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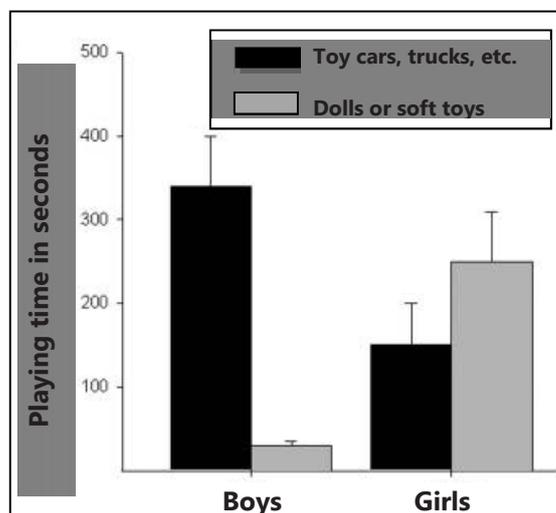
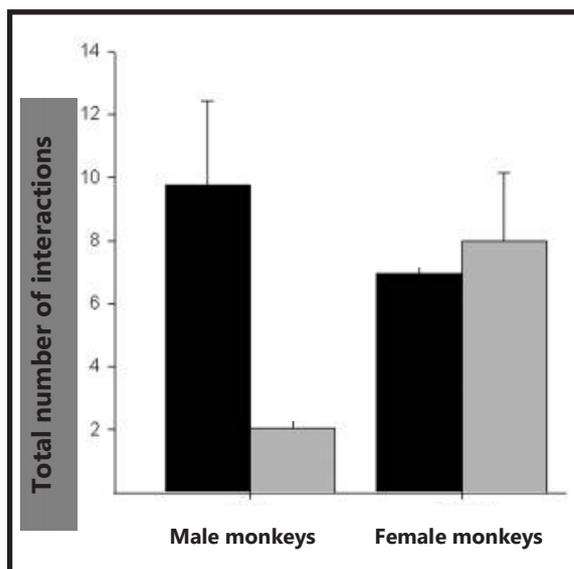
# NEWSLETTER



## Male monkeys give playing with dolls a miss

The received wisdom says that society and education have dictated children's toy preferences: dolls for girls and trucks for boys. According to the experts, this is part of the social construct of gender.

Numerous experiments have been conducted in this area since the 1960s. Regardless of how the toys are presented to children, boys will always show a strong preference for anything on wheels. Girls tend to choose dolls or soft toys, but they are not as uncompromising and will happily play with cars or trucks. Time and time again it has been found that boys firmly reject "girly" toys. Exceptions are possible of course, because these studies are statistical in nature. It is well known that there have always



The above graph, the result of an experiment conducted in Los Angeles in 1992, shows the average time in seconds spent playing with the two toy categories. The children were aged between three and eight.

been certain boys who like to play with dolls<sup>1</sup>.

The usual explanation goes along the lines of: "We let girls know that they are supposed to play with dolls. But if a girl chooses to play with a truck, it's not the end of the world. The message we give to boys, on the other hand, is more hard-line. It is very awkward if a boy chooses to play with a doll<sup>2</sup>." This explanation for our unconscious steering of children's playing habits seems to make a lot of sense.



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Kim Wallen of the National Primate Research Center in Atlanta had the idea of repeating this experiment using rhesus monkeys. As the graph shows, he found the same differences between the sexes, though not as pronounced as in the human experiment. The researchers observed the behaviour of the monkeys and did not detect any social pressure that would guide the choice of individuals to one type of toy. Their conclusion was that sex is the primary factor accounting for the choices of monkeys and human children alike. In children, the socialisation exercised by parents, the toy industry, etc., adds to and accentuates this natural state of affairs. So the psychologists are not wrong: a certain level of social pressure is exerted on children. However, this pressure can only explain 10% to 20% of the tendency.

This is a surprising discovery and it gives rise to an interesting question: can we pinpoint the natural causes for this male/female disparity? No doubt, there are many causes and many possible explanations. Leonard Sax, basing his theories on numerous research studies in this area, has come up with an extremely interesting explanation which revolves around vision. Like all mammals, we have two visual systems, which work in parallel. One of these, sensitive to shape and colour, has the task of working out what an object is. The other system is for working out where something is going, i.e. it analyses movement. In the late 1990s, scientists discovered that in males the visual system for “movement” was much more dominant than the other – which explains why the male retina is thicker. In females, meanwhile, the system for discerning shape and colour is slightly more developed. This seems to explain the results of the experiment: boys, as well as the male monkeys, prefer the toys with wheels because they move, whereas girls are more drawn to objects that have an attractive shape and colour. At the same time,

These two visual systems seem to explain the results of the experiment: boys, as well as the male monkeys, prefer the toys with wheels because they move, whereas girls are more drawn to objects that have an attractive shape and colour.

girls do not totally reject the toys that move<sup>3</sup>.

This cannot, of course, be the sole explanation for these preferences. Differences in metabolism and the “need to move” so prevalent in boys could also play a role. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to regard this difference in visual systems as insignificant, because vision is undoubtedly one of the most important senses in terms of forming a personality and perceiving the world. In this case, the difference between the male and female retina represents a valid hypothesis to explain in part – leaving reductionism aside – the behavioural differences observed between girls and boys. The predilection of boys for action, evident in the way they draw and write, and in their inclinations when it comes to



Yerkes National Primate Research Center à Atlanta



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history and literature, could be the result of this predisposition for movement. Similarly, the visual system of girls might go some way to explaining their love for detail and colour. These findings are very useful for educators seeking to adapt their teaching to girls or to boys, whether in a mixed or single-sex environment.

Jean-David Ponci, Ph.D, EASSE's  
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Speaking Countries

Sources :

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  2. Sax L. (2010). Girls on the edge, p. 135. See also Kane E.W. (2006). No way my boys are going to be like that! *Gender and Society*, 20, pp. 149-176; Martin C.L. (1990). Attitudes and Expectations about Children with Nontraditional and Traditional Gender Roles, *Sex Roles*, 22, pp. 151-165.
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- Pictures of page 1: Boys Love Cars, Even as Infants, <http://blogs.cars.com/kickingtires/2010/04/boys-love-cars-even-as-infants.html>. <http://www.prison-fellowship.org.uk/angel-tree.html>  
Picture of page 2: [http://www.emoryphotodb.com/hsc/main.php?g2\\_itemId=142&g2](http://www.emoryphotodb.com/hsc/main.php?g2_itemId=142&g2)

Reproduced below is an excerpt from an article which appeared in *Patrons*, a publication of the Centre Patronal in the canton of Vaud in Switzerland. This publication, always brimful of common sense, comments here on Swiss gender equality policy. There is cause to regret that the trend criticised in this article is not confined to Switzerland.

### Money for hot air

The Swiss Federal Commission for Women's Issues (FCWI) has again this year published its very large periodical *Questions au féminin* [women's issues], the theme this year being "changing gender roles". Comprising of more than eighty pages of contributions from authors with prestigious titles – including quite a few doctors – and boasting impressive critical commentary and an extensive bibliography, it has, nonetheless, precious little content. We learn, for example, that society is still scandalously influenced by stereotypes, that most men continue to work full-time, but many would like to spend more time doing family things, that boys spend more time playing online games than girls, and that sex influences education and training choices and hence careers. [...] In other words, "gender roles" are not really changing at all, equality agencies and other commissions for women's issues are as useless as ever, and despite all this the State continues to finance the blasts of hot air emanating from equality advocates. Yet another good reason for abolishing the federal direct tax.

Sophie Paschoud, January 2012/ No. 1, p. 11.



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