

# INTRODUCTION

ERICA S. WEISGRAM AND LISA M. DINELLA

Do boys and girls play with different toys? Is there such a thing as a “girl toy” or a “boy toy?” If boys and girls are interested in and play with different toys, why do these differences occur? Are there biological factors that contribute to gender differences in children’s toy interests and play? Cognitive factors? Social factors? Is it problematic for boys and girls to play with different toys? What do top scientists say about children’s gender-typed toy play? What recommendations do these experts make for parents, educators, and toy developers? As a part of a societal conversation about gender and toys, these questions, among others, have received considerable attention in the last 5 years within the psychological literature, social media, and popular press and have also been considered by parents, scholars, feminist activists, and even the White House. These questions often lead to debate among interested parties and do not have clear-cut answers, as the chapters in this volume illustrate. The scientific literature demonstrates that gender differences in children’s toy interests and play are

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*Gender Typing of Children’s Toys: How Early Play Experiences Impact Development*, E. S. Weisgram and L. M. Dinella (Editors)

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complex in their presence and causes, as well as their consequences for child development.

We do know that gender differences are present in children's toy interests and choices. Numerous studies have shown that boys, on average, are more interested than girls in toys such as vehicles, action figures, and sporting equipment—toys that are often considered by society to be “boys' toys” (or masculine toys, as they will be called throughout this volume). Girls, on average, are more interested than boys in toys such as baby dolls, fashion dolls, and princess dresses and accessories—toys that are often considered by society to be “girls' toys” (i.e., feminine toys). Boys' and girls' toy interests both contribute to and are derived from these classifications, illustrating one of the complex issues within the literature.

What makes a toy a masculine or feminine toy? Imagine a new toy has been developed for an upcoming holiday season. When the new toy is introduced, it is marketed as the “Top New Toy for Girls” and includes a picture of only girls on the pink and purple packaging or marketing materials. The explicit and implicit labels used in the advertising and packaging of the toy may consequently create a greater interest among girls than boys. However, one can imagine an alternative scenario, in which a toy is marketed to both boys and girls by omitting explicit and implicit labels. If girls become more interested in the toy, regardless of the gender-neutral marketing, does the toy become stereotyped by society as a feminine toy? These scenarios illustrate the complexity of gender typing of toys

## OUR GOALS

In this volume, we bring together top scholars from the field of developmental psychology to contribute their expertise about gender, toys, and play. These esteemed scholars discuss a constellation of topics about gender and toy play while relying heavily on the scientific literature. The authors in this volume, ourselves included, share the goal of understanding how gender differences in children's interests may emerge, what consequences gender-typed toy play has for children's development, and how we can break down gender stereotypes about toys.

The first part of this volume presents a general introduction to the topic of gender-typed toys and play. Erica S. Weisgram (Chapter 1) begins by discussing the reasons it is important to study gender and children's toy interests, providing a brief history of gender-typed toys, and summarizing the recent conversations in American society about gender typing of children's toys. Lisa M. Dinella (Chapter 2) then presents a review and critique of the methodology that is commonly used to study gender and toys. Kristina M. Zosuls

and Diane N. Ruble (Chapter 3) present a thorough discussion of gender differences in infants' toy interests and play patterns, and consider the role of cognitive constructs such as gender identification in these interests and behaviors. Isabelle D. Cherney (Chapter 4) broadly examines gender-typed toys, the implications of gender-typed toys and play, and the features that denote each toy type, such as explicit and implicit gender labels.

In the second part of this volume, the chapter authors illuminate the factors that may contribute to gender differences in children's toy interests and play patterns. Melissa Hines and Jacqueline Davis (Chapter 5) discuss biological factors that may contribute to these differences with an emphasis on the role of prenatal testosterone. Christia Spears Brown and Ellen A. Stone (Chapter 6) discuss the social agents that impact children's interests and behaviors, highlighting the role of parents, peers, and media and advertising. To close Part II, Carol Lynn Martin and Rachel E. Cook (Chapter 7) review prominent theories of gender development, illustrating the importance of gender identity, gender schemas, and stereotype construction and endorsement in the development of children's interests and behaviors.

The final part of this volume reflects on the consequences of gender-typed toy play. In sum, the authors examine how playing predominantly with gender-typed toys may lead to gender differences in development that extend into adulthood. Lise Eliot (Chapter 8) discusses the importance of play from a biological and evolutionary perspective and the potential consequences of gender differentiated play for biological and neural development. Next, Sarah K. Murnen (Chapter 9) highlights the consequences of gender-typed toys and play for social development, including the development of nurturing behaviors, sexualization of girls, and aggressive behaviors. Lynn S. Liben, Kingsley M. Schroeder, Giulia A. Borriello, and Erica S. Weisgram (Chapter 10) discuss the role of toys and play in the development of cognitive skills and how gender differences in toy interests and play patterns may contribute to gender differentiation of these skills. Next, Megan Fulcher and Emily F. Coyle (Chapter 11) discuss the long-term consequences of gender-typed toys and play for individuals' work and family roles as adults. Specifically, they reflect on how play with masculine and feminine toys may differentially prepare men and women for social roles or constrain their visions for their future. Campbell Leaper and Rebecca S. Bigler (Chapter 12) shift the conversation to how society's gender typing of toys can have consequences for the development and maintenance of gender stereotypes. They also highlight evidence-based practices for intervention to encourage diversity in children's toy play and attenuate the negative consequences of gender-typed toy play. In the Conclusion (Chapter 13), the volume editors echo the many authors' calls for additional research on gender, toys, and play. We outline gaps in the scientific literature where further research is needed, and discuss the type of

methodology that may best address the issues at hand. We also conclude that evidence supports the need for a reduction of gender stereotypes about toys in our society. Achieving this goal will allow children to follow their own interests without gender limits and help them develop a wide range of skills that will benefit them in the future.

We hope that this volume will inform scholars, parents, educators, feminist activists, policymakers, and executives in the toy industry who seek a deeper understanding of gender and toys. We also hope that these pages will inspire more research into the gendered nature of children's toys and play—research that continuously answers and poses interesting and important questions to advance the psychological literature.