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The Gender-Stereotyped Nature of Christmas Toys Received by 36-, 48-, and 60-Month-Old Children: A Comparison Between Nonrequested vs Requested Toys

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This research provides normative information on the gender-stereotyped nature of Christmas toys that children received from their parents. A list of over 500 toys was obtained from the parents of 86 children between the ages of 31 and 65 months. The toys were rated and placed into gender-stereotyped groups, and were categorized into child requested or nonrequested groups. It was found that the children had considerable input into the types of toys they received from their parents for Christmas, requesting approximately one half of the toys. Toys the children requested were judged to be more gender stereotyped than nonrequested toys. Very few boys received either requested or nonrequested toys considered stereotyped for the opposite sex. In contrast, one third of the girls received at least one toy judged to be stereotyped for the opposite sex. Also, boys appeared to develop sex-typed interests in toys at an earlier age than girls, and they requested 72%, 76%, and 75% gender-stereotyped toys in the corresponding age groups of 36-, 48-, and 60-months. The girls' sex-typed interests in toys lagged behind the boys', with girls requesting 29%, 51%, and 73% gender-stereotyped toys for the same age groups. In the nonrequested condition, parents selected types of toys judged to be traditionally more sex role neutral and emphasized musical instruments, art supplies, and educational toys for their sons and educational toys for their daughters.

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Sex typing is viewed as the process whereby individuals come to acquire, to value, and to adopt for themselves behavior patterns appropriate for their ascribed gender. Since they remain part of the child's daily environment for a considerable period, toys have been viewed by educators, parents, and developmentalists as playing a crucial role in the sex-typing process. When presented with pictures of toys (Eisenberg, Murray, & Hite, 1982), when given actual toys with which to play (Frasher, Nurss, & Brogan, 1980), and when observed in nursery school (Barry & Barry, 1976) or home settings (Gidding & Halverson, 1981), children have been shown to develop sex-typed interests and activity preferences that reflect sex-stereotyped standards at a very early age.

In order to determine to what extent parents actively support the development of sex-typed activities and interests with toys in the two sexes, Rheingold and Cook (1975) found that boys' bedrooms contained significantly more vehicles, spatial/temporal toys, military toys, education/art toys, machines, depots, and sports equipment. Girls' rooms were found to contain significantly more dolls, dollhouses, and domestic items; their rooms tended to be decorated with more floral motifs, lace, fringe, and ruffles. Rheingold and Cook concluded that parents are providing their children with toys that encourage sex-stereotyped activities.

Although quantitative reports are not available, it would appear obvious that when Christmas or birthdays approach, parents are likely to buy dolls and domestic-item toys for girls, and to buy trucks and trains for boys. Whether parents choose toys because they are responding to already developed preferences expressed by the children, or whether their purchases precede and guide the development of such preferences, is not assertainable from the literature, it is likely that the influence works in both directions. Attempts to understand the direction of this influence point out that a major limitation of the Rheingold and Cook study was their failure to take into account the important parameter of toy-selection choice. Do parents respond to children's request for toys, and if so, what kinds of toys do children receive from their parents when they are requested as compared to those toys that are not requested? These questions remain unanswered in the literature.

The major goal of the present study is, therefore, to obtain normative data from a list of toys that children receive from their parents at Christmas, and to categorize the types of toys they receive when the toys are requested and/or nonrequested. An additional focus is to assess whether there are any age or sex differences between the children in the proportion of gender-stereotyped toys they receive from their parents.

METHOD

The Sample

Subjects were 89 children (46 males and 43 females) between the ages of 31 and 65 months who were selected from a sample of seven nursery and/or kindergartens in and around Greensboro, North Carolina (pop. 160,000). The children were randomly selected from the classrooms that they attended and were predominantly from upper-working and middle-class backgrounds.

Procedure

A toy inventory was used to record the toys the subjects received for Christmas from their parents. One month after Christmas the toy inventory sheet was given to 115 children to take home for their parents to fill out. Parents of 89 children (77%) chose to participate in the study and returned the toy inventory to the school the following day. Parents were asked to list and describe in some detail on the toy inventory sheet only the toys their children received for Christmas from the parents (not toys received from siblings, peers, or relatives). In addition, they were asked to indicate whether or not each toy was requested by the child.

Toy Stereotypic Rating Procedure

The toy inventory filled out by the parents resulted in a list of over 500 toys. A panel of three female and three male child development professionals judged each toy on this list according to its gender-stereotyped category. A toy was classified under "toys for boys" when two-thirds of the panel members agreed it was stereotypically considered most appropriate for boys. A toy was classified under "toys for girls" when two-thirds agreed it was stereotypically considered most appropriate for girls. A toy was classified under "toys for both" when two-thirds agreed it was traditionally appropriate for both boys and girls.

Toy Categorization Procedure

To determine the categories for the listed toys the authors followed similar categorizations used in two previous studies (Giddings & Halverson,

1981; Rheingold & Cook, 1975) to allow for some comparisons between the furnishings found in children's rooms, the toys they played with at home, and the toys they received from their parents that were requested or not requested. The following items were categorized:

vehicles—all transportation toys such as cars, trucks, trains, and airplanes;
sports—regulation sports equipment as well as imitation equipment; and all riding toys such as tricycles and bicycles;
games—structured-activity toys with specific rules such as board games;
occupational role—toys portraying occupational activities such as doctor kits, fire helmets, and police uniforms;
weapons—toys designed for mock warfare or combat;
arts and crafts—materials such as paints, felt-tip pens, coloring crayons, and clay;
educational—a combined class of items including books, puzzles, microscopes, computer tutors, alphabet letters, and magnetic numbers;
musical/camera—a combined class of musical-making items such as radios, play and actual musical instruments, as well as viewmasters, projectors, and cameras;
manipulative (designing and building)—items such as Lincoln Logs, Tinker toys, Legos, work benches, and tools;
stuffed animals—animal-shaped items with a soft filling;
action figures—small human and animal figures such as Star Wars characters, Fisher Price Adventure People, Lone Ranger and Silver;
domestic items—toys related to domestic role play such as dish sets, play food, toy stoves, toy pots and pans;
dolls—traditional baby dolls, Barbie dolls; and
doll assessories—dollhouses, carriages, clothes, cradles, etc.

Data Preparation

The average number of reported toys the children received from their parents at Christmas was 6.4 toys per child (6.7 for boys and 6.1 for girls). Since the individual number of toys each child received varied from 3 to 16, for data analysis, mean percentages of the sex-typed, neutral, and cross-sexed toys were calculated for each child, using the panel's toy ratings. In addition, the mean percentages of sex-typed, neutral, and cross-sex toys were thought to be more reliable indicators of parental sex-typing influences (rather than toy frequency or number of the above toy categories) because the number of types of toys are so much more varied for boys than they are for girls

(Kutner & Levinson, 1978). This may explain why boys received more toys than the girls and why using toy categories to determine parental sex typing would be misleading. The results of the data preparation are shown in Table I, which lists the mean percentages of sex-typed, neutral, and cross-sexed toys the children received broken down by age, sex, and request status.

RESULTS

To assess whether there were age and/or sex differences in the gender stereotyping of toys children received from their parents, a t test between the mean percent of gender-stereotyped requested toys and the mean percent of gender-stereotyped nonrequested toys each child received for Christmas was calculated. The t test revealed that, for both sexes, requested toys were judged to be more gender stereotyped than nonrequested toys, $t = 5.49$, $p < .001$. As Table I indicates, a mean of 63% of the requested toys all the children received were judged to be gender stereotyped, while a mean of 37% of the nonrequested toys were judged to be gender stereotyped. Only 3% of requested toys and 4% of the nonrequested toys all children received were judged to be cross-sexed.

Having determined that a gender-stereotyped difference existed between requested and nonrequested toys for all children, the next step in the analysis was to determine sex differences within each request status. For nonrequested toys a t test revealed no significant differences between the mean percent of gender-stereotyped toys the boys received and the mean percent of stereotyped toys the girls received. Of the nonrequested toys, means of 36% and 38% that girls and boys respectively received from their parents were gender stereotyped, with 56% and 62%, respectively, being gender neutral.

In contrast to a nonsignificant sex difference for the nonrequested toys, a significant gender-stereotyped difference was found for requested toys between boys and girls ($t = 2.92$, $p < .01$). Seventy-four percent of the toys that boys requested were judged to be gender stereotyped while 51% of the toys that girls requested were judged to be gender stereotyped. An examination of the requested toys by age sheds further light upon this sex difference. As Table I shows, the children were categorized into three age groups; 36 months ($x = 36.6$ months), 48 months ($x = 50.1$ months), and 60 months ($x = 60.8$ months). An analysis of variance on the mean percentages of the requested toys that boys received did not result in a significant difference for age group. Boys who were 36, 48, and 60 months of age requested means of 72%, 77%, and 75% gender-stereotyped toys, respectively. For girls, an analysis of variance on the mean percentages of requested toys (29%, 51%, and 73%) did yield a significant age-group effect [$F(2, 35) = 6.02$, $p < .01$].

Table I. Mean Percentages of Toys That Children Received from Parents by Age, Sex, and Request Status

	Boys (%)				Girls (%)				
	3 years	4 years	5 years	Boys	3 years	4 years	5 years	Girls	Both
Requested toys									
Sex-typed	72	77	75	74	29	51	73	51	63
Neutral	28	23	24	25	70	39	21	43	34
Cross-sexed	0	0	1	1	0	10	6	5	3
Nonrequested									
Sex-typed	39	43	31	38	44	20	43	36	37
Neutral	61	57	69	62	54	68	47	56	59
Cross-sexed	0	0	0	0	2	12	10	8	4

Post hoc comparisons on the mean percentages revealed that girls in the 60-month age group requested a significantly higher percentage (73%) of gender-stereotyped toys than did girls in the 36-month age group (29%). In addition, a test for trend on the mean percentages yielded a significant linear trend [$F(1, 35)) = 12.03, p < .01$], suggesting that as the age group increases the mean percentage of gender-stereotyped toys the girls request and receive for Christmas increases as in a linear function. As the data in Table I indicates, when girls approach the 60-month age group the mean percentage of gender-stereotyped requested toys is similar to the mean percentages of gender-stereotyped requested toys for the boys in all three age groups.

Cross-Sex Toys Received

Data in Table I also indicates that girls received more toys judged to be stereotyped for the opposite sex. Only one boy in the study received a cross-sex toy and this was requested by the child. Two boys did receive Ronald McDonald dolls, but these dolls were rated gender neutral by the panel. Although only 8% of the total toys the girls received were judged stereotyped for the opposite sex; significantly, one third of all girls received at least one toy considered cross-sexed. One half of these cross-sexed toys the girls received were requested and the other half were nonrequested.

Types of Toys Children Request

The second major focus addressed whether or not sex differences between the types of toys the children received for Christmas can be delineated if the toys are placed into requested and nonrequested categories. The frequencies of requested and nonrequested toys that the boys and girls received in each of the 14 toy categories are summarized in Table II. The toys were placed in these general categories after they were rated by the panel for sex stereotyping. As such, each of the 14 categories are not intended to be used to provide toy-stereotyped information for either sex. For example, in the *dolls* category, Ronald McDonald dolls were rated gender netural, as were toy telephones in the domestic items category (boys received each of these items). In the sports category roller skates were rated gender netural while footballs were rated stereotyped for boys. Likewise, in the musical/camera category a Sunny Bunch clock or wristwatch was rated stereotyped for girls while Incredible Hulk watches or clocks were rated stereotyped for boys. For purposes of comparison, the number of boys and girls were equalized to 43 subjects each. These 86 children received a total of 492 toys for Christmas

Table II. Frequency of Requested and Nonrequested Toys Received in Each Toy Category by Sex[a,b,c]

	Boys (n = 43)		Girls (n = 43)	
Category	Number requested	Number nonrequested	Number requested	Number nonrequested
Musical camera	9	22***	10	14
Arts and crafts	2	14***	11†	12
Educational	5	23***	4	21***
Games	4	10	6	10
Building and designing	11	12	5	6
Sports	7	12	12	7
Stuffed animals	3	1	3	2
Action figures	18†	14	6	6
Occupational roles	10**††	2	2	1
Weapons	10†	4	1	0
Vehicles	38†††	25†††	5	5
Dolls	0	2	25**†††	9††
Doll assessories	0	0	12†††	11†††
Domestic items	1	1	11††	14††
Total	118	142	114	118

[a]Difference between request status within sex: *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.
[b]Difference between sexes: †$p < .05$; ††$p < .01$; †††$p < .001$.
[c]Significant differences in toy frequencies between request status and sexes were determined by z score tests between proportions.

(x = 5.72 toys per child). Of the 492 toys, 232 toys were requested by the children (47%, x = 2.70 toys per child) and 260 toys were not requested by the children (53%, x = 3.02 toys per child). A t test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant.

Between Toy Request Status. Tests of z-score differences between proportions were calculated for each toy category to determine any frequency differences between requested and nonrequested toys. The analyses revealed that boys received more occupational-role toys in the request status than they did in the nonrequest status. On the other hand, boys received more musical/camera, arts/crafts, and educational toys in the nonrequested status than in the request status. Girls received more dolls in the request status than in the nonrequest status, and they also received more educational toys in the nonrequest status.

Differences Between Sexes. Tests of proportions were also calculated to determine the frequency differences of toys in each category that existed between the boys and girls in the two request statuses. Analysis of the requested toys showed that the boys received more action figures, occupational-role toys, weapons, and vehicles than did the girls. In contrast, the girls received more art/crafts, dolls, doll assessories, and domestic toys in the requested status than did the boys. Analysis of the nonrequested toys showed that the boys received more vehicles while the girls received more dolls, doll assessories, and domestic items.

DISCUSSION

Because toys are thought to play a crucial role in the sex role socialization of children, the main purpose of this study was to obtain normative information dealing with the circumstances and quantity of gender-stereotyped toys that children receive from their parents at Christmas. Also, because little information is present in the literature addressing whether parents choose toys because they are responding to already developed preferences expressed by the children, or whether their purchases precede and guide the development of such preferences, the Christmas toys were analyzed in child-requested and -nonrequested categories.

A major contribution of this study is that it quantifies a general notion previously considered obvious: children have considerable input into the types of toys available for toy play in the home environment. Parents reported that approximately one half of the toys they gave their children for Christmas were specifically requested by the children. Since children receive most of their toys at Christmas, any study attempting to use toys found in the home as either an index to a child's sex typing or as an index to parental stereotyping (i.e., Rheingold & Cook, 1975) may not be valid. The toys found in the home invironment are not singly the result of the parent's sex-typing philosophy nor are they solely the result of children's wishes—both child and parental toy preferences have to be taken into account.

Requested Toys

These data also pointed out that when a distinction is made between toys requested by children and those not requested, different gender-stereotyped toy patterns become evident. The gender-stereotyped pattern for requested toys suggest that children are quite sex-typed in their toy preferences by the time they reach school age. The boys predominatly requested traditional sex-typed toys such as cars, trucks, action figures, and weapons in contrast to neutral toys. By the age of five girls largely requested traditional female sex-typed toys such as baby dolls, cradles, and tea sets. Only one boy requested a toy considered gender stereotyped for the opposite sex. Not a single boy in the study requested a doll or doll assessories, while five girls requested traditional boy sex-typed toys such as weapons or vehicles. These findings are consistent with those of numerous toy-preference studies conducted in both experimental settings (Liss, 1981; Rabban, 1950) and in nursery school observations (Conner & Serbin, 1977; Parten, 1933) that show young children's preferences for traditional gender-stereotyped toys have remained quite stable over the past 50 years since sex-typing measurements of young children have commenced.

The significant increase with age in the percent of gender-stereotyped toys requested by the girls but not for boys supports similar findings by Blakemore, LaRue, and Olejnik (1979). Blakemore et al., examined the toy preferences of two-, four-, and six-year-old children and found that, like the boys in this study, there were no significant increases with age in the stereotypic preferences for boys because their sex-typed preferences were strong at all ages. However, the two-year-old girls (similar to the 36-month age group in this study) preferred significantly less gender-stereotyped toys. In the second part of their study, Blakemore et al. showed that the age of three was the transitional year for girls in developing strong gender-stereotyped preferences. Both the findings of Blakemore et al. and this study suggest that boys acquire toy preferences judged to be gender stereotyped at an earlier age (by two- and three-years old) than do girls. Also, both studies suggest that by the ages of four- and five-years, boys and girls are similar in the degree of their sex-typed preferences. In addition, this study points out that 13% of the four- and five-year-old girls request at least one toy judged to be stereotyped for the opposite sex. The findings that boys sex stereotyped earlier than girls is not surprising, given the many studies in the literature that show boys are (1) more strongly sex typed than girls by their parents—especially by their fathers (Langlois & Downs, 1980) and (2) more strongly sex typed by their peers than girls—especially by male peers (Lamb & Roopnarine, 1979).

Nonrequested Toys

While the children in this study (especially the boys and older girls) predominantly requested sex-typed toys, the gender-stereotypic pattern of the nonrequested toys is not as clear. Generally, the children tended to receive more gender-neutral toys when the toys were nonrequested (62% neutral for boys and 56% neutral for girls) than in the requested status (25% neutral for boys and 43% neutral for girls). In addition, the types of toy categories are somewhat different. For example, boys received significantly more musical toys, art supplies, and educational toys when they were not requested. Girls received more educational toys when not requested, along with a lesser number of baby dolls. The pattern for nonrequested cross-sexed toys received is interesting. Not one boy received a toy judged to be cross-sexed, and although only 8% of the total nonrequested toys the girls received were cross-sexed, one third of the girls received at least one cross-sexed toy. The precise motive that parents have in selecting these specific types and categories of toys for their sons and daughters, in addition to the cross-sexed toys for their daughters, is beyond the scope of these data. On the surface these data seem

to suggest that if the parents in this study are indeed attempting to actively guide their children's toy-play behavior through toy selection, for boys this guidance is towards educational, musical, and art activities. For girls this guidance is towards educational activities and to some extent towards cross-sex toys. Since 38% of the nonrequested toys the boys received and 36% of those for the girls are sex typed, these data indicate that although the parents are not overwhelming their children with gender-stereotyped toys, they do contribute to their children's stereotyping through their nonrequested toy selection choices.

An inherent problem in attempting to ascertain the motives that parents have in selecting certain types of toys, whether examining a list of toys selected by the parents or examining toys found in the home, is that there are so many more types and categories of toys available for boys than for girls (Kutner & Levinson, 1978). This large sex discripancy between the amount of toys from which to choose may influence in some way the choices both parents and children make in toy selections, which possibly could make it more difficult for girls to be sex typed than for boys. This may account for the discrepancy between the 36- and 48-month-old girls and the rest of the children in the amount of sex-typed toys they requested and also perhaps influence the amount of cross-sexed toys the girls received as compared to the boys.

SUMMARY

Two significant findings of these data stand out. The first finding is that traditional sex-typed toys found in the home environment are largely the result of parents responding to their children's sex-typed requests. The second finding is that traditionally neutral toys such as art, games, and educational items found in the home are mainly the result of parental choice. Concerning this second finding, it appears on the surface that for nonrequested toys, parents are attempting to guide some amount of their children's toy play towards gender-neutral toys. Additional research is required to ascertain the precise motives parents may have for this behavior. Concerning the first finding, these data do not provide the information required to determine what types, how extensive, and which sources of early influences the children in this study had in developing their gender-stereotyped toy preferences, but it is highly plausible that parents, along with peers and the media, play an important role. For example, Fagot (1978) found that highly educated young parents unknowingly encouraged their two-year-old children to play with gender-stereotyped toys in subtle ways, even though the parents reported that they did not encourage sex-stereotyped toy play. The data of

the present study does not provide information addressing the extent that the parents in this study had input, suggestions, reinforced, or discouraged ongoing play with sex-typed toys so that the children perceived that their toy requests would be congruent with their parent's wishes. In light of the strong gender-stereotyped toy preferences of the children (especially the boys) in this study, this explanation is quite plausible. Further research is necessary to determine more fully the interaction and impact of various cultural gender-role values (transmitted by the family, peers, and media) upon young children in the sex-typing process.

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