Preadolescents’ Perceptions of Cross-Gender Toy Preferences in Early Childhood and Gender Atypical Behaviour in Adolescence: A Qualitative Exploration

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abstract
This qualitative study explored preadolescents’ perceptions towards cross-gender toy preferences in childhood and gender atypical behaviour in adolescence. Twenty-three participants aged 11-12 years (11 male, 12 female) evaluated two vignette-style conflict situations in which a male and female character demonstrated gender nonconformity. Semi-structured interviews were administered and a thematic analysis was employed to interpret the findings. Results illustrated that eleven preadolescents adhered to traditional gender stereotypes in relation to toy preferences, while a comparable number (nine participants) displayed flexibility in gender stereotypic beliefs. Societal influence on the enforcement of gender stereotypes emerged as a key theme. The rigid definitions of masculinity that boys are subject to contrasted with the relative freedom of gender expression afforded to girls. Participants believed that gender nonconforming boys would be targets for bullying. Implications for school-based bullying prevention and intervention were discussed.

Introduction
Gender stereotypes have been defined as beliefs about the behaviours and characteristics that men and women are likely to possess (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1986). They are prescriptive in nature and dictate how an individual ‘should’ behave (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). Children gain a rudimentary awareness of gender stereotypes from an early age and preferences for sex-typed toys is one of the most consistent and well established features of gender development in children (Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, Colburne, Sen, & Eichstedt, 2001). Visual preferences
for sex-typed toy objects have been shown in male infants as young as 9 months old (Campbell, Shirley, Heywood, & Crook, 2000). This suggests that stereotyped toy preferences may be evident long before infants acquire a sense of gender identity, whereby they can accurately identify their own gender status at 24 months (Kohlberg, 1966; Kohlberg & Ullian, 1974). By the age of 5, children know a range of gender stereotypes which are often ‘amusing and incorrect’ (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

Young children are extremely constrained by categorical thinking when judging if a toy is ‘for boys’ or ‘for girls’ (Halim, Ruble, & Amodio, 2011; Martin, Woods, & Little, 1990). They use stereotyped assumptions about gender when selecting toys for themselves, and also for other children (Lobel & Menashri, 1993; Martin & Ruble, 2004). Most children prefer toys that are stereotyped as gender appropriate for their own sex (Alexander, Wilcox & Woods, 2009; Connor & Serbin, 1977; for review, see Ruble, Martin & Berenbaum, 2006). While girls prefer feminine or neutral toys, boys primarily play with masculine toys (Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). Recent research has shown almost parallel toy preferences among male and female rhesus monkeys (Hassett, Siebert, & Wallen, 2008). Despite the fact they had never encountered the toys previously; male rhesus monkeys preferred wheeled mechanical toys and showed a strong dislike towards plush toys. According to Williams and Pleil (2008) the idea that toy preferences are influenced by genetics and hormones has faced ‘considerable resistance’. However, the possibility remains that biological factors may contribute to sex-typed toy preferences. Girls with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), for example, who have been exposed to high prenatal levels of adrenal androgen, show an increased preference for masculine toys (Berenbaum & Hines, 1992; Berenbaum & Snyder, 1995).

Researchers have consistently found that toys are gender stereotyped in very predictable ways (Blakemore & Centers, 2005). In one study Campenni (1999) asked adults to rate children’s toys according to their gender appropriateness. Toys considered most appropriate for boys were action figures, weapons, vehicles and sports gear. Female appropriate toys included those relating to ‘domestic tasks, beauty enhancement, or child rearing’ (Messner, 2000). Dolls (which are consistently seen as feminine toys) are routinely described as objects that support opportunities for nurturance and as a result girl’s play often involves acting out family roles (Blakemore et al., 2005; Campbell et al., 2000; Maccoby, 1998; Miller, 1987). Masculine toys however, emphasise violence and aggression (Klugman, 1999). Blakemore and Centers (2005) argued that violence was the most problematic aspect associated with strongly masculine toys. As one research study has shown, even a
feminine domestic toy (a mixing-bowl) can be easily reimagined by boys into something exciting and dangerous, namely as ‘a drill and a machine gun’ (Schau, Kahn, Diepold, & Cherry, 1980).

Martin and colleagues (1995) found that regardless of toy attractiveness, young children tended to avoid toys which were labelled as being for the other sex (the ‘hot potato’ effect). Boys in particular are more likely to restrict themselves to sex-typed toys and avoid attractive cross-gender toys (Frey & Ruble, 1992). Ross and Ross (1972) wondered if preschool boys would accept a cross-gender toy if they were encouraged to do so by their favourite teacher. Not only did all of the boys resist the teacher’s suggestion, but they also tried to discredit her advice. Some told the researcher she must be ill while others implied that she was overworked (‘Teacher has too much to do today’). In middle childhood children develop more sophisticated reasoning abilities and start to appreciate the many similarities to be found in males’ and females’ behaviour (Crouter, Whiteman, McHale, & Osgood, 2007; Martin & Ruble, 2004). As a result they tend to become more flexible in their gender attitudes (i.e. their stereotype rigidity begins to wane). By approximately 7 or 8 years children are less likely to accept gender stereotypes as being ‘fixed’ or ‘morally right’ (Halim et al., 2011).

Girls begin to shift away from rigid feminine gender roles in middle childhood, whereas the majority of boys remain unwaveringly masculine and interact mainly with same-sex peers (Maccoby, 1998; Ruble & Martin, 1998). Why might this be? Children are influenced by social and environmental cues and studies have shown that parents, peers and teachers criticise or punish boys (more so that girls) for engaging in cross-gender behaviours (Fagot, 1978; Langlois & Downs, 1980; Pasterski, Geffner, Brain, Hindmarsh, Brook & Hines, 2005). Parents routinely express unease with their sons undertaking behaviours which might be considered traditionally feminine (Freeman, 2007; Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999). According to Kane (2006) parents responded negatively to their sons dressing up in ‘pink or frilly clothing’ and were uncomfortable at the thought of their son’s exhibiting ‘excessive emotionality’. Fathers as opposed to mothers have been shown to have a lower tolerance for gender atypical behaviour in their sons’ play (Lytton & Romney, 1991; Goldberg, Kashy, & Smith, 2012). Fathers in the Kane study (2006) feared that gender nonconforming sons would be perceived as ‘gay’ and would prefer same-sex relationships in adulthood. The same concern was not expressed in comments about daughters.

Leisure activities also tend to be gender stereotyped in childhood. Boys tend to play more physically strenuous sports and team sports such as basketball and
football (Cherney & London, 2006; Mac
coby, 1998) whereas girls tend to engage in more sedentary, non-competitive, in
door activities. Some girls may be drawn towards masculine activities as they are highly valued by society (Feinman, 1981; Frey & Ruble, 1992). Toyama (1997), for example, discovered that successful female administrators played more football and participated in more team activities in childhood when compared to their less successful female colleagues (Toyama, 1997 as cited in Giuliano, Popp, & Knight, 2000). According to Kane (2006) parents often celebrate and encourage gender atypical behaviour in their young daugh
ters, and refer fondly to their daughters as ‘tomboys’. Retrospective studies have re
vealed that up to three-quarters of women recall being tomboys in middle childhood (Halim et al., 2011). Some researchers claim that girls are given more gender lee
way than boys in early childhood because parents believe that girls will ‘outgrow’ any cross-gender behaviour by adoles
cence (Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999).

Adolescence is a time when tradition
al gender roles may be intensified, cre
ating a curvilinear ‘retreat to stereotypes’ age trend (Katz & Ksansnak, 1994; Perry & Pauletti, 2011; Ullian, 1976 as cited in Percival, 1985). In a study conducted by Stoddart and Turiel (1985) adolescents were asked to consider a series of gender role deviations (e.g. a boy wearing nail polish). Their results revealed that adoles
cents were less tolerant of gender atypical behaviour than younger children, despite understanding that such behaviours were a matter of personal choice. Gender dif
ferences are accentuated during the onset of puberty and young people may face intense pressure to ‘fit in’ or assume tradi
tional dating roles (Alfieri, Ruble, & Higgins, 1996; Smith & Leaper, 2006). If adolescents wish to meet these social expec	ations of gender they must adhere to social conventions and avoid any gender nonconforming behaviours (Hill & Lynch, 1983; Menon, 2011; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004).

Gender atypical behaviour in child
hood and adolescence typically has a negative impact on peer relations (Langlois & Downs, 1980). Boys in particu
lar are victimised by peers for exhibiting gender nonconforming behaviours and punishment from peers often begins at a very early age (Boldt, 2002; Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram, & Per
tudes toward gender atypical behaviour are the foundations for bullying. Higdon (2011) suggested that some bullies act as gender enforcers, teasing other boys for not being ‘man enough’. Pascoe (2011)
stated that these bullies were less concerned with sexual orientation but rather with ‘gender expression’. She implied that male effeminacy (i.e. lack of stereotypical masculinity) is the reason why some gender nonconforming boys become perpetual victims of bullying. While female gender roles have expanded in recent decades, Pollack (1998) has suggested that boys remain locked in a ‘gender straitjacket’. Repeated peer victimisation has been shown to lead to increased rates of depression and suicide among gender non-conforming children (Higdon, 2011; Pollack, 1998) and negative correlations have been found between gender atypical behaviours in childhood and psychological well-being in adulthood, especially with men (Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2006; Weinrich, Atkinson, McCutchan, & Grant, 1995).

The Present Study. Thus far the majority of studies relating to cross-gender toy preferences and gender atypical behaviour in childhood and adolescence have been conducted with parents (e.g. Kane, 2006; Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999) or with preschool children in early childhood (e.g. Ross & Ross, 1972). There has been very little research into the attitudes of children in middle childhood, especially preadolescence, regarding such phenomenon and this is a considerable gap in the literature. Research has suggested that adolescents are more stereotyped in their gender roles than they were in middle childhood (e.g. Stoddart & Turiel, 1985). Therefore preadolescence could mark a period of developmental change in terms of gender stereotypes. The transition from childhood into adolescence itself may influence gender attitudes, as gender differences become more salient during the onset of puberty.

The aim of the present study was to evaluate preadolescent participants’ perceptions of cross-gender toy preferences in early childhood and gender atypical behaviour in adolescence. This aim was assessed by reviewing children’s responses to two vignette-style conflict situations. Each conflict situation contained examples of deviations from traditional gender roles. A qualitative approach was used with the intention of gaining insight into participants’ attitudes and beliefs (Buston, Parry-Jones, Livingston, Bogan, & Wood, 1998).

Method

Participants. Participants comprised of 23 primary school students (11 male and 12 female) all of whom were in sixth class. The age range was between 11-12 years old. Participants were recruited voluntarily from an urban coeducational primary school. A sixth class was chosen by the school principal and all of the children in the class were invited to take part.

Materials. During the semi-structu-
red interview participants were asked to read two vignette-style conflict situations involving hypothetical characters. These conflict situations were adapted from Terrance Q. Percival’s (1985) study titled ‘The Development of Gender Constructs’. Situations 1 and 2 follows:

**Situation 1.** Joe and Jill Johnson are twins, and today is their fourth Birthday. The Johnson family are poor and the brother and sister usually only get one small present each. So when two presents from a kind old aunt arrived in the post this morning the children got very excited! The presents were wrapped in the same wrapping paper and there was no name tag on either present. The children quickly opened the presents. Inside one was a beautiful purse and inside the other was a pair of boxing gloves.

Joe really likes the beautiful purse. He enjoys carrying it around with him, putting things in and out of it. Jill is really excited about a pair of boxing gloves because she wants to be a boxer when she grows up. Since their aunt did not say which child should get which present, it was up to the parents to decide who got the purse and who got the boxing gloves.

The parents decide that Jill should get the purse and that Joe should get the boxing gloves. Their reason was that a boy should get a boy’s present and that a girl should get a girl’s present.

**Situation 2.** Joe is now thirteen years old. He sometimes plays sports like football with the other boys, but he much prefers quiet indoor activities. Joe enjoys reading and sometimes he cries when a book is sad. He likes drawing and spends hours on his pictures. Lately he had become interested in writing poetry, although he was shy about reading his poems to other people. Joe often tells his family he loves them. He is a very sensitive boy and hates hurting people’s feelings.

Joe’s father is upset. He thinks Joe is too quiet, sensitive, and loving. His father wants Joe to be more aggressive and more adventurous like other boys. He thinks Joe should stop all his quiet indoor activities, like reading and writing poems. Joe’s father tells Joe to be more manly and wants him to do different activities.

Joe was sorry that his father was upset and wanted to please him, but Joe really didn’t like doing the things his father wanted him to do.

For the present study the conflict situations were simplified in terms of their language content for readability purposes. Similarly, some non-relevant cultural references from the original conflict situations were adapted to suit an Irish context. A hockey stick and puck (a Canadian example of a stereotypical boy’s present) became a pair of boxing gloves. An interview schedule (Appendix A) with eight
questions relating to the two situations was developed. Each potential participant received an informational parental consent form which was distributed by their class teacher. Furthermore, participants were given an additional informational consent form before the interview began. Present on the table during the interviews was a laminated visual aid containing two Clip Art images of the Situation 1 toy presents: a purse and a pair of boxing gloves. The interviews were recorded using an Olympus VN-702 digital audio recorder and transcribed on a Samsung laptop.

Procedure. The school principal was contacted and permission to conduct the interviews was obtained. Parental informational consent forms were distributed through the class teacher. Prior to the individual interviews, the researcher introduced herself to the class. Provided a letter of parental consent was returned and signed, pupils were asked to take part in a short 10 minute one-on-one interview. Interviews took place in the assistant principal’s office. Upon arrival at the office, participants were greeted by the researcher and the signed parental consent forms were collected. The participants were assured that they were not being compelled to take part in the study. They were also reminded that the interview would be recorded. The design of the semi-structured interview was explained to the participants. The researcher clarified what the participant would be asked to do during the interview using simple verbal instructions. The participants were then given an additional consent form before the interview began. Using the prepared interview schedule (Appendix A) the researcher encouraged participants to respond to the conflict situations and give reasons for their answers. Upon completing the interview participants were debriefed verbally and thanked for their contribution.

Data Analysis. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate transcript of participants’ responses. Transcripts were then analysed using a thematic analysis in accordance with the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes were identified through an inductive analysis of the data.

Transcripts were read several times by the researcher and notes were made in the margins of meaningful units, such as key words and phrases. When all of the data coding was complete, a long list of identified codes was created. The codes were then sorted into potential themes. The themes were reviewed, and problematic themes were adjusted and refined. Subthemes were identified and a thematic map was created. Another researcher familiar with thematic analysis then openly coded four of the transcripts and identified themes. Only themes which were verified by both researchers were included in the final results to ensure reliability.

Results
Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes

As can be seen in Table 1 four primary themes emerged following a thematic analysis. Furthermore, eight sub-themes were also discovered and will be outlined here.

**Note 1:** Res. = Researcher  
Par. = Participant

**Note 2:** (P11-11F.L16-19) = Participant 11, age 11, female, lines 16-19

**Note 3:** Casual speech was transcribed orthographically. Contractions were only used when produced by speaker as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complete Form</th>
<th>Contracted Form</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because</td>
<td>’Cos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to</td>
<td>Gonna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yeah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note 4:** Speaker pauses and restarts are indicated with double dash surrounded by spaces (i.e. -- )

1. **Adherence to Traditional Gender Stereotypes:** (Toy Preferences & Physical Activity and Peers).  
1a. **Toy Preferences.** Eleven participants’ adhered to traditional gender stereotypes in relation to toy preferences. They believed that biological sex alone should determine who got the ‘girl’s present’ and who got the ‘boy’s present’ (e.g. P11-11F.L9). These participants tended to disregard the character’s own preference for cross-gender toy play (e.g. P19-12F.L10-17) and while they typically did not elaborate on their reasoning, some presented stereotypical arguments.

Par.: -- They should give her (Jill) the purse because she’s a girl and she should want the purse (P05-12F.L2)

Nine participants did not adhere to traditional gender stereotypes. These participants took into account the character’s preferences and decided that they should receive whichever toy they wanted (e.g. P15-11F.L1-13). One participant stated that giving them toys purely based on their
biological sex would be a waste of a toy as they would not ‘use’ them (P02-12F.L13). Two participants displayed a more advanced understanding of sexism, while another was concerned with freedom of choice.

Par.: -- I think it’s kind of sexist the way they gave a girl a purse. Maybe the girl (Jill) doesn’t want a purse (P03-11F.L9)
Par.: If he (Joe) likes the purse, doesn’t matter what gender he is. He just likes it. So he should be able to have it (P21-12M.L8)

1b. Physical Activity and Peers.
When asked to define ‘manly activities’ all participants gave sports or a particular sport as an example. Nineteen participants mentioned a team sport or ‘boy’s sport’ such as football, rugby and hurling (e.g. P18-11M.L26). ‘Active and rough sports’ were considered manly (P15-11F.L24). Participant’s believed that sports encouraged socialization with same-sex peers as sports were something ‘other boys would naturally do’ (P08-12M.L35). One participant indicated that ‘getting a bit stronger’ (P22-11M.L28) was also manly thing to do, while another participant stressed the importance of relationships with same-sex peers in order to avoid appearing weak.

Par.: -- He (Joe) should still try and mix with the other boys more
Res.: Yeah, and why do you think he should do that?
Par.: Just so he could -- I dunno. Not be so weak or something. Or too sensitive or anything like that (P06-12F.L55-57)

2. Society and the Enforcement of Gender Stereotypes: (Bullying & Conforming to Gender Norms).
2a. Bullying.
Three participants were very concerned with social ‘norms’ and what the majority would think (e.g. P12-11F.L65). Another participant expressed that while he them-selves did not have any ‘problem’ with gender atypical behaviour, others in society would (P07-12M.L16-19). Three participants believed that a young boy carrying a purse around would be an invitation for bullying.

Res.: Now Joe’s four here, but imagine he’s an older boy, do you think that would make a difference?
Par.: Well if he has like a purse and some boys are mean, then they might slag him and they might keep it against him when he gets older (P10-12M.L16-17)

Other participants suggested that a young boy’s sensitive nature and preference for indoor activities would hinder him in future fights.

Par.: ‘Cos like, He (Joe) might like, get into some trouble one day and he’ll be real sensitive inside (P01-12F.L45)
Par.: (Joe should) play more football and then if he’s ever in a fight he’s able to like fight the boy (P10-12M.L30)

2b. Conforming to Gender Norms.
Twelve participants assumed that a four year old boy would grow out of his gender atypical
behaviour (e.g. P08-12M.L20-27). These participants anticipated that the male character Joe would conform to conventional gender norms by age thirteen.

Par.: When you’re four you don’t really know -- Like, sometimes you wouldn’t know what more girlish and what’s more boyish
Res.: Yeah?
Par.: But then like when -- If he were older he’d probably say “oh no I’d like the boxing gloves” (P16-11F.L19-21)

3. Categorising Gender Atypical Behaviour through Use of Labels: (Effeminacy and Homosexuality & Tolerating ‘Tomboys’). 3a. Effeminacy and Homosexuality. Five participants described the male character Joe as being ‘gay’ for showing a preference for a purse (e.g. P05-12F.L27). This labelling occurred when Joe was both four and thirteen years old (e.g. P20-11M.L11-14). Three participants felt hesitant saying the word ‘gay’ openly in the interview until given permission to speak freely.

Par.: And maybe the boy (Joe) wants the purse, for reasons I’m not gonna say
Res.: You can say the reasons
Par.: Okay he’s gay. He’s obviously, he’s completely gay (P03-11F.L11-13)

The remaining participants concluded that Joe’s behaviour was ‘weird’, ‘strange’, ‘not normal’ and ‘unusual’ (e.g. P09-11F.L31, P13-12M.L17, P08-12M.L48 & P07-12M.L23).

3b. Tolerating ‘Tomboys’. Two participants labelled the female character Jill a ‘tomboy’ for her cross-gender toy preference (e.g. P20-11M.L6). The majority of participants accepted her preference for a pair of boxing gloves without any labelling. One female participant referenced ‘Katie Taylor’ an Irish female boxer and Olympic champion (P12-11F.L39) who is a prominent figure in the Irish media. There was a question of double standards when it came to the differential labelling of the male and female characters.

Par.: If she (Jill) wants to be a boxer, fine enough. But giving the guy (Joe) a purse isn’t exactly --
Res.: Isn’t exactly what?
Par.: -- Right (P07-12M.L8-10)

4. Parental Support and Understanding: (Acceptance and Encouragement & Compromise). 4a). Acceptance and Encouragement. Nearly half of the participants were critical of the parental characters. Ten participants believed that Joe should be allowed pursue his own interests and/or be free to ‘do what he wants’ (e.g. P18-11M.L47). Similarly, ten participants expressed that his father should either accept Joe’s interests or ‘let him be’ (P08-12M.L50) rather than trying to change him.

Res.: -- So do you agree with Joe’s dad then?
Par.: No
Res.: Why not?
Par.: Because he’s trying to make his son
Empirical Investigations

PREADOLESCENTS’ PREFERENCES AND GENDER ATYPICAL BEHAVIOUR

(into) something his son doesn’t want to be (P19-12F.L38-41)

However, eight participants were not critical of Joe’s father and felt they understood his motives.
Par.: -- He doesn’t want him (Joe) growing up, being like a sissy and like, being weak and all (P13-12M.L39)

Eight participants were concerned that his father was ‘forcing him’ to do things that he simply didn’t want to do, which they felt was wrong (e.g. P15-11F. L32-37). One participant alleged that Joe was ‘being pushed’ into boxing (P03-11F. L51) and took issue with his father trying to control him.
Par: Because it’s not his, the dad’s decision. He’s not the kid. He doesn’t have control over what the kid wants to do, and what he (Joe) likes. (P03-11F.L41)

One participant suggested that parents should actively encourage their children’s interests, while another participant expressed that parents had a duty to support their child’s ‘dreams’ (P18-11M.L9). Two participants suggested that parents should ‘respect’ their children’s opinions (e.g. P21-12M.L47-49).

4b. Compromise. Eight participants expressed that Joe should attempt a compromise with his father by giving some of his suggestions a ‘try’ (e.g. P02-12F. L43-45). It was also recommended that Joe learn to communicate with his father better.
Par.: Maybe he should say to his dad that “I’ll give it a go, but if I don’t like can I stop?”(P22-11M.L35)
Par.: Em. Well, I’d say he could like try a sport and see if he likes it
Res.: Yeah?
Par.: -- But if he can’t find one he likes then just tell his dad that he doesn’t really want to do sports (P16-11F.L41-43)

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to evaluate preadolescent participants’ perceptions of cross-gender toy preferences in early childhood and gender atypical behaviour in adolescence. Four main themes emerged from the data: adherence to traditional gender stereotypes, society and the enforcement of gender stereotypes, categorising gender atypical behaviour through use of labels, and parental support and understanding.

The participants in the present study were 11-12 years old, an age range which was overlooked in Stoddart and Turiel’s (1985) study in which participants ranked sex-role transgressions in terms of ‘wrongness’. Nonetheless, it was predicted by their U-shaped curve that gender stereotypes would be on the incline at this age. The results in the present study indicate that most preadolescents are familiar with traditional gender stereotypes and
can give examples when the question requires them to (e.g. ‘what kind of manly activities do you think Joe’s Dad is talking about?’). However, there was a noticeable divide amongst participants when it came to using gender stereotypical reasoning as a form of conflict resolution. Nearly half of the preadolescents (eleven participants) displayed gender stereotype rigidity and adhered to traditional gender stereotypes. However a comparable number (nine participants) displayed flexibility in gender stereotypic beliefs. It is possible that the variability in responses is shaped by individual cognitive differences, in addition to the diverse social contexts in which participants are growing up.

According to Ullian (1976) children typically perceive differences between masculinity and femininity across a sequence of three developmental levels: biological, societal and psychological. In line with Ullian’s findings, participants in the present study revealed similar trends in response to cross-gender toy preferences. At a biological level, eleven participants used the character’s sex as rigid classification tool to determine who got the ‘boy’s present’ and who got the ‘girl’s present’. It is possible that these participants believe adherence to traditional gender roles is biologically predetermined rather than voluntary. At a societal level, three participants were convinced that the gender nonconforming male character would be subject to social disapproval and would face hostility from same-sex peers. There was little concern shown for the female character’s gender atypical behaviour at a societal level. At a psychological level, nine participants responded free of the rigid stereotyping found at the biological and societal levels. When considering which toy each character should be given these participants highlighted the characters’ individual preferences and expressed that they should get whichever toy they wanted. Unlike Ullian’s study, participants did not show any evidence of a sequential age-trend (i.e. 12 year olds were just as likely as 11 year olds to give biological reasoning).

Society and the enforcement of gender stereotypes emerged as a primary theme in the present study. A sub-theme of bullying emerged in line with previous research (Higdon, 2011; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Pascoe, 2011). Three participants stated that a young boy who enjoyed carrying a purse around would provoke bullying, especially from same-sex peers. In this respect preadolescents mirrored the fears of Higdon (2011) concerning the large role that gender stereotypes play in the cycle of bullying. Some of the participants were uncomfortable with the male characters’ gender atypical behaviour and branded him ‘weak’ and a ‘sissy’ illustrating their need to enforce traditional notions of gender. It can be argued that these participants use societal norms (perhaps unintentionally) as a justification for criticising boys
who exhibit gender atypical behaviour.

Previous research has shown that fathers in particular fear their sons will be perceived as ‘gay’ if they exhibit gender atypical behaviour (Kane, 2006; Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999). The present study confirms that these fears have merit. Although twelve participants believed that the male character Joe would ‘outgrow’ any gender atypical behaviour by age thirteen, five participants speculated that Joe was ‘gay’. This ‘gay’ labelling occurred when Joe was both four and thirteen years old and was used as a prescriptive explanation for the character’s nonconformity. Even participants who stated that there was ‘nothing wrong’ with Joe’s behaviour (e.g. P02-12F.L23) assumed, in a matter-of-fact way, that boys who exhibited traditionally feminine behaviour must be ‘gay’. This inference illustrates a distinct problem with the rigid definitions of masculinity. That is, if young boys do not conform and adhere to the stereotypical definitions of masculinity they will be labelled a homosexual.

It is apparent from both Pollack’s (1998) research and the present study’s results, that female gender roles have expanded in recent decades and females are no longer subject to rigid definitions of femininity. The majority of participants accepted the female character’s gender atypical behaviour and she was not subject to the same homosexual labelling as the male character. One participant even expressed that forcing the female character Jill to have a purse that she didn’t want was ‘sexist’. It was apparent that most of preadolescents interviewed have been raised to embrace the idea that ‘girls can do anything boy cans do’ (Boldt, 2002). Previous research has shown that girls may be drawn towards masculine activities because they are highly valued by society (Feinman, 1981; Frey & Ruble, 1992) hence parents must be careful not to perpetuate the assumption that masculine activities are superior to feminine activities, with both their sons and daughters.

Another issue raised in the present study was that of parental support and understanding. Participants were critical of the parental characters for not accepting and encouraging the male character Joe’s gender atypical interests. Many participants were concerned that the father character was forcing his son to take up ‘manly activities’, in which Joe displayed little interest, at the expense of his preferred quiet indoor activities. It was suggested that Joe should be free to express himself (i.e. ‘do what he wants’) by age thirteen. Clearly preadolescents take issue with overly controlling parents, especially parents who interfere in their children’s leisure activities. Research has shown that preadolescents trade their dependency on parents for a dependency on peers during their transition from childhood into adolescence (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). This transition period is characterised by intense peer
pressure to conform to social norms (Crouter et al., 2007). Preadolescents may therefore resent any additional source of social pressure besides that of their peers, such as parental attempts to modify their gender atypical behaviour.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research. The findings reported in this paper were limited in scope and the small sample may restrict the generalizability of the results. Future studies should consider employing a larger sample of preadolescents. Gender stereotypical attitudes in the present study showed no obvious age or sex trends. Research has suggested that parents with ‘less traditional’ gender stereotype attitudes are influential during early adolescence years (Crouter et al., 2007). Therefore a data triangulation with the inclusion of interviews with the participants’ parents could perhaps explain these individual differences in gender stereotyping. Likewise a longitudinal design would allow for repeated follow-up interviews with participants as they progress through adolescence, and would perhaps produce a gender stereotyping age trend which was not observable in the present study.

Implications for Bullying: Prevention and Intervention. The findings of the present study indicate that preadolescents are highly critical of young boys who exhibit gender nonconforming behaviours. Preadolescents may be unaware of the degree to which rigid definitions of masculinity drive gender stereotypes. Therefore classroom seminars should be employed to inform preadolescents of the social forces which underlie and perpetuate gender stereotypes and how these can lead to bullying. It is important that preadolescents understand why victimisation and labelling on the basis of gender expression should not be tolerated in a primary school environment.

Preadolescents should be made aware that bullying behaviour is not a normal phase of development, and that persistent name-calling directed at the same individual is unacceptable. It is crucial that teachers and school administrators do not ‘turn a blind eye’ when they hear preadolescents engaging in gender-based verbal bullying, such as homophobic name calling. Primary schools’ anti-bullying procedures should be required to address this type of identity-based bullying specifically, within the framework of their overall code of behaviour.

References


Schau, C. G., Kahn, L., Diepold, J. H., and


