

## GENDER-TYPED PLAY AND ITS STATE-OF-THE-ART SCIENCE

*Gender Typing Of Children's Toys: How Early Play Experiences Impact Development*. Edited by Erica S. Weisgram and Lisa M. Dinella. Washington, DC: APA books, 2018. 341 pp. \$ 74.95 (hardcover) ISBN: 978-1-4338-2886-7

Around the globe, there is an increase in the awareness of gender issues. Examples that support this observation abound, ranging from the spread of the #MeToo movement, the installation of all-gender toilets, and the emergence of new gender studies programs to the educational and political debates surrounding single-sex schooling. Gender-typed play is among this list of current hot topics of gender psychology. Play is recognized by the United Nations as an indispensable and universal right of children. Piaget and other forerunners of psychology have long regarded play as not only a fun activity but also an avenue of learning (Smith, 2010). However, toys differ in their affordance of learning, and there are large individual as well as gender differences in play preferences. Numerous studies have shown, on either the theoretical or the empirical level, that gender-typing of play early in life has far-ranging social and cognitive consequences in later years. The editors of “Gender Typing Of Children's Toys: How Early Play Experiences Impact Development” reviewed in detail the numerous signs that interest in gender-typed play has surged in the last decade, including a conference hosted by the White House for stakeholders as diverse as scientists, media executives, educators, feminist activists, and toy manufacturers and a special issue of *Sex Roles* (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018)..

Despite increasing awareness of gender-typed play and the number of studies on gender-typed play published since the last century, there was not a single source to provide an up-to-date and comprehensive reading on the topic, although at least one such book was published over three decades ago (Liss, 1983) and other books have focused on play in general (e.g., Smith, 2010). “Gender Typing of Children's Toys: How Early Play Experiences Impact Development”

therefore provides a timely summation and reflection on the new findings, new methods, and new ideology concerning gender-typed play that have arisen more recently.

The book included an impressive list of authors well-versed on research on gender development. Every question is evaluated with a critical and scientific mindset emphasizing an evidence-based approach. The prevailing perspective on gender-typed play covered in the book may be said to align with the championing of gender equality. Indeed, the authors explicitly acknowledged that one of their goals is to breakdown gender stereotypes about toys. This emphasis is reflected in their choice of scholars, many of whom have made significant contributions to research that promotes gender equality. The empirical literature on gender-typed play is marked by a relative focus on how to utilize play to combat girls' disadvantage in science and math. This may be due to the importance of STEM in modern society and the concern about women's rights that arose throughout the three waves of feminist movement since the early 1900s. The book offers a balanced focus by covering both social and cognitive consequences of play and by suggesting ways of breaking boundaries about play that apply to both boys and girls. The book also adopted an eclectic theoretical approach in explaining the causes of gender-typed play. For example, Chapter 5 reviews the evidence of hormonal and evolutionary influences, and Chapters 6 and 7 review social and cognitive influences on toy play.

The book is neatly organized into three sections. The first section is descriptive, including chapters on the history of gender-typed play, as well as the ways and the extent to which play is gender-typed. Given the niche of the topic, these chapters offer a convincing discourse as to why gender-typed play deserves the attention that it is now being given. The first section also includes a chapter on research methods. This section gives a broad overview of the basics of research methodology—the pros and cons of correlational, experimental, quasi-experimental, meta-

analytic, content analytic, and longitudinal designs, citing specific studies on gender-typed play as illustrations. It offers a good understanding of the basic principles of methodology to aid readers' evaluation of studies cited in the book, and it would be useful for readers unfamiliar with empirical research. For researchers who are familiar with the basics of research design, it would have been useful to include in this chapter a deeper discussion of methodology more specific to gender-typed play research, such as the choice of proper toy stimuli and the methods of measuring play preference and quality.

The second and third sections cover two questions that likely arise when people learn about gender-typed play—"Why" (Causes: Chapters 5–7) and "So what" (Consequences: Chapters 8–12). In the last chapter of the third section, the editors pointed out some gaps in the literature and suggested future directions. Most of the chapters reiterate the history, pattern of gender-typed play, and research methods. Allowing for this repetition is in fact desirable because authors were able to discuss these issues from their unique perspectives. It also allows readers to gain a comprehensive picture of the field, even if they chose to read individual chapters on their own. The writing throughout the book is highly readable and there is little use of jargon. However, including a list of key messages at the beginning or at the end of each chapter may have helped readers get a quick grasp of each.

In terms of improvements, certain content could have been covered or given more dedicated space. The review on the historical context and empirical studies on gender-typed play focuses heavily on North America and developed European countries. The reliance on White and educated samples from developed Western countries is evident in the behavioral sciences (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). However, people all over the world play, and gender socialization and gender-typed marketing of toys are widespread so that research on gender-

typed play is important for all children across all cultures. Notably, the historical context and ideology about gender-typing may vary from region to region. For many children, their play may be markedly different from what we know from the core literature. Greater sensitivity to other cultures can add insight into the extent to which prevailing theories about the patterns, causes, and consequences of gender-typed play are true, and it may even suggest alternative views and theories. Also, play is an evolved phenomenon that can be observed in many species. Some studies showing that non-human animals show sex differences in play are included (e.g., Chapter 5), but it would have been interesting to see more discussion on what and how non-human animals play, why they play, and how they are impacted by play. Understandably, coverage of other cultures and species may be limited by the availability of studies, but the book could serve to increase awareness of the need to pay attention to these issues, perhaps at least in the last chapter where research gaps and future directions are suggested.

The book is written by psychologists and is heavily referenced with empirical studies. Naturally, the book may be most suitable for psychologists, especially those specializing in developmental, educational, and gender psychology. However, it would also be useful to scientists in many other fields because of the interdisciplinary nature of gender and the centrality of play in children's lives. The relevance of the topic to daily life also makes the book an interesting and useful read to parents, toy makers, policymakers and educators who are interested in learning more about children and strategies to improve learning and well-being. Readers may find it useful to begin with the four chapters of the first section, and then select chapters depending on whether one is interested in causes or the consequences. If interested in causes, readers can focus their reading on the hormonal (Chapter 5) or the social-cognitive theories

(Chapters 6 and 7), and if in consequences, they can focus on the neurological (Chapter 8), social (Chapters 9, 11, 12) or cognitive arenas (Chapter 10).

Overall, this book is a timely and highly valuable addition to the literature on gender and psychology. With the contribution of top scholars and an extensive and careful consideration of the scientific literature, it offers an authoritative source of information on gender-typed play. It will serve well as a resource book for researchers conducting studies on gender and play, as a textbook in a special topics course, or as leisure reading for anyone interested in learning about the science of the issue.

#### References

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