



Children's Gender Differences and Gender Stereotypes in the Context of Play*

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Article Information	ABSTRACT
Received: 08.09.2025	Gender is a significant social construct in early childhood, significantly impacting children's play, peer interactions, and meaning-making processes. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative framework, this study investigates preschool children's lived experiences of play and their processes of meaning-making concerning gender differences and stereotypes in play. The study included 64 children aged five and six and used semi-structured interviews to collect data regarding their descriptions of play, toy preferences, choices of playmates, rules, and perceived consequences of rule violations. It is employed inductive content analysis to examine the data and identify shared units of meaning and variations in the children's lived experiences. The findings indicate that children of all genders generally perceive play as an enjoyable and social endeavor. But kids' accounts about the kinds of play, their favorite toys, their favorite friends, and how they understood violating the rules became more centered on gender. Children's narratives demonstrated gender biases, particularly when referring to toys and plays as "for girls" or "for boys." Girls typically expressed more flexible and inclusive interpretations of cross-gender plays, while boys' narratives demonstrated more rigid gender distinctions. Children's understanding of play rules and their consequences revealed gender-based stereotypes reflected in their perceptions of social interactions, authority, and exclusion during play. The results illustrate how crucial it is to create early learning settings that don't follow strict gender stereotypes and foster play that is open-ended and welcoming to everyone.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Play is a fundamental activity that supports the holistic development of preschool children, facilitates their preparation for life, and serves as a primary medium through which children express themselves and make sense of their social world (Yogman et al., 2018). From the earliest stages of life, children engage in various forms of play and utilize diverse materials as play tools (Lockman & Tamis-LeMonda, 2021). Among the numerous factors influencing children's play experiences and toy preferences, gender emerges as one of the most salient organizing categories.

Gender is one of the earliest social categories that children use to interpret their environment and social relations (Dafflon-Novelle, 2006). Drawing on Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory, Kohlberg (1966) proposed that children's understanding of gender identity develops through three sequential stages: gender identity (around age 2, recognition of one's own gender), gender stability (ages 3–4, understanding that gender remains constant over time), and gender consistency (ages 5–7, realization that gender is not altered by changes in appearance or behavior). Expanding on Kohlberg's framework, subsequent researchers have suggested that the rigidity of gender-related knowledge and behavior follows a distinct developmental trajectory, characterized by fluctuations in intensity throughout childhood (Halim et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2002). Notably, children begin to recognize gender stereotypes between the ages of two and four and typically exhibit heightened rigidity in their endorsement of these stereotypes between the ages of five and seven (Trautner et al., 2005). This period of intensified stereotype rigidity aligns with the developmental milestone of achieving gender constancy, during which children display a strong motivation to conform to gender norms (Martin et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2006).

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Gender, as a salient social category in early childhood, is reflected in children's play behaviors, toy preferences, and peer interactions. Research on play preferences indicates that boys are more inclined toward physical, competitive, and construction-based play, while girls tend to engage more in symbolic, dramatic, and craft-related activities (Gülay Ogelman, 2019; Lindsey & Mize, 2001; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). In the context of dramatic play, girls have been found to favor themes related to domestic life and social narratives, whereas boys are more likely to choose play centered around adventure and conflict (Cherney et al., 2003). These patterns suggest that gender stereotypes play a significant role in shaping children's play preferences during the preschool years. A similar influence is evident in toy preferences: children often classify dolls as toys for girls and vehicles such as cars as toys for boys, making choices that align with traditional gender norms (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Campbell et al., 2000; Cherney et al., 2006). These patterns suggest that play functions as a key context in which gender norms are both learned and reproduced during early childhood.

In parallel with play and toy preferences, children's playmate preferences also exhibit notable gender differences. Preschool-aged children tend to favor same-gender peers in their social interactions, with evidence of this preference emerging as early as age three (Martin et al., 2011). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as gender segregation, which is often attributed to children's inclination to engage with peers who exhibit similar behaviors. While gender cognitions—children's beliefs about girls and boys—may also contribute to gender segregation, this aspect has been comparatively understudied (Martin et al., 2011). Maccoby (1998) highlighted that children who interact with opposite-gender peers may face social sanctions such as ridicule or exclusion, further reinforcing same-gender preferences. Supporting this, Ruble et al. (2007) found that children aged 3 to 6 were generally reluctant to befriend peers who deviated from traditional gender norms. These findings suggest that children's preferences in play, toys, and playmates are largely shaped through the process of gender socialization. While biological predispositions may play a role in the emergence of early preferences, environmental factors such as parental and teacher attitudes, household roles, media portrayals, and broader societal expectations significantly influence their development (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Körner et al., 2020; Leaper, 2014; Sims et al., 2022).

Theoretically, children's comprehension of gendered play can be analyzed through social-cognitive and gender schema frameworks, which assert that gender-specific behaviors are not only displayed but are actively constructed through cognitive meaning-making processes (Bem, 1981; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Furthermore, Social Domain Theory posits that children assess social norms and infractions within moral and conventional frameworks, indicating that their interpretations of play rules may embody more extensive socio-moral reasoning processes (Turiel, 1983). These viewpoints collectively underscore that gender in play is influenced not merely by visible behavioral inclinations but also by children's cognitive interpretations and normative assessments of social interactions. Thus, analyzing children's lived experiences about play is crucial for comprehending the construction and negotiation of gender norms within everyday play situations.

Despite extensive research, significant questions remain regarding how children understand and experience gender in play. While the literature addresses the cognitive and behavioral-social dimensions of preschool children's play experiences to some extent, socio-moral evaluations of play rules and the consequences of rule violations remain relatively limited. However, evaluating children's play experiences solely through cognitive interpretations or behavioral preferences can lead to neglecting the normative processes that emerge within the social interaction-based nature of play. Therefore, considering the socio-moral dimension together with the cognitive and behavioral-social dimensions is important for a holistic understanding of children's experiential experiences related to play. However, the literature on gender in early childhood lacks phenomenological research, especially focusing on children's voices.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Previous research has shown that gender stereotypes affect preschoolers' preferences for play and toys. However, this influence has mostly been studied within a relatively narrow analytical scope, typically by focusing on observable behavioral indicators such as the toys children choose or the types of play in which they engage. While this research has yielded significant insights into gendered patterns of play behavior, it provides a relatively constrained understanding of how children cognitively conceptualize the essence of play and how they interpret the social and moral implications of play rules and violations within gendered contexts. Consequently, a significant gap persists in the literature concerning whether children's cognitive conceptualizations of play—specifically, how they delineate the essence of play—alongside their social-moral assessments of adherence to and transgression of rules, are influenced by gender in a manner analogous to their observable behavioral inclinations. In other words, even while children's play behaviors may seem gendered at the behavioral level, it is still not obvious if their basic ideas about play and how they comprehend rule-based interactions also show gendered differences.

Addressing this gap requires examining children's play experiences in an integrated manner across cognitive, behavioral-social, and socio-moral dimensions, rather than treating these aspects as separate or independent elements. Accordingly, the present study goes beyond behavioral indicators of gender-based play (e.g., types of plays or toys) to investigate how children define and evaluate their play activities (cognitive dimension), how their preferences for types of play, toys, and playmates are shaped within gender-based social interactions (behavioral-social dimension), and how they interpret play rules and the consequences of rule violations (socio-moral dimension).

This study aims to investigate whether children's experiential interpretations of play operate independently of gender, despite observable and seemingly gender-specific behavioral tendencies, by examining these interrelated dimensions from their own perspectives. This multidimensional perspective aims to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how gender stereotypes are formed, negotiated, and potentially challenged within the broader social ecology of play in preschool. To this end, the study adopts a phenomenological approach that emphasizes children's lived experiences and meaning-making processes, thus highlighting children's voices in understanding how gender norms are perceived, applied, and negotiated in everyday play contexts.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

In line with the phenomenological approach of the study, the research questions are addressed within the framework of cognitive (Question 1), behavioral-social (Question 2), and socio-moral (Question 3) dimensions in a way that holistically reveals children's experiential experiences related to play and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. In this context, the study is guided by three overarching research questions encompassing different dimensions of children's play experiences, supported by eight sub-questions.

1. How do preschool children cognitively conceptualize play, and do their definitions and personal evaluations of play activities differ by gender?
 - 1.a. How do children define the concept of play, and do these definitions differ by gender?
 - 1.b. What are the reasons children report for liking or disliking play activities, and how do these reasons vary by gender?
2. How are children's play preferences, including types of plays, toys, playmate choices, and engagement with gender-typed or cross-gender toys—shaped by gender?
 - 2.a. What types of plays and toys do children engage with, and how do these preferences differ according to gender?
 - 2.b. According to children, what are the favorite plays and toys of boys and girls?
 - 2.c. What are children's views on playing with toys that are typically associated with the opposite gender?
 - 2.d. What are children's playmate preferences, and how are these preferences shaped by gender?
3. What are children's perspectives on the rules governing play and the consequences of rule violations, and do these socio-moral evaluations vary by gender?
 - 3.a. What are children's perspectives on the rules to be followed during play, and do these views differ by gender?
 - 3.b. What do children think about the consequences of not adhering to play rules, and are these perceptions influenced by gender?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed phenomenological design within a qualitative research framework. Phenomenology, grounded in the disciplines of psychology and philosophy, aims to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon, as perceived and articulated by the participants themselves (Creswell, 2014).

2.1. Participants

In phenomenological research, the voices of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation are prioritized, as such studies aim to reach the essence of the experience through an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Accordingly, in the present study, which seeks to reveal gender differences and gender stereotypes in the context of play, the study group consisted of preschool children who have had direct experiences related to play.

Although there are ongoing discussions regarding the ideal number of participants in phenomenological research (Bartholomew et al., 2021), Creswell and Poth (2017) refer to Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation of between 5 and 25 participants in such studies. However, in the present study, which aims to explore gender differences, a larger sample was deemed necessary to ensure data saturation. Accordingly, the study group consisted of 64 preschool children (33 girls and 31 boys) enrolled in early childhood education programs.

Of the children included in the study, 41 were five years old and 23 were six years old. Sixteen children were only children, while 35 had one sibling, 9 had two siblings, and 4 had three or more siblings. In terms of maternal education, the majority of the children's mothers were high school graduates ($n = 22$) or held a bachelor's degree ($n = 21$). Additionally, 4 mothers had completed primary education, 7 had completed secondary education, 8 held associate degrees, and 2 had completed graduate-level education. Similarly, the educational background of the fathers was primarily at the high school ($n = 29$) and bachelor's degree ($n = 27$) levels. Furthermore, 2 fathers had completed primary education, 1 had completed secondary education, 3 held associate degrees, and 2 had completed graduate degrees. Regarding the type of preschool education, 32 children were enrolled in preschool classrooms within public primary and secondary schools, while the other 32 attended public kindergartens.

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Data regarding children's age, gender, number of siblings, parental education levels, and the type of institution they attended were gathered using a demographic information form developed by researchers. According to Giorgi (2009), interviews are typically essential in phenomenological research, as they align with their philosophical foundation. In line with this, children's experiences related to play were explored through a semi-structured interview form designed by the researchers. This form comprised 12 open-ended questions intended to elicit children's definitions of play, their reasons for enjoying or disliking play, the plays and toys they engage with, their preferences for playmates, their perspectives on play rules, their opinions about the plays and toys preferred by both same-sex and opposite-sex peers, and their views on whether peers can or cannot engage in plays and toys typically associated with the opposite sex.

2.3. Data Collection Process

Following the receipt of the necessary permissions, the data collection process began on January 20, 2025, and was completed on February 28, 2025. Prior to data collection, approvals were obtained sequentially from the ethics committee, the Ministry of National Education, school administrations, and the parents of the children. The children were informed about the purpose and process of the study using age-appropriate language, and it was clearly stated that participation was entirely voluntary. Child-friendly verbal assent was obtained from the children who expressed willingness to participate in the study. First, the children were informed with the following statement: "I want to learn how children play. Can we talk about plays, toys, and rules in the play? You can join if you want, but you don't have to. You can also leave if you get bored. Then, the following instructions were given: "Now you can choose the green card if you want to participate or the red card if you don't. You can tell or show us which card you want to choose." Children who chose the green card and completed the process were included in the working group. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the children in the preschool institutions they attended and were audio-recorded with permission.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an inductive content analysis technique, following the steps outlined by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009). Initially, the audio recordings were transcribed and transferred to a computer, and the interview documents were thoroughly read by the researchers. Words were then identified as the unit of analysis. In the subsequent stage, the researchers independently coded the data. The coding was compared, and consistency was checked; any discrepancies were resolved, and the results derived from the coded data were compiled into a report.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, strategies recommended by Gibbs (2007) were employed. For validity, direct quotations from the children's statements were included in the presentation of findings, providing in-depth descriptions for the readers. Furthermore, a field expert unfamiliar with the study reviewed the relationships between the research questions and the data, as well as the consistency between raw data and findings, effectively serving as an external reviewer. In addition, two field experts were consulted during the development of the interview questions. To ensure reliability, the audio recordings were subjected to repeated checks during the analysis phase. During the coding process, both researchers consistently compared the data with the codes to ensure that the meanings of the codes remain unchanged. After coding independently, the researchers cross-checked the obtained codes. Additionally, both researchers possess substantial knowledge and experience in early childhood development, early childhood education environments, and children's play behaviors, having spent extensive time in the field.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings will be addressed in parallel with the sub-questions of the research.

3.1 Preschool Children's Cognitive Constructions and Experiential Understandings of Play

This section explores how preschool children construct meanings around play and how children's evaluative experiences of play may differ across gender.

3.1.1. Preschool children's lived meanings of play

When children were asked to describe what play means to them, their accounts revealed play as a lived experience primarily associated with enjoyment, emotional engagement, and social connection rather than as a structured or rule-bound activity. Across children's narratives, play was consistently framed as something that is pleasurable and meaningful in itself. Also, many children described play using affective expressions, such as "fun" or "something nice," indicating that enjoyment constitutes a core element of their experience of play. One child captured this sentiment succinctly by stating, "It is fun" (C45, 5-year-old, boy), another one stated "Doing something enjoyable" (C47, 6-year-old, girl). These expressions suggest that children understand play less as a specific set of activities and more as a positive emotional state. For several children, play was experienced as a social phenomenon rooted in togetherness. Being with friends and sharing time emerged as a meaningful

dimension of play. As one child explained, “Being with my friends” (C34, 5-year-old, girl), another child explained, “Playing games with my friends” (C57, 6-year-old, boy) highlighting that play is closely tied to relationships and peer interaction. Some children described play through imaginative or bodily experiences, referring to creativity, movement, or exploration. For example, one child defined it as “Creating plays with imagination” (C2, 5-year-old, boy), while another child defined it as “Imagining and scattering things around” (C26, 6-year-old, girl). Descriptions such as “imagining,” “running,” or “making a mess” illustrate that play is also experienced as freedom, spontaneity, and physical expression. A small number of children defined play through concrete examples, such as hide-and-seek or drawing, suggesting that play is understood through familiar lived moments rather than abstract definitions. Overall, children’s descriptions indicate that play is experienced as an emotionally rich, socially embedded, and experientially meaningful phenomenon, extending beyond specific toys or activities.

3.1.2. Affective dimensions of play experiences

Children’s accounts of why they enjoy or dislike play revealed that play is constructed primarily as an affectively charged experience rather than merely as an activity. Rather than emphasizing particular plays or toys, children often described play in terms of how it makes them feel and what it allows them to do. For many children, enjoyment of play was closely linked to fun and positive emotions. Play was frequently described as an activity that makes them feel happy, excited, or entertained. One child expressed this simply by saying, “I like playing because I have fun while playing” (C6, 5-year-old, girl) another one said “I enjoy playing. When I don’t play, I get bored; playing is very enjoyable.” (C36, 5-year-old, girl). Such descriptions suggest that children experience play primarily as an affective state characterized by pleasure and enjoyment. Beyond enjoyment, play was also experienced as an opportunity for social interaction and togetherness. Several children emphasized being with friends as a central reason for enjoying play. As one child explained, “Yes, because I want to play a lot with my friends” (C61, 6-year-old, boy). These narratives highlight the relational dimension of play, indicating that play is valued not only for what is played but also for with whom it is shared. Some children described play as a means of self-expression and bodily engagement. References to being active, moving, or “not getting bored” suggest that play is experienced as a way to release energy and escape monotony. Some children noted enjoying play because “it is active,” reflecting an embodied understanding of play as physical involvement and movement.

In contrast, a small number of children expressed that they do not enjoy playing. Their accounts reveal experiences of boredom or disengagement rather than opposition to play itself. One child stated, “No, I don’t like it. I get a bit bored” (C17, 5-year-old, girl), indicating that when play fails to provide stimulation or emotional engagement, it loses its meaning. Overall, children’s descriptions indicate that enjoying or disliking play is closely tied to emotional engagement, social relationships, and bodily experiences. Play is experienced as meaningful when it offers enjoyment, connection, and activity, whereas boredom or lack of stimulation can diminish its appeal. These findings underscore that children’s motivation to engage in play is rooted in lived experiences rather than in the formal characteristics of play activities themselves.

3.2. Gendered Behavioral and Social Patterns in Preschool Children’s Play: Preferences, Peer Selection, and Engagement with Gender-Typed and Cross-Gender Toys

This section examines gendered behavioral and social patterns in preschool children’s play, focusing on the types of play and toys children engage with, gender differences in these preferences, children’s perceptions of boys’ and girls’ favorite activities and toys, their views on cross-gender toy use, and playmate selection shaped by gender.

3.2.1. Gendered meanings attributed to play and toys

This research reveals that gendered meanings are not merely reflected in children’s play preferences, but are also actively constructed and reproduced through everyday play practices. Rather than presenting children’s preferences as individual choices, they often framed play and toys within shared gendered meanings, implicitly categorizing certain forms of play as appropriate for girls or boys.

Dramatic play appeared as a meaningful and expressive space for girls, characterized by symbolic and imaginative engagement. Girls frequently referred to activities such as “hide-and-seek, house play” (C28, 6-year-old, girl), presenting these forms of play as familiar and enjoyable. When describing their preferred toys, girls similarly emphasized relational and domestic themes, as reflected in statements such as, “My dolls, stuffed animals, my kitchen set” (C31, 6-year-old, girl). These narratives suggest that dramatic play and related toys function not merely as leisure activities but as contexts through which girls explore caregiving roles, social relationships, and narrative construction. Such experiences appear embedded in how girls experience belonging, competence, and identity within the play environment.

In contrast, boys’ narratives of play commonly centered on balls, vehicles, and physically active or competitive games. For example, a boy explained his preferences by stating, “I like playing soccer and play with cars” (C56, 6-year-old, boy), reflecting an action-oriented and movement-focused understanding of play. Similarly, when children were asked which plays boys prefer, responses emphasized cars, ball games, and outdoor activity: “Games with cars and balls, playing in the park” (C25, 5-year-old, girl), and “Games with cars and Legos” (C57, 6-year-old, boy). These descriptions highlight an embodied experience of play that emphasizes movement, speed, mastery, and spatial engagement.

3.2.2. Interpreting others' play and toy preferences

It is revealed that children's interpretations of peers' play and toy preferences were structured by socially shared gendered expectations rather than individual observation alone. When asked which play girls like to play, both girls and boys frequently associated girls with domestic and dramatic activities. Statements such as "Girls usually like to playhouse" (C5, 6-year-old, girl) and "Girls definitely like household games" (C2, 5-year-old, boy) illustrate how house play is constructed as a socially recognized feminine activity. Similarly, dolls and soft toys were consistently linked to girls, as reflected in responses like "Barbie doll, talking doll, and kitchen toys" (C23, 5-year-old, girl). In contrast, boys were commonly associated with cars, balls, and construction-related activities. Children described boys' play as "Car games, ball games, playing in the park" (C25, 5-year-old, girl) and "Games with cars and Legos" (C57, 6-year-old, boy), reinforcing an action-oriented and competitive image of masculine play. Toy preferences followed a similar pattern, with cars, balls, and superhero figures identified as typical for boys, as seen in responses such as "Ball, cars" (C39, 5-year-old, boy) and "Spiderman, Batman, cars" (C8, 6-year-old, girl). Notably, girls appeared to describe boys' play and toy preferences in greater variety and detail, mentioning robots, racing games, and mischievous activities, whereas boys' descriptions of girls' play were more narrowly centered on household games and dolls. Interestingly, although some girls stated that boys liked robots, boys themselves rarely expressed an interest in playing with robots. These patterns suggest that children do not merely report personal preferences but actively reproduce shared gender norms when interpreting others' play.

3.2.3. Normative judgments on cross-gender toy use

Children's responses show that cross-gender toy use is not experienced as a simple matter of preference, but as a socially negotiated boundary closely tied to gender identity. Not only girls but also boys frequently categorized toys as inherently belonging to one gender, constructing symbolic distinctions between "girls' toys" and "boys' toys." Some girls explained that girls could not play with toys preferred by boys because "they are boys' toys," while some boys similarly argued that boys could not play with toys associated with girls. One girl stated, "Boys only play with boys' toys. Because they are boys" (C35, 6-year-old, girl), and one boy remarked, "He can't play with these toys. Because they are boys'." (C12, 5-year-old, boy). At the same time, some children offered more flexible interpretations, framing toy use in terms of individual interest and desire. For example, one girl stated that "Girls can play with boys' toys, because girls can also like cars." (C51, 5-year-old, girl) and one boy explained that "I think boys can play with girls' toys, because maybe he wants to play with them." (C58, 5-year-old, boy). These explanations reflect an understanding of play grounded in personal agency rather than rigid gender norms. However, comments suggesting that pink toys belong to girls or that girls would not allow boys to play with them indicate that toy boundaries are shaped by peer expectations and shared social beliefs.

3.2.4. Playmate preferences and the construction of gendered peer spaces

Children's statements revealed that their playmate preferences were not random, but were closely linked to the formation of gender-based peer groups within the school environment. Regardless of gender, most of the children described playing with peers of the same gender, expressing that play groups are often experienced as gender-aligned social worlds. Children further noted that while some girls demonstrate flexibility by including peers of both genders in their play, boys more frequently align with same-gender peers. This tendency implies that gender-based peer boundaries may be more strongly reinforced within boys' peer cultures.

3.3. Gendered Socio-Moral Constructions of Rules, Authority, and Exclusion in Peer Play

This section presents the findings related to children's perspectives on the rules that should be followed during play and whether these views differ by gender, as well as their interpretations of the consequences of rule violations and the extent to which these perceptions are shaped by gender.

3.3.1. Gender differences in children's socio-moral views on rules governing play

Narratives of children indicate that play rules are experienced not merely as formal prescriptions but also as social moral frameworks organizing interaction, safety, and belonging within peer contexts. It is revealed that rules constitute necessary relational and regulatory frameworks through which play becomes possible. Play was explained by children as a space where one should not harm others, exclude peers unfairly, or disrupt the shared activity. Children also referred to fairness in rule-based plays and to the importance of respecting shared materials, suggesting that play is experienced as a collectively sustained moral environment rather than an unrestricted activity. However, while this shared foundation was evident across genders, the ways in which these meanings were articulated revealed subtle differences.

In girls' narratives, rules are constructed within a socio-moral framework centered on relational sensitivity and fairness, highlighting the importance of non-harm, honesty, and the preservation of emotional safety in play. In contrast, boys more frequently conceptualize rules as regulatory structures that delineate participation boundaries—governing inclusion, behavioral expectations, and temporal limits, stabilizing peer interaction. While children across genders conceptualize play

rules as mechanisms that sustain social cohesion, girls' socio-moral reasoning is more closely oriented toward relational equilibrium and fairness, whereas boys' interpretations privilege the regulatory and structural dimensions of rule-making in organizing peer interaction.

3.3.2. Gendered socio-moral constructions of rule violations and their consequences

The findings suggest that children construct non-compliance with play rules not simply as an interruption of activity, but as a socio-moral transgression with relational, emotional, and regulatory implications. Moreover, children articulated the potential consequences of rule violations through lived experiences such as disapproval, exclusion, conflict, and the interruption of play continuity.

Relational rupture emerged as a central theme, as rule-breaking was understood to disrupt the flow of play and jeopardize peer relationships. For some children, rule transgressions were interpreted through the lens of adult disapproval and external punishment, situating them within a broader hierarchical framework beyond the peer group. Others highlighted social exclusion and peer sanctions were emphasized, underscoring the conditional nature of belonging within peer play. Accounts of conflict and physical harm indicate that rules are experienced as protective structures designed to prevent escalation and safeguard mutual well-being.

Gendered nuances were evident in children's constructions. Girls more frequently expressed rule violations in terms of the risk of relational breakdown and exclusion, emphasizing peer harmony and relational integrity. In contrast, boys placed greater emphasis in their narratives on adult authority, hierarchical regulations, and the preservation of structural boundaries. Taken together, these findings suggest that although children's common concerns about cohesion and safety in play, their socio-moral interpretations of rule violations reflect gendered orientations toward relational versus regulatory dimensions of rule-making.

4. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, it is revealed how preschool children construct meanings of play and how these constructions are shaped by gender. Children defined play as an intrinsically meaningful and affectively grounded mode of engagement instead of as an activity structured by rules. Each gender described play as an activity filled with enjoyment, freedom, and social presence. This result shows that play functions as a lived experiential state characterized by pleasure and relational connectedness. These findings resonate with previous studies indicating that children commonly associate play with pleasure and voluntariness (Howard et al., 2006; Keung & Fung, 2021; Koçyiğit & Başara Baydilek, 2015; Letourneau & Sobel, 2020; Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008; Sapsağlam, 2018; Tuğrul et al., 2014). However, these present results extend literature by demonstrating that children construct play not merely as an enjoyable activity but as a lived experiential state grounded in relational connectedness and emotional meaning.

Gender-based disparities in children's play and toy preferences are revealed in this research. For instance, girls consistently showed a predilection for relational and domestic-themed games while boys favored physically active, vehicle-based games, and competitive games. These results are consistent with the literature documenting gender differences in early childhood play (Azkeskin et al., 2020; Bay Döndü, 2024; Çivril Yılmaz, 2022; Davis & Hines, 2020; Lindsey & Mize, 2001; Saracho, 1994). Similarly, stereotypical gender associations were evident in toy choices, with girls favoring dolls and soft toys and boys preferring vehicles, balls, and movement-oriented objects (Shojaee et al., 2016; Weisgram & Bruun, 2018). Children's preferences should therefore be understood not merely as individual inclinations but as meaning-making processes shaped by social expectations and culturally embedded norms. Literature highlights that children begin to internalize gender norms early, preferring toys considered appropriate to their roles (Campbell et al., 2000; Cherney et al., 2006; Ulrich & Ezan, 2016; Weisgram, 2019). Generally, girls are attracted to toys deemed "feminine," while boys choose those classified as "masculine" (Özkar, 2020; Weisgram et al., 2014; Yağan Güder & Alabay, 2016). This rigidity is linked to preschoolers' limited cognitive flexibility. According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, children in the preoperational stage exhibit egocentrism and struggle to adopt alternative perspectives (Santrock et al., 2021). During this time, gender constancy develops, reinforcing stereotypical beliefs (Martin et al., 2002; Sravanti & Sagar, 2019). Moreover, adults' gendered perspectives significantly influence children's behavior (Bahtiyar Saygan & Pekel Uludağlı, 2021). Consequently, children's play and toy preferences appear as expressions of socially controlled meaning-making processes rather than biologically predetermined inclinations. Play serves a symbolic domain in which gender norms are performed, contested, and reproduced. Understanding these dynamic highlights the value of early educational settings that offer diverse and non-gendered opportunities, broadening children's interpretive frameworks and facilitating more flexible constructions of identity.

The findings of this study indicate that children's perceptions of play and toy preferences are not experienced merely as individual choices but are embedded within shared gendered meanings that shape how play is understood and enacted in everyday contexts. Rather than describing play solely in terms of personal interest, children frequently interpreted both their own and their peers' play through socially recognizable categories associated with girls and boys. Within this experiential framework, domestic-themed games and dolls were commonly positioned as appropriate for girls, whereas car-related games and toys were understood as belonging to boys. Previous research have similarly documented how gendered distinctions in play practices become visible in early childhood through engagement in different forms of play (Blakemore & Centers, 2005;

Cherney et al., 2003; Gülay Ogelman, 2019; Lindsey & Mize, 2001; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). These accounts suggest that children's interpretations of play emerge within an already meaningful social world in which certain activities are perceived as fitting or legitimate for particular genders. Children's narratives, in this sense, mirror socially learned assumptions about what constitutes appropriate, typical, and legitimate behavior for girls and boys in the play context. The tendency to describe peers' preferences through such shared meanings indicates that children's understanding of play is shaped not only by direct engagement but also by inter subjectively constructed expectations circulating within their social environment. At the same time, from a developmental perspective, according to Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, children in the preoperational stage tend to exhibit egocentric thinking and may have difficulty adopting others' perspectives (Piaget, 1967, as cited in Santrock et al., 2021). In this regard, children may experience socially shared meanings about play as fixed and self-evident categories within their own experiential world, thereby interpreting peers' play preferences through these gendered frames of meaning. In this way, children's beliefs about peers' play preferences may reflect internalized gender norms that organize how social interactions are understood (İnci Kuzu, 2015; Martin et al., 1995). Notably, boys' descriptions of girls' play appeared more limited, whereas girls demonstrated a broader awareness of boys' play practices. Girls frequently characterized boys' play as competitive, mischievous, or associated with robot-themed games. However, although some girls expressed the belief that boys enjoy playing with robots, boys themselves rarely articulated such preferences. In line with this discrepancy, previous research has pointed to the differentiated positioning of certain toys within gendered play cultures, particularly in relation to robotic toys (Pilten & Pilten, 2013; Sullivan & Bers, 2016). This pattern suggests that socially mediated meanings beyond immediate lived experiences shape children's interpretations of others' play. In this way, play becomes a relational space in which gendered understandings are not simply expressed but continuously negotiated and reproduced through everyday interactions. Taken together, these findings highlight that children's engagement with play occurs within a shared life world in which gendered meanings shape what is perceived as possible, appropriate, or desirable. Play, therefore, appears not only as a site of activity but also as a symbolic context through which children make sense of gendered identities in their interactions with others.

Notably, this study found that girls were more open to their same-gender peers interacting with toys associated with the opposite gender, while boys generally resisted using toys associated with girls. These narratives suggest that children perceive the use of opposite-gender toys not merely as a matter of preference, but as a socially negotiated boundary closely linked to gender identity. In this sense, toys are perceived not only as attractive objects, but also as symbolic signs in daily play interactions where gender-based belonging is affirmed or questioned. Previous research confirms these findings, showing that girls' interaction with toys generally associated with boys is socially more acceptable, while boys' interaction with toys generally associated with girls is socially less tolerated (Pew Research Center, 2017). Similarly, parents were found to express stronger disapproval of their sons interacting with toys perceived as feminine (Kane, 2006). These interpretations may reflect broader cultural meanings that differentiate masculinity and femininity in children's play-related life experiences (Bem, 1981; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

The analysis of children's playmate preferences in the study revealed that both girls and boys predominantly preferred same-gender peers as playmates. Nonetheless, girls demonstrated a greater tendency than boys to include peers of the opposite gender in their playmate choices. This finding can be interpreted considering the social development characteristics of preschool-aged children and the evolving nature of peer relationships during this period. It is well-documented that during early childhood, same-gender peer interactions become more prominent, with children typically preferring to engage in play with peers of the same gender (Özdemir, 2019). Early years are a time when same-gender peer interactions are more common, and children mostly prefer to play with same-gender peers. These preferences typically become more visible when children start to become more conscious of and knowledgeable about gender differences, particularly in the preschool years (Maccoby, 1998; Özdemir, 2019).

Distinct gender-based patterns emerged in children's narratives concerning the perceived consequences of rule violations during play. Girls' narratives are more likely to construct rule violations, exclusion from the peer groups, and damage to social connections. Existing research highlights that girls mostly display heightened relational awareness and empathy within peer environments (Benenson et al., 2013; Fanger et al., 2012). From the perspective of socio-moral development, these answers show an early focus on the interpersonal area of moral reasoning, where preserving relationships and avoiding social rejection become important issues (Turiel, 2006). In contrast, boys more frequently referred to adult reprimands, formal sanctions, or the potential for physical harm as repercussions for rule infractions. This regulatory orientation may have associated with boys' increased involvement in physically active and competitive play, which often involve higher levels of risk and necessitates more defined external boundaries (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). In these contexts, rules may be experienced primarily as instruments of control and structural organization rather than as protective measures for relationships. From the perspective of Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981; Martin et al., 2002), children internalize culturally mediated expectations regarding appropriate behavioral orientations, potentially influencing whether relational or authority-based consequences are emphasized in their interpretations. Furthermore, the finding that girls more frequently reported social exclusion, while boys focused on authority-related consequences, highlights the influence of gendered socialization processes in structuring socio-moral meaning-making (Bahtiyar Saygan & Pekel Uludağı, 2021). Rather than showing static disparities, these patterns imply varied emphases in the manner children structure moral experiences during play activities. The findings indicate that children's socio-moral interpretations of rule violations are influenced by developmental processes and culturally embedded gender schemas. Recognizing these differentiated orientations has critical implications for early childhood education. Pedagogical practices that deliberately incorporate gender-sensitive and relationally responsive strategies into rule-learning processes may facilitate

balanced development of relational and regulatory moral reasoning. By doing so, early childhood settings can become environments where inclusive, equitable, and socially reflective peer cultures are constructed rather than passively reproduced. This study offers a unique contribution by examining gender differences and stereotypes among preschool children in play from a multidimensional perspective. It explores children's interpretations of play, reasons for enjoying or disliking it, gender-based preferences in play and toys, attitudes toward cross-gender toy engagement, playmate choices, and perceptions of rules. By focusing on children's direct expressions, the study captures their understanding of gender not only behaviorally but also cognitively and emotionally. It also addresses how children perceive the preferences of the opposite sex and how broader social meanings shape their gender-based judgments. This comprehensive approach provides valuable insight into the early socialization processes through which gender roles are formed. The findings reveal that gender influences children's play both individually (e.g., motivations, concepts of play) and socially (e.g., toy and peer preferences, rule compliance). These results underscore the need for pedagogical approaches in early childhood education that promote gender equity, challenge stereotypes, and foster open-ended play. The study offers important implications for educators, parents, and policymakers seeking to create more inclusive and equitable early learning environments. The recommendations based on the findings of this study are as follows:

- Given that children define play not merely as a structured activity governed by rules but as an intrinsically meaningful and affectively grounded form of interaction and understand it as an experiential journey encompassing joy, freedom, and social existence, it is crucial that early childhood education settings treat play not solely as a structured activity but as an experiential space where children derive meaning through emotional participation and social interaction. In this context, supporting flexible and open-ended play environments where children can find opportunities to enjoy themselves, be together, and express themselves can enrich the relational and affective dimensions of play. Organizing educational settings in a way that allows children to freely experience play within their world of meaning can contribute to preserving the experiential nature of play, which is not limited to specific activities.
- In the light of that gender-based differences in children's play and toy preferences are related to socially mediated meaning-making processes, it is important that early childhood education environments are designed to allow children access to diverse play styles and materials, independent of gender stereotypes. In this context, presenting play materials without associating them with specific gender categories and supporting inclusive play environments where children can interact with different toys can contribute to the more flexible development of children's meaning-making processes regarding play and identity. Furthermore, creating opportunities in educational settings where children can interact beyond gender-aligned play patterns can allow play to be experienced not only as a space where gender norms are reproduced, but also as an experiential space where alternative meanings can be negotiated.
- As children's perceptions of play and toy preferences are constructed through shared gender meanings within peer interactions rather than individual interests, it is crucial that early childhood education settings are designed to offer children opportunities to experience play outside of predefined gender categories. In this context, it is recommended that play materials be provided to all children without being associated with a specific gender, that inclusive practices supporting children's interaction with diverse play styles be encouraged, and that collaborative play activities involving mixed-gender peers be planned. Furthermore, these arrangements, which support children's interaction with diverse peer groups, can enable them to develop empathy, understand different perspectives, and negotiate their identities more flexibly beyond gender-based expectations.
- Rule-learning in early childhood education should extend beyond behavioral compliance to engage with the relational and regulatory meanings children attribute to rules. Teachers can adopt gender-sensitive and reflective practices that encourage children to consider both the interpersonal consequences of exclusion and the structural purposes of rules. Brief, post-play discussions may help children understand how rule violations influence relationships, fairness, and group continuity. Such approaches can promote more integrated socio-moral reasoning and support the cultivation of inclusive and equitable peer cultures.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Ethics Committee stated that the research was ethically appropriate, and necessary permission was given to conduct the research (24.04.2024/E-84026528-050.99-2400107899). Ethical principles and rules were taken into consideration in the collection, analysis, and reporting of data. The authors declare that all information in this study has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

The authors declare that each author made an important contribution to every stage of the study. The authors worked together during the analysis and reporting of the data.

Statement of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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