

## **Jaboa Lake**

Jaboa Lake is a fourth year senior at UC Merced majoring in Psychology and minoring in Sociology. Having always been passionate about research, she has worked with faculty at the University of Cape Town while studying abroad in South Africa on her own independent research, as well as having worked with a number of faculty members on their research at Fresno Pacific University and at UC Merced. Because of her enthusiasm to promote research on campus, Jaboa joined the Associated Students of UC Merced as the Commissioner of Undergraduate Research. As an undergraduate, Jaboa has been able to attend a number of conferences, such as the annual American Psychological Association Convention, in order to keep up to date with current, relevant research. She is also an active member of Psi Chi, the International Honors Society of Psychology as a Grants, Awards, and Scholarships committee member.

After attaining her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Jaboa plans on going into a Social Psychology Ph.D. program in order to ultimately gain a career that involves research. Her main research interests include personality theory and development, social identity and stigmatized groups, and interpersonal relations.



Same-Sex vs. Mixed-Sex Playgroup Participation in Young Children

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## Abstract

This study was done to explore the differences in sex-based playgroups between 18-29 month old toddlers and 30 month to prekindergarten aged preschoolers. Sex-based segregation has been found as early as two years of age (Beneneson, Apostolaris, & Parnass, 1997), at about the same time children are able to correctly identify themselves and others as one a boy as a girl (Campbell, Shirley, Caygill, 2002). The data was collected from 12 observations over an amount of time of children participating in playgroups, six observations from each age group. Counts of the proportion of children participating in mixed-sex and single-sexed playgroups were observed. Children playing alone were not counted. The hypothesis that preschoolers engaged in more single-sexed playgroups than toddlers was found to be statistically significant. This may suggest that, along with a child's development of gender identity, he/she may develop an in-group preference for gender in playgroups along with the development of the conscious of self. Part of this may be due to the influence of gender-typing, which may lead young boys and girls to prefer particular gender-typed play and their association with others of similar play-related interests (Campbell, Shirley, Caygill, 2002). It was also found that toddler girls were significantly more likely to play in same-sex groups than toddler boys, which may suggest the earlier development of same-sex in-group preference and gender-based development in girls over boys. The results of this study support the results of past research that indicate early preferences and identification for like-genders, but further research can be done to explore developmental and cognitive association with other children of the same gender.

### **Same-Sex vs. Mixed-Gendered Playgroup Participation in Young Children**

Gender segregation and sex differences emerge at a young age, as found by previous research. This actuality is seen worldwide in all cultures, regardless of social roles (Maccoby, 1990). Among children, some as young as three years of age, it has been found that same-sex playmate selection is spontaneous and frequent, but more often, very young children are found in mixed-gendered playgroups, while children around six years of age are rarely seen in mixed-gendered playgroups (Maccoby, 1990; Maccoby, 1988). These largely sex-segregated groups occur mostly in prepubescent school years, but can be seen emerging in very early child-

hood (Maccoby, 1988). Based on sex-selection in play-partners at both ages four and six, it has been confirmed that, in dyadic playgroup interactions, sex difference patterns emerge earlier than five years of age (Beneneson, Apostolaris, & Parnass, 1997). For preschool aged children, choosing the opposite-sexed playmate is rare in both group and dyadic situations (Colwell & Lindsey, 2005). There is more of a tendency for children to automatically choose same-sexed playmates during elementary school age (Blatchford, Baines, & Pellegrini, 2003). This interaction preference is found as strong and that attempts to interrupt children's preference to play with children of the same sex is very difficult to change (Maccoby, 1990).

Sex-segregation development is seen and has been studied numerous times, as has the reasoning behind children's actions to prefer same-sex play-partners. Both qualitative and quantitative research had been done to attempt to explore these reasons. This study focuses on the implications of the proportion of children who engage in same-sex and mixed-sex playgroups between two young age groups: toddler and preschool. This may help to contribute to the discovery of approximately when sex-segregation develops and how strongly it occurs in young children and their social situations.

Some studies have been shown to suggest that sex-segregation tendencies emerge as early as three years of age (Beneneson, Apostolaris, & Parnass, 1997), just after about the time children are able to correctly identify themselves and others as one a boy as a girl, which was found as young as two years of age (Campbell, Shirley, Caygill, 2002). It has even been found that children as young as nine months of age prefer to visual fixate on the pictures of other people of their same gender, suggesting a preference for one's own group before their first year (Campbell, Shirley, Heywood, and Crook, 2000). Children have also been found to choose similar gendered children as primary playmates as young as two years of age to approximately nine years of age, and sometimes up to eleven years of age, all suggesting that gender plays as a very large factor in the social behavior of children (Maccoby, 1990; Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978). The child's gender is the main factor of influence when choosing play-partners (Maccoby, 1988), though much of this can be seen from the effects of gender-typing in young children, leading them to prefer certain types of play and associating themselves with others of similar play-related interests (Campbell, Shirley, Caygill, 2002).

Acknowledgement of one's gender seems to be the key in children's realization of one's social roles and preferences. Same-sex preference and opposite-sex avoidance may be due to the mutual interests between young boys and young girls (Maccoby, 1988). Most children that have experience in social situations and society have been primed with sex-typed characteristics, leading similarly sex-typed children to have more in common and more compatibility because of the similar interests and manners in activity preference and personality characteristics (Maccoby, 1988). Girls and boys have different types of friendships and social interactions, in the qualitative sense. While girls are more likely to confide in details about their lives and thoughts, boys are not as aware of their friends' small life details and engage in more physical activity as a form of bonding and creating friendships: these actions are found as consistent (Maccoby, 2002; Colwell & Lindsey, 2005). It was also found that girls respond more positively to other girls than to boys in social situations regardless of the "gender" of the activity, while boys preferred other boys in more "male" activities only (Fagot, 1985).

Though the sex of the play partner has a large effect on what sex playgroup they will participate in, it has been found that, more often than not, segregation of sex is not very related to the gender of the activity (Maccoby, 1990). Children often engage in activities that are gender-neutral, but when the activities are gender-oriented, segregation occurs regardless of who is involved in the activity (Maccoby, 1990). Children do have the tendency to engage in more activity that has been deemed gender-appropriate by society, but this has been found to not have a large effect on group segregation (Blatchford, Baines, & Pellegrini, 2003; Maccoby, 2002).

Many studies have tried to explore whether or not this segregation occurs for reasons other than basic gender differences and preferences. Though found to be untrue in very few cases, it is more frequently noted that parental and adult influence have a large part in the way children pick play-partners based on gender (Maccoby, 1990; Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978). The sex-typing behavior and pressures in social situations may be influenced by the child x parent interaction (Jacklin, DiPietro, & Maccoby, 1984). Children may possibly receive more positive reinforcement from authority figures when they interact with the same sex more often (Fagot, 1985). It has also been found that children found in mixed-sex playgroups received disapproval from authority figures, influencing them more to desire children of their own gender in play situations, and that

there was less social interaction in mixed-sex playgroups than in female-only or male-only playgroups (Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978).

Though I do not explore any of the qualitative reasons for this group segregation in my study, I briefly look at the quantitative differences of the gender makeup of child playgroups.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Children were observed from the University of California, Merced's Early Childhood Education Center. Participants were observed under two categories, Toddler and Preschool. Children in the Toddler group ranged from the ages of 18-29 months .

children in the Pre-School group ranged from 30 months to kindergarten entry age .

Since the population of interest were the children participating in group-play, all children that were playing alone were not counted. Children were of different, mixed ethnic backgrounds. All other demographics are unknown.

### **Procedure**

Six snapshot observations were done of the Toddler group, and six snapshot observations were done of the Preschool group, at various times of the day, between 7:30 AM and 5:30 PM. During each snapshot observation, for both groups, the total number of children playing in groups, the total number of playgroups, the total number of Female-Only play-groups, the total number of Male-Only play-groups, the total number of Mixed-Sex play-groups, and the total number of children in male-only and female-only playgroups were recorded.

## Results

I was interested in the proportion of children in each age group (Toddler and Preschool) that engaged in mixed-sex playgroups as opposed to same-sex playgroups. An alpha level of 0.05 was used in the two-sample statistical t-test. The test proved to be statistically significant,  $t(9) = 0.01, p < 0.05$ . On average a high proportion ( $M = 0.84$ ) of children in the Toddler-aged group engaged in mixed-sex play-groups, while less than half ( $M = 0.42$ ) of children in the Preschool-aged group engaged in mixed-sex playgroups. The proportion of children in each age group (Toddler and Preschool) that engaged in mixed-sex play-groups or same-gendered play-groups can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1** *The proportion of children in each age group (Toddler and Preschool) that engaged in mixed-gendered playgroups, female-only play-groups, and male-only play-groups.*

## Discussion

As hypothesized, the difference between toddlers and preschoolers in playgroup participation preference was found to be significant. The proportion of toddlers that were involved in mixed-gendered playgroups was almost twice as much as those of the children in preschool aged groups. This, along with previous studies,

may suggest that as gender association and recognition develop, children are more likely to associate themselves and look for acceptance in like-groups (Beneneson, Apostolaris, & Parnass, 1997). Sex is one of the more easily recognizable social groups, so the children, as a young group, may be already searching for people similar to themselves, finding an in-group in which to associate and have a preference.

An interesting find in the research was that there was a higher proportion, by almost three times, of toddler girls in same-sex playgroups than toddler boys in same-sex playgroups, possibly suggesting that females developed same-sex in-group preference earlier than males, though this point was not explored further. Other, older studies (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) suggest that young boys show more awareness of gender roles because of the greater cultural emphasis of gender-typing boys over girls in general, which contradicts the findings in this study. The change of social influence over time must be taken into consideration when comparing these two studies, though. This may suggest future research in studying the age difference of gender-based development between young girls and boys.

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