Children at Play

Even at a young age, gendered play patterns begin to emerge. Children on playgrounds tend to separate into groups based on girl activities or boy activities. There are often proclamations that “only girls are allowed” or “you can’t do this because you’re a girl.” These patterns emerge very early in a child's life. There are many cross-overs, but general trends play an important role in how children play together and the language used to exclude other children from play. The question that emerges is where do these differences come from? Are there fundamental differences between girls and boys that tend to discourage cross-gendered play or are these differences constructed because of social roles? Play patterns are very important, since it is the opinions and roles we form at these young ages that influence our later lives. Perhaps insight as to why play patterns emerge as they do will help us determine the roles that are placed on females and males of all ages.

For the past few weeks, I have studied the play behaviors in a class of eighteen three and four year olds at a local Montessori school. I generally spent an hour or two with the class three times a week in which I noted the differences in the play patterns amongst the children. I looked at the general trends of play that the children engaged in during free play, as well as the structured group time play that was led by the teachers. I watched how the children formed their groups and how they decided on playtime activities. The class was equally divided, there were nine girls and nine boys. Of these eighteen children, fifteen of them went through the two year old class together, and have thus had lots of time to form their social bonds. I noticed that the three new kids sometimes had more difficulty assimilating with the others, even though they have already been in the class for half a year. I have known most of the children since they began in the two year old class, so I
have been able to compare how their interactions have changed as they begin to talk more and to form structured play. I know the teachers well, and hence I know that gender stereotypes and gender specific play are not encouraged and have not been encouraged in school. However, I know also that this is not always the case at home; some of these children do experience gender roles in their homes. This is an important fact to realize, since the social interactions at school are a small part of the children’s day, and general conclusions can’t be drawn without realizing the social and cultural roles that may be placed on these children outside of the three hours that they spend at school.

There were several general differences in the play patterns of the children. Given a choice, the boys tended to want to play outside and their activities included lots of running around the playground. Their favorite play activity was firefighters, a game which they played everyday in one form or another. The boys tended to form a large group that ran around following one or two distinct leaders. The girls however, often choose to play inside or would choose one activity in the yard where they tended to spend longer periods of time. The favorite activity of the girls was often centered around house or teacher games. The typical outside activities were playing on the swings or small group centered activities like building in the sandbox or "painting" the picnic tables or other items in the yard.

These differences have become more important as these children have been in school. In the two year old class, most activities were not specifically gendered. These same boys that now almost exclusively play firefighter once played house with the girls; some were even moms in play. The girls, as two year olds, ran around with the boys and were accepted as equal in the play. Obviously, something began to change with age, and children set up alliances which most of the time were based on gender.
Playing House

House is a favorite activity among the three year old girls. This is in fact a quite complicated activity, as house takes on many meanings for these girls. I often had difficulty understanding where the situations that were played out came from. On one occasion, four or five girls were playing house, but their play centered on two or three of these girls "dying" and the other girls being nurses and fixing them. As this particular activity was occurring, one of the girl’s mothers suggested that her daughter should be a doctor or surgeon, not a nurse, to which the girl immediately responded that no, she was definitely a nurse. Other games of house also centered around a death theme, baby dolls “died” and the mothers had to save them. Another game of house centered around four girls using their "computers." These girls were sitting around the kitchen table with various keyboards and calculators, tapping the keys furiously. I tried to ask about the purpose of these computers, but was unable to get a response other than they were busy using their computers.

Boys were often explicitly excluded from joining in games of house. If a boy approached for one reason or another, they were often told that they couldn’t play or that boys weren’t allowed. Even if I tried to plea to the girls, by suggesting that the boys could join the game as brothers or dads, the girls were often reluctant to let them join. Some girls were also excluded or forced to lesser roles in the game; girls as well as boys would be informed that they weren’t liked and that they couldn’t join the game. In other circumstances, they were allowed roles but only the less desirable ones. In one game of house, five girls were playing "make-up" but only four of the girls were technically allowed to use the "make-up." The girls justified their rules by saying that the two moms and the big sister could wear makeup, but the little sisters couldn’t. These girls that
were excluded or left to the less desirable roles often were the same two or three girls who sometimes played with the boys.

There was one boy in the class who almost exclusively played with the girls. This boy was usually included in smaller games of house with one or two girls. In one situation, this boy and one girl were playing house, which consisted of the two of them fixing a car that crashed. (They were actually removing tape from a little plastic bus.) The girl was in complete control of the game, she dictated what was happening and what they were doing and the boy was expected to follow her lead. As they were playing another girl and boy came up, wanting to join the game, but both were excluded. Minutes later another girl attempted to join and was readily accepted into the activity. On another occasion I noted the same boy and girl playing house around the table by having a little tea party. Again, the girl was in control of the situation. She was taking the beanie cat that the boy had brought to school, suggesting that they share the animal, and they could both take turns holding the cat. However, all this was with the unspoken understanding that she would have the first turn. At first the boy seemed uncertain by her suggestions, but quickly gave in to her demands.

Another form of play that the girls often engage in is teacher. At this age, it usually entails them sitting on a step and pretending to read a story. It is a significantly less structured activity than house. Several children will be teachers together, or one will do it on her own, but rarely do rules exist. While I was observing the class, I only noticed girls engaging in playing teacher. Perhaps this is because all the teachers that they have thus encountered have been female.

**Firefighters**

Firefighters is the typical game in the three year old class among the boys. Firefighter play outside requires the boys to wear their firefighter hats and to have a yellow shovel which they run
around with. There was often friction in the yard because there is a limited number of yellow
shovels, and the boys feel as if they can’t be part of the group with a shovel of any other color.
Verbal and physical disputes often resulted because of the limited shovel quantity. It was harder to
closely observe firefighter play because I was often excluded from being near their activities.
Hence, most of my observations were made at a distance that respected the area where the boys
were "working." The boys generally had one or two leaders who commanded the group and who
everybody followed as they ran around performing their various activities. Typically a firefighter
game involved working in this little playhouse in one corner of the yard. The boys used their yel-
low shovels to dig holes and pound against walls. I am assuming these shovels also worked as
hoses for fighting fires, but I never specifically observed any play fires being put out by the boys.

One inside game that I observed by the firefighter crowd was a rocket ship game. This game
involved the same keyboards that the girls used as computers as well as some plastic toys which
were used as telescope and lights. The instigator of this rocket ship game was very specific in his
instructions to the other boys about the proper way to play. One boy remarked to me during this
game "I’m not afraid of anything, I am a fire fighter guy." Soon after one girl tried to join the
game, when suddenly it changed into a cat and dog interaction. The girl ran off when she was
barked at, and came back moments later as the group began to disperse throughout the classroom.
It was hard for me to follow exactly what was going on with this initial rocket ship game, and as
the boys ran wild throughout the room, the girl who had been trying to join in told me that she
didn’t have anybody to play with. When the one boy who usually plays with the girls offers to
play with her, she doesn’t respond, and moments later another girl runs up to her and gives her a
hug and they run off to paint a picture. A few minutes later the boys who had been playing the
rocket ship game reconvene to read books together.
There is one other girl who often tries to play with the firefighter crowd. She too, is one of the new children who plays with the girls as well as the boys. Not many of the girls in class join in the active games that the boys play. When the boys are engaged in quieter activities, like playing with blocks or trucks, the girls are more likely to join in. Among the active running outside playing firefighter with the yellow shovels, I only noticed one time when a girls even showed interested in joining in.

**Group Activities**

During several activities at school, I failed to notice specific gender differences. Stories read by the teacher attracted both girls and boys to listen and participate in discussion. Doing puzzles and art activities were enjoyed by all children equally, as were little games where they pretended to be ghosts or when they "camped" under tables covered in sheets. Digging worms and planting seeds were teacher initiated activities where gender differences failed to be apparent. Perhaps the teachers specifically have encouraged children to play together during these more structured teacher led activities which has led to there being less differences among the children as everyone is integrated into group play.

**So why the differences?**

The gender differences I observed in my study caused me to question several trends I noticed among the children. What startled me the most was apparent change that occurred from the two year old class to the second half of the three year old class. No longer were the children integrated in all aspects of play. Whereas at one point everyone played house and boys could be moms or girls could be dads or brothers; now boys are often excluded from play and gender roles are very specific. As the children’s language grew, so did the social roles that they tried to fill. The philosophy of the school is to not give gender specific roles, but I believe the children still see these gen-
nder specific patterns in their older siblings, on television and through their parents. The children with parents who do enforce gender roles influence children who may not see these roles at home.

It is interesting to note that in recent years the children’s language has become less gendered, even though their play hasn’t. When I was a child, I could have easily said that I want to be a fireman. Today, the children lose that gendered specific language by using terms like firefighter, but the roles are still enforced by the examples they see in society. Discourse is still used to reinforce stereotypes; children are often told by another child, "you can’t do it because you’re a boy" or "girls can’t build rivers, it’s a boy’s job." I believe that nurture plays a large part in the gender roles of children at this age. Even if parents try to avoid the stereotypes, I think the stereotypes and differences are still stressed in the language used and the response to a child’s play. If a young boy is pretending to be a mom while playing house, his parents are likely to feel uncomfortable with the activity and stress that he participate in more "boy like" activities.

I briefly started to look at Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School by Barrie Thorne which reinforced the ideas that children are influenced by societal models, especially in setting such as school, where there are large numbers of other children of the same age to play with. Thorne noted that school setting often highlighted gender roles, since the children were trying to fit in with their peers. Activity level was also noted by Thorne as playing a large role in the social interactions among young children, which corresponds to the differences I noted when I observed the children’s outdoor activities such as firefighter.

Domination in play groups was also noted by Thorne to be a determining factor in mixed gender play groups. This certainly could be the cause of many of the groups: especially among the newcomers. Most of the cross-over cases in play occurred with the children who began school this year, and as newcomers these children are likely to be dominated in most of the social interac-
tions. These children are more willing to put up with pressures in order to find their niche in any social group, without regards to the gender of that group. While this does not completely cover the cross-over cases that I saw, I believe it could be one of the underlying causes.

The gender differences and similarities that I saw could be attributed to many causes. The interweaving of social constructs, gendered language, social ability, and domination patterns are all likely to have played a large role in the play patterns of these children. As they continue with school, certain aspects of their play are likely to become even more gendered while other aspects may equal out. All these changes in differences and similarities between boys and girls continue to occur as society persists to impose roles based on gender, and as more people become aware of these gendered roles and try to promote equality. I think that children now have an even more confusing time than I did when I was young. There is almost a constant struggle between these traditional roles of gender and the modern view that girls and boys don’t have to fit into these restricted roles and that children should be free to develop “naturally” without limitations. Until there is a society that doesn’t differentiate between boys and girls, there will be differences in the play patterns of children, since these patterns directly reflect the roles that society associates gender.