Let’s play! A study examining the Acceptability OF Cross-Gender Play Of Children

Angela R. Youngs
Murray State University

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LET'S PLAY! A STUDY EXAMINING THE ACCEPTABILITY OF CROSS-GENDER PLAY OF CHILDREN

A Thesis Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Psychology
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Science

by Angela Youngs
August 2016
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine parental preference regarding their children and gender-specific and gender-neutral toys. More specifically, to examine some factors that may impact parents’ preferences regarding the types of toys their child chooses. The factors of interest used in the present study include general demographics (e.g., gender, age, etc.), gender role perceptions, religiosity, and level of conservatism. Participants were gathered from a survey-taking website. The sample consisted of 88 parents (43 female, 43 male, and 2 who chose not to identify) whose ages ranged from 22 to 62 ($M = 31.82$, $SD = 6.95$). Each participant was given brief measures to assess for each of the factors of interest. Parents were then asked to identify one of their children to consider throughout the study. They were shown a series of images of toys and asked the likelihood they would purchase that particular toy for their child, as well as how happy they would be if their child were to play with the particular toy. Overall, results suggest those that those endorsing more masculine stereotypes are more likely to purchase a masculine toy for their child; the opposite was found with female stereotypes and feminine toys. Further, those that identified as more conservative were more likely to adhere to stricter gender roles.
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Introduction

Gender-related factors, such as roles and expectations, begin to impact individual’s experience and understanding of the world from birth. These roles and expectations are generally based on what the parents or caregivers feel are appropriate. (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993). The child’s parents provide the toys children are given to play with and a child’s behavioral expectations (Martin, Eisenbud, and Rose, 1995). The aim of the present study is to examine the factors that influence parents’ beliefs of what is appropriate for their child to play with and what is appropriate behavior. In particular, this study will examine parents’ feelings regarding their child playing with same and opposite gendered toys.

The History and Importance of Play

Examining and understanding children’s play behavior has been a theme of many scholars’ research for the past 150 years; which has led to a number of interpretations and understandings of what play encompasses. These differences reflect theories developed by scholars’ definitions of play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). The theories have been divided into two clusters: (a) those developed between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and focused, primarily, on the purpose and existence of play and (b) those developed after 1920 and focused on the role play has in child development (Mellou, 1994).
Spencer (as cited in Stagnatti, 2004) viewed play as having no real benefit regarding child development. Children are reliant on their parents for survival; their parents take care of them by providing life’s necessities (e.g., food, water, shelter, protection). Because children do not have to use their energy for survival purposes, they have excess energy. Spencer’s theory, the Surplus Energy Theory, stated that children play in order to rid themselves of excess energy. While Spencer’s theory has its place in both understanding and explaining the purposes of play, it is a basic theory, and it does not encompass all that play is. As time and research have progressed, theories have become more complex and begin to provide a stronger understanding behind the purpose of play.

Groos (as cited in Saracho & Spodek, 1995) defined play as behaviors essential to survival later in life. His definition was based on his play theory of pre-exercise. Groos postulated that play often encourages children to take on and practice traditionally adult roles and behaviors (i.e., taking care of a baby, cooking dinner, and washing a car), and engaging in such behaviors is a way for children to practice before these acts are essential for daily living. The theory would suggest that during play, little girls are engaging in activities that involve baby dolls and kitchen sets and little boys are engaging in behaviors such as playing with trucks to practice driving and playing ‘cops and robbers.’ The theory implies gendered play also begins during early childhood (as cited in Stagnitti, 2004).

After 1920, scholars came to a general consensus that children engage in play behaviors for reasons more complex than to simply relieve surplus energy. These
“modern” theories, or more specifically, cognitive theories of play, focused on how play contributes to child development. Piaget emphasized that play is merely a reflection of a child’s development. He did not, however, view play as a requirement for a child to develop cognitively (as cited in Hughes, 2010). Piaget’s theory of play is focused on the psychological adaptation, and it describes the ways in which children process new and old information in order to organize and understand their external world. This is a dual process that consists of assimilation and accommodation. Piaget describes assimilation as the process in which children take in information from their environment and integrate it with information already existing in their mind. For instance, if a child encounters a type of ball he has never seen before (e.g., a basketball), he will be able to understand this ball is a different kind of ball without adjusting his idea, or mental representation, of what characteristics make up a ball. The child will have integrated, or assimilated, this new information about balls into his existing mental structure of what this object is.

The other process Piaget uses to describe the way in which children process new and old information is accommodation. He describes accommodation as the process in which children take in new information from their environment and alter their existing mental representation in order to make the new information fit. Perhaps a child only plays with toy cars; however, for his birthday, he receives a toy truck. He may refer to this new toy as ‘car’ until someone points out it is a truck. He is now aware of the differences between a car and a truck, and has created a new mental representation for ‘truck’ (Sarcho & Spodek, 1995). His theory and explanation as to how children grow to organize and understand their world is important to the idea of play.
Vygotsky felt previous theories, such as that of Piaget, left out important focal points. He felt that the development of abstract thinking, as well as the influence of a child’s social world was imperative aspects of a child development. Vygotsky used the example of dramatic play to demonstrate how play can aid in the development of a child’s abstract thinking (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Dramatic play is play that requires a child to imagine or pretend he or she is in a particular situation. According to Hughes (2010), dramatic play begins around one year of age. During this time, children engage in basic, pretend actions that are generally centered on the self. The child typically engages in actions that he or she observes day to day. Additionally, the objects used in this stage of symbolic play are used in a realistic manner. As the child approaches one and a half years old, his or her abstract thinking becomes slightly more complex. The child begins to use objects while engaging in symbolic actions (e.g., pretending to talk on a telephone). The objects used in this type of play still appear realistic, but the child is likely to begin using objects that do not appear as realistic. For example, the child may pretend other objects are telephones. As the child approaches two years old, he or she is able to use objects as characters in the symbolic play (e.g., teddy bears become guests to a tea party). At this age, children are also able to use representative objects in novel ways. These novel uses typically go against the natural function and use of the object. The example Vygotsky uses of dramatic play demonstrates how much play can influence a child’s development.

Additionally, Vygotsky believed as a child becomes older, his or her social world becomes more influential. An infant engages behaviors to satisfy an internal desire (e.g., sucking on a pacifier). Here, the infant has a desire that is solely related to him or herself
with no consideration for the infant’s social world. As the infant becomes older, the needs and desires shift outward. The child’s surroundings begin to play an important role in what behaviors the child desires to engage. For example, a young girl may observe her mother cooking dinner. The child has a desire to behave like her mother. Thus, she has a desire to cook dinner as well. The problem here is that the young girl is not yet capable of cooking dinner. However, the fact that she is not able to engage in this behavior does not rid her of the desire. Therefore, her only option is pretend to cook dinner. She is able to behave like her mother in a way that is both appropriate and satisfying (Vygotsky, 1966).

Vygotsky’s basic idea is that play is not a mindless activity. Play has purpose. Eventually, rules become a part of a child’s play. Whether these rules are conscious or unconscious is not the primary focus. The rules begin to drive the motive of behavior. They provide meaning of things and situations, and they guide the child to behave according to these rules (Vygotsky, 1978). For instance, a child learns the “rule” that girls play with dolls. This may guide or drive a young boy to choose other activities that specifically do not involve playing with dolls.

Play has been found to aid in the development of social behavior. Bettelheim (1987) proposed the idea that the “externally, imposed rules” of games provides more for children than new opportunities to engage in play behavior. The rules of games force children to control natural impulses to behave impulsively and selfishly. If the children do not learn to cooperate, the game will be unsuccessful. Bettelheim points out that this control and compromise takes time to learn, and only by engaging in such social interactions can these skills be learned.
Learning the rules to games is the first step towards learning and understanding societal rules. Games provide a foundation for proper behavior among peers. As children become older, they typically desire interactions with peers. When they behave inappropriately, they quickly learn their peers will no longer desire to include them in activities. Thus, the beginning of learning societal norms takes place through play (Bettelheim, 1987).

**Gender Role Development**

Gender begins impacting an individual’s life before birth. Parents typically begin planning for the arrival of their child according to the child’s gender. If the parents are expecting a girl, the preparations are likely to include purchasing gender-specific items, such as pink clothing and toys.

Once the child is born, adults continue to interact with the child according to the child’s gender. Seavey, Katz, and Zalk (1975) observed adult interaction with an infant. The same infant was presented as male, female, or neutral. The researchers found that adults, did in fact, interact significantly differently with the infant as a function of its gender. These interactions included the use of a toy (e.g., doll, football, or teething ring). For example, the participants were more likely to interact with the child using a doll if the child was presented as female. This suggests adults likely have and act upon preconceived notions of what it means to be male or female, and that adults begin passing these ideas onto children from a young age.

Sidorowicz and Lunney (1980) replicated this study and the results suggested the same notion that adults interact with infants in different sex-stereotyped manners. The findings from these two studies suggest that children experience gender cues from others
even as young infants. These cues are likely to continue throughout the child’s life and influence his or her own gender identity. Children are typically able to understand gender labels around 2 years of age, and by the age of 4, children are likely to have a strong understanding of the different characteristics of boys and girls (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993).

Kohlberg postulated that children have an active role in developing gender identity. Their gender development is based on what they observe in their environment. Kohlberg also stated that children have a desire for acceptance. Therefore, they are likely to engage in behavior that is similar to the groups with which they identify. This is known as the cognitive-developmental theory. For example, a four year-old boy’s parents tell him he is a boy. Perhaps he observes a male peer playing with toy cars and trucks; the child understands they are both boys, and is likely to think, “He is a boy like me. He is playing with cars and trucks, so I should play with cars and trucks, too” (as cited in Hughes, 2010).

Based on the gender schema theory, all children need to learn about gender roles is the ability to understand their own gender identity (i.e., label themselves as either male or female). Once this skill is mastered, children begin organizing gender-related information they encounter about themselves and others (Martin & Halverson, 1981). Like the cognitive-developmental theory, this theory emphasizes the importance of children actively engaging in their environment. Their gender role schema continues to grow as they engage with others. By engaging with peers, they are able to observe other children of the gender of which they identify, and begin to learn what is appropriate play behavior for boys and girls.
These two theories appear to reflect Bandura’s (1971) social learning theory, in which individuals learn behavior by simply observing others in their environment. According to Bandura, one can learn behaviors this way, or by observing not only others engaging in various behaviors, but also observing the consequences that accompany those behaviors. For instance, if a young boy began playing with dolls at his preschool and some other boys began to pick on him, it is less likely that the other boys observing the situation would play with a doll in the future.

Alternatively, Bussey and Bandura (1999) hypothesize gender roles may have some innate biological origins. They argue gender roles are a product of evolution. In the times of our ancestors, men were the stronger, tougher, and more aggressive of the genders. Thus, it made sense for them to engage in what are now viewed as stereotypical male behaviors. Similarly, women were the individuals that took care of the children and the home. Again, it made sense for them to engage in stereotypical behaviors that were nurturing and gentle. The biological theory suggests that modern day humans still operate this way.

Whether cognitive or biological theories best explain the development of gender roles, there is no denying they exist. Because they exist, and because they develop so early in life, researchers have been interested in examining gender roles and the various tools and experiences that promote their development.

As previously stated, exposing children to same-sex behaviors, activities, and toys often begins as soon as the child is born; little boys are given blue clothing and toy cars and little girls are given pink clothing and dolls. Some may find these behaviors meaningless to infants and toddlers seem far too young to be affected by the clothes they
wear and the toys they are given. However, there is reason to believe that even children as young as 9 and 18 months are learning gender norms and are picking up on gender cues. Campbell, Shirley, Heywood, & Crook (2000) found, while they may not be able to formally voice their toy preference, it has been found that boys as young as 9 months are more likely to gaze at toys viewed appropriate for boys (e.g., trains and cars).

Additionally, at 18 months of age, both boys and girls were more likely to gaze at stereotypic gender-appropriate toys. These findings may also support the notion that male gender roles are more rigid and less flexible than are female gender roles due to the fact that boys are able to roughly understand gender norms at a younger age than girls. Thus, boys have more experience with these norms. The norms are reinforced longer, making them stronger than the norms for girls.

It appears males are able to identify more masculine toys at an earlier age. These norms are then likely to be more ingrained and, thus less flexible. Girls are likely to play with toys that are either feminine or masculine, suggesting female gender stereotypes are more relaxed (Green, 2004).

As society continues to advance and push forward, gender roles continue to transform and create blurred lines. Females entered the workforce, a traditionally male-dominated area, and males have gradually begun engaging in homemaking behaviors, a traditionally female-dominated area (Marshall, 2006). If adults are engaging in traditionally other gender behaviors, we might expect them to raise children to be just as flexible with reduced and more relaxed gender stereotypes and roles. This may be reflected in the type of toys they choose to introduce their child to.

*Toys*
Rheingold and Cook (1975) noted that because the toys children have and play with are almost entirely based upon what the parents purchase and deem appropriate, looking in the rooms of children, ages 1-6 years old, can provide a strong basis for what characteristics make up “girl” and “boy” toys. It was found that girls had more dolls and floral furnishings and boys had more sports equipment and animal furnishings. They found no significant differences in the number of books (boys = 28.1 & girls = 23.9), musical objects (boys = 1.4 & girls = 1.2), or stuffed animals (boys = 4.1 & girls = 4.4) in boys’ and girls’ rooms.

Parents may purchase toys based on what they view as gender-role appropriate. Toys that contain more feminine characteristics are likely to be purchased and given to girls, while toys that contain more masculine characteristics are more likely to be purchased and given to boys. Owen, Blakemore, and Centers (2005) investigated what exactly were masculine and feminine characteristics and with which toys exhibited those characteristics. Their data suggest weapons, sports equipment, and toy vehicles were considered to be toys that are strongly masculine. Alternatively, the data suggest toys such as housekeeping equipment, dolls, and vanity equipment (e.g., dress-up clothes and vanity sets) were considered strongly feminine toys. Toys that encourage creativity, focus on appearance, and encourage domestic skills were also thought of as highly feminine toy characteristics. Toys that are able to be manipulated, encourage social play, and are aggressive or violent were considered to be strongly masculine toy characteristics.

While parents do make the ultimate decision as to what toys are made available to children at home, Rheingold and Cook (1975) offer the explanation that the toys purchased may be centered on the type of toys with which children already enjoy playing.
When asked to look at photos of various toys and select the toys with which they would most like to play, girls preferred housekeeping materials (e.g., doll buggies, washing equipment, and telephones) and boys preferred plastic materials (e.g., worktable and tools, clay, and paint) (Vance & McCall, 1934).

Adult Gender Role Expectations

As stated, parents make the final decision on what toys their children own. These decisions are likely based on the parents’ attitudes and expectations about gender roles. It has been suggested that both males and females are more likely to approve of girls engaging in cross-sex role behaviors than boys. That is, it is more acceptable for girls to engage in events and activities typically viewed as masculine than it is for boys to engage in events and activities typically viewed as feminine (Feinman, 1974). These findings suggest parents would be more comfortable with their daughter playing with “boy toys” than their son playing with “girl toys.”

Martin (1990) found evidence of this notion when directly investigating the acceptability of girls playing with “boy toys” and vice versa. Results indicate it is far more acceptable for girls to play with “boy toys” than it is for boys to play with “girl toys.” Further, women were found to be more accepting of children’s cross-sex toy preferences than were men. Women were also more accepting of their own children engaging in cross-sex play behavior than were men.

Feinman (1981) suggested this gender role flexibility seems to be based on the fact that male role behavior is valued whether girls or boys perform it. However, the opposite appears to be true in regards to female role behavior. Additionally, the author
proposes that based on this gender role behavior flexibility, society is beginning to become more androgynous and open.

Much of the research regarding gender roles and toys has been conducted a number of years ago. Therefore, a partial goal of the present study was to reevaluate gender role behavior acceptability; particularly, in regards to parents and their view of the acceptability of gender role and cross-gender role toy preferences of their children.

Additionally, many researchers have focused on gender-directed toys; that is, toys that are targeted towards either males or females. The present study was also aimed at examining gender-specific and gender-neutral toys. It was predicted that the acceptable toy preferences, identified by parents, would be related to the parents’ personal views on what is considered masculine and feminine, such that if the parent held stricter views on what he/she considers masculine or feminine, they would also hold stricter views of what is considered acceptable toy preferences. It was hypothesized that males and females would both express greater dissatisfaction with boys engaging in cross-gender play. Additionally, it was hypothesized that males would express greater dissatisfaction than females with boys engaging in cross-gender play.
Method

Participants

Participant data were obtained through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a website that offers monetary incentive to individuals who complete surveys and other tasks. The sample consisted of 88 parents (43 females, 43 males, and two who chose not to identify) whose ages ranged from 22 to 62 ($M = 31.82$, $SD = 6.95$). Of these participants, the majority identified as Asian/Pacific Islanders (65.06%) followed by individuals who identified as Caucasian (26.51%); the remaining participants identified as belonging to other racial/ethnic groups. The participants’ education level ranged from 9th grade to completing a graduate degree, with the majority (68.18%) reporting having graduated from a four-year college. Regarding religion, the majority of participants identified as Christian (44.32%), followed by those that identified as Hindu (37.50%), those unaffiliated with religion (10.23%), and those that identified as Muslim (7.95%). Half of the participants came from several different states in the United States, and half came from India. Each parent was asked to identify only one of his or her children to consider while completing the survey. Parents were more likely to select a same gender child, $\chi^2(1) = 5.68$, $p < .05$ (i.e., fathers chose sons, mothers chose daughters). More specifically, 29 (33.72%) of fathers selected sons and 25 (29.07%) of mother selected sons. Only data from parents who identified as having a child ages four to nine were included, with 5.67 as the mean child age ($SD = 1.57$). Of the 86 children that were identified, 48 were male
and 40 were female. The age range was selected because, typically, by the age of four, children have begun segregated play. That is, children will begin selecting playmates of the same gender, as well as will be able to identify toys that match his/her gender. Further, by the age of 9, children typically have begun a different type of play that involves less symbolic play and more play that demonstrates the acquisition of skills (e.g., reading a book, playing a card game, or telling a joke). This type of play also begins to establish their position within their peer group (as cited in Hughes, 2010).
Materials

The demographics questionnaire consisted of questions about age, gender, geographic location, and education level. It also asked questions regarding participants’ children, such as the number of children, ages, and gender. Further, participants were asked questions concerning their religiosity (See Appendix A).

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) is a measure that examines individuals’ gender role perceptions. It consists of 60 adjectives (20 masculine, 20 feminine, and 20 neutral). The subject is asked to identify, on a seven-point Likert scale, how acceptable it is in American society for a man or a woman to possess characteristic (Holt & Ellis, 1998). For the purpose of this study, only scores from the 20 masculine and 20 feminine adjectives were analyzed.

Holt and Ellis (1998) attempted to reevaluate the validity of this measure. Cronbach’s alpha for the measure’s masculinity scale was .95 and .92 for the femininity scale. There were two characteristics that were only rated as marginally desirable for a woman, loyal ($p = .09$) and childlike ($p = .08$). These values suggest the Bem Sex-Role Inventory is still a reliable measure of evaluating gender role perceptions (See Appendix B).

The participants were then shown twenty-four images of a single toy, eight strongly masculine, eight strongly feminine, and eight gender-neutral based on ratings of toys from the Blakemore and Centers study (2005). The participant identified one child, between the ages of 4 and 9, of which he/she is the primary caregiver and rated each toy in regards to this child. A seven-point Likert scale was used to rate how likely the
participant would be to purchase the toy for the identified child and how happy the
participant would be for the identified child were to play with the toy (e.g., 1, “I would
definitely not purchase this toy,” to 7, “I would definitely purchase this toy” and 1, “I
would be very unhappy” to 7, “I would be very happy,” respectively) (See Appendix C).

Finally, participants completed the Core Conservatism Scale (Solomon & Harvey,
2011). The scale is designed to measure conservative ideology. It is made up of 12 items,
which form 3 subscales: individualism, attitude toward equality, and attitude toward
social change. In the present study, only a total score was used in analysis, with high
scores reflective of more conservative views and low scores reflective of less
conservative views.

Upon developing the scale, Solomon and Harvey (2011) measured its validity.
The measure was found to show evidence of convergent validity, as it was positively
correlated with a measure of conservatism (r = .50) and negatively correlated with a
measure of liberalism (r = -.49). Additionally, Cronbach’s alpha for the measure’s
subscales (Individualism = .79, Attitude Toward Equality = .83, and Attitude Toward
Social Change = .79) provided further evidence the measure reliably examines
conservatism (See Appendix D).

Procedure

Participation was voluntary and participants were recruited from the general
population via a surveying website. Participants completed the questionnaires online in
approximately 30 minutes. Before participants completed the questionnaire, informed
consent information was presented to each individual. The informed consent explained
the purpose of the study and reminded participants they may quit completing the survey
at any time. Continuation of the study indicated their consent. Although any risk related to completing the questionnaire was low, a debriefing screen was shown to each participant once he or she completed the study.
Results

Based on BEM masculine and feminine scores across both genders of respondents, individuals who endorsed highly masculine stereotypes were more likely to report purchasing masculine toys \( (r = .25, p < .05) \) They also indicated they would be happier if their child played with that toy \( (r = .22, p < .05) \). Correlations among variables appear in Table 1. Participants with higher feminine stereotypes were more likely to report purchasing a feminine toy for their child \( (r = .28, p < .05) \). However, unlike those that strongly endorsed masculine stereotypes, there was no significant relationship between endorsing feminine stereotypes and being happy with one’s child playing with a feminine toy.

When only males were examined, males with higher masculine BEM scores were more likely to report purchasing a masculine toy for their child \( (r = .35, p < .05) \), as well as being happy with their child playing with a masculine toy \( (r = .35, p < .05) \).

Participants who endorsed higher political conservatism appear to subscribe to strict gender roles for boys but not for girls. That is, there was a negative correlation between those identifying as more politically conservative and the likelihood they would purchase a feminine toy for their son \( (r = -.29, p < .05) \). There was also a negative correlation between those identifying as more politically conservative and the likelihood
Table 1

Correlations of the Likelihood of Toy Purchase and Happiness Rating Regarding Masculine, Feminine, and Neutral Toys Between Sex Trait, Conservatism, and Religiosity Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>BEM Masculine</th>
<th>BEM Feminine</th>
<th>Conservatism</th>
<th>Religiosity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Masculine Toy</td>
<td>.35* (.17)</td>
<td>.04 (.25)</td>
<td>.32* (.18)</td>
<td>.02 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Feminine Toy</td>
<td>-.28 (.20)</td>
<td>.17 (.37*)</td>
<td>-.45** (.01)</td>
<td>.02 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Neutral Toy</td>
<td>.08 (.09)</td>
<td>-.06 (.51**)</td>
<td>.02 (-.07)</td>
<td>.03 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Masculine Toy</td>
<td>.35* (.13)</td>
<td>.03 (.19)</td>
<td>.38* (.21)</td>
<td>.06 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Feminine Toy</td>
<td>-.27 (.11)</td>
<td>.12 (.27)</td>
<td>-.42** (-.05)</td>
<td>-.08 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Neutral Toy</td>
<td>.05 (.14)</td>
<td>-.06 (.55**)</td>
<td>-.04 (-.09)</td>
<td>.15 (.14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* N = 88, * p = < .05, ** p = <.01, ***p = < .0001

Note. In parenthesis denotes mothers and outside parenthesis denotes fathers.
they would be happy with their son playing with a feminine toy ($r = -.33, p < .05$).

Conversely, participants who identified as highly conservative were more likely to purchase masculine toys for their sons ($r = .35, p < .05$), as well as to report being happy if their sons play with masculine toys ($r = .42, p < .05$). There was no significant correlation between political conservatism and daughters. Similarly, no significant relationships were found between the measure of religiosity and any of the dependent variables.

The results indicate mothers endorsing higher feminine stereotypes on the BEM scale were more likely to purchase a feminine toy for their child ($r = .37, p < .05$). They were also more likely to purchase a gender neutral toy for their child ($r = .51, p < .05$), and reported being more happy if their child were to play with a gender neutral toy ($r = .54, p < .05$). Unlike for fathers, political conservatism was not significantly correlated with likelihood of toy purchase or happiness with their child playing with a particular toy for mothers.

A series of 2 x 2 analyses of variance (ANOVA) with gender of parents and gender of child as independent variables and the likelihood of purchasing various toys as dependent variables was conducted. A main effect was found for the gender of the child and likelihood of the parent purchasing a feminine toy ($F(1, 85) = 24.71, p = < .0001$) such that participants of both genders were more likely to purchase feminine toys for a girl ($M = 42.46$) than for a boy ($M = 28.4$). With respect to the likelihood of purchasing a masculine toy, there was a main effect for parent gender ($F(1, 85) = 5.7, p = < .05$), as well as a main effect for child gender ($F(1, 85) = 41.00, p < .0001$). That is, fathers were more likely to purchase masculine toys for children of both genders, and parents of both
genders were more likely to buy masculine toys for their sons. None of the interactions were significant. Means and standard deviations for parent gender main effects appear in Table 2. Means and standard deviations for child gender main effects appear in Table 3.

Another series of ANOVA’s was run using happiness ratings as the dependent variable. A main effect was found between the gender of the parent and being happy if their child were to play with a feminine toy \((F(1, 85) = 4.48, p = < .05)\) such that mothers were happier than fathers. Similarly, a main effect was found between the gender of the child and the happiness of the parent if that child were to play with a feminine toy \((F(1, 85) = 21.20, p = < .05)\) such that parents were happier if daughters played with feminine toys. Fathers indicated they would be happier if their children played with masculine toys than mothers \((F(1, 85) = 4.03, p = < .05)\). Further, parents reported they would be happier if their sons played with masculine toys \((F(1, 85) = 39.23, p = < .0001)\). None of the interactions was significant.
Table 2  

*Purchasing Likelihood and Happiness Ratings by Parent Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variables</th>
<th>Fathers M (SD)</th>
<th>Mothers M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Masculine Toy</td>
<td>41.05 (11.43)*</td>
<td>35.58 (14.11)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Feminine Toy</td>
<td>32.16 (14.14)</td>
<td>37.37 (13.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Neutral Toy</td>
<td>46.12 (8.32)</td>
<td>45.88 (7.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Masculine Toy</td>
<td>41.72 (10.81)*</td>
<td>37.20 (14.04)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Feminine Toy</td>
<td>34.79 (12.84)*</td>
<td>40.09 (12.99)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Neutral Toy</td>
<td>47.23 (14.24)</td>
<td>46.78 (7.66)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *p = < .05  
Range of possible values for all dependent variables is 7-56.
Table 3

*Purchasing Likelihood and Happiness Ratings by Child Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variables</th>
<th>Child Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Masculine Toy</td>
<td>44.96 (8.39)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Feminine Toy</td>
<td>27.10 (13.53)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Neutral Toy</td>
<td>47.13 (7.54)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Masculine Toy</td>
<td>45.73 (8.24)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Feminine Toy</td>
<td>31.69 (13.03)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Neutral Toy</td>
<td>47.79 (7.95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p* = < .05

*Range of possible values for all dependent variables is 7-56.*
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ attitudes and preferences in regards to the types of toys their child played with, specifically, masculine and feminine toys. It was hypothesized that the type of toy preferences parents deemed acceptable would be influenced by the extent to which parents endorsed traditional masculine and feminine ideals. It was also hypothesized that all parents would find it less acceptable for males to play with feminine toys, and that among parents, fathers would find it less acceptable for boys to play with feminine toys than mothers.

It was found that one’s gender role beliefs are correlated with the likelihood of purchasing a same-gendered toy for his or her child. That is, those endorsing more traditional masculine stereotypes are more likely to purchase a masculine toy for their child, as well as identifying a higher satisfaction with his or her child playing with a masculine toy. Similarly, if an individual identified with more feminine stereotypes, he or she is more likely to purchase a feminine toy for his or her child. However, there was no significant relationship between identifying with more female stereotypes and expressing happiness with one’s child playing with a feminine toy. This was a finding that was expected. It was predicted that parents’ preference of the toys their child plays with would be dependent on their views of what is appropriately masculine and feminine. These results indicate a father is happier if his child is playing with a masculine toy and more likely to purchase a masculine for his child. These specific findings do not indicate whether the identified child is a male or female. The same is for mothers and their
likelihood to purchase feminine toys for their child. So, while the overall finding was expected, the specifics of it were not. These findings may suggest that the gender the parent identifies most strongly with is the gender with which he or she is most comfortable. However, because fathers were more likely to choose sons, and mothers were more likely to choose daughters, these results may be an artifact of that significant difference. Therefore, the parent is more comfortable purchasing or thinking about purchasing that same gendered toy for his or her child.

Religiosity was assessed among the participants, and no significant relationships were found. This is an unexpected finding, as one might expect those that who more religious are more conservative. If this were the case, it would be expected that participants that scored high on the religiosity scale would endorse items related to the likelihood of purchase and happiness rating in a similar way that those that scored high on the conservatism scale did. It may be that religiosity is not strong indicator of political affiliation or beliefs. Further research is needed in order to identify reasoning behind this finding.

Independent of the predictors (i.e., BEM or Conservatism scores), it was found that parents of both genders were more likely to purchase a feminine toy for a girl rather than a boy. Further, parents of both genders were also more likely to purchase a masculine toy for their sons. Fathers were also more likely to purchase a masculine toy for their child of either gender. It was expected that parents would be more likely to purchase a toy for their child that matched the child’s gender (e.g., purchasing a feminine toy for a female child). This is consistent with parents adhering to gender norms and ideals. It was expected that parents would be less likely to purchase a cross-gender toy for
their child. Again, the results support that males are more strictly held to gender norms as fathers were more likely to purchase masculine toys for their sons and daughters, but not the other way around. Many cultures have a history of patriarchy. That is, a society in which males are the leaders and the ones that must be obeyed. One may interpret this as the society placing more value on males and their masculine stereotypes. Western cultures are, and have been, generally a patriarchy. Men have been viewed as head of the household, as well as held most positions of power for centuries. The results of the present study suggest fathers are still attempting to preserve the value of the male and masculine stereotypes by adhering to strict gender roles. The results also suggest that not much has changed in regards to the flexibility of gender roles and norms (Leaper & Friedman, 2008).

In terms of the happiness ratings regarding their child playing with a specific toy, the results were similar to previous findings. Fathers indicated a greater level of happiness if their child of either gender were to play with masculine toys. Mothers indicated greater happiness than fathers if their child of either gender were to play with a feminine toy. It was expected that mothers would be in greater support of their child engaging in cross-gender play, and this finding supports that. Fathers are more likely to desire adherence to social norms, especially from their sons.

There were several limitations to this study that may have impacted the results. To begin with, it was found that when parents were asked to identify one of their children to consider when completing the study, parents were more likely to select a child of their same gender. This may suggest a selection bias. It may also have limited the ability to accurately assess the research questions. Perhaps, parents would have responded to the
items differently had they selected a child of the opposite gender. We were only given a limited idea of how the parents truly feel regarding their child and gender specific/gender neutral toys. Future studies may ask parents to identify both a child of the same and the opposite gender. This may provide a better idea of the parents’ true feelings.

A second limitation to this study was the fact that the sample in a not a representative sample of the larger population. A majority of the participants identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, which is disproportionate to their percentage in the population. Because of the non-representative sample, the presented results cannot be generalized to the overall population. It may be that, for reasons not entirely known, individuals that identify as Asian/Pacific Islander are more likely to participate in survey taking websites. Further, these individuals may exhibit different opinions about male and female roles and norms than those that identify with different ethnicities.

A third limitation to this study was the sample size. While the overall sample size was adequate in doing general analyses, the sample could only be divided so many times before there were not enough participants per group to gather strong results. The sample could only be broken down into four groups before becoming too small for appropriately analyzing. In order to strengthen the findings of this study, assessing a larger, more representative group of individuals is necessary. A larger and more diverse sample may also provide insight into other phenomena not noticed with the current sample and sample size.

A final limitation regarding the present study involves the BEM Sex Role Inventory. There are several critiques of this inventory that may impact the way its results are interpreted. One of the biggest critiques, and most relevant to the present study,
suggests that identifying masculine and feminine traits are more a product of society’s view, as opposed to personal beliefs. That is, an individual may be able to identify stereotypic gender differences, but the individual may not personally hold the characteristics to the same regard. For example, the individual may be aware that the term “acts as a leader” is traditionally viewed as a masculine trait. However, the individual may personally view the trait as acceptable for both a man and a woman. Additionally, the inventory has not been updated in over 30 years, and is likely outdated. A more updated, reliable, and valid inventory may be better suited to more thoroughly examine gender stereotypic beliefs (Hoffman & Borders, 2001).

This study was designed for parents to respond to how they believe they would behave. Future studies may aim to actually observe parents’ behaviors. For instance, when given various toys to give to their child to play with, which toy are they most likely to select? It may also be interesting to formulate a study assessing children as well as their parents. Which toys do children of specific genders prefer to play with, and how does this relate to the views of their parents?

In conclusion, the findings of the presented study indicate that overall, gender norms and expectations of children still exist with respect to toy preferences and play. There is still a desire for children to behave in accordance with their gender and those gender roles. However, the results also suggest some change has and is taking place. While it appears the expectations for male children are still very much in line with gender norms and roles, it does appear there has been some flexibility in the expectations of females. Despite the limitations in regards to the sample, the results offer some insight into some of the current values and expectations of today’s parents. Although, the
findings only begin to answer the questions posed in this study, they do lay groundwork for future research.
References


Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Appendix A – Demographics Questionnaire

Age: ____________  Gender: M  F  Where do you live (state)?: 

________________

Highest Completed Grade: ______  Race: ______________

  9  10  11  Graduated High school or GED  13  14  15

Graduated College  17  18  19  20

Religious Affiliation: ___________________________________

How often do you attend religious services?

  ____ Multiple times a week
  ____ Once a week
  ____ 1 to 3 times a month
  ____ 6 to 12 times a year
  ____ 1 to 5 times a year
  ____ Never

Current Career/Job Title: _________________________________

Number of Children: ______

Age and Gender of Children (Oldest to Youngest):

  1. Age: ____________ Gender: M  F  -- Is that all of your children? Y N*
  2. Age: ____________ Gender: M  F
  3. Age: ____________ Gender: M  F
  4. Age: ____________ Gender: M  F
5. Age: ____________ Gender: M  F

6. Age: ____________ Gender: M  F

* If yes, participant will be taken to the next page. If no, participant will be continue to log his/her children. Prompt will be shown after entering each child.
Appendix B – Bem Sex-Role Inventory

How desirable is it in American society for a man (woman) to possess each of these characteristics?

1 = Not at all desirable  to  7 = Extremely desirable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine Adjectives:</th>
<th>Feminine Adjectives:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a Leader</td>
<td>Affectionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>Childlike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Does not use Harsh Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Eager to Soothe Hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defends own Beliefs</td>
<td>Flatterable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful</td>
<td>Gullible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Leadership Abilities</td>
<td>Loves Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Loyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>Sensitive to the Needs of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Others
Makes Decisions Easily
Masculine
Self-Reliant
Self-Sufficient
Strong Personality
Willing to Take a Stand
Willing to take Risks

Shy
Soft Spoken
Sympathetic
Tender
Understanding
Warm
Yielding
Appendix C – Gendered Toys

Please select one child, between the ages of 4 and 9 of which you are a primary care giver and describe him/her here.

First name: ___________________ Age: ________
Gender: _________________ Biological Child: Y or N

Girl Toys:

How likely would you be to purchase this toy for ________?

1 = Very unlikely to 7 = Very likely

How happy would you be if ________ were to play with this toy?

1 = Very unhappy to 7 = Very happy
Boy Toys:

How likely would you be to purchase this toy for _________?

1 = Very unlikely to 7 = Very likely

How happy would you be if ______ were to play with this toy?

1 = Very unhappy to 7 = Very happy
Gender-Neutral Toys:
How likely would you be to purchase this toy for ________?

1 = Very unlikely  to  7 = Very likely

How happy would you be if ________ were to play with this toy?

1 = Very unhappy  to  7 = Very happy
Appendix D – The Core Conservatism Scale

Please read the following statements indicating your level of agreement.

1 = disagree very strongly  to  7 = agree very strongly

1. Everyone can raise themselves to a higher status if they work hard enough.
2. If you work hard it will pay off in the end.
3. For the most part, people are responsible for the life they have.
4. I believe that people should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps in order to succeed.
5. I do not like to see drastic changes in society.
6. I like it when things in society stay relatively the same.
7. Society should avoid fundamental changes unless absolutely necessary.
8. Any major societal changes should be made very slowly and gradually rather than quick and hastily.
9. The government should stop wasting time and resources attempting to solve issues of inequality that will never change.
10. Trying to eliminate all inequality in society is a fruitless endeavor.
11. It is okay to have differences in equality in society.
12. Making everyone truly equal would have negative consequences.
TO: Laura Liljequist  
Department of Psychology  

FROM: Institutional Review Board  
Sally Mateja, CIP, IRB Coordinator  

DATE: July 15, 2014  


On behalf of the IRB, I have completed my review of your student’s Level 1 protocol entitled “Acceptability of Cross-gender Play.” After review and consideration, I have determined that the research will be conducted in compliance with Murray State University guidelines for the protection of human participants. You may begin data collection now using the following website which was reviewed today at 8:46 a.m.:  

This Level 1 approval is valid until September 30, 2014. If data collection and analysis extends beyond this time period, the research project must be reviewed as a continuation project by the IRB prior to the end of the approval period, September 30, 2014. You must reapply for IRB approval by submitting a Project Update and Closure form (available on the Institutional Review Board web site). You must allow ample time for IRB processing and decision prior to your expiration date, or your research must stop until such time that IRB approval is received. If the research project is completed by the end of the approval period, then a Project Update and Closure form must be submitted for IRB review so that your protocol may be closed. It is your responsibility to submit the appropriate paperwork in a timely manner. A reminder letter may be sent to you.

The protocol is approved.