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Sex differences, sexuality and gender identity – what's play got to do with it?

Boys and girls play differently.

'These differences emerge early in life, and are among the largest non-reproductive physical or psychological differences (between male and female children) …the differences have considerable significance for mental health, social relationships and cognition across the life span' Becker, Berkley, Geary, Hampson, Herman and Young. Eds. (2008:275)

These differences and the causes of these differences have been the subject of much debate in recent years.   Are there indeed differences, and if so, are they a natural manifestation of our biology; are they nurtured through social construction or is there truth in both? Does context contribute to potential difference? If there are differences, is there a purpose to these and if so what might that be? What does all this have to do with playing and what might it therefore mean for playwork?

To begin with, to clear up some terminology, let's talk about sex – are you a male or a female? By sex we mean the biological, genetic differences that are fixed at birth. With a few exceptions, females are born with vaginas, ovaries filled with eggs, wombs and the potential to grow breasts, menstruate, and have babies. They have some different hormones to males – most notably oestrogen and progesterone. Males are born with a penis that has the potential to become erect, testicles with sperm that can be ejaculated from the penis, the potential to father babies and, with a few exceptions they have more testosterone than females.

'Gender is a psychological term describing our awareness and reaction to our biological sex and is affected by biological, psychological and social factors' *Featherstone & Bailey (2005:9).* Are you a girl or a boy baby? Will you grow into a man or a woman? By the age of about two years most children have a notion of whether they are a boy or a girl and they gradually grow more aware of the biological differences between males and females. This develops into the private experience of feeling like a male or a female. Generally, but not always a person's gender identity is in line with their biological sex.

Gender role is the public expression of gender, it is behaviour and ways of being, that are considered to be masculine, feminine or somewhere in between. This is influenced by both experience and biology but the extent to which one has the greater influence than the other, is a point of considerable and ongoing contention within the scientific world and for many others, some of whom consider that people can be severely disadvantaged by the gender role that they play out in society.

Sexuality is the capacity for sexual feeling and arousal or a person's sexual preferences for particular types of activity that arouse them.

'Although each child comes to form his or her sexuality in a unique way, there are patterns of sexuality formation common for both boys and girls. At an early age, children begin to form an understanding of the ways that bodies look and function for both sexes, often through a process of body discovery in which children become aware of their bodies as part of themselves and part of their identity' Schuhrke,(2000:1537).

In this way children acquire their gender identity.

Sexuality is also a term sometimes used to question whether a person is homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual or somewhere on that spectrum. Adults can have difficulty with children's emerging sexuality but 'Cross-cultural studies have shown that children are not born with sexual guilt or anxieties; they acquire them' *Tannahill (1992:1537).* Children often explore sexuality through sex play, for example, by "playing doctor." Through sex play, (between consenting children of a similar age) children participate in information exchange in which they learn to label their sexual thoughts and functions *Langfeldt (1990:1538*). Another way that 'children explore their sexuality is through bathroom humor' *Cavanagh Johnson (1999:1538).* The way that adults respond to children's early sexual play, can have a profound affect on how comfortable the children become with their later sexual behaviour and sexual identity.

Bailey (2011:14) in the Governmental Review on the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood talks of the "wallpaper of children's lives" (being filled with sexual images) and children "living in a sexual and sexualised culture" and reports on the very strong concerns that parents express about their children's early sexualisation which they believe is being caused by inappropriate media images; pop music videos; 'sexy' children's clothing, such as padded bras for infants and slogans on tee-shirts; ease of access to online pornography; plethora of unsuitable adult material on full display to children either before the watershed on television or in magazines and newspapers; sexually explicit images in advertising, such as perfume advertisements and so on – it's a sexualised world out there. The report suggests that there are two potential ways to approach the problem. One is to think of children as being vulnerable and in need of protection from this 'wallpaper of sexual images', in which case legislation and adult intervention is needed and the other is to see children as strong and capable and to give them information and the skills that are necessary to recognise the problems and to overcome them themselves. The report suggests that both approaches may be necessary.

There are aspects of children's play that are, of course, similar for boys and girls, but are girls and boys genetically programmed to play differently? The answer is yes, no, maybe. Research has very conflicting results which unsurprisingly usually fit the scientific model from which they are spawned. Thus, for instance, neuroscientists and biologists generally find evidence to

show that gendered play and behaviour is genetically hard wired, whilst feminists and many social scientists believe that gendered behaviour is socially and culturally 'engendered'. *Cealy Harrison and Hood-Williams (2002:145)* point out that "we might say of research into the differences between sexes that it tells us more about the social, political and intellectual concerns that animate it than about the difference between boys and girls or women and men".The views of parents and people who work with children also vary according to their philosophical stance and political inclinations. At various times throughout their childhood most children and young people are sure that males and females are different and behave differently. Conclusive evidence is sparse yet views expressed are very definite, from academics and non-academics alike. There is little love lost between the 'nature' and 'nurture' brigades.

So for those in the biological 'yes' camp, sex differences in children's play are 'large' and 'important' according to *Berenbaum et al (2008:286)*. *Brizendine (2008:17*) says that scientists have learned that no matter how we try to influence our children, 'girls will play house and dress up their dollies and boys will race around fighting imaginary foes, building and destroying and seeking new thrills'. According to *Bead (1994:125)* Boys tend to engage more in rough play and complex competitive team games. Girls on the other hand choose more individual activities such as, reading and colouring, and team sports. She suggests that girls have best friends are co-operative and avoid confrontation with friends but can be mean to girls outside their group. Whereas boys have groups with a leader, dominance, hierarchy and are involved in establishing and maintaining status. *Sax (2005:28)* states 'Girls and boys play differently. They learn differently. They fight differently. They see the world differently. They hear differently.' *Eliot (2010:119)* thinks that 'separation is a fact of human childhood. As long as there are enough kids to form a group, the first split will be down gender lines'.

There has been a rise in studies of the brain and neuroscientists have found definite differences in the brains of males and females. 'From birth neural activity in the brain is activated by what is experienced and this in turn alters the structure of the brain either directly or through gene expression. Gender is part of our social biology. *Becker, J, et al (2008:xvii)* suggest that we 'now know that even the basic neurochemistry of the brain can differ according to sex' and this is due to developmental events and the effects of steroid hormones on neuronal and glial activity. Male brains are 9% bigger than female brains, but female brains finish growing one to two years earlier. In young children there is evidence of differences in sensory processing, memory and language circuits, frontal lobe development and overall neural speed and efficiency.

In the 'no' camp are the people who consider that play behaviour is not 'hard wired' - boys and girls do often appear to play differently (depending upon circumstances) but that their gender related behaviours are totally a reflection of societies values and are not necessary, indeed they are considered to be disadvantaging. *Fine (2011:229)* believes that boys and girls may well play in

the same way if they were brought up in a non-gendered world. She suggests that

'A child's toy preferences are no doubt influenced by a whole host of factors, with his or her gender knowledge being just one part of a complicated mix.....overall it does suggest that gender identity and gender stereotype knowledge motivate gender stereotypical play.'

Bead (1994:xvii) says that 'biology is not destiny and the fact that we can observe differences in how boys and girls behave does not mean that those differences are inevitable or unchangeable.' There are also those, women particularly, who anecdotally talk of playing mainly with children of the opposite sex throughout their childhood and playing the same things, in the same way. Their personal experience tells them that boys and girls do play in the same ways and ergo differences that manifest themselves in other children's lives must be socially constructed.

The 'maybes' believe that stereotypically gendered play is a fair mixture of nature and nurture. Eliot (2010:110) says that one study of twins determined that gender-typical play to be roughly 50% heritable, suggesting that the other half is determined by nurture. In *Delusions of Gender (2011:123),* primatologist *Frances Burton* is cited as proposing 'that the effect of foetal hormones in primates is to predispose them to be receptive to whatever behaviours happen to go with their own sex in the particular society into which they are born.' *Melissa Hines* points out this would provide a very 'flexible design' that would 'liberate' the primates from 'hard wired' masculinity or femininity, so that the behaviour would be adaptive to changing circumstances in the society. This idea is in line with that hypothesis that is put forward in *Pink Brain, Blue Brain (2010:136)* "Gender differences begin as little seeds, planted by genes and hormones but nurtured through social learning, gender identification and children's strong urges to conform". We would suggest that it is not merely that children want to conform, but also that their own ideas about gender make them more or less receptive to the influence of others, in different contexts. Gender identity is very important as part of a child's self concept – knowing who they are and who else is like them.

Parents who try to bring their children up in non-gendered ways report varying degrees of success in relation to the non-gendered behaviour of their boys and girls. In the 1980s Sandra and Daryl Bem, psychologists, raised their children in a gender aschematic way, going to great lengths to neutralise any gendered influence that might have affected their son's and daughter's gendered development so that their children were free to adopt any stance that they chose free from stereotypical attitudes. Few parents go to these sorts of lengths but those who say they are trying, varyingly report stereotypically male play behaviour from their sons and female play behaviour from their daughters. Others suggest that each child is an individual and their behaviour cannot be described in either male or female ways. Yet others report stereotypically female behaviour from their sons and vice versa. *Fine (2011:201)* suggests that it is almost impossible for ingrained stereotypical gender notions to not leak out when adults are with children regardless of

their explicit gender attitudes. 'Implicit attitudes play an important part in our psychology …. They leak out into our behaviour, influence our decisions – and all without us realising'. However there are also those theories that suggest that children 'genderise' themselves through peer socialisation – *Rich-.Harris, (1995:199)* suggests that' peers are the most influential mediators and interpreters of gender'. *Diane Ruble in 'The Gender Delusion' (2011:211)* believes that children become 'gender detectives' in search of clues as to the implications of belonging to the male or female tribe.' This suggests that it is important for them to be responsible for their own gender identity, regardless of the beliefs of adults around them. We could examine every aspect of our selves (beliefs, likes and dislikes, viewpoints, behaviour and so on) and say that they have all been, and continue to be, influenced by socialization. But there is an expectation that as adults we are responsible for every aspect of our selves. Surely we owe children the same respect. Is meddling with children's gender schemas, manipulation or support for a fairer life?

If there are non-physical differences between boys and girls, these are some of the differences that have been put forward (Obviously age affects how these differences come into play):

Featherstone and Bailey (2005:29) suggest that boys think deductively (start from general principles and apply to circumstances); think in abstract symbols; apply abstract reasoning; work silently or use jargon or codes; hear less and need more repetition and explanation; get bored more easily than girls and become disruptive; find it difficult to stay still; are less sensitive to group dynamics and less co-operative; behave impulsively; use more space as they play and learn indoors and out; are helped to self manage by movement. They suggest that girls think inductively (start from concrete examples and build up to general theory); use objects to work out mathematical problems and calculations; apply concrete reasoning; produce more words and enjoy collaborative working; are better listeners and absorb detail through conversation, instruction and discussion; are better at self managing boredom than boys and less likely to be disruptive; find it easier to sit still; play and work more neatly and use less space and invade others' space less.

 Eliot (2010:6) believes "There are a few truly innate differences between the sexes – in maturation rate, sensory processing, activity level, fussiness and play interests" *..*

In their chapter on Sex *differences in Children's Play, Berenbaum et al (2008:277)* say that in fact 'the sex based preferences of rhesus monkeys for wheeled vs. plush toys are similar to the sex based preferences of human children for boys' vs. girls' toys'. This suggests that children's toy choices partly reflect inherent sex differentiated preferences for characteristics that underlie toys. They also suggest that socialization theories alone are insufficient to explain children's typed play, given evidence for the effects of prenatal androgens and cognitive contributions.

Despite these potential differences, there are far more similarities between girls and boys than there are differences and *Bem (1983)* expressed some concern that society sought to de-emphasize racial distinctions but continued to exaggerate sexual distinctions and play does appear, at times, to manifest itself very differently during the childhood of boys and girls. Are these differences due to natural inclination or due to the gender roles that children have been socialized into or indeed socialise themselves into? "Boys and girls different play preferences are clearly biased by innate tendencies but are further augmented by social factors, especially the child's own growing awareness of actually <u>being</u> a boy or a girl." *Eliot (2010:107)*

There are many theories related to the acquisition of gender, through nature or nurture, summarized below. There is no conclusive evidence that supports any of them, but all have some relevance for the way that we treat children in relation to their gender. Some of the theories are inter-related

Nurture
- Social Structure theories suggest that there are many different cultural contexts and all people are products of social construction. Gender is just part of this and society supports the different social positions that gender roles ascribe to.
- Social Role Theory is all about trying to understand the stereotyped roles that men and women play and why there is this division of labour in different societies. Are males and females equally suited to all roles?
- Social Learning Theory suggests that children develop their gender identity and roles through a learning process that involves modelling, imitation and reinforcement of role models of the same sex. Children observe the behaviours of men and women, copy it, and then receive positive or negative responses to their own gendered behaviour, which in turn reinforces the development of gender roles.
- Social Cognitive Theory asserts that children are active participants in the process of socialization and their cognitive abilities are important in this. Children construct their own abstract models of female and male appropriate behaviour based on their observations and then adopt behaviour that fits their model. This may not be in line with, for instance, their relatives behaviour so a girl may not imitate her mother, or a boy his older brother.
- Group Socialization Theory argues that peers are the most influential mediators and interpreters of gender. Rich-Harris (1995:199) suggests that children are socialized mainly by identifying with their peer group and then taking on that group's norms for attitudes and behaviours, including those associated with gender.
- Cognitive Development Theory proposes that gender cannot be learned until a child reaches a particular stage of intellectual development. According to this theory once the child has categorised her/himself as definitely being either a boy or a girl it will become a self-defining category.
- Gender Schema Theory, developed by Bem in the early 1980s, refers to the theory that children learn about what it means to be male and female from the culture in which they live. According to this theory,

children adjust their behaviour to fit in with the gender norms and expectations of their culture. She felt that if all children were brought up in a 'gender aschematic' way, they would learn nothing about being male or female, would therefore not display any stereotypically male or female behaviour and therefore our culture would cease to be gendered.

Nature
- Evolutionary Theories stress the biological basis of gender difference. Differences are the result of genetics which cause differences in reproductive parts, hormones, brains and therefore the behaviour of males and females and is all part of the evolution process. Neuroscientists are finding new information about the brain all the time and they certainly find many differences between the brains of males and females at all ages. Whether these differences are caused by genetics, hormones or experiences is not agreed on. However *Eliot (2010:6)* suggests that the 'brain actually changes in response to its own experience….and in childhood the brain is far more plastic and malleable that at any other time – "wiring itself in large measure according to the experiences in which it is immersed from prenatal life through adolescence – your brain is what you do with it"'
- Socio-biological theory supports the evolutionary theory too and is all about natural selection. It looks for evidence that links the social behaviour of animals and humans and suggests that males and females have developed different strategies of sexual selection and reproduction and this leads to differently gendered behaviour
- Psychoanalytic Theory was instigated by Freud. It is the first theory of human personality to assign a central role to sexuality. This theory is based on the idea that behaviour (and therefore development) is influenced by our feelings and thoughts, many of which are unconscious and due to previous experiences.
- Essentialism is a theory whose proponents believe that certain properties possessed by a group are universal, and not dependent on context. For example 'women are more empathetic than men' is an essentialist statement based on the idea that gender differences in males and females can be attributed to qualities possessed by males and females.

Whatever your opinions as to how these differences come about;

'Sex differences in childhood play are important for many reasons….they are large, they lead to sex differences in other characteristics (including cognition and adjustment) they reflect the joint effects of biological predispositions, the social world and children's constructions of that world. These differences also have indirect long-term consequences. Children's environments are changed as a result of their play and this in turn affects later opportunities'
Berenbaum et al (2008:286*).*

This notion that children's environments (by this we mean the imaginary worlds they inhabit, which in turn allow them to see their real world differently) are changed as a result of their play (including their gender stereotyped play) and that this change has implications for their future, is a very important consideration for people who work with children as it suggests that through play children can change the whole scope of their lives.

Are there benefits to children developing gender stereotyped roles or is it all disadvantage? Play is very important. *Eliot (2010:113)* suggests that "If each sex sticks to its own gender-appropriate play, children wind up strengthening those same brain areas that were already biased to work better from birth". Gender becomes an organising principle for children, helping them understand and interpret the behaviours of those around them.

There may be a cost to encouraging girls to play more with stereotypical boys' toys, because they will play some of the time with boys' toys anyway, but time use, in childhood play, is limited to certain periods during that childhood, and there may be benefits to playing with girls' toys that we are not aware of. The same may be true related to encouraging boys to play with stereotypical girls' toys. There are particular skills associated with different types of play and some are specifically associated with gender. Does providing boys with construction and transport toys give them an advantage over girls? Do these represent some kind of power? Does providing girls with dolls and pushchairs give them an advantage over boys? Do these represent some kind of ability to care for people? Do gender roles serve an important social and psychological function for individuals as well as society or are they, as some feminists would have it, a way of keeping a power differential in favour of men? There are certainly those who would say so. It is rare that you hear views expressed that suggest that pink, pretty or domestic type toys imbue children with power. In an extract from Cinderella Ate my Daughter in the Observer Newspaper (2011), *Orenstein (2011)* wonders whether she should see this mania for pink princesses as being some kind of progress, where girls can celebrate their power, strength and independence through the colour pink.

What should we who work with children make of this? Do we believe that children are empty vessels ready to be filled with whatever (including gender roles) society throws at them or, as *Malaguzzi* suggests in *Moss & Petrie (2002:22),* are children 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent' and therefore able to determine their own behaviours and work out for themselves what gender means to and for them? If so, how should we best support their gender development – by imposing our own gender agenda on them, by providing what they appear to want (think pink princess outfits, Barbie, toy guns, knives and machetes!), or do we leave it all to chance? The media is very busy influencing what children want to wear, play with, listen to, watch and if they have their way it's a pink and blue world out there, with lots of sexy images and violence – a matter of great concern to many in our society.

We have two examples of girls' play that show their own ideas about gender and power differentials. One of our friends recounted this wonderful anecdote.

'My friend's four year old niece (one of twins, both girls) who, for the past year, has refused to be identified as a girl because she believes that girls can't play in the same way as boys and, if asked, she uses the example of Ben 10 (a children's TV character), which she loves, as proof that girls can't do the same stuff as boys. When I asked her what boys can do that girls can't she put her fist in the air, squatted to the ground, jumped up and shouted "Ben 10! Ben 10!" The rest of the 'girls' in the room - who ranged from four to fifty-five - all, copied her to show that girls could do that too...she just shrugged and said that we didn't do it properly. The thing is, like you say, it isn't just her play that reflects her beliefs about gender differences - she's also refusing to wear nighties, dresses and hates pink, which is the opposite of her sister.'

Fine (2010:11) tells of sociologist Bronwyn Davies description of a little girl in a kindergarten having had her doll snatched away by a boy. After a failed attempt to retrieve the doll she strides to the dressing-up cupboard, pulls out a man's waistcoat and puts it on. She then 'marches out and this time returns victorious with the dolly under her arm. She immediately takes off the waistcoat and drops it to the floor.'

In both these examples the girls seem to be suggesting that if stereotypically masculine traits are adopted then they will be more powerful? They adopt different, more stereotypically, masculine selves in order to fulfil their own goals. Interestingly these anecdotes seem amusing and acceptable when related to girls. Would they be considered in the same way, particularly by fathers, if it were boys, who took on a female self to achieve a goal? Research would suggest not. *Eliot (2010:111)* says that there is much 'parental stereotyping over boys playing with "girl" toys - status difference between the genders is still rife'. She believes that daughters get more leeway than do sons. Tomboys are more acceptable than effeminate boys. 'Sissies' often get family criticism and much peer teasing.

Eliot (2010:113) tells us that it seems that few children engage predominantly in cross-gender play, but a certain amount of experimentation with opposite gender behaviour is normal; according to one survey 23% boys and 39% girls exhibited at least ten different cross-gender behaviours on various occasions. In relation to children's own thoughts, *Bead (1994:106)* thinks that age plays a critical part in exaggerated gender stereotyping. She suggests, for instance, that 4yr olds think it is fine for a boy to wear a dress but 5 & 6yr olds are critical, yet 9 & 10 yr olds are accepting.
In children's minds the 'same sex' and 'other sex' schemas are not equal. Their own is better.

Is it our role to encourage this cross gender play or gender equity or to manipulate the play environment so that there is no gender bias? Should we maintain the status quo or bury our heads in the sand and behave as if it doesn't matter (well does it?)? Children may have a gender bias, and does that in someway limit their play? Should we deprive children of that which they want and behave as if we know what they need? *Featherstone & Bailey (2005:12)* say that 'Only when we can honestly say that every boy and every girl has their individual needs catered for will we be able to say we have

achieved equality of opportunity' Does 'need' suggest that we know better than children what they need to play and if so, how do we square that with our mantra of "freely chosen personally directed, intrinsically motivated play"? If you believe in the social constructionist theories of gendered behaviour then as *Walkerdine (1989)* in *Cealy Harrison & Hood-Williams (2002:151)* suggests the child only 'believes itself to have chosen that which is really being imposed upon it externally'. The child assumes her or himself to be the originator of her or his own actions, but in actuality gendered play has been imposed on her or him by the society and culture in which she or he lives. Do we assume that this has not happened to us?

Walt Whitman as quoted in *Fine (2011:7)* says 'I am large: I contain multitudes' and when we think about how to react to the gendered play of children we bring up a multitude of our own selves all of which will be context sensitive but also possibly we are prey to our own primary gender schema, therefore perhaps we find it hard to come to any form of conclusion. *Fine (2011:7)* suggests that as context can bring our stereotyped self to the fore, it is useful to have a dynamic sense of self in order to be flexible in our responses.

Playworkers can have a profound effect on the indoor environment, and this may be related to gender. The natural outdoor environment is, in itself, non-gendered, but the way that playworkers communicate with children and what they communicate may, potentially engender any play space and if you believe in socialization theories potentially support children's own gender schemas. "Do you girls want to come over here and make daisy chains whilst the boys climb on the rocks?" "Matt is going to do basketball training in the yard, whilst I (Jenny) am going to do cooking in the kitchen". Playworker intervention may also genderise play. "Be careful Suzy. That's a big jump for a little girl". "Go on Luke, you know you can do it" and so on and so forth. Although these examples may seem a little extreme to some readers, unconscious gender stereotyping is alive and kicking. Based on our own experience of having observed or participated in a range of different playwork provision we suggest that there are a number of ways in which playworkers respond to the notion of gender at play as follows:

GENDER IGNORANT
Playworkers here haven't thought about any of this at all. So the play environment is very much based on the personality and experiences of the playworkers themselves who basically make the assumption that what has worked for them personally (in their own childhoods or previous practice) will be fine for the children they work with now.

GENDER NEUTRAL
Playworkers here believe that fundamentally there's no difference between boys and girls playing apart from that which has been socially constructed through their prior experiences. So workers create and resource an environment that is non-gendered and believe and expect that given the opportunity, both girls and boys will be happy to have a go at anything and we should just leave them to get on with it.

GENDER CONTROLLED

Playworkers here decide that boys and girls are reluctant to play at that which is considered to be the other gender's forte and so they set out to ensure that stereotypical play will not happen if they can help it. They ban weapons. They encourage girls to play football, pool and rough and tumble. They encourage boys to do creative stuff and dressing up. They intervene in conversations where girls or boys – usually and especially boys – are putting each other down on account of gender.

GENDER STEREOTYPED

Playworkers here decide that girls will be girls and boys will be boys so set out to cater for both by having girly things and macho things and having the male playworker outside doing physical stuff and sports and the female playworker inside doing creative stuff and cooking

GENDER SIMILAR

Playworkers here decide to create and resource an environment that will focus on the similarities of boys/girls play. They may therefore deliberately encourage games like rounders rather than football on the grounds that both genders like rounders and will happily participate. They may go large with craft projects like constructing a life-size crocodile on the grounds that both genders will therefore enjoy and access this.

GENDER APPRECIATIVE

Playworkers here have decided there are differences in boys and girls play. On the whole they operate by creating a gender-neutral environment – let them do what they like – but sometimes they encourage specific events or bring in specific resources that they know will mostly appeal to one gender e.g. a rap workshop, a dance workshop – hiring in rubber sumo-wrestling suits or bead-making kits. They do this because of their belief in children's rights.

GENDER SPECIFIC

Playworkers here very much recognise the differences and regularly try to cater for this by having particular sessions or resources that will mostly appeal to and satisfy one gender. They do this without reinforcing stereotypes and still encourage children to break the mould and be themselves if they wish. They also behave themselves in ways that might be unexpected for their gender.

A few playworkers, that we have observed, display a number of these different ways of intervening related to gender and play, based on the situation at hand, yet many have a 'one way suits all' approach. Our experience tells us that in Britain there are no specifically approved approaches to playworking in relation to gender and little attention is paid to gender and play in the Playwork Occupational Standards or in many of the courses that are delivered. This leads to either a gender-neutral or gender-controlled approach to play being 'taught' based on the dominant paradigm of child development. If stereotypically male and female toys/activities are made

available in such a way that boys and girls can play with either (whilst the playworkers protect them from any stereotype peer ridicule) some boys will play with dolls, thereby bringing out their feminine nurturing side, or (much to the consternation of many fathers) dress up in princess outfits and some girls will play with construction toys thereby developing their spatial relation skills and so forth. There is no evidence that supports this. Indeed in a review of 172 studies involving 28,000 children, *Lytton & Romney (1991:109: 267-96)* found there was no evidence to support claims that gender-neutral child-rearing had any measurable benefit. They found that 'Boys who are encouraged to play with dolls do not grow up to be any more nurturing than boys who play with trucks or guns'. However much has been written about the detrimental affects of boys being deprived of play fighting *Holland (2003) Thompson (2000).* Is it time to think more about the issue of children and their gendered play? We believe so. Perhaps a start might be for us all to reflect further and start observing how children themselves are dealing with all this.

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