and gender association (Cherney, Harper, & Winter, 2005). Hypothesis

We expect that children will spend longer playing with novel toys than familiar ones. Children will provide strong egocentric reasoning and stereotypes that will correspond to their gender.

### Methods

Participants

Sixty-four children (29 females and 35 males) between 3-5 years (Mean age ± 6.08 ± 6.59 12 months), 10 1 1/2 months, 10 2 1/2 months.

Materials

A play room was set up in a one-way mirrored room.

40 age-appropriate toys were rated on gender stereotypes using a 7-point Likert scale: [1] masculine, [2] neutral, [3] female by undergraduate students (masculine, feminine, neutral, ambiguous).

Procedure

Pretest: half of the children viewed gender-typed toy pictures and categorized toys into boy and girl toys and were asked why.

Children were given 15 minutes to play with whatever toys they wanted.

While children were playing, some were asked for the gender of the toy and a reason.

Participants were asked to categorize toys into boy and girl toy and why.

Parents filled out a survey asking which toys they owned and how interested their child’s interest in the toy based on a 1-5 scale.

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### Results

Gender Reasoning

Adapted from Cherney, Harper, and Winter (2006)

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### Discussion

Play Time

Children spent a larger percentage of their time playing with novel toys than playing with familiar toys.

Children chose to play with more novel toys than familiar toys during their time in the play room.

Although they played with a greater number of novel toys, children played for longer time periods with familiar toys.

Gender Reasoning

- Children are most likely to stereotype toys for reasons that they cannot explain.
- As children grow older, they are better able to explain their gender reasoning.
- Children are most likely to assign stereotypes because they have created a gender association after watching children of a certain gender play with that toy or ‘like’ the toy.
- Children will use specific characteristics of the toys and how the toy is played with to explain their thinking.

Gender Stereotypes

- Children are most likely to stereotype a toy to fit their gender.
- As children grow older, they are less likely to stereotype a toy as acceptable only for a single gender and are more likely to allow both genders to play with the toy.
- Children were more flexible with assigning gender stereotypes for novel toys. They assign a greater percentage of these toys to the opposite gender than with familiar toys.

### References


