Casey Gelderman

Professor Mundy

English 120

November 25th, 2014

<div align="center">Are Children Playing or Performing?</div>

Children are greatly impacted by what they see, and young children create an idea of the normal based on what they see and hear while they are growing up. The "normal" is conforming to the standard, and in this case children must conform to their gender roles. Today, children spend a significant amount of time in front of the television, which is one source in their life that they get an idea of normal. Another source is influential people in a child's life such as their parents and teachers. All of these things contribute to children identifying themselves at a young age. Children's toys play a big role in triggering children to identify themselves as either girl or boy. Toys are classified as either girl toys or boy toys, and children must play with the proper toy. Children are restricted to playing with their gender specific toy only because they believe that parents or other children will not approve of a boy playing with a girl toy or a girl playing with a boy toy. This creates a gender divide at such a young age, and it doesn't allow for children to cross the gender divide. Toys are supporting the cultural divide and creating cultural expectations because children are expected to start performing their gender specific roles at a young age.

Gender stereotypes for children are created before a child is actually born, when parents who are having girl babies receive gifts that are pink, and parents who are having boy babies receive gifts that are blue. These stereotypes continue to early childhood toys as girls are expected to play with dolls and stuffed animals while boys are expected to play with action

figures or video games. Eileen Wood, Serge Desmarais, and Sara Gugula believe "Traditionally, girls have more dolls and domestic items whereas boys have more tools, sports equipment, and large and small vehicles in their rooms"(40). There are two main influences in a child's life that demonstrate gender roles and expectation. Parents can be the first influence because they are they people who are actually buying the toys for their children. Advertising is the other influence because children see what they are supposed to look like and what they are supposed to play with. For these reasons, children play with the type of toy that they are expected to play with, and that is how toys have been characterized as either girl toys or boy toys.

Parents have a significant impact on the toys that children have available to them, and the toys that children choose to play with. Children are aware of the social expectations that their parents place on them and they try to fit in to their gender roles. A study done by Freeman surveyed three and five year old children, and it asked the children to predict if their parents would accept them playing with certain toys. The outcome of this study shows that children believe that their fathers are stricter than their mothers when it comes to allowing their children to play with toys that are for the opposite gender. Also, fathers are more likely to enforce sex role expectations on their sons rather than on their daughters (Freeman 358). The problem with parental expectation, gender roles, and the gender divide in toys is children think that their parents will not be accepting of them playing with toys made for the opposite gender. The children believe that their parents will not allow them to play with cross-gender toys based on the survey conducted by Freeman. In reality, 96% of parents said they would be okay with their daughter acting like a tomboy, and 88% of parents said they would encourage their daughter to play with trucks and building blocks. 84% of parents said they would be okay with their son

playing dress up or wearing a dress (Freeman 362). These numbers say that parents would be very accepting if their child decided to cross the gender divide. The problem with this children are scared to cross the gender divide in fear of not being accepted and because they see how society expects them to behave.

Advertising and television have a significant influence on how children are prompted to identify themselves as either girls or boys at a young age. By the age of two, children start to identify themselves as girl or boy, and by the age of five the child has an idea of how they should perform according to their gender (Nancy Freeman 358). When children identify themselves they create an idea of how they are supposed to act based on what they see in their life. For example, a young boy would try to perform like his father or any other important male in his life. Another huge influence on a child's idea of gender is seen on television. Television, specifically commercials that are geared towards children, have a huge influence on children's desires and opinions. Besides sleeping, children spend more time watching television than doing any other activity (Hein 831). Television provides an example of how children should act and behave, and commercials are made to target a gender specific audience. Even the colors seen in the commercials are geared towards a specific gender. Companies target children and children try to perform like the people that they see on television. What children see on television helps them to create their idea of gender normality and encourages children to conform to gender expectations.

The gender divide is placing expectations based on gender and preventing people from stepping into gender roles that are not meant for them. Michael Messner believes, "[Cultural symbols] often carry encoded gender meanings that are taken up by the children in ways that construct gender divisions and boundaries" (773). Children observe gender symbols and

messages that illustrate how they should perform which creates the gender divide. At a simpler

level, young boys are not supposed to play with girl toys such as dolls, and girls are not

supposed to play with boy things like weapons and video games. Although, through many

studies, parents find it more acceptable for girls to play with boy toys rather than boys play

with girl toys. This demonstrates societies expectation of males to be tough, strong, and men

are not allowed to cross the gender divide and show any feminism. For example, "In Toy R Us

stores, the gender crossing is locational; "...boys' toys are encountered before girls' toys – so

that girls must pass the boys' toys before reaching their own sections, but boys can completely

avoid the girls' aisles..." (Auster and Mansbach 377). Society expects males to completely

avoid feminism, but is more accepting of females crossing the gender divide slightly, but not

completely. Females are still expected to perform in their gender roles by doing their motherly

and household duties. The gender divide very exposed on the Disney store website because the

website organizes the toys by gender. On the website, you can click a "Girl Toys" tab or a

"Boy Toys" tab, but there is no option for both girl and boy toys tab (Auster and Mansbach

376). This is true for many company's websites, not only Disney. Males and females are very

strongly divided, and there are strict expectations on how people must perform in society. The

way that people must perform is learned at a very young age, and it is practiced ever since they

are playing, or "performing", with their toys as a child.

  Girls get an indication of how they are supposed to perform and behave at a young age

by observing female figures in their life and from the toys that are "girl toys". Typically, girls

are expected to play with toys that are feminine, and display ideals of motherhood, household

duties, and beauty (Hein 835). A study done by Carol Auster and Claire Mansbach show the

impact of color on children's toys. Typically, pink, purple, and pastel colors were the colors of

dolls, cosmetics, beauty toys, jewelry, or domestic oriented toys, which are all classified as girl toys (375). These color combinations were also present in commercials that were targeting girls and Halloween costumes that were made for girls. Some girl toys are geared towards motherhood and domestic activities in order to prepare girls for their possible future. Young girls are physically playing with their toys, but at the same time they are performing what they are expected to do. According to a study done in Spain, toy advertisements represent females as having values and meaningful roles (Martínez, Esther, M. Ángel Nicolás, and Álvaro Salas 190). Toys and play support the cultural expectations by setting girls up for what they are expected to do starting at a young age. This makes it very difficult for girls to cross the gender divide because they have performed their role ever since they started playing with their toys as a child.

Boys will also develop a sense of their cultural expectations at a young age based on the male role models in their life. A few of the typical toys that boys are expected to play with are cars, trucks, action figures, and video games. Characteristics of most boy toys include competition, rapid activity, noise, and aggression. The same study about color combinations was also done for what are believed to be boy toys. It was found that colors that were most common in toys made for boys were bold colors such as red, black, brown, and gray (Auster and Mansbach 375). Boy's toys represent masculinity, so it is very difficult for boys to cross the gender divide because boys feel like they must keep up their masculine front. Auster and Mansbach say, "Boys become their toys in play; girls take care of their toys" (377). Gender contributes to how children play and take care of their toys by supporting that girls play calmly and take of their toys while boys will play wilder and misuse toys.

Children's toys have a huge influence on how children identify with their gender and try to learn their gender roles. Toys support cultural expectations by preparing young children to conform to their gender role. Typically, girl toys will prepare girls for motherhood and domestic duties while boy toys will prepare boys to become very tough and masculine. Children learn how they are supposed to act and perform at a very young age based on their role models and the toys that they play with. Therefore, children do not want to cross the gender divide in fear that they are not fulfilling their gender expectation, or they fear that they will not be accepted. In the beginning of a person's life, everything is identified by gender, even a child's room décor. Toys are things that create a strict gender divide and support the expectations that are associated with gender. Although children are physically playing with their toys, they are conforming to gender expectation, and performing how they are expected to based on their gender.

Auster, Carol, and Claire Mansbach. "The Gender Marketing of Toys: An Analysis of Color and

Type of Toy on the Disney Store Website." *Sex Roles* 67.7/8 (2012): 375–388. *EBSCOhost*.

Web. 14 Nov. 2014.

Center for History and New Media. "Zotero Quick Start Guide." N.p., n.d. Web.

Freeman, Nancy. "Preschoolers' Perceptions of Gender Appropriate Toys and Their Parents' Beliefs

About Genderized Behaviors: Miscommunication, Mixed Messages, or Hidden Truths?" *Early

Childhood Education Journal* 34.5 (2007): 357–366. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 13 Nov. 2014.

Martínez, Esther, M. Ángel Nicolás, and Álvaro Salas. "Gender Representation in Advertising of

Toys in the Christmas Period (2009-12)." *La representación de género en las campañas de

publicidad de juguetes en Navidades (2009-12)*. 21.41 (2013): 187–194. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 13

Nov. 2014.

Messner, Michael A. "BARBIE GIRLS VERSUS SEA MONSTERS Children Constructing

Gender." *Gender & Society* 14.6 (2000): 765–784. *gas.sagepub.com*. Web. 30 Nov. 2014.

Susan, and Michelle Hein. "Progression on Nickelodeon? Gender-Role Stereotypes in Toy

Commercials." *Sex Roles* 62.11/12 (2010): 830–847. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 14 Nov. 2014.

Wood, Eileen, Serge Desmarais, and Sara Gugula. "The Impact of Parenting Experience on Gender

Stereotyped Toy Play of Children." *Sex Roles* 47.1/2 (2002): 39–49. Print.