

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns Among School Children

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ABSTRACT

The play habits of lower primary school students in Kerala, India, are examined in this qualitative study in relation to gender. The study examines how gender norms influence children's play preferences, spatial access, and social interactions through semi-structured interviews with twelve kids (six boys and six girls) from three different schools. Two global themes emerged from the data's analysis utilizing Thematic Network Analysis: Gendered Access and Spatial Politics of Play and Gendered Play Preferences and Social Conditioning. The results show that although girls are frequently restricted to the periphery and prefer domestic, role-based play, such as cooking or playing with dolls, boys dominate the central playground areas and play physically assertive, competitive activities. These inequities are further reinforced by institutional factors such as inadequate access to play equipment, a lack of skilled play facilitators, and the absence of specific physical education hours. The study emphasizes the necessity of teacher-led interventions and equitable physical education policy in order to break gendered play patterns and promote inclusive play environments in early childhood.

Keywords: Gender, Play, Childhood, Spatial Politics, School Environment

A key component of childhood development, play provides insight into social, emotional, and cognitive processes (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). One of developmental psychology's most solid conclusions, among its many facets, is that gender differences in play patterns occur and are noticeable from a very young age. The nature of play is also different, with girls typically favoring cooperative or nurturing activities and boys participating in more rough-and-tumble interactions. These differences extend beyond preferences for toys, such as dolls for girls and vehicles for boys (Davis & Hines, 2020; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987).

Toy preferences that are gender-specific start to show up as early as the end of the first year of life. Meta-analytic data supports the notion that females are drawn to dolls and things with facial cues, whereas boys are more interested in toys centered around motion and mechanical systems (Alexander, Wilcox, & Woods, 2009; Davis & Hines, 2020; Pasterski et al., 2005). Gender-typed toy preferences showed significant effect sizes ($d \geq 1.60$) in a meta-analysis of 75 research, and these differences hold true across several decades and

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Received: July 19, 2025; Revision Received: July 25, 2025; Accepted: August 17, 2025

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

cultural contexts (Davis & Hines, 2020). Based on these findings, gendered toy choices may represent underlying developmental tendencies rather than being purely cultural artifacts.

In addition to toy choice, boys are more likely than girls to participate in play fighting, which is defined as wrestling, hitting, and chasing. DiPietro (1981), for instance, discovered that boys play-fight almost 4.5 times more frequently than girls, with the difference peaking in middle childhood (Psychology Today, 2019). Conversely, girls are more likely to engage in relational, cooperative, and dramatic play (McHale et al., 2004).

Researchers are debating the relative influences of upbringing and biological predispositions in light of the persisting gender inequalities in play. According to evolutionary viewpoints, boys' rough-and-tumble play may be adaptive, developing the physical coordination and risk-taking abilities required for roles peculiar to men (Archer, 1994). At the same time, social-cognitive theories emphasize the role of modeling, reinforcement, and self-socialization in the internalization of gender-typed behaviors. These ideas are based on Bandura's social-learning paradigm (Bussey & Bandura, 1992; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). According to gender schema theory and other cognitive-developmental viewpoints, children form mental models that influence their choices of gender-typical playthings and activities (Bem, 1981; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Lastly, perceptual and maturational theories propose that intrinsic differences, such as parvocellular vs magnocellular processing, may make girls more likely to choose form-oriented toys and boys more likely to favor motion-heavy ones (Alexander, 2003).

Different cultures and educational settings have different standards for gendered play. In their seminal work from 1987, Maccoby and Jacklin discovered that gender segregation was prevalent in Western civilizations. But according to cross-cultural research, these differences are influenced by social norms. For instance, Kenyan children do not exhibit same-sex preferences until considerably later in life (Harkness & Super, 1985). Furthermore, gender-stereotypical play can be strengthened or lessened by the attitudes of teachers and the conditions in the classroom (Chapman, 2015).

Play in childhood has long-term effects. Preschool gender-typed play predicts occupational interests ten years later, according to longitudinal data from the Avon Longitudinal Study (ALSPAC) (Pasterski et al., 2005). Children with masculine play patterns tended toward male-typed occupations, while those with feminine play patterns tended away from them. Early masculine play was associated with increased levels of physical aggressiveness at age 13 in another ALSPAC-based study (Hines et al., 2016). These results highlight how early play activity shapes long-term developmental paths.

Boys and girls develop diverse abilities through varied play options, according to research from Ireland's Neighborhood Play Study, which involved 1,688 households. Girls tended to play more socially and constructively, whereas boys tended to choose physically demanding games (O'Connor, 2017). As a result, the playground turns into a microcosm that reflects larger trends in peer group formation, skill acquisition, and gender socialization.

Early gendered distinctions are reinforced by marketing strategies and media messaging. To reinforce gendered interests, toys like dolls and toy trucks are promoted using gendered cues (Alexander et al., 2009; Gender Roles in Childhood, 2025). Concerns over gendered

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

disparities in physical exercise and related well-being are raised by recent news publications that point out that British girls as young as two play outside less than boys (The Guardian, 2024).

There are still gaps even if there is strong evidence of gender disparities in play. First, there aren't many research that combine several categories into a coherent framework, such as educator impact, social structures, toy preferences, and longitudinal effects. Second, the majority of the evidence comes from Western cultures; information from many sociocultural contexts, such as India, is required. Third, there is a dearth of comprehensive evaluations of educational initiatives, such as instructor training or gender-neutral play environments. Thus, the purpose of "Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns Among School Children" is to investigate: gender differences in play types (physical, dramatic, cooperative, etc., the function of classroom and playground contexts, and how such patterns relate to peer interactions and social competence.

METHOD

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how lower primary school students' play behaviors differed by gender. Unpacking how gender norms are socially created and perpetuated from an early age requires an understanding of these disparities. Because it allows for the in-depth analysis of actions, attitudes, and contextual factors in real settings, qualitative research is particularly well-suited for this kind of investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, this study used semi-structured interviews with children and applied Attride-Stirling's (2001) approach of thematic network analysis to examine the children's responses.

Twelve lower primary school students (Classes 1–4) from three government aided schools of Kerala, India, participated in this study. Four kids in which two were boys and two were girl, guaranteeing equal representation of each gender in all contexts. The students were between the ages of 6 and 9, which corresponds to early primary school, when gender-based foundational socialization and play behaviors usually pick up speed (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Blatchford et al., 2003).

Schools were identified using a purposive random sample technique, and participants were chosen from those schools using a stratified random sampling process. Each class teacher was asked to submit a list of students who met the characteristics of the study like, equal gender representation, regular attendance, and communicative skills in either Malayalam or English. After receiving approval from the relevant school authorities. Two boys and two girls were chosen at random from this pool from each school, guaranteeing diversity within a controllable sample size appropriate for qualitative depth.

Written consent was acquired from the headmasters and school officials of each of the three schools prior to data collection. Every child participant was also asked for verbal consent, and teachers were briefed on the purposes and methods of the study. Children were carefully screened to ensure their voluntary participation, with the knowledge that they might leave at any time without facing any repercussions. All identifiable information, including names, has been anonymised to maintain privacy.

Semi-structured interviews were the main way of data collection. Every youngster was interviewed separately in a calm, comfortable area of their school. Depending on the child's

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

comfort level, interviews were done in either English or Malayalam, which is their first language. The duration of each session was roughly 15 to 20 minutes.

As described by Attride-Stirling (2001), Thematic Network Analysis was used to examine the interview data. This method provides a layered structure of interpretation by using basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes to systematically organize and understand textual material. By describing the kids' answers and seeking confirmation throughout the interviews, member checking was done informally to guarantee trustworthiness. To improve data interpretation, triangulation was used by combining field notes. Dependability was reinforced by keeping an open audit trail of choices made during sampling, data collecting, and coding, while transferability was addressed by providing thorough contextual explanations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The techniques employed in this study ensured an ethically sound, contextually aware, and theoretically grounded approach to examining the ways in which gender influences children's play habits. The study provides a thorough framework for understanding how gendered preferences and perceptions are created, upheld, or challenged in early educational settings by fusing topic network analysis with child-centered interviews.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Two global themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews using Attride-Stirling's (2001) framework: Play Preferences and Social Conditioning, as well as Gender Access and Spatial Politics of Play

A detailed understanding of how gender norms influence children's play experiences and opportunities in lower primary school settings is provided by the several organizing and basic themes that are included in each global topic.

Gendered Access and Spatial Politics of Play

This theme illustrates how egalitarian play opportunities especially for girls, as they are restricted by institutional procedures, physical space, and supervision.

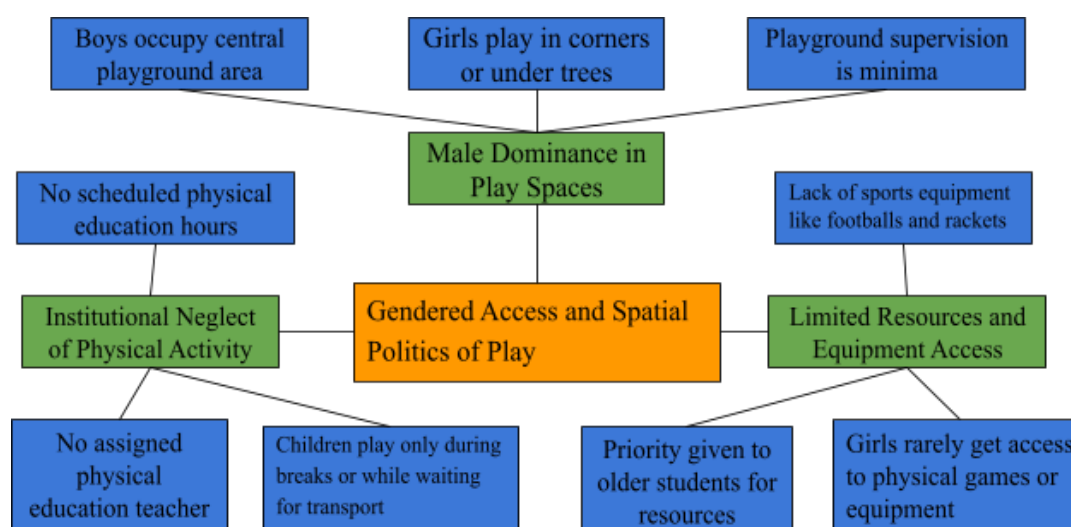


Figure 1. Thematic network representing gendered access and spatial politics of play

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

Male dominance in play space

This organising theme has emerged from three basic themes: boys occupy central playground area, girls play in corners or under trees, and playground supervision is minimal.

All the three basic themes shows how play or sports are becoming a male dominated space from the very early stage of development. The responses from children had clearly shown how gender is explicitly practiced in play behaviors. Participant PS had reported that “*Most of the time boys ran to the play ground as soon as the bell ring for break, but we girls are like some sit in the class and play or some clapping games under the trees*”. As reported by students there are no instructors to monitor children’s play. So it is mostly unstructured, less inclusive in nature.

For running, chasing, and ball activities, boys were shown to predominate in the central open spaces at all three schools. Females were frequently observed gathered in areas with shade, such as beneath trees or on the outskirts. The findings of McHale et al. (2004), who discovered that spatial control frequently mirrors larger gender power dynamics in schools, are consistent with this. An additional factor supporting the unofficial gender segregation of space during these play sessions was the lack of adult supervision.

Institutional Neglect of Physical Activity

This organising theme has emerged from three basic themes: no scheduled physical education hours, no assigned physical education teachers, and children play during breaks or while waiting for their transport in the evening.

This basic theme comprises the institutional structure of lower primary schools where there is no physical education faculty in any of this three lower primary schools. This create a lack of structured play and physical education hours for students, which is really essential for their physical and psychological development and to develop interest in various sports in younger age. As this limitations are also missing an opportunity to find young athletes from there young age and upbringing their potentials.

Many students had reported that they rarely get a play time, it is mostly during their break time that they play. Participant SK, reported that “*we don’t have any specific play hours, sometimes teachers allow us to play, if any teachers are on leave etc. we mostly play during the lunch break and in the evening waiting for our transportation*”. As a critical issue, given that early physical engagement supports motor and social development (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).

Limited Resources and Equipment Access

This organising theme has emerged from three basic theme: lack of sports equipment like footballs and rackets, priority given to older students for resources and girls rarely get access to physical games or equipment.

The lower primary schools are reported with limited resources to play. As childrens had reported that they are mostly into unstructured plays and there is no much resources available for them to play. Participant KP had reported that “*there is football and a cricket bat in school, but sir will give it to fourth standard students to play*”. This response shows

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

how sports equipments are prioritised by age and also it was mainly used by older boys, and girls get access to such games

very rarely. This is indicative of more general problems with gendered access in educational environments, when the distribution of equipment itself turns into a site of disparity.

Gendered Play Preferences and Social Conditioning

This theme investigates how peer reinforcement of gender roles and ingrained social norms are reflected in children's play choices.

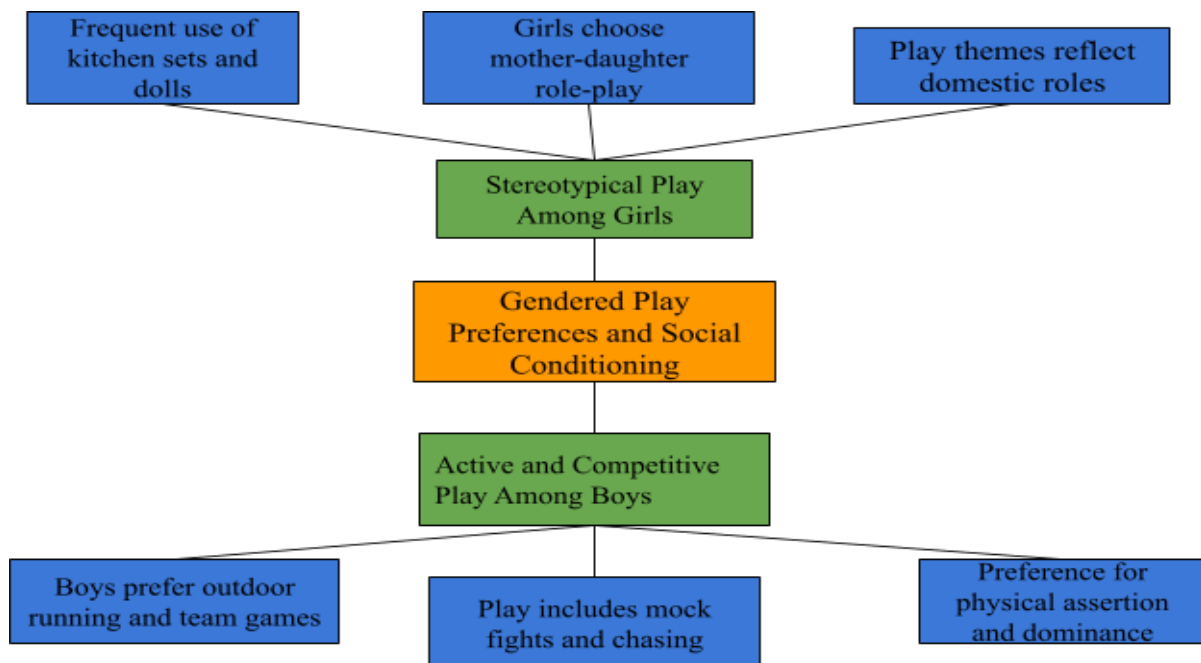


Figure 2. Thematic network representing gendered play preferences and social conditioning

Stereotypical Play among Girls

The majority of the girls who were interviewed said they cooked, took care of dolls, or played mother-daughter roles. These decisions are a reflection of deeply ingrained gender norms related to domestic work and childcare (Bem, 1981). Girls acted out the social norms they see in their surroundings, even in their fantasy worlds.

This organising theme emerged from three basic themes: girls choose mother-daughter role plays, play theme reflect domestic roles and frequent use of kitchen sets and dolls. As children's responses clearly exhibits the stereotypical gender schemas ingrained in an early age. In most of their plays they mimic the domestic roles that were familiar to them. Participant AK has reported "*I usually play mother and daughter with my friends and with my sister also. I make food for her and clean our play house*". And most of the girls' toy preference and those they use daily for playing were dolls and kitchen sets. They receive such toys from their young age from their parents and others as gifts mostly. A modelling behaviour was also seen common in girls where they try to mimic their same sex parent on the play related to domestic roles.

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

If females aren't exposed to more diversified play materials and broader role models, these stereotyped role-plays may limit their ability to develop leadership or inquisitive behavior.

Active and Competitive Play among Boys

Boys, on the other hand, preferred action-packed, outside games like football, racing, and pretend combat. According to Archer (1994), these play preferences uphold masculine standards of aggression, power, and leadership. These activities reinforce gender divisions by defining boundaries against feminine activity, even as they promote teamwork and athletic ability.

This organising theme emerges from three basic themes: boys prefer outdoor running and team games, play includes mock fights and chasing, and preference for physical assertion and dominance.

The play preferences of boys were completely different from that of girls. Participant DS responded that “*all boys in my class go to the ground immediately after lunch, and we play chasing mostly*”. “*It will be difficult for girls to run fast as we do and they will cry fast when they fall down, so we don't play with them*”, says participant GP. and boys were mostly preferring outdoor plays where girls mostly prefer indoor plays. In addition to influencing peer hierarchies, these views exclude girls from physically demanding play activities.

The study shows how peer socialization, institutional neglect, and gendered spatial politics all have a significant impact on and influence children's play. Boys preferred vigorous, central, and frequently competitive activities, whereas girls' play was primarily domestic, quiet, and confined to the periphery. These gaps were made worse by a lack of monitoring, infrastructure, and instructor participation. These results highlight the value of inclusive, structured physical education as well as active pedagogical approaches to combat gender stereotypes from an early age.

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Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

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Acknowledgments

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns among School Children

How to cite this article: Krishna, S., Thomas, T.M., & Sreekumar, S. (2025). Playing by Gender: Exploring Differences in Play Patterns Among School Children. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 10(3), 644-652. DIP: 18.02.068/20251003, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1003068