

Impact of gender stereotypes on children's choice of toys - an insight into research written in English

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET
ODSJEK ZA ODGOJITELJSKI STUDIJ**

Zrinka Lončarić

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CHOICE OF TOYS – AN INSIGHT INTO RESEARCH
WRITTEN IN ENGLISH**

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Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Alenka Mikulec

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SUMMARY

Some researchers claim that gender stereotypes in toy choice may exert a significant influence on the development of pre-primary aged children. Gendered marketing in the toy industry can support traditional norms, affecting what activities and toys children enjoy most or how they view their future careers. It has mostly been suggested that male toys contribute to the development of problem-solving skills and leadership for boys, whereas girls' toys foster nurturing and appearance-based behavior. Researchers propose that by promoting and buying gender-neutral toys, skill development becomes balanced with children getting access to a more diverse experience. Understanding how gender-neutral play and digital environments may have longer-term impacts is important for learning what drives stereotypes down and increases inclusive growth. Teachers working with pre-primary-aged children need to read literature in the English language on a wide range of topics to enhance their professional practice which will help them be better at their job. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to present an analysis of ten scholarly papers written in English and recommend some implications for teaching practice relevant to pre-primary education.

Keywords: child development, gender stereotypes, gender-neutral play, pre-primary development, toy choice.

UTJECAJ RODNIH STEREOTIPA NA IZBOR IGRAČAKA KOD DJECE – PREGLED ISTRAŽIVANJA NA ENGLESKOM JEZIKU

SAŽETAK

Neki istraživači tvrde da utjecaj rodni stereotipa na izbor igračaka može imati značajnu ulogu u oblikovanju razvoja djece rane i predškolske dobi. Rodno uvjetovano oglašavanje u industriji igračaka može podržavati tradicionalne norme i utjecati na dječje preferencije prema aktivnostima i igračkama ili način na koji gledaju na svoje buduće zanimanje. Najčešće se sugerira da igračke za dječake pridonose razvoju koje potiču rješavanje problema i liderske vještine, dok su igre za djevojčice usmjerene prema razvijanju brižnosti i ponašanju koje u prvi plan stavlja fizički izgled. Istraživači naglašavaju da poticanje i kupovina rodno neutralnih igračaka može pomoći uravnotežiti razvoj vještina, pružajući djeci širi raspon iskustava. Razumijevanje dugoročnih učinaka rodno neutralne igre i digitalnog okružja ključno je za razumijevanje kako smanjiti rodne stereotipe i promicati uključivi razvoj. Odgojitelji djece rane i predškolske dobi trebaju moći čitati literaturu na engleskom jeziku o različitim relevantnim temama kako bi unaprijedili svoju profesionalnu praksu. Stoga je cilj ovoga rada prikazati analizu deset znanstvenih članaka napisanih na engleskom jeziku te predložiti neke implikacije za nastavnu praksu relevantnu za ranu i predškolsku dob.

Ključne riječi: izbor igračaka, rani i predškolski razvoj, razvoj djeteta, rodno neutralna igra, rodni stereotipi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since their birth, children's development can be influenced by different social and cultural factors, among which are also gender roles. Hence toys, though widely viewed as simple forms of amusement, are actually very important for children's socialization, especially since they present useful social packages given to boys and girls that may affect their view of how they should behave in society. The concept of defining toys as being made for girls or boys is an extension of stereotypical thinking that has long dominated the ways people perceived the male and female roles. For instance, boys are guided to use toy vehicles, construction sets, superheroes and alike while girls are directed towards toys like dolls, kitchen sets, and beauty accessories, among others.

Of course, these are not only differences that are skin deep, they also significantly affect children's thinking processes, peer relations, and emotional well-being. In today's world gendered toys may have adverse effects on skills, interests and even career advancement in later years of a child's life. Shaped by the boys' toys as toys that help build spatial abilities and strategizing, it may help lay the groundwork for boys in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers (Wang et al., 2023). On the other hand, girls' toys, which are usually represented as toys that focus on such activities as caregiving and grooming, seem to encourage stereotypical views connected with domestic or caretaker occupations (Wang et al., 2023). Consequently, children get to learn the culture of a specific society through toys and in this way develop first impressions on how they should behave depending on their gender.

Moreover, children's socialization into gender roles through toys may begin quite early in life (Wang et al., 2023). Even before they start school, in their preschool years, children are introduced to a playtime that often aligns with their gender. This exposure is crucial since play serves as a tool for young children to discover themselves and the world around them. Through playing, children shape their identities, enhance their social skills and explore various roles and situations. However, when toys are strictly categorized by gender, it can restrict these developmental experiences potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting a child's diverse abilities and interests (Ramdaeni et al., 2020).

An increasing amount of research has emphasized the importance of taking steps to address and lessen the effects of gender stereotypes in toys (Azmi et al., 2021). Findings indicate that

exposing children to toys can promote a better rounded skill development and expand their future career ambitions (Weisgram, 2019). In addition, the emergence of play areas and virtual environments presents opportunities to challenge traditional gender norms. In these settings children can explore identities and roles that do not conform to societal gender expectations providing a more adaptable approach to gendered play.

It is important for parents and teachers to understand how gendered toys can affect children's development since they play a role in shaping their early experiences. Creating an environment where children can freely explore a variety of toys and activities regardless of gender can help adults nurture a wider range of skills and interests. This, in turn, might promote a society that is more inclusive and fairer.

Considering a range of topics teachers have to be acquainted with in order to be able to perform their job well, it is very important for them to continually work on their professional development and to keep up with the most recent findings related to their field of work. Therefore, they also need to be able to find relevant studies and theoretical discussions about children and potential positive and negative influences on their development. Since most professional and academic literature is written in English, it is also important for teachers to be able to read such texts and extract relevant information from them.

Therefore, the main objective of this thesis was to find and analyze scholarly articles in English related to the impact of gendered toys on children. After searching the relevant databases and selecting ten articles related to the topic, they were carefully read and reviewed, and the most relevant findings were summarized and presented in this thesis. Based on the analysis, some recommendations for teaching practice are provided.

The main theme involves toys and gender stereotypes, so the analysis centered on the following aspects: adults' perceptions of gender stereotyping of children's toys, children's use of gender stereotypes in making social judgments, the role of gendered toys in education and play assessment, and the important impact advertising, cartoons and stories have on gendered toys.

2. TOYS

Children's toys are an integral part of a stimulating educational environment. Numerous pedagogical classics, such as Jan Amos Comenius, Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori, have emphasized toys as a powerful educational tool. Comenius highlighted the importance of making toys and giving them to children instead of using ready-made items that could break. John Locke opposed owning a large number of toys and advocated for educators to give children only one toy at a time and encourage children to make their own toys. Froebel viewed play as the beginning of child development and creativity, leading to personality development. He developed a system of gifts - toys, where each toy had a special role. Montessori developed a variety of materials, toys, and work tools with clear instructions for their use, aiming to stimulate the child's initiative and self-respect (Master, 2021).

Toy making in Croatia began at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The first toys were made in the Croatian regions of Zagorje and Prigorje, and later in Dalmatinska Zagora. The method of toy making, the decoration of toys, and the choice of materials from which they are made represent the cultural environment in which the toys are created. Toys were mainly made in small villages by skilled locals, most often of flexible wood such as willow, linden or beech. They were made to represent animals, vehicles, or objects children often encountered in their everyday lives. These toys were made on a smaller scale than their real-life counterparts and painted with bright colors which helped children harness their imagination, and they were usually divided into 4 categories: animals, household utensils, musical instruments, and means of transportation. A toy butterfly, made with two wheels attached to wooden wings that moved as they were pushed by the child, was one of the most popular toys at the time (Biškupić Bašić, 2019). Horses frequently appeared as toys, often mounted on four wheels and paired with a cart. These black horses could also be placed on a base with four wheels or attached to a cart. The creativity of children and the creation of toys for children were genuine, drawing inspiration from everyday life, stories, and situations. Emphasis was placed on tradition and its preservation for future generations, fostering community bonds where children were raised, allowing both young and old to partake in children's folklore (Biškupić Bašić, 2019). During the 20th century, over one hundred and twenty motifs served as inspiration for making toys in Croatian Zagorje (Biškupić Bašić, 2019). The toys were made by men who were self-taught wood carvers, and women decorated and painted them. When decorating toys, red, yellow, or blue paint was used and is still used

today. Thus, a set of kitchen tables, cabinets, and chairs would be painted in one of these colors, often adorned with floral or geometric patterns (Taylor, 2003). According to Biškupić Bašić (2019), in Dalmatinska Zagora, wooden toys were made mainly by men. The motifs for making toys were butterflies, airplanes, horses, birds, stick dancers, and the like. The toys were recognizable by the details that adorned them, with the most common being "gentle yellow with gentle red and green ornaments" (Biškupić Bašić, 2019, p. 121). The later development of industry in Croatia, brought toys made from artificial materials like plastic (Miller, 1995) and nowadays, they are most commonly made of plastic, wood, and plush, though the use of materials is really diverse.

Many adults today often express surprise and discontent about the abundance of toys surrounding children (Ellemers, 2018). In their childhoods, toys were not as readily available, especially in rural areas, where access to stores was limited, so children played with what was available. They often made their own toys or had help from their parents. Ellemers (2018) points out that this practice was widespread and allowed children to use their imagination and creativity to create play objects, and some parents also bought toys at fairs or other sales places where various handmade items could be obtained. Even today, it is common for children's favorite toys to be those made at home, which allows the child to do things with them that factory-made toys cannot (Ellemers, 2018).

There are many criteria by which toys can be classified: by function, by the material from which they are made, by the age group they are intended for, and by size and structure (Campenni, 1999). Besides physical characteristics, toys can also be classified according to their impact on a child, i.e. they can stimulate a child's cognitive development, language development, or motor skills (Campenni, 1999). Toys can also activate all of a child's senses or just specific ones. Accordingly, toys can be distinguished by their degree of completion: they can be finished, semi-finished, or raw materials for toys. They can also be differentiated by the season in which they are used, such as summer or winter toys, and by where they are used (for example, indoor toys versus playground toys). We can also distinguish them by shape, size, and structure; toys can be made from a single piece or multiple pieces. Toys can be seasonal, often associated with holidays, and can be either purchased ready-made or created from objects transformed into toys. Seasonal toys can include items and materials children find in nature (e.g. plants, flowers, sand, water) (Campenni, 1999).

Children usually play with different toys in different periods of their lives. Infants usually first play with their own body (initial movements of limbs, hands, and feet), followed by teething

toys, etc. Child's activities gradually develop, moving from aimless movements to the phase of grasping. Soon after, the child begins to watch, focus on objects, listen to sounds, and follow them. Besides fingers, the mouth is also used for exploring textures, so throughout the first year of life, the child brings objects to their mouth. Putting objects in the mouth is an important aid in learning about them (Campenni, 1999).

According to Campenni (1999), in the first year of life, children are explorers. They primarily explore themselves and the world around them. The best and most beautiful window to the real world is the mother's breast. In addition to providing food and strength for growth and development, the mother's breast is also a "toy" for the child, serving as an excellent way to bond with the mother. Curiosity drives children to explore and discover the world around them, and they need toys to develop their physical and motor skills (walking, stacking, climbing, pushing objects, etc.). In the first year, functional play is dominated by brightly colored toys that produce sound or light (Miller et al., 2006).

It is important to allow the child to explore through play. At this age, children imitate adults and need objects to help them master life skills. They enjoy balls (with a diameter larger than five centimeters), push toys and vehicles, wagons, puzzles or larger blocks (up to six pieces), shape-sorting toys, dolls, garden toys, bath toys, stacking rings (from largest to smallest), fabric or rubber picture books, and they especially enjoy games that involve opening and closing. At the beginning of their second year, and especially when the child starts walking, they become more mobile and explore a wider environment. At this age, the child practices grasping and throwing objects, so accordingly, toys should be lighter and larger to prevent injury. Only in the third year does the child show interest in symbolic play, role-playing, and imaginative play (Miller et al., 2006).

In the fourth and fifth years, creative play and group play begin, and the child is drawn to building, shaping, and playing outside (painting, modeling, building materials, etc.). In the period from six to seven years, in addition to creative games, there is a prevalence of games with rules, sports games, performance games, and toys such as kites, sports equipment, balls of various kinds, computer games, toys that prepare children for school, and didactic games (workbooks, graphomotor exercises) (Miller et al., 2006). In other words, they are ready for cooperation with peers and show greater interest in toys that foster social interaction such as cards, dominoes, pick-up sticks, checkers, small basketball, memory games, and Monopoly (Koenig, 2018).

Toys can also be classified and grouped according to type and activities into four categories: sensory toys, toys for symbolic play, construction toys, and challenge toys. Constructive or building play involves toys such as blocks, beads, or any toy that allows material creation. The last type of toy refers to challenge games which test children's intellectual and psychomotor abilities (e.g. puzzles, juggling balls, cards, and numerous educational toys) (Taylor, 2003).

Toys for symbolic play refer to those used for role-playing, such as playing a veterinarian, a doctor and a patient, a soldier, and the like, or mimicking everyday adult life. Therefore, toys for symbolic play do not necessarily have to be toys; for example, a hairbrush can be a microphone, etc.

Considering such a wide selection of toys available today, it is important that all adults, primarily parents and teachers, are acquainted with their benefits and potential disadvantages or even dangers. In addition, Miller et al. (2006) warn that toy manufacturers often offer toys made of plastic, which are more prone to breaking and tearing. In other words, they produce toys that attract children's attention at first glance but quickly lose their appeal, which often results in toys becoming uninteresting to children soon after the first use, leading to their quick abandonment and a constant need for replacement making it a favorable strategy for manufacturers. Consequently, children seek new toys to satisfy their curiosity and need for new challenges. It is important to recognize this and be aware that some toys are intended for short-term use. Instead, it is beneficial to choose toys that provide long-term value and stimulate children's creativity, imagination, and development (Miller et al., 2006).

A good alternative to buying toys are toy libraries, which are specialized institutions that offer access to a variety of toys for everyone interested. They collect, store, and lend various toys to allow children to use them. In the communities where they exist, toy libraries can be independent or located within public libraries, preschools, recreational centers, companies, or hospitals. Additionally, there are mobile toy libraries that travel by bus to visit remote areas, enabling children living in those areas to access quality toys (Miller et al., 2006). Visiting a toy library can be a fun and inspiring experience for children and parents, providing them the opportunity to choose toys that will stimulate the child's imagination and creativity.

Play and toys are crucial for children's healthy development. They are indispensable partners in a child's play and an integral part of play, without which childhood is unimaginable. They aid in the development of language, motor, psychosocial, emotional, and cognitive skills. It is also essential for raising happy, creative, self-assured children. In order for the child to participate in society as a healthy adult at every stage of his or her development, consideration should be given to the concepts of play and toys (Koenig, 2018). Toys have a special significance for the child as children form an emotional attachment to their toys, and they perceive them as more than just an ordinary object; a toy becomes a friend and a source of comfort in times of sadness. To a child, a toy is something between the animate and inanimate (Koenig, 2018). According to Master (2021), it is important to emphasize that a toy has its meaning and value when it allows the child to be an active participant and creator of play, i.e. the more a toy can stimulate interest and the diversity of children's activities, the greater its value. However, we must not ignore the fact that a toy should not encourage negative behavioral tendencies and actions and should not be of poor quality, or that have negative associations. Master (2021) says that good toys are necessary for a child's play because they encourage activity, and creativity, enrich experiences, and develop thinking. They also encourage social play and remain interesting to the child for a longer time. In addition, they should meet aesthetic criteria - harmonious colors and shapes and they should continuously develop the child's sense of beauty. The material from which toys are made is also important. It should be safe, harmless, and easy to maintain (Master, 2021). To conclude, when choosing a toy, the adults should consider how the child can play with it, whether it will stimulate imagination and exploration or provide ready-made solutions, and whether the child will enjoy it for a long time (Master, 2021).

Another important aspect of children's development is play. Historically, play has been a significant part of cultures around the world and remains a crucial part of childhood for most people. Play was first recorded in prehistoric times in the world, as well as across Croatia, where children engaged in various forms of play, from war games and wrestling for boys to playing with rag dolls for girls. Play helps children develop a healthy brain and nervous system by stimulating the brain and creating connections between nerve cells (Taylor, 2003), nurtures their imagination, develops problem-solving skills, resilience, creativity, and prosocial traits, and generally keeps children happy and healthy. In addition, play is important for children's bonding with others and it offers parents the opportunity to connect with their children. Much of the teaching occurs through play, as it helps a child learn rules, and as

children grow, play helps them learn how to behave in society. Children also learn by playing with other children (Koenig, 2018).

Since toys and play have been identified as relevant aspects of children's development and are considered important for their adult lives as well, allowing children to freely choose the toy of their liking, and not because it is considered gender appropriate is important. This is going to be discussed in more detail in the following section.

2.1. Toys for girls and toys for boys

Gender stereotypes are broadly simplified assumptions about the characteristics and roles of genders in a society. They represent generalized prejudices about the typical attributes of women or men, such as beliefs about physical abilities, personality traits, professional preferences, or emotional predispositions of individuals of a particular gender. Moreover, they are seen as a social construct that significantly influences our behavior toward children, guiding them, more or less consciously, to conform to the existing gender norms. Gender stereotypes differ from gender roles in that they are descriptive, describing what women and men are like, while gender roles are prescriptive, indicating what women and men should be like (Master, 2021). Literature on gender roles and stereotypes also mentions instrumental and expressive traits. Instrumental traits express assertiveness, competence, and rationality and are considered masculine, while expressive traits are considered feminine, expressing warmth, caring, and sensitivity.

The parents' approach, behavior, beliefs, and attitudes are extremely important as they may shape the child. The parent is the one who integrates the child into the community to which they belong from the beginning, and the way they do this is important. Parents should allow the child to develop into a person beyond the pink and blue frames.

Usually, when a child is born, clothing, toys, and the child's room are arranged "appropriately" to match their gender. Thus, for girls, pink and dolls will prevail, while for boys, blue and cars will dominate. Our entire life is a reflection of our first sensations (images, colors, atmosphere, shapes, sounds...), according to which we build our whole world. This is also connected with a number of issues such as the content we offer to children. The influence of gender stereotypes and roles can be implicit or explicit, manifesting through

play and toys, books and picturebooks, animated films, and other media that reinforce traditional gender roles. For instance, picturebooks have many gender stereotypes, with boys often portrayed as superheroes; they are strong, brave, and capable; girls, on the other hand, are depicted as cooks, cleaners, fragile, tearful, and sensitive characters. Hence, it is important to be aware of this and choose contemporary picturebooks with quality content that will allow children to identify with the main character who is also of the same gender as the child. In this way, we can help the child build self-confidence and a positive self-image. It is important to provide both girls and boys with an equal ratio of such content (Martin, 1995). These are powerful agents of socialization and strong means of maintaining the existing stereotypes. Children adopt them from an early age, and it can be observed that already in early childhood, between the ages of one and two (Campenni, 1999), they exhibit behaviors and attitudes consistent with stereotypical perceptions of the female or male gender. Almost immediately after becoming aware of their gender identity, children begin to accept stereotypes that they apply to themselves and others to solidify their understanding of their identity and emphasize its significance. Girls typically choose dolls, clothing, and cooking utensils, while boys are more inclined towards vehicle toys like cars and trucks, as well as sports equipment. Gender-stereotyped beliefs intensify between the ages of three and five and become rigidly fixed by the age of seven. However, it is important to consider the possibility of deviations from such toy selection based on gender, as each child is unique with their own characteristics and needs (Peterson & Lach, 1990). All this makes the early childhood and preschool period critical for addressing gender stereotypes (Taylor, 2003).

Raising awareness about gender roles and stereotypes is very important, but we should also not forget that girls and boys have different physical characteristics, as well as different brains, hormones, and genetic makeup. By the age of three, children recognize which gender they belong to. Besides the aforementioned biological factors, various social and psychological factors also influence children's behavior, including upbringing and the influence of the environment in which the child lives. Numerous studies have shown different personality traits and behaviors in boys and girls. Instrumental traits are closely linked to masculinity, associated with aggressiveness, ambition, and independence, while expressive traits, linked to emotionality and care for others, are associated with femininity, which is connected with gentleness, attentiveness, and tactfulness. Accordingly, each child is unique in their behavior and has different interests, including the way they play and choose toys (Koenig, 2018).

Comparative studies on young children's preference for a particular kind of toy over others and an examination of the activities that children engage in with them are still lacking. Previous research on children from the first year of life showed a definite selective attitude toward specific toys and activities and games connected with them. Simultaneously, every established suggestion in early childhood and preschool pedagogy regarding the choice of toys considers the significance of each item for particular aspects of children's development from the perspective of adults (Ellemers, 2018).

Two studies were conducted by Blakemore and Centers (2005). The aim of the first study was to determine which toys would be labeled by adult participants (age range between 18 and 53) as being specifically for boys and which for girls. The results showed that male and female participants slightly differed in how they determined what is and to what extent masculine and feminine. Ballerina costumes, Barbie dolls, make up, tea sets, and pink ice skates were some of the toys categorized as strongly feminine while superhero costumes, firefighter gear, remote-control cars, and helicopters were categorized as strongly masculine toys. The goal of the second study was to examine the characteristics of toys, and the authors hypothesized that toys aimed at girls are "associated with appearance and attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skills" while "boys' toys were more likely to be associated with competition, construction, and sociability" (Blakemore & Centers, 2005, p. 624). Again, the participants aged 18 to 53 years were involved, and out of 706 participants, 176 were parents. The toys were grouped into five different categories (strongly masculine, moderately masculine, neutral, moderately feminine, and strongly feminine), each containing 15 toys and the participants rated them on a numerical scale "based on the toys' obvious qualities" (Blakemore & Centers, 2005, p. 621). The results confirmed the hypothesis, i.e. toys which were marked as male were the ones used to build something new or imagine flying in space, while the ones marked as female were those used to play pretend ironing clothes and washing dishes. Toys for boys were also rated higher on the sociability scale (in terms of allowing play with others versus individual play), and were described as contributing to competitive spirit, aggression, and constructiveness (Blakemore & Centers, 2005). Toys for girls were rated higher on the creativity, manipulability, nurturing, and attractiveness scales. This means that from an early age, boys and girls are socialized into their gender roles through the toys they play with (Ellemers, 2018). In addition, toys for boys were more likely to be rated as "violent" than toys for girls. Blakemore and Centers (2005) concluded that the development of both boys and girls would be enriched by learning and adopting household skills as well as playing

with construction toys. In addition, both boys and girls can gain advantages from playing with toys that support the development of intellectual, scientific, artistic, and musical abilities (Master, 2021).

Toys thus come with a certain prediction of which gender they are intended for. Males and females differ in how masculine or feminine they rated something, but the differences were not drastic. The more feminized or masculinized a toy is, the easier it is to correlate with that gender. On the other hand, toys for both genders are designed to stimulate role play, educate children, develop cognitive abilities, and foster shared play with other children. From an early age, depending on the type of toys they play with, children tend to behave accordingly, with boys learning to be more active, engaged, and freer than girls. For instance, according to Miller (1997), traditionally "strong" male toys like Action Man, soccer balls, Hot Wheels cars, miniature weapons, toolboxes, and even "moderately" masculinized toys like telescopes and chemistry sets, are designed for boys as mechanisms of socialization, as educational toys with the aim of helping them easily build their careers and teaching them leadership. Boys have more spatial toys (such as a clock or toys for observing space) and sports equipment (Master, 2021).

Another important aspect that needs to be considered in relation to toys and gender are differences in the way preschool children play, and choose games and toys, depending on their gender. According to Koenig (2018), previous research has shown that girls choose cooperative and calmer games, while boys are more inclined towards competitive games and sports. In pretend play, girls predominantly play house, while boys engage in adventure and action. Klarin (2015 as cited in Koenig, 2018) mentions the existence of gender separation during children's play, i.e. forming boys' and girls' groups, starting from the age of three. It has been observed that boys predominantly play with other boys in larger groups, while girls play with other girls in smaller groups. Additionally, boys are generally more aggressive than girls due to natural, hormonal, and social factors that influence them. Furthermore, Klarin (2015) highlights the differences in communication between boys and girls during play. Boys tend to engage in conversations that focus on sharing information, recounting stories, and making jokes, whereas girls often prioritize discussions that revolve around building relationships and emotional connections (Koenig, 2018).

Campenni (1999) proposes that when we are talking about the functions of toys, we are actually discussing the developmental aspects that these games stimulate. The functional value of a toy depends on what can be done with it. Toys have various functions in different

types of games; for instance, in imaginative and role-playing games, they help create imaginary situations, in physical games, they serve as props, and in constructive games, they act as materials for realizing ideas. If a sound toy breaks and becomes uninteresting to a child, it loses its function. Among other things, a toy helps concretize the content of the game and enrich it with new content. Miller et al. (2006) said that with its appearance and the possibility of reconstruction, a toy guides a certain way of performing operations according to a logical order (e.g., a toy "kitchen" can only be used in the intended way in household or cooking games, teaching children the sequence of actions and how they occur in reality).

Different toys and games can help children develop a range of skills, and this is why they should not be gendered. For example, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, and coordination along the central axis of the body can be developed with the following toys and games (Campenni, 1999):

- Gross motor skills: jumping up, long jump, skipping, hopping, bicycle, hoops, balls.
- Fine motor skills: cutting and gluing, tying a knot, stringing large beads, scribbling and drawing, LEGO bricks, puzzles, and jigsaw puzzles.
- Coordination along the central axis of the body: spreading and then crossing arms, moving the hand from the right side to the left and vice versa.

Board games are also a tool for developing boys' and girls' skills – more specifically, communication with others. Social skills are also very important because if a child feels good about themselves, they are more likely to treat others well. According to Weisgram (2019), the social skill development games and toys are based on three important aspects of the self-confidence-building process – respect and recognition, uniqueness, and behavioral mistakes. Toys such as dolls, stuffed animals, Barbies, Ken dolls, and similar toys encourage sociability and teamwork. Games like "Don't Get Angry," Monopoly, chess, and other board games are excellent for socializing children, fostering a competitive spirit, teamwork, the process of building self-confidence (winning, losing), and promoting fairness in play. Cognitive development can also be fostered with the appropriate toys and games, especially those that involve activities and experiences with hands. During a child's growth, it is important to allow them to explore, explain, and allow the child to experience as much as possible. It is also important to keep in mind that people remember 10% of what they hear, 50% of what they see, and 90% of what they experience. One of the games that may encourage a child's cognitive development is playing in the sand. In this way, hand-eye coordination is developed,

and almost all senses are active, the child touches the sand, and lets it flow through their fingers, which further stimulates the creation of synapses in the brain, recognition of the difference between dry and wet sand, then sight – looking at the sand and recognizing clusters of small particles, and smell – recognizing the smell of sand, and differentiating the smell of dry and wet sand (Weisgram, 2019).

Gender stereotypes in children, besides in the choice of toys and activities, are also evident in the choice of colors. Colors are one of the primary characteristics by which children categorize toys into gender schemas. Darker colors, blue, brown, and gray are considered masculine or "male," while pink, purple, yellow, and pastel colors are considered feminine or "female." By the age of 2.5, girls develop a strong attraction to pink objects, while boys start to actively avoid this color. Differences have also been researched between the motifs of drawings chosen by boys and girls. Boys most often choose motifs such as competitions, vehicles, monsters, and supernatural forces, while girls more often depict people, animals, and nature (Campenni, 1999).

As previously mentioned, media, which play an increasingly important role in child development, strongly influence the development of gender roles and the way children perceive men and women, i.e., understand genders. Boys and girls are inclined to imitate the activities of their favorite characters and use aspects of their favorite programs while playing. Various studies have revealed strong gender-specific tastes in media content favored by preschool children and the characters they preferred. While boys preferred action-adventure and scary movies and most often chose superheroes or characters with superhuman powers as their favorites, girls enjoyed family shows, movies, and comedies and liked characters such as fairies, angels, princesses, and similar fictional characters (Weisgram, 2019). It is important to emphasize that various literature sources document a greater tendency for preschool boys to think and behave in a highly gender-typed manner.

In Croatia, a study carried out by Miller et al. (2006) investigated the extent to which boys and girls showed interest in certain activities, examining the connection between gender and gender roles in preschool children. The results confirmed that boys are more often engaged in activities stereotypically considered "male," such as fighting or arguing, and show interest in cars, trains, and airplanes, while most girls spend time in activities involving other girls, role-playing female occupations, and avoiding activities that involve role-playing male activities (Miller et al., 2006). If children are convinced that they must conform to stereotypes, it can harm their personality development by reducing authenticity and hindering the development

of a healthy identity. Furthermore, such exposure to stereotypes during childhood can later negatively impact the ability to process emotions healthily, the ability to engage in equal-gender relationships in adulthood, and the perpetuation of the historical system of gender inequality.

3. TOYS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES – RESEARCH REVIEW

Teachers need to stay informed about the most recent findings related to their profession to enhance their teaching and successfully tackle contemporary challenges in education. In order to be able to address the changes, teachers need to engage in continuous professional development, and one of the most effective ways to achieve this is by regularly reading professional literature. Reading scholarly articles and academic research helps teachers to deepen their understanding of current trends, methodologies, and issues impacting education. Given that the majority of academic publications are written in English, it is essential for teachers to have good command of the language in order to access, comprehend, and extract relevant information from these sources. In addition, the ability to read about research in English enables teachers to broaden their knowledge and apply evidence-based practices in their work. More specifically, they may find ideas for their own research or make informed decisions on how to implement new ideas into their own teaching practice. Developing these skills is therefore not only beneficial for their own professional growth but also for improving the quality of educational work with children.

Therefore, the main part of this thesis focuses on the content analysis of ten studies published in the English language dealing with gender stereotypes in the context of children's toys.

3.1. Gender Stereotyping of Children's Toys: A Comparison of Parents and Nonparents

(Estelle Campenni)

This article deals with how gendered toy preferences vary between adults with and without children. The main objective was to examine whether parenthood influences adults' perceptions of toy appropriateness for boys and girls, given the inherent responsibilities parents have in shaping their children's social development. Research participants were 50 mothers and 35 fathers (M age = 33.6) and 50 female and 37 male nonparents (M age = 20.7). The research methodology in this study involved surveys where both parents and nonparents were asked to evaluate 206 various toys based on their perceived gender associations. For example, participants were presented with dolls, action figures, construction sets and kitchen sets, and then asked to assign these toys as more appropriate for boys or girls or gender

neutral. They rated the toys on a 9-point scale (e.g. 1- toy is appropriate only for girls, 5 – toy is equally appropriate for boys and girls, 9 – toy is appropriate only for boys), first just marking them as being appropriate for children, and then rating them again according to their appropriateness for infants and toddlers.

One of the key findings was the heightened sensitivity of parents to gendered toy stereotypes, in other words, non-parents' ratings of the toys were more gender stereotyped than those provided by parents. It may be suggested that parents, due to their active engagement in child-rearing, were more aware of the potential developmental impact of toys. They may choose more frequently the toys that break traditional gender norms. For instance, some parents might encourage their sons to play with dolls to nurture caregiving skills or select science kits for their daughters to promote interest in STEM fields. This awareness could be driven by parents' desire to provide balanced opportunities for their children, away from rigid gender norms that limit their self-expression or future ambitions.

It was noted in a previous study (Miller, 1987) that feminine toys were contributing more to the development of characteristics such as nurturing, creativity, and attractiveness while masculine toys were more competitive, aggressive, and reality based. In addition, it was proposed that the characteristics that best described these toys were also characteristics that were most desirable in women or men respectively. The research showed that while both parents and non-parents had similar views when it came to differentiating gender-appropriate toys, parents were more likely to lean towards selecting *gender-neutral* toys. The researchers believe this was due to parents' neutral perception of cultural norms, and the values derived from their children's surroundings. This led the authors to conclude that close interactions with children during play may change an adult's perspective on gender-stereotyping toys. The results of the research also showed that feminine toys were marked as more gender-stereotyped than masculine ones, which is in accordance with previous research. Furthermore, boys are taught to avoid female-gendered toys while girls do not encounter the same obstacle while playing with male-gendered toys. Additionally, studies have found that girls often favor masculine toys over feminine ones, which could help explain why masculine toys are perceived as being less stereotyped compared to feminine toys.

3.2. Toy stories: Children's use of gender stereotypes in making social judgments

(Michelle Z. Wang, Vivian Ng, and Tracy R. Gleason)

The paper examines the extent to which stereotypical images of gender help or hinder the growth and development of young children, especially in areas such as choice of toys and with regards to social evaluation. The authors emphasize how conceptions of what is female and what is male, and the corresponding behavior is acquired from very young age through conscious and unconscious messages from parents, teachers, the media and peers. Such stereotypes also determine what type of toys will be purchased for children and consequently impact the skills that the children will acquire and the interests that they will develop throughout their lives. Thus, boys are usually channeled towards instructive toys that are intended to develop spatial and mechanical skills while girls are often guided towards toys that promote caretaking behavior. This advancement in the marketing of toys and patterns of play has also been blamed for the scarcity of women in the sciences, especially STEM fields, as there are no dolls that encourage girls to be scientists or engineers.

One of the theories mentioned by the authors is the Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT), which proposes that children classify people using categories that are psychologically defined, like gender, which is readily stressed both in family and society. Children do so because they have learned to appreciate gendered objects and gendered actions. It is proposed that those parents who make active efforts to fight gender stereotypes may still inadvertently strengthen these stereotypes through other means.

In Study 1, the researchers investigated how gender-related information would impact children's social judgment. The study was conducted in a preschool in New England which promotes gender equality, and the participants were 33 children (age range between 43 and 67 months). The children were told short stories about fictional children and had to choose a toy for the story characters. The stories were gender stereotype-congruent, stereotype-incongruent, or stereotype-irrelevant. After the testing was completed, each child was asked what his or her favorite toy was. The results showed that the favorite toy choices were gendered. Girls only chose feminine toys, and most of the boys chose masculine toys, thus confirming H1 which predicted gendered preferences towards toys. However, some boys also selected neutral or moderately feminine toys. This study also considered whether children would apply differentiation based on peer's activity preference in situations where they were

asked to choose toys for imaginary children they learned about from the stories (H2). Findings indicated children could select toys in relation to the activity their peers liked. However, when the peers' activities were gendered, children were found to consistently pick stereotype congruent toys, which indicates children's ability to apply both stereotypes and individual information. There was, however, no significant impact of gender in such decisions (H3), i.e. boys and girls equally employed individuating information in such decisions. This means that the results did not support this hypothesis.

In Study 2, the researchers had a somewhat larger sample (N=44) of similar pre-school children population. Research instruments were slightly modified and improved based on the findings from Study 1. The results again showed that the toys selected by children as their favorite were gendered, although a small percentage of girls opted for neutral toys, unlike Study 1 where they all chose gendered toys. The results related to H2 were also similar, but in this replicated study children's choices of toys for story characters were only moderately counter stereotypic. The authors also hypothesized that children would prefer same-gender peers as play partners and gender-conforming peers within their own gender. These hypotheses were unsupported, whereas the last hypothesis which proposed that girls would prefer gender-congruent or neutral activities was supported.

The authors also conducted a third study, which replicated Study 2 (with a few minor changes in the selection of activities) in a different setting, i.e. this study was done in China with a group of 21 children (age range 34 to 63 months). The only significant difference in the result compared to Study 2 was related to the hypothesis which proposed that children would prefer gender-conforming peers within their own gender. This hypothesis was supported for the Chinese children.

The authors, therefore, concluded that their findings emphasize children's ability to consider individual characteristics when making social judgments about others, even though they themselves may often reject toys and activities associated with the opposite gender.

3.3. Gender and toys in early childhood education

(Suci Ramdaeni, Vina Adriany, and Hani Yulindrasari)

This paper presents the results of an investigation of how gender identities are created and reinforced within the kindergarten context through toys. In their study, the researchers started from a post-structuralist perspective and the theoretical approaches of Foucault tracing the production of power and knowledge through language and discourse. The ideas represented state that power does not belong to people, it is embedded within ideological structures that construct subjects and relations in a certain way, such as the distribution of load in an organization. Language and discourse are seen as contributing to gender construction – particularly via the choice of toys and the play that follows afterwards.

The method used in this study is the focused ethnography research, which is ethnographic research conducted over a limited period of time. The observation and interview phase lasted for nine weeks and was conducted in a kindergarten in Bandung, Indonesia with teachers and students. Data analysis focused specifically on the role that toys play in reinforcing gender identities in children. Three themes were identified, and these were the observations. The first theme was constructing masculinity through superhero toys, and the researchers found that boys excluded girls from play through superhero discourse, but also that teachers' selection of toys for children (sometimes even unknowingly) was gendered. The second theme was constructing femininity through cooking set toys, and the researchers observed that the gendered choice of toys by girls teaches them to adopt the femininity and traditional social roles for females. The final theme was policing gender through toy selection, and it refers to teachers determining appropriateness of toys children chose to play with on the basis of gender.

The authors therefore concluded that parents and teachers should understand that limiting children's play with a certain toy because the toy has been traditionally marked as male or female is wrong because it limits children's opportunities to learn certain skills.

3.4. Reducing gender stereotypes in toys and play for smarter, stronger, and kinder kids

(Erica Weisgram)

The author examines the role that gendered toys and play have in a child's development, and focuses on good examples such as Sesame Street, which has successfully dealt with these issues. Gender schema theory, supported by research (Martin et al., 1995, Weisgram, 2016) states that children will lean towards sex-appropriate toys regarding the gender associations used to label them. Research also suggests that gender schematic children are more likely to use gender schemas when engaging in play activities.

Play is essential in early childhood development as it supports cognitive, physical, and social development of a child. The author first analyses studies dealing with the effect of gender-typed play on children's cognitive skills and abilities, with a special focus on spatial skills. Studies have confirmed that cognitive skills tend to be enhanced by gender-typed play, with masculine toys associated more with spatial skills and abilities, especially video games and building blocks, which along with board games have been found to enhance math skills as well. On the other hand, feminine toys seem less popular, but they may be associated with increased complexity of play and verbal skills, although research in this area is limited. Based on the analyzed studies, the author concludes that children's gender-typed behavior may contribute to gender differences in cognitive skills.

Another aspect analyzed by the author is the impact of play on children's physical strength and development. Boys typically display faster growth in physical development, engaging in more aggressive play that assists in the development of large muscle physical skills while girls may have more rapid development of skills related to small muscle movements and fine motor skills through diverse play.

The last aspect analyzed was children's prosocial development. The author proposes that understanding of the effect of gender-typed play patterns on social behavior is rather complex, but some evidence suggests that feminine toy play has a positive impact on social behavior and children's social and emotional development.

The author also provides an overview of strategies employed by the Sesame Street project to systematically address gender stereotypes. These are reducing the functional use of gender in the environment (e.g. using the term mail carrier instead of mailman), explaining gender stereotypes and how we can counter them (e.g. explaining that it is acceptable for boys to play

with dolls), and increasing the complexity of gender categories through counterexamples (e.g. children playing in mixed-gender groups and showing female characters in male-dominated professions or male characters in female-dominated professions).

In conclusion, the author proposes that lessening children's gender stereotypes may contribute to greater gender diversity in their play and consequently lessen gender differentiated skills and behavior throughout life.

3.5. The effects of stereotyped toys and gender on play assessment in children aged 18-47 months

(Isabelle D. Cherney, Lisa Kelly–Vance, Katrina Gill Glover, Amy Ruane, and Brigitte Oliver Ryalls)

The authors of this study aimed to ascertain what effect specific stereotyped toys have on young children's play, to assess how this may impact children's cognitive development and to identify which toys would be most appropriate for play assessment. They provided an overview of more standardized assessment instruments, like the Bayley Scales of Infant Development and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. However, they emphasized that, although generally valid- and reliable, these instruments have been criticized for the artificial testing conditions and language, which does not reflect young children's actual developmental level. To overcome such limitations, the authors recommend play assessment as a more fitting approach. This enables the researcher to track cognitive development in a more naturalistic fashion where the child is allowed to play with toys of his or her choice throughout the study hence possibly yielding a more credible measure of the child's cognitive abilities.

The participants in the study were 30 typically developing children (15 boys and 15 girls, mean age about 30 months). The play sessions were conducted at the university in a laboratory playroom which was furnished with a variety of toys that were classified as masculine, feminine or neutral. Some of the toys were kitchen playsets, construction toys, dolls, jigsaw toys, toy phones and farm sets. Parents were present during the sessions, and children were allowed to play freely with only limited supervision and participation by the adults. Children's play was videotaped and sessions lasted 40 minutes. The specific objective

of the study was to identify the amount of time the children engaged in playing with different types of toys and their connection with the complexity of their play.

The toys children played with were categorized into eight groups, and the results showed that both boys and girls spent the longest time playing with mechanical toys, next kitchen /food toys and toys in the house category. Boys played mostly with the male-stereotyped toys, and girls with the neutral toys, which was contrary to expectations. Compared across age, play complexity, defined as the symbols and representational skills displayed, was higher in older children and, compared across toys, play complexity was higher with female stereotyped toys, both for girls and boys. These findings emphasize the need for including these toys during play in order to obtain a complete range of developmental profiles. The authors stress that the complexity of children's play depends on the toy type and gender with larger complexity scores obtained for female stereotyped toys. This may indicate that based on play assessment using a range of toys, including those stereotypically associated with gender, it is possible to gather relevant information and insight about child's cognitive development and thus reduce the overreliance on standardized tests.

3.6. Toys, advertisements, and gender roles: a(sic.) research on three Italian television channels for children

(Claudia Baiata, and Elena Pacetti)

The role of the mass media is accentuated in the context of role modeling, with TV and advertising on the Internet being the primary examples of the impact mass media has on people. The authors specifically emphasize the impact of media on the perpetuation of traditional masculine and feminine stereotypical roles in society. They state that although social networks are becoming increasingly popular, television still plays an important role in forming customers' attitudes in the western countries like Italy. Since children are the most frequent consumers of television content, because of their young age, they are most susceptible to the messages expressed by advertisements. Research (Pike & Jennings, 2005) therefore supports the claim that through reinforcement of these messages, youth is socialized to these roles and expectations and therefore it is through the media that young people often develop their personal identity. The authors discuss the nature of information relayed by toy

commercials and propose that much of it perpetuates stereotypical gender roles. These advertisements are likely to label toys as *boys' toys* and *girls' toys* reinforcing the ideas on what is allowed for a boy or a girl. Action figures or construction sets are mostly associated with boys whereas dolls and domestic playsets are associated with girls. It is equally seen in some examples of marketing strategy that gender division is too rigid and it influences children by suggesting what is suitable for a male or female role in the society, just because of the toys they choose to use.

The authors conducted an exploratory study aiming to determine if and to what extent gender stereotypes can be found in contemporary toy advertisements, by analyzing commercials aired on three Italian private television channels with children's programs. A total of 148 toy commercials were analyzed focusing on the type of toy, slogan, age and gender of actors, setting, color of clothes, furniture, other characters, kind of music and voice-over. The analysis confirmed that 60.5% of the advertisements were gendered, almost 20% targeting boys, around 40% girls and the remaining were both for boys and girls. In addition, most of the analyzed factors such as setting, colors and such were also gendered.

The authors warn that these gendered messages do more than provide a clear-cut inclination but play a significant role in shaping prejudices in the long run. The continuous portrayal of genders in this manner only perpetuates the male and female gender identities and thus discourages children from following any form of interests outside the traditional roles. All this may impact future career aspirations and individuals' identity. In this way, such advertising is not limited to childhood but molds the perception of adult behavior and of the society, as these initial notions are transferred into adulthood.

The article ends with a call to increase concerns about the consequences of advertisements and the impact of toys on children. The authors urge everyone to reconsider how different toys are promoted to children as more inclusive strategies can enhance the likelihood of social integration of individuals with different sexual orientations and gender identities. They propose that gender stereotyped advertisements could potentially be eliminated thus freeing the children from what is socially accepted and providing them with opportunities they may not otherwise have because of the predetermined gender roles.

3.7. Gender stereotype in toy advertisements on social networking sites

(Nor Jijidiana Azmi, Isyaku Hassan, Radzuwan Ab Rashid, Zulkarnian Ahmad, Nor Azira Aziz, Qaribu Yahaya Nasidi)

The article gives a detailed analysis of social construction of gender as well as the ways in which it is reinforced, especially through children's toys and advertisements. According to Killerman (2013 as cited in Azmi et al., 2021, p. 5), gender is "socially constructed behavior that society expects and considers most appropriate for men and women based on their biological characteristics", for example, there are girls' toys and male jobs. Even among children's play preferences, it is possible to observe this division – boys prefer those toys that can be associated with traditional male roles, and girls prefer toys associated with female roles. Toy commercials, particularly those targeted at the male child, promote action and aggression, for instance, car toys or balls while girl-oriented toys equally promote toy kitchen or baby dolls. This reiterates the gender roles that young children are expected to adopt from an early age. A number of studies have found high levels of gender stereotypes in toy commercials. Kahlenberg and Hein (2010) demonstrated how advertisements incorporate different elements including colors and background to support gender stereotyping. TV commercials portray boys manipulating toys that represent force and dominance while girls are usually shown either inside the home or indoors and playing with toys or in activities that depict caregiving responsibilities. Owen and Padron (2015) also found gendered language in action figure advertisements where male action figures are depicted as violent with stereotypical masculinity while the female action figures are portrayed as social and emotional. These studies indicate the representation of boys and girls in advertisements in a manner that encourages different behavioral patterns and interests that are aligned with traditional gender roles.

The paper also identifies ways in which gender is represented through advertisement media, stating that girls in advertisements are shown exhibiting feminine traits by playing with dolls, enchanted animals, and accessories. At the same time, boys are presented playing with action figures, animals, and transportation. Davis and Hines (2020) pointed out that conventional sex differences in toy preferences appear to increase with children's age and while girls may be more accepting of neutral or boys' toys, boys are relatively more restrictive in their toy choices. This rigidity is even informed by the socialization process that isolates boys and girls and directs them to different roles from childhood allowing girls some room to alter their roles

unlike boys who are usually forced to stick to their masculinity. Such early experiences of gendered exposure to toys play a vital role in the formation of gender schemas, as explained by Bem in her Gender Schema theory (1981), which holds that society transmits messages to children regarding what is expected of them based on their gender. It also describes how parents, peers and media influence children's toy preference with authors pointing to the importance of explicit and implicit stimulation and visual preference. Some advertisements do a great job of programming children's minds to decide what toys they are fit to play with depending on their gender. According to Pike and Jennings (2005), these perceptions are highly influenced by toy advertisements which continue to enforce the social constructivist impression that there are toys intended for boys only as there are those meant only for girls. This is in line with Gender Schema theory which further contributes to the conclusion that children, by interacting with people and media acquire gender roles which shape their toy selection. As they develop this gender-typical view, children start to ignore information that does not fit the Gender Schema, supporting the impact of traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

The authors next describe a study they conducted using a case study approach. They analyzed 87 toy advertisements that appeared on the Mattel Official Facebook Page in 2019. The advertisements were analyzed and classified according to toy color, toy traits (male, female, neutral), role behavior, and emotions to understand how gender stereotype is reflected in these advertisements. This study proved that advertisements for girl toys were more frequently posted, the most dominant color palettes were pink, purple and blue. The toys targeted at boys were vehicles and action figures, i.e. toys associated with action and strength, and the dominant colors were brown, black, blue, grey and red. Only 15 of the advertised toys were gender-neutral, and they used colors such as white, green and yellow. In the discussion of the findings, the authors stress that gender stereotyping is observed, especially the fact that even though both boy and girl toys are promoted, there are more commercials aimed at girls. The application of color and traits in these advertisements also perpetuates gender roles by depicting girl characters as engaging with domestic or nurturing toys and boy characters in action oriented or aggressive manner while playing. The findings further showed a lack of specific emotions or gendered emotions in most of the advertisements. In conclusion, the authors emphasize the contrast of toys advertised for girls and those advertised for boys in advertisements on Facebook. With these advertisements children directly become absorbed with the gender role models presented and conditioned on how society views them. In

continuing to market toys according to gender norms, toy companies keep influencing children's views on traditional gender roles and limit their potential experiences and interests beyond these roles that could be accessed and activities that could be done. In order to address these issues, the authors suggest that greater representation of male characters and toys addressing the male population is necessary in advertisements.

3.8. TV Cartoon Programs: An Analysis of Gender Roles and Characteristics

(Beenish Zaheen, Samia Manzoor, and Aasima Safdar)

This article provides insight into gender roles and how they are presented in cartoons on twelve TV cartoon programs. The cartoons that were analyzed were shown on the following TV channels targeting children: Disney, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Pogo. The research questions addressed in this study were:

1. Is there any difference in the representation and roles assigned to male and female cartoon characters?
2. What is the difference in gender roles and characteristics assigned to male and female cartoon characters in cartoon programs?

To answer these questions the researchers reviewed 192 hours of chosen cartoons that aired between January 1, 2017 and December 31, 2017. The researchers hypothesized that female cartoon characters would be given less screen time than male characters and that male characters would be portrayed in more lead roles than their female counterparts. Both hypotheses were proven correct with a surprising contrast in the representation of female and male characters.

It was also hypothesized that male cartoon characters would be shown as more resilient, skilled, driven, hardy, sporty and independent. In contrast, female characters would be portrayed more as nurturing, beautiful, failing more frequently than their male counterparts, and showing characteristics that are viewed as traditionally female such as submissiveness and sensitivity. The results showed that the traits related to the first hypothesis were exhibited by both female and male characters almost equally, with the only exception being the characteristic *hardy*, which was more prevalent in male characters. The second hypothesis

was proven correct in every point except for *failing more frequently than their male counterparts* and *submissiveness*.

These research results show partial progress in the representation of female and male characters as compared to past studies. Even though male characters have up to 44% more screen time than female characters, they are both given an almost equal number of characteristics such as intelligence, power, assertiveness, and independence. Even though the results confirmed some traditionally male characteristics, female characters also exhibited some of the traditionally female characteristics, which helps viewers discern female characters from male.

The researchers conclude that cartoons play an important role in teaching children to differentiate males from females. They state that social behavior and TV programs come hand in hand when it comes to gender role stereotypes. One cannot change without the other – in order for society to move forward in bridging the gaps of gender stereotypes, those gaps must first be resolved in cartoons shown to children.

3.9. Sweet Girls and Tough Boys: An Analysis of Gender Representations in Children's Cartoon Shows

(Attia Altaf, Qasim Mahmood, and Zarmina Gul)

This article discusses a similar topic as the previous one. The researchers analyzed randomly selected 34 hours of cartoons aired on the following TV networks: Disney, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network. The content analysis focused on the period between 2016 and 2021, totaling 30 seasons and 150 episodes. The following research questions were defined:

1. What is the ratio of male and female characters in children's cartoon shows?
2. How has gender been portrayed in children's entertainment programs?
3. Which gender is more actively related to positive and negative themes in cartoon shows?

The researchers hypothesized that male roles would be more active than female roles, male characters would be active in displaying negative themes, and there would be more males representing unethical themes than females. It was found that male characters did appear on

screen more than twice as much as female characters did, male characters were more often portrayed in negative themes, and the ratio of male and female characters participating in unethical themes was 2.2:1.

It is important to note that we live in a time where technology cannot be avoided. TVs, laptops, tablets, and phones are all around us, and more often than not children have access to them. Children watch cartoon shows and, in their mind, create a picture of how boys or girls should behave and which qualities they should embrace. Also, some of the shows are not specifically for the very young, as their target population are adolescents, but they still might be watched by young children. The authors emphasize that girls in most shows are sexualized by being shown wearing revealing clothes such as shorts, miniskirts, and crop tops. They are shown dealing with shallow “problems” such as gossiping, shopping, and jealousy. Even though jealousy is an important emotion that children should learn to recognize and deal with, the authors warn that in these cartoons it is represented as superficial and simply brushed off. Seeing how unrealistic some standards in modern media are, it may be harmful for a young mind to create an image of what they are supposed to be, look, or act like only to find it unachievable. In other words, the authors propose that because of a false representation of duties, roles and limitations assigned to a specific gender individuals may be prevented from understanding and realizing their full potential.

3.10. The effects of gendered information in stories on preschool children’s development of gender stereotypes

(Maximillian Seitz, Jan Lenhart, and Nina Rübsam)

The authors emphasize that storybooks have an important role in young children’s lives as they may contribute to their socialization. They may also have a significant influence on the reinforcement or change in their perception of gender stereotypes as they may tell children what is acceptable for the male or female gender.

The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of gendered information on unfamiliar words in children’s books. The study was conducted in Southern Germany with 40 preschool children aged 3-6 years (60% female) from three different kindergartens and from a diverse socioeconomic background. Two experiments were carried out by the researchers. In the first experiment, stories were read to 40 children about a gendered protagonist in a non-

gendered context or a non-gendered protagonist in a gendered context. In the second experiment, the children were read stories in which the protagonist's gender and the context information were compatible. Each story told had a child as the main character, the researchers only used age-appropriate words, and the stories featured no pictures. If the characters in the stories were gendered, they were given common German names. In the stories where the main character was not gendered, instead of names, pseudowords were used. Upon hearing the story, the children were asked 1) if the neutral pseudoword was something for boys, girls, or for both, 2) if they would like to pursue the activity described in the story, and 3) whether the character in the story was male or female.

In the second experiment, the children were asked (1) if the neutral pseudoword was something for boys, girls, or for both; (2) if they thought that interacting with the pseudoword would be fun; and (3) whether they would like to pursue the pseudoword activity.

The results showed that when presented with a non-gendered character, the children tended to use context to assign the character a gender whether male or female. On the other hand, it was determined that a gendered character had more influence on a child's understanding of gender stereotypes than gendered context. Boys identified with male protagonists as well as the non-gendered ones and showed interest in engaging in the activities from the stories, while girls showed a clear preference for activities associated with their own gender. Children showed more interest in a story if the gender of the protagonist was aligned with the context of the story (e.g. a female protagonist in a feminine context). Even though both genders favored gender-congruent stories, the effect was more pronounced in girls than in boys.

This article shines a light on the way gender is depicted in children's stories and the importance it plays in a child's perception of gender and gender stereotypes. It shows that, when provided with a context, children are able to assign gender to an activity, and vice versa. Through books, authors, parents, and educators can affirm gender stereotypes or broaden the boundary of what is acceptable for a certain gender. Promoting traits usually considered to "belong" to the opposite gender could support the healthier development of children.

4. CONCLUSION

Continuous professional development is one of the key requirements all teachers need to meet. Nowadays, there are many different ways in which teachers can learn about the most up-to-date findings related to their profession, and reading about academic research related to topics relevant for the field of education is only one of them. Due to its *lingua franca* status in the contemporary world, English has also become the dominant language in which scholarly papers and other writings are published. Therefore, the teachers, regardless of the educational level at which they are teaching, need to possess sufficient English language proficiency to be able to find the most relevant information to implement in their teaching. The analysis of ten scholarly papers dealing with the topic of gender stereotypes related to children's toys presented in this thesis will hopefully provide relevant and applicable information for teachers in the field of early childhood and preschool education.

Based on the analysis, it may be concluded that the researchers whose articles were analyzed warn about the lasting effects the choice of toys in pre-primary age may have on both boys and girls. Children come into contact with toys very early in life and because of all the digital technology, the information about different toys is all around them. In the media and in shops, toys are frequently presented according to gender norms, reinforcing the prevailing cultural understandings or expressions of masculinity and femininity. Early exposure to specific views and ideas can have significant implications for the ways in which children perceive themselves and others, influencing their cognitive development as well as subsequent actions or interests. Hence, boys are more likely to be given toys that will impact the development of their spatial and problem-solving skills (e.g. construction sets and vehicles) while girls are mostly given toys aimed at encouraging nurturing, caregiving and appearance schemes. In addition to reinforcing familiar gender norms, these trends may also influence how children understand their own experiences and possibilities for personal growth.

Studies have shown that insistence on gendered toys may have long-term consequences for children. Play may determine how children are going to be influenced by gender stereotypes and how they may affect their aspirations and direct them towards the existing job categories. In other words, if boys frequently come into contact with construction sets and STEM-friendly toys at a young age, they are more likely to choose careers in science and technology. On the other hand, girls who mainly play with dolls and other domestic toys might be steered into caregiving or similar careers, traditionally regarded as feminine. Although these are not

toxic toys per se, the sharp division between what is male or female inhibits all children from having more varied experiences.

The research shows that the more extensively the children are exposed to games and toys that have not been gendered or marketed explicitly towards girls or boys, the greater the chances are they will develop balanced skills, which in turn provides them with more options in their future career choices. Boys and girls benefit from playing with different kinds of toys, which makes them better rounded individuals and provides them with access to some traditionally gendered qualities.

Researchers recommend a change in toys and play, emphasizing the role of parents, caregivers, and teachers. Through intentionally facilitating diverse play opportunities and encouraging cross-gendered play, adults can provide more inclusive environments for children. Toys can do more than reinforce stereotypes, and this is why children need to be provided with tools that encourage critical thinking, creativity and independence to explore a wide range of interests and career paths confidently.

Future studies will be crucial for a more complete understanding of the long-term effects of playing with gender-neutral toys. Examination of children's skills development and their career aspirations and relating them to early play interventions focusing on gender role perceptions may provide much needed knowledge that may help in determining appropriate educational approaches. Similarly, research should explore the way children are learning about gender from digital play experiences since these environments will continue to become more and more part of most children's lives.

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Izjava o izvornosti završnog/diplomskog rada

Izjavljujem da je moj završni/diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristio drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

(vlastoručni potpis studenta)