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# The Contents of Boys' and Girls' Rooms as an Index of Parents' Behavior

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RHEINGOLD, HARRIET L., and COOK, KAYE V. *The Contents of Boys' and Girls' Rooms as an Index of Parents' Behavior*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1975, 46, 459-463. The furnishings and toys of boys' and girls' rooms were canvassed on the assumption that differences, if found, would indicate parental ideas about appropriateness by sex. The children were 48 boys and 48 girls under 6 years of age, each having his own room. The results showed that the boys were provided more vehicles, educational-art materials, sports equipment, toy animals, depots, machines, fauna, and military toys. Girls were provided more dolls, doll houses, and domestic toys. The rooms of boys were more often decorated with animal motifs; those of girls, with floral motifs and lace, fringe, and ruffles. The differences do indeed show differences in parental behavior.

Differences in the behavior of boys and girls are attributed in part to differences in how parents behave toward them (see Mischel 1970 for a review). Differences in parental behaviors have been obtained from questionnaires, interviews, and observations in the home and laboratory. The present study offers another measure of such differences: the furnishings and contents of the rooms of young boys and girls. We propose that how parents furnish the rooms of their sons and daughters, including the toys they supply, provides an index to their ideas about appropriateness by sex and thus indirectly may indicate differences in their behavior toward their sons and daughters.

The proposal holds especially when, as here, the rooms of children under 6 years of age are studied. Children so young may indeed express their preferences and wishes, but it is the parents—now the mother, now the father—who decide which toy to buy or to place in the child's room (if a gift from others), as well as the kind of curtains, pictures, etc., that furnish the room. Thus, any differences found in the contents of boys' and girls' rooms are held to reflect differences in parental behavior.

The effect on children of the furnishings

and objects in their rooms can only be surmised. Still, since they offer children different experiences, the contents may indeed instruct them in what is proper for their sex.

The primary purpose of this study was to look for sex differences, but since the children were selected by age, age differences are also reported.

## Method

### *The Sample*

The contents of the rooms of 96 children between the ages of 1 and 71.6 months were recorded. Each child had his own room. The children included four boys and four girls at each half-year of life. Year 1 designates the children under 1 year of age; year 2, those in the second year of life, and so on.

The subjects were obtained primarily from the census of births at the North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill but also from names volunteered by parents already visited. Homes in well-to-do residential areas were selected to insure the likelihood of a child's having his own room. The purpose of the study was explained to the parents by telephone, and only three refused permission.

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All the children lived in privately owned homes except for five of the younger children, who lived in rented apartments. All but one were white. Order of birth was approximately similar by sex; for example, 27 boys and 29 girls were firstborn children. The occupational status of the majority of the fathers (40 of the boys' fathers and 34 of the girls') fell into the first of Hollingshead's seven categories—that of executives and proprietors of large concerns and major professionals (Hollingshead & Redlich 1958); 72% of the fathers held university-related positions.

### Procedure

The survey was carried out between December 14, 1972 and February 28, 1973. On any one day the rooms which were visited as nearly as possible kept the age-sex categories equally filled.

The observer recorded on a checklist all the furnishings and toys in the room. In addition, color photographs were taken of each part of the room to supplement the checklist data. Toys elsewhere in the home were not canvassed, although a record was made of the number of children's rooms that did not contain the major part of their toys.

### Classes of Items

Classes of items were established from the furnishings and toys of the rooms; when the number of objects was too small to form a class by itself, related objects were combined. For the 13 resulting classes the data were the number of items present in a room. These classes, in alphabetical order, were defined as follows: *animal furnishings*—furnishings (including furniture, bedspreads, curtains, pillows, rugs, pictures, posters, and mobiles) bearing the figures of animals; *books*—children's books; *dolls*—small-scale figures of human beings, including toy soldiers, cowboys, and Indians; *educational-art materials*—a combined class of items including charts of numbers or letters, typewriters, materials for drawing and coloring, and clay; *floral furnishings*—furnishings (as above) bearing the figures of flowers and plants; *furniture*—beds, chests, toy boxes, etc.; *musical items*—musical instruments, radios, record players, etc.; *"ruffles"*—bedspreads, pillows, curtains, and rugs bearing ruffles, fringe, or lace; *spatial-temporal objects*—a combined class of items relating to the properties of space, matter, energy, and time, including shape-sorting toys, outer-space toys, magnets, clocks, etc.; *sports equipment*—toys such as balls, skates, and

kites; *stuffed animals*—material marked or shaped like an animal, with a soft filling; *toy animals*—toy animals and their houses, such as barns and zoos; and *vehicles*—toys representing carriers of people or goods, such as cars, airplanes, and trains. A frequency of 10 was arbitrarily assigned to large collections of small cars and trucks.

Some very infrequent classes of items were tallied by the number of children's rooms containing them instead of by the number of items in a class. These classes, in alphabetical order, were defined as follows: *depots*—toys representing places for the storing or servicing of vehicles, such as garages, train stations, and airports; *"doll houses"*—houses, beds, carriages, etc., for dolls; *domestic objects*—toy stoves, refrigerators, sets of dishes, etc.; *fauna*—live animals and animal cages; *flora*—live and artificial flowers and plants; *machines*—toys representing equipment for doing work, such as tractors, cranes, and bulldozers; and *military toys*—toys relating to soldiers, arms, or war, excluding dolls.

A number of other objects were identified but occurred too infrequently to analyze even by the number of rooms in which they were present. These objects included Bobo dolls and puppets; banks and cash registers; combs, brushes, and mirrors on the tops of dressers; and doctor and nurse kits; these are not reported.

Color of course was a characteristic of all objects but was in most instances too variegated to yield to tallying.

### Statistical Treatment

The 13 classes of items tallied by the number present in a room were analyzed by a multivariate analysis of variance, using the *F* approximation for Wilks's *A* criterion, for the main effects of sex and age and their interaction. Because of inequality of the cell variances, the analysis was carried out on a square-root transformation of the frequencies.

The other seven classes of items that were tallied by the number of rooms containing them were analyzed for sex differences by  $\chi^2$  test.

### Results

The findings are based on the contents of the 96 rooms, even though for 21 children the major part of their toys were stored elsewhere in the house. Inspection showed that these 21

subjects were approximately similar by age and sex to the other 75 subjects.

The multivariate analysis of variance of the 13 classes for which the numbers of items were counted yielded a statistically significant sex  $\times$  age interaction,  $F(65,344) = 1.42$ ,  $p < .03$ , a significant sex effect,  $F(13,72) = 10.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a significant age effect,  $F(65,344) = 2.74$ ,  $p < .001$ . The individual univariate  $F$  tests can therefore be reported.

#### The Sex $\times$ Age Interaction: Vehicles

The univariate  $p$  value for vehicles was  $< .001$ ; the other 12 classes of items as a group yielded a nonsignificant multivariate interaction ( $p > .10$ ). Therefore, only the class of vehicles was responsible for the reliable multivariate sex  $\times$  age interaction. As the actual nontransformed frequencies in table 1 show, boys had more vehicular toys than girls at every age. In fact, the mean number for girls was always less than one. The analysis also showed a reliable age effect for males ( $p < .001$ ), but not for females ( $p > .10$ ). Furthermore, the analysis of sex effects within age showed that the difference was not reliable at year 1 ( $p > .10$ ), but was at year 2 ( $p < .05$ ) and also at years 3-6 ( $p < .001$ ).

The number of vehicles summed over all ages was 375 for boys and 17 for girls. The difference must be still larger because a count of 10 was assigned to large collections of small cars and trucks. A more detailed analysis showed that no girl's room contained a wagon, bus, boat, kiddie car, motorcycle, snowmobile, or trailer, a subset of vehicles of which boys had 36.

#### Sex Differences

Table 2 shows the nontransformed mean numbers by sex of the remaining 12 classes of items, together with their levels of reliability

TABLE 1  
MEAN NUMBER OF VEHICLES BY AGE AND  
SEX OF CHILD

Age (Yr)	Male	Female	Mean
1	0.1	0.0	0.1
2	2.8	0.0	1.4
3	11.4	0.6	6.0
4	10.4	0.8	5.6
5	17.2	0.5	8.9
6	5.0	0.2	2.6
Mean	7.8	0.4	...

NOTE.—Mean number in the eight rooms of each sex at each age.

TABLE 2

SEX DIFFERENCES IN MEAN NUMBER OF ITEMS

Class of Items	Male	Female	$p$ Value
Animal furnishings	6.8	5.0	$< .05$
Books	28.1	23.9	N.S.
Dolls	3.6	7.0	$< .001$
Ed-art materials	1.1	0.6	$< .05$
Floral furnishings	3.0	4.5	$< .001$
Furniture	6.2	6.3	N.S.
Musical objects	1.4	1.2	N.S.
"Ruffles"	0.9	2.0	$< .01$
Spatial-temporal	1.7	0.8	$< .001$
Sports equipment	1.0	0.4	$< .05$
Stuffed animals	4.1	4.4	N.S.
Toy animals	4.8	2.3	$< .01$

NOTE.—Mean number in the 48 rooms of each sex.

by univariate tests. The rooms of boys contained more animal furnishings, more educational-art materials, more spatial-temporal toys, more sports equipment, and more toy animals. The rooms of girls contained more dolls, more floral furnishings, and more "ruffles."

No differences by sex appeared in the number of children's books, furniture, musical objects, and stuffed animals.

*Types of dolls.*—Even though the rooms of girls contained more dolls—almost twice as many as those of boys—the boys' rooms also contained dolls. Inspection, however, suggested differences in the kinds of dolls found in these two sets of rooms.

To measure the difference, all dolls were first separated into three categories: male, female, and baby. Because many rooms of the boys contained none of some of these classes, the analysis was carried out by  $\chi^2$  test of the number of rooms in which each class was found. The results showed that only eight of the 48 boys' rooms contained a female doll; in contrast, 41 of the 48 girls' rooms did,  $\chi^2 = 42.69$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, only three of the boys' rooms contained a baby doll, while 26 of the girls' did,  $\chi^2 = 23.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . Male dolls, however, were present in 36 of the boys' rooms and 28 of the girls' rooms, a difference that was not reliable. Thus, although girls as well as boys were provided male dolls, girls were provided female and baby dolls much more often.

To measure still another difference, all dolls were now divided into two classes: jointed or not. The results showed that jointed dolls were present in only eight of the boys'

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rooms but in 30 of the girls',  $\chi^2 = 19.21$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Age Differences

Only five of the 12 classes of items showed age differences by the univariate tests. The frequency of animal furnishings decreased from a peak of 8.9 at year 2 to 2.1 at year 6 ( $p < .001$ ). The number of children's books increased markedly from a mean of 1.9 at year 1 to a mean of 60.2 at year 6 ( $p < .001$ ). The number of dolls also showed an age difference, increasing from a mean of 1.6 at year 1 to a peak of 10.5 at year 5 ( $p < .01$ ). The number of educational-art materials increased with age ( $p < .001$ ), while floral furnishings decreased from a peak at year 2 ( $p < .05$ ).

### Sex Differences of Infrequent Items

Objects that occurred too infrequently to be included in the multivariate analysis were tallied by the number of male and female rooms containing them. The results showed that males were provided more depots,  $\chi^2 = 14.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , fauna,  $\chi^2 = 5.55$ ,  $p < .05$ , machines,  $\chi^2 = 5.69$ ,  $p < .05$ , and military toys,  $\chi^2 = 5.69$ ,  $p < .05$ ; females, more "doll houses,"  $\chi^2 = 16.44$ ,  $p < .001$ , and domestic items,  $\chi^2 = 6.77$ ,  $p < .01$ . Although the girls' rooms contained more flora, the difference was not reliable.

No girl's room contained a depot of any kind, or a live animal or an animal cage. No girl had a crane, cement mixer, front-end loader, corn harvester, or lawnmower, toys that were found in seven of the boys' rooms. In the class of military toys, the boys had four cannons; the girls had none. In contrast, in the "doll houses" category, girls had 12 doll carriages, strollers, or swings; boys had none. Finally, in comparison with the 12 girls' rooms containing refrigerators, stoves, sinks, irons, pots and pans, and entire tea sets, in the rooms of two boys, both under 2 years of age, there was in one a coffeepot and in the other a set of spoons.

### Quantity of Toys

These children were well supplied with toys, as the data show. The recorder was often overwhelmed by the task of enumerating such quantities of objects. To document this fact, the number of all toys was subjected to an analysis of variance on the square-root transformation of the data. Although boys had more toys than girls at every age but year 4 (in fact, twice as many at year 3), the difference was not reliable

( $p < .09$ ). The difference by age was reliable,  $F(5,84) = 9.81$ ,  $p < .001$ , the mean frequency of the actual count increasing from 27.8 at year 1 to 90.6 at year 6. Since for a considerable number of the children the major part of their toys were stored elsewhere, these counts were surely an underestimate of all the toys they possessed.

## Discussion

The parents of these children did indeed provide different furnishings and toys for their sons and daughters. The rooms of boys contained more vehicles, more toys related to the physical properties of matter, more educational and art materials, more sports equipment, and more toy animals. More of their rooms contained toy depots, machines, and military toys. Animal motifs more often decorated the furnishings of their rooms. The dolls in boys' rooms were more often male dolls—cowboys, Indians, and toy soldiers. The rooms of girls, in contrast, contained more dolls in all, especially more female and baby dolls, and more jointed, hence more realistic, dolls. Their rooms also contained more objects for the care of dolls and the home. The furnishings of their rooms were more often decorated with floral designs and more often embellished with lace, fringe, and ruffles.

These differences may come as no surprise. Still, they do contain a measure of surprise. The boys were provided more toys of more classes (depots, educational-art materials, machines, military toys, spatial-temporal objects, sports equipment, toy animals, and vehicles) than the girls (dolls, "doll houses," and domestic objects). Then, too, some differences were much larger than anticipated. Impressive was the much greater number of vehicles, the boys' most frequent class of toys, than the number of dolls, the girls' most frequent. As impressive was the complete absence of such toys as wagons, boats, buses, etc., in the girls' rooms, a class of objects frequently found in boys' rooms. Equally striking, on the other hand, was the almost total absence of baby dolls and toy domestic equipment in any boy's room. If, as is generally believed, our culture permits greater latitude for girls to behave like boys than for boys to behave like girls, one could account for the poorer showing of dolls among boys, but not for the very small showing of vehicles among girls. (In our laboratory 18-month-old girls spend as much time as boys

playing with a large plastic truck.) Finally, counter to expectation, girls were not any better supplied than boys with books and musical objects.

The conclusions are based, of course, upon the choice of classes. Straightforward as the classes seem, the category of dolls especially presented difficulties. Although toy soldiers met the definition of "a small-scale figure of a human being used especially as a child's plaything," they could as well have been classified as military objects. But how then to classify cowboys and Indians? Nevertheless, had some or all of these figures been classified as military objects, the results would not have been much different; girls would have had still more dolls and boys still more military objects.

The conclusions reached here apply to a small sample of a population, special in many ways (high educational and socioeconomic level), that was studied at a certain time. The characteristics that make this sample special are those very ones that might lead one to expect fewer rather than more sex differences, the parents being informed on current efforts to provide more similar opportunities for boys and girls, more ready to challenge cultural stereotypes, and presumably more sensitive to the effects of their behavior on their children. Yet in many ways the rooms of their sons and daughters closely resembled the rooms of boys and girls pictured in mail-order catalogs and home-decorating magazines. What would we expect in the larger culture? Even though having one's own room may not be modal, still the majority of the children in the United States have some commercially produced toys. It seems likely that among these other samples of children, the sex differences reported here would be at least as large.

#### *The Effect on Children's Behavior*

The rooms of children constitute a not inconsiderable part of their environment. Here they go to bed and wake up; here they spend some part of every day. Their rooms determine the things they see and find for amusement and instruction. That their rooms have an effect on their present and subsequent behavior can be assumed; a standard is set that may in part account for some differences in the behavior of girls and boys. Clear in the findings of this study was the extent to which the boys were provided objects that encouraged activities di-

rected away from home—toward sports, cars, animals, and the military—and the girls, objects that encouraged activities directed toward the home—keeping house and caring for children.

The sex differences aside, the objective bystander may well ponder the effect of the sheer quantity of toys found in these rooms on children's distractibility today and their attitude toward the exploitation of the environment tomorrow. Children—or rather the parents—are heavy consumers of toys.

#### *An Index of Parental Behavior*

By their youth we have ruled out children as the providers of their toys or the furnishings of their rooms and have assigned the responsibility to the parents. Yet one might counter this conclusion by arguing that the parents were guided by what they found their children enjoyed playing with and, despite their young age, might assign a measure of responsibility to them. But that argument by itself would not account for the large number of toys of any one class and certainly not for the complete absence of any object of a class; the children's interest could have little influence if they were given no opportunity to exercise an interest. In the last analysis, the parents need not be influenced by their children's interests, or even requests or demands, if they are guided by some more compelling set of principles.

The many sex differences found in the contents of the rooms, therefore, do indeed qualify as evidence of differences in parental behavior. It is not parsimonious to assume that one set of principles guides their behavior in providing their children one setting rather than another, one toy rather than another, and that different sets of principles guide other behaviors. It may therefore be concluded that the differences in how parents furnish the rooms of their boys and girls may well document differences in other classes of their behavior toward their sons and daughters.

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