



Action Figures and Dolls: Exploring Preschool Children's Interests

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BACKGROUND

Interest is present from birth and fosters human development by impelling growth-oriented behaviors such as exploration, curiosity, cognitive activity, information seeking, and involvement (Silvia, 2005). Young children sustain interests across a variety of areas including sociodramatic activities, skill-based domains (e.g., soccer, chess), creative activities, constructive activities, and various information-based domains such as bugs or dinosaurs. Research shows that there are sex-differences in interest, with boys displaying interests in sport-related, mechanical, or natural domains and girls displaying interests in creative and sociodramatic areas (Johnson et al., 2003). In addition to examining the types of interests children display, researchers have also investigated the relationships between interest, learning, and motivation and have revealed positive relationships between these factors (Renninger, 1992).

The aim of the current study was to examine preschool children's interests, particularly sex differences in interests, breadth of children's interests, agreement between children's and parents' reports of interest, and the relationship between interest and academic achievement.

METHOD

Participants

The current sample included 48 children (30 males) between the ages of 3,0 and 5,7 ($M = 4,5$). Eight additional children participated in the study but did not complete all of the tasks because of fatigue and/or misunderstanding of questions or scale usage.

Materials

- Children's interests were measured using a self-report inventory. Children were shown pictures of 16 common interests and were asked to rate their level of interest using a 3-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all;" 2 = "a little;" 3 = "a lot").
- The 16 items included in the inventory were: sports, science, music, pretending, math, art, animals, blocks, computer, dolls, video games, books/reading, action figures, vehicles, puzzles, and dinosaurs.
- Parents' ratings of children's interests were measured using the same inventory that was used with the children. Parents were asked to rate how much their child was interested in each of the 16 items. They used the same Likert scale as the children.
- Children's academic achievement was measured using the Numbers, Letters, and Words subtest of the Kaufman Survey of Early Academic and Language Skills (K-SEALS; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1993). This subtest included a total of 40 items: 20 that assessed number skills and 20 that assessed pre-reading and reading skills.

Procedure

- Children were recruited from two local childcare centers.
- For each child, all of the measures were administered individually in a quiet room within the childcare center.
- Each testing session began by explaining the nature of the tasks and then assuring each child of the confidentiality of his/her responses. Upon receiving each child's verbal assent, the child was asked to draw a picture of him/herself. This established rapport and increased the child's comfort level.
- In addition to the interest inventory and K-SEALS, children also completed two self-concept tasks. The interest inventory was completed last, and the K-SEALS was completed second. The majority of children completed the 4 tasks within 25 minutes.
- Children were given stickers as a token of appreciation.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- Johnson, K. E., Alexander, J. M., Spencer, S., Leibham, M. E., & Neitzel, C. (2004). Factors associated with the early emergence of intense interests within conceptual domains. *Cognitive Development, 19*, 325-343.
- Renninger, K. A. (1992). Individual interest and development: Implications for theory and practice. In K. A. Renninger, S. Hidi, & A. Krapp (Eds.), *The role of interest in learning and development* (pp. 361-396). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Silvia, P. J. (2005). What is interesting? Exploring the appraisal structure of interest. *Emotion, 5*, 89-102.

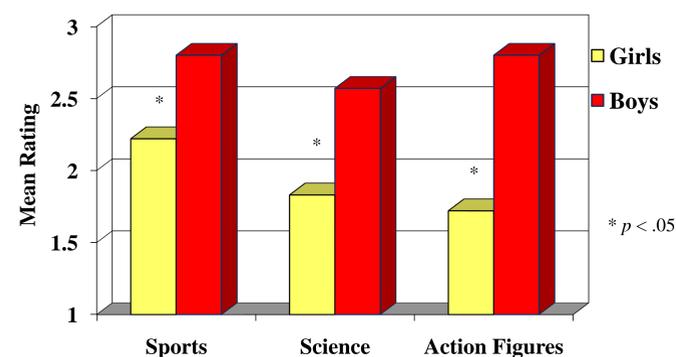
MEASURES

SAMPLE ITEMS ON INTEREST INVENTORY

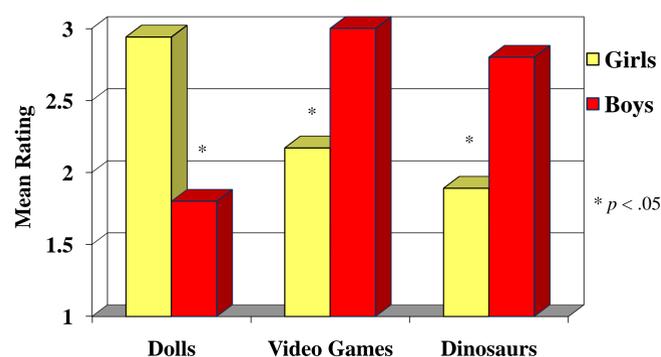


RESULTS

Girls' and Boys' Average Ratings of Interest in Sports, Science, and Action Figures

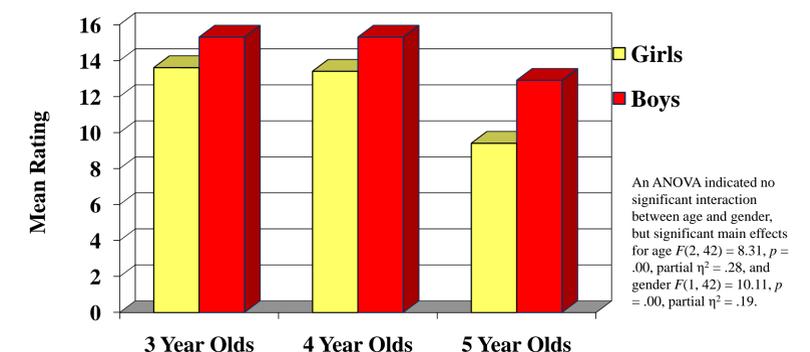


Girls' and Boys' Average Ratings of Interest in Dolls, Video Games, and Dinosaurs



RESULTS

Girls' and Boys' Breadth of Interests Across Age



Bivariate Correlations Between Parental Ratings of Academic Interests and Academic Achievement

	K-SEALS
Math Interest	.31*
Science Interest	.33*
Reading Interest	.01

* $p < .05$

CONCLUSIONS

- In over 75% of cases, parents' reports of their child's interests agreed with their child's self-reports.
- As expected, boys rated their interest in sports, science, actions figures, video games, and dinosaurs significantly higher than did girls.
- Girls rated their interest in dolls significantly higher than did boys.
- There were no significant sex differences in children's interests in music, pretending, math, art, animals, blocks, computers, books/reading, vehicles, and puzzles.
- Across the three age groups, boys displayed more breadth of interests than did girls. Younger children (3 and 4 year olds) displayed more breadth of interests than did older children (5 year olds).
- Parental reports of children's math and science interests were positively correlated with children's achievement scores, but children's self-reports of their math and science interests were not related to their achievement scores.
- The potential relationship between children's academic-related interests and academic achievement should be further explored. If children's math and science interests are related to their achievement, then interest in these domains may be beneficial for academic performance.
- The current study used a self-report interest inventory to assess children's interest. Although this provided information on children's likes and dislikes, it did not provide information on children's favorite interests or those interests in which they devote a significant amount of time. Future research should examine other methods of measuring children's interests. For example, it may be worthwhile to examine children's rankings of their interests, perhaps through a forced-choice assessment.
- The fact that boys displayed a greater breadth of interest than did girls should be further examined. It is possible that this finding may be a result of the types of stimuli chosen for this study.