

PART ONE: SEX ROLES

Nursery School Sex-role Play among Four- and Five-Year Olds

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Children growing up in society are influenced by the people around them, and by the values and traditions of the culture into which they are born. Through socialization, individuals learn to coexist and interact with others, and to live within the bounds set by the norms of the group. Socialization is an inherent part of the cultural process. However, when socialization carries with it implications that are political — when, for example, in the case of sex roles, cultural cues define the man as strong and dominant and the woman as dependent and submissive — then a massive system of stereotyped socialization is institutionalized. Such stereotyping can provide security: it allows people to know exactly how to act and what to expect from others. Stereotyping often makes it difficult, however, to see people as individuals. People tend to develop expectations of others that are not necessarily accurate, but to which they cling even in the face of contrary information. Furthermore, people develop expectations about their own abilities, potentials, options, and expectations that are often self-fulfilling. Stereotyping makes it difficult for anyone, male or female, to feel that s/he is a unique individual, and not merely a living embodiment of a large and powerful generalization.

Socialization is an extremely effective way of strengthening and transmitting stereotypes. One has only to look at the first-grade reading texts from the recent past to see the tremendous effect socializing forces can have in the formation of stereotyped sex-roles. How many times were children told about Dick and Jane and Mother-in-her-apron and Father-coming-home-from-work? Although the books provided an accurate picture of how duties were divided in many American households in the early 1960's, they also contributed to stereotyped assumptions and lent legitimizing force to the structural arrangement of society.

In the United States, school is a powerful and pervasive socializing force. Many children begin school at the age of three or four, and thus are exposed at an early age to other children and to adult role models who, by virtue of their role as "teachers," are instrumental transmitters of culture. In school, children interact with their peers and learn to live by the rules of group life. They also are given a chance to work out their conceptions of the world through play.

In play, children can actually "be" other people. They can express other people's concerns, imitate

other people's language, and often dress up in other people's clothes. The study of play, therefore, is extremely valuable. It can tell us something about how children see their world — which in many ways is our world, too. Because as adults we are often so enmeshed in our world, children in play, by their unassuming frankness, often reveal things of which we are not aware.

Research Setting and Design

This paper is based on eight visits of three or four hours each to a nursery school. During the first six visits I observed the children of one class at play, sitting a few feet away and taking notes. At first they were curious as to what I was doing. They asked me, I told them, and from then on, they pretty much ignored me. During the last two visits I interviewed the children, recording their answers on a small tape recorder. I think that neither I nor my notebook nor my tape recorder interfered particularly with their spontaneity, and that I therefore got an accurate representation of their play activity and opinions.

One of the first things I noticed during my fieldwork at the University Nursery School was how seriously children take their play. "Everybody in the school," one girl said simply, "likes to play." Children often draw a clear distinction between what is play and what is not. One girl who was observed making tie-dyes with a boy was asked if she had been playing with him. She replied, "No, I wasn't playing with him. I was just making tie-dyes." The same girl, when asked why she didn't like to play in the school's walk-through doll house, explained, "Cause I don't want to be a doll!"

Another girl, in a longer exchange, was asked why the girls didn't play on the climbing structures or swings. She answered,

" 'Cause ... they're usually doing something inside ... and then riding their horses home."
 "Girls play inside?"
 "Yeah."
 "Do girls play out on the swings and the climbing bars?"
 "No, they're riding their horses by ..."

The ability to carry on continuity of thought and of play is one of the things that allows children to role-play. Children's role-play not only represents the world that they see, but may also carry over into their non-play behavior and even, I hypothesize, form the beginnings of adult value structures. Role-play is taken

as seriously as any other kind of play, and many games involve a high degree of realistic role differentiation. In the doll house, for example, children not only assume the roles of “mommy” and “daddy,” but also those of big and little sister and brother, babies, and grandparents.

The setting of boundaries for who can play what, where, and with whom is also indicative of the seriousness of children’s play. These boundaries are especially of interest in the study of stereotyped sex-role play. In my study I looked for differences in play based on sex. I was interested in whether differences evolved out of individual preferences, whether they were maintained and enforced by a mandate, whether they applied to all children, and whether there were differences among children or groups of children.

I found that there were no clear-cut male/female differences in play that held true for all the children. Instead, it appeared that different groups of boys and girls, and different individuals within those groups, engaged in various types of play to various degrees. The children’s impressions of what they and other children *could* play also varied widely.

Who Plays with Whom?

Each child was interviewed and at the beginning, was asked to point out his/her best friends — i.e. those children with whom s/he played most often — on the school’s Birthday Chart (which had photographs of all the children). Additional information on patterns of association, likes, and dislikes emerged in the course of the interviews. The responses of the children to these questions are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the

overall play pattern included near-exclusive same-sex play, completely flexible boy/girl play, and extreme other-sex exclusiveness.

Table 1: Best Friends and Play Partners

subject no.	sex of subject	best friends		children not liked or played with	
		same-sex	opp. sex	same-sex	opp. sex
1 ¹	m	4	(4)	1	(*) ²
2	f	7	1	1	3
3	m	12	6	0	1
4	f	4	2	0	2
5	f	5	4	1	3
6	m	5	4	2	2
7	f	1	5	2	0

¹Although eight children were interviewed, two of the boys were interviewed together, and because of the extreme similarity in their answers, they are referred to throughout the study as “Subject 1.”

²Subject 1 repeated throughout the interview that he “hated all girls” and seemed to interact with his four opposite-sex (female) friends in a “macho” and stereotyped manner. See further comments.

Who Plays What and Where?

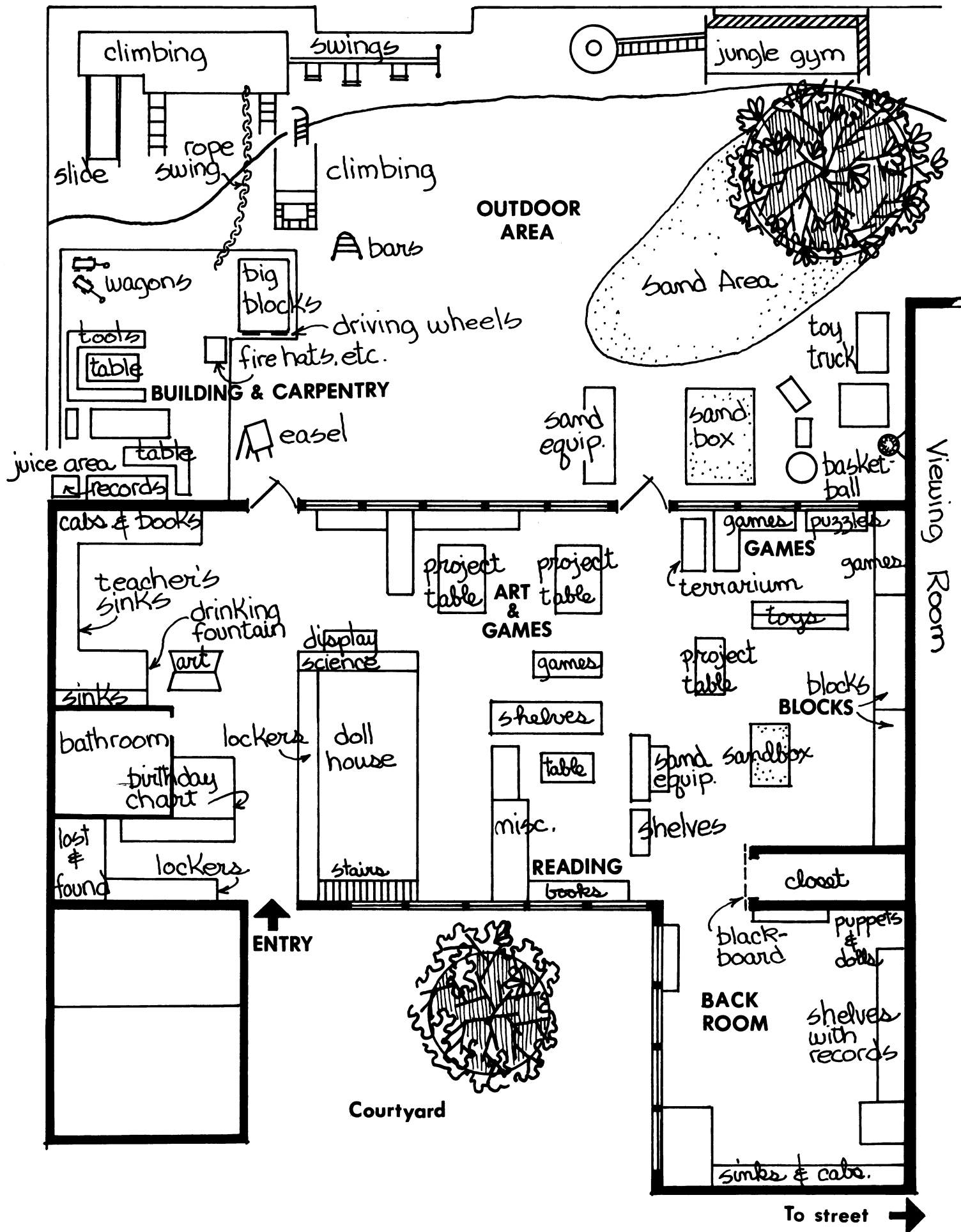
The children showed a somewhat smaller range of response when questioned about where they played. (The nursery school is divided into distinct play areas, the names of which are familiar to the children — see map.) These responses are shown in Table 2.

Initially, it would seem that most children played most places, and that at least as far as areas were

Table 2: Preferences for Games and Places to Play

subject #	sex of subject	chase games	Jungle Gym	swings	big sand area	doll house	art	outside/inside	blocks	super heroes	stories	other
1	m	yes	—	—	yes	yes	—	no diff.	—	—	no	ranger, cub scouts
2	f	—	—	yes	no	yes	—	no diff.	—	—	yes	—
3	m	—	—	—	—	yes	—	—	—	yes	—	—
4	f	—	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no diff.	—	no	—	—
5	f	—	yes	—	no	no	yes	—	not much	yes	—	—
6	m	no	—	—	yes	yes	yes	—	yes	—	—	—
7	f	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	—	—	no	yes	—

yes = plays there
 no = doesn’t play there
 — = did not come up in interview



← Offices & Testing room →

To street →

concerned, the teaching staff had achieved its goal of providing the children with a totally flexible range of play options. However, it was important to ask not only *where* the children played but also *what* they played. This distinction was particularly apparent in the case of the doll house. The two-story walk-through doll house had many of the trappings of a house, and thus had the potential to elicit play relevant to the children's impressions of sex roles. As it turned out, however, a preference for playing in the doll house was not necessarily a preference for stereotyped sex-role play.

The Doll House

Seven of the eight children interviewed said that they played in the doll house. Their descriptions of what they did in the doll house, however, ranged tremendously. The most "macho" boy, Subject 1, who consistently tried to project an image of strength and of antipathy towards girls and "girl games," said that he played in the doll house "sometimes," and that when he did he played "ranger" or "cub scouts." Subject 2 reported that she played "toys and dolls" in the house. Subject 3 reported that he played in the house "a lot," but did not specify any particular games. Subject 4 said that "all (she did) was cook." Subject 5, the only child who said that she never played in the house and who said, in fact, that she had never seen anyone playing there, exclaimed, "I don't like to play with dummy dolls!" Subject 6 said that he played in the doll house with both boys and girls, and that he and his friends did not pretend they were daddy or mommy, but "just played." Finally, Subject 7 indicated that she "sometimes" played in the house. Although she did not state specifically what she played there, she did feel that girls played in the house more than boys. She also conceptualized a clear difference between what girls played in the house and what boys played there. This difference extended to her conceptions of adult sex-roles as well.

"Do girls play (in the doll house) more, or boys?"

"Girls. They . . . cook and do . . . that stuff."

"Do you think boys would like to stay home and cook and play in the doll house, or not? Do they like to do other things?"

"Yeah, they like to pretend that the robber's home . . . and girls don't like that."

"Why do girls play in the doll house more than boys? Why do they like it?"

"Because, doll houses . . . usually girls stay near houses. 'Cause they have to cook . . . and that stuff."

"You mean when they get bigger?"

"Yeah."

"Girls . . . mothers usually stay at home?"

"Yeah. And boys like to do other things."

Clearly, then, not all of the children who played in the doll house played the same games there. However, we are not merely interested in differences in play. We are also interested in whether these differences are due to differences in preference or in pre-

rogative — in whether they reflect differences in what the children like to play or what they feel they *can* play, in whether the children feel the differences to be rigid and stereotyped. If there are, in fact, certain games that some children feel are "girl games" or "boy games," the strength of the taboos imposed for violation of these expectations by other children is an important consideration.

Super Heroes

The question of prerogative was raised most successfully in reference to a popular game called "Super Heroes." In this game, children take on the roles of such TV characters as Batman, Wonder Dog, Wonder Woman and Aqua Girl. I asked questions to determine not only who the children thought usually played the games, but also who they thought *could* play the games, and why.

All three of the girls who responded to questions about Super Heroes had rigid conceptions of who played and who was allowed to play. Subject 4, when asked, "What do A and B (two boys) like to play?," answered, "Batman." When asked if she had ever played Batman, she said, "No," and when asked if the boys mostly played Batman, answered, "Yes." Subject 7, even with her obvious propensity for playing with the boys, stated that she had never played Super Fans (a Super Heroes game), and that only one girl in the school did. She also stated that she had never played Batman. She was aware of the Batman game and said she had seen other children playing it, but when asked, "Who does (one boy) play Batman with?," pointed only to the same girl referred to earlier, and to numerous boys. Later she changed her mind and said that "Everybody plays it but me and (one boy away in London)." She continued to maintain, however, that a girl could never be Batman.

"Why?"

"Because . . . he has to be a boy."

"Why does it have to be a boy? Why couldn't a girl be Batman?"

"Well, because girls are precious of people. Really, that's not it!" (and did not offer any further explanation)

Subject 5 said that she never played Batman, but that "friends and I play Wonder Woman and Super Girl, and Batman and Robin are our boyfriends." Interestingly, although the girls in this game took on "Super Heroes" roles, the interactions were still somewhat stereotyped (*i.e.* "girlfriend-boyfriend").

The boys who talked about the Super Heroes games were less restrictive in their descriptions. Subject 3, an avid Super Fans player, outlined the characters in the game:

"(a girl) played Wendy. That's Wonder Dog's friend and Marvin's friend. Marvin's Wendy's brother."

"And who played Marvin?"

"(a boy) played Marvin. I played Wonder Dog."

When asked later if girls could play in the Wonder

Dog game, or if a girl could ever be Wonder Dog, Subject 3 replied, "No . . . because Wonder Dog's a boy." Asked if a boy could ever play Wendy, he answered, "No . . . Wendy's a girl." He did, however, state that Wendy was Wonder Dog's best friend, just like Marvin, which indicated that although he had a fixed conception of who could take on which roles, he did feel there were roles for girls as well as for boys, and that these roles enjoyed approximately equal status.

Only Subject 6, the most flexible child overall, had a completely flexible description of the game. According to him, not only could girls play the Batman game, but girls could be Batman as well as Wonder Woman and other characters. When asked specifically if one rather shy girl would ever play Batman, Subject 6 answered,

"Well, she never does."

"She never does? Could she if she wanted to? Could any of the girls play with you if they wanted to? Why do you think some of them don't?"

"Because they just don't want to."

Although in many cases attitudes toward Super Heroes correlated with the children's general attitudes toward restrictions and prerogatives in play, and with their preferences for same-sex or opposite-sex playmates, this was not always the case. Subject 4, for example, had a rigid conception of the Batman game, but stated that she "didn't know" whether boys liked to play in the doll house. Furthermore, she said that "everybody" played in the Big Sand area, an area many children identified as largely restricted to boys. Subject 7, who was also somewhat rigid in her description of Super Heroes, reported that although the boys played on the climbing bars and swings more than the girls did, the girls could play there if they wanted to — the girls simply "(didn't) like it as much." When asked if boys could play with dolls, Subject 5, who saw Super Heroes as a "boyfriend-girlfriend" game, responded, "Maybe . . . I'm not sure," and said that although she didn't usually play with the blocks, she could if she wanted to. Subject 3 extended his insistence upon children playing same-sex roles in the Super Heroes game to other games as well, exclaiming, "You never saw a girl on the Lone Ranger!" Here he did not mention alternative roles available to girls; he simply said that, "Nobody bugs us when we play Lone Ranger — nobody."

Subject 6 remained entirely consistent. During the entire interview he mentioned no sex-role restrictions on any game whatsoever. He said that although he didn't think girls played as much as boys did in the Big Sand area, he didn't know why, and stated that girls liked the outdoors as much as boys. He remarked that one girl in particular made up "pretty good games," and he explained his conceptions of who liked whom by hypothesizing that children liked other children who were close to them on the Birth-

day Chart. During his description of chasing games, Subject 6 was asked, "Do (the girls) ever turn around and chase the boys, or do the boys just chase the girls?" "Both," he explained; "they have the same feeling." Finally, when asked if there were anything he played that he wouldn't want girls to play, he said no.

The two remaining children who did not answer questions about the Super Heroes game were also generally consistent in their conceptions of play options. Subject 2 said that she played "daddy and mommy" in the doll house, and she was emphatic that she did not play in the Big Sand area — only the boys and a few select girls, she said, were allowed to play there. Subject 1 constantly tried to convey a "macho" image. The interview was filled with such comments as "I'm gonna kill you, (a girl)," and, "I could beat that girl up." Subject 1 said that the girls always "told the teacher." He punched girls' pictures on the Birthday Chart, and said that he often boxed with both boys and girls. When asked if he would ever let girls play in the Big Sand area, he said repeatedly, "No way — no way."

Conclusion

The study of children's play shows that not all children have preconceived ideas of what boys and girls can do. All children take their play seriously, however, and attitudes toward prerogatives in play may generalize to attitudes about sex roles in a wider sense. The stereotypic attitudes of some children are not isolated phenomena; rather, they are part of the complex whole of American culture.

We must keep in mind, however, that nursery school is only one part of the child's day and only one of several agents of socialization. Children may learn flexible role patterns during the three-and-one-half hours per day they are in nursery school, only to have this counterbalanced in the home — by an average of six hours per day of television, for example. Television fare tends to be extremely stereotypic: male detectives, female secretaries, male presidential candidates, female housewives. Popeye saves Olive Oyl from a disastrous fate, the handsome prince rescues and awakens the Sleeping Beauty. Girls can become "smooth, soft and sexy" while their carpets clean themselves; boys learn from Joe Namath what kind of aftershave gets the girl. No nursery school staff can counteract all this with a few non-stereotypic stories during story hour.

If children could leave their nonstereotypic nursery school and come home to nonstereotypic television programming, their school experiences would not be thwarted. In-school learning could be reinforced, rather than counteracted, by learning outside of school. Furthermore, parents and teachers could add a new element to the American child's cultural milieu: the habit of questioning assumptions and of challenging traditions that may no longer be approp-

riate. Culture is a powerful force, one that does not bow easily to individual challenge. But we have some powerful tools at our disposal, and by appreciating the influence of cultural cues in shaping attitudes, we have taken the first step toward the utilization of those tools.