Gender and play – childhood influences assignment

Childhood is simply the time between infancy and adulthood, the time when we are developing, learning and are dependent on someone to guide us and help us through life. Richard Mills' (2000, p. 8) research shows many views, such as is " childhood a state of powerlessness and adaptation to a lack of power (as Waksler maintains, 1991: 69)? " "... Or dependency (Shipman, 1972: 13)? Can it not simply be regarded as a period of biological, intellectual, and social development; as a time for the ' accumulation of experience' (Wadsworth, 1991: 13)?

Leading to self-definition (19991: 12)? " Or does it have a whole different meaning all together? What does childhood mean to you? Does it have the same meaning to everyone? Does the meaning change as we get older? Is everyone's childhood the same? Or does it differ according to, gender, culture, class, the country you live in, religion and time? In this assignment I will address some of these issues and issues surrounding them.

There are many interesting themes surrounding childhood; I will be focusing on gender as I believe that your experience of childhood is greatly influenced by this, and gender stereotypes are in result influenced by many external factors, some of these include, media, culture and social conformity. A report done by the American Psychological Association in the Mail (2007) and Telegraph (2007) newspaper reports the strong influences of media on young children and how " The consequence of the sexualisation of girls in media today are very real and are likely to be a negative influence on girls' healthy development".

Media plays a big role in today's society and the development of not only the mind of children but adults too are influenced, the changes and views are deeply imbedded in the subconscious. Another big influence on children, are other children, it is reported in the Independent Education (1996, pp. 10-11) that girls have a better attitude to learning, when children were questioned about this " boys themselves put it down to their friends' influence". All human beings want to be accepted by not only their own social groups but by all beings.

It is such a strong desire that individuals will suppress their own thoughts on an issue and conform to that of a group. It is not only children that are heavily influenced by peers, though they do hold the fort on the whole issue. This is further supported by Schmalz and Kerstetter study, (2006. P. 550) that children although unaware " curb their behaviour" "… to fit the social norm of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour based on gender, from lessons learned from media, community, family, and friends, yet they lack the ability to explain or understand why. "

From a very young age children are treated differently according to their gender; at birth the very first thing everyone wants to know is if the baby is a girl or a boy; do they need to buy a ' pink' or ' blue' gift? Neill Thew (quoted in Mills, J. & Mills, R 2000. p. 134) that in a hospital near his area " babies were tagged" differently " Little boys were given a wrist band reading, ' I'm a boy', whereas girls had one proclaiming, ' It's a girl'. " Initially one may think what is the difference? It is ' only' stating the differences in gender and has no other meaning.

However, Thew believes that there is an " implicit idea underlying this – that boys are assumed to have ready access to active social agency and girls are not – is so powerfully encoded in many other areas of gendered life. It is not, in other words, either accidental or unimportant, but rather one minor example of a regularly present form of social engendering. " A baby from moment go is categorized, leaving little room for them to decide what they like or don't like. Throughout their childhood they see examples of conformity which they ' must' follow to fit in, girls should play with dolls and boys should play with cars.

This notion continues throughout history; gender stereotypes have existed for a long time, dating back to Adam and Eve. We like to believe there is equality in year 2007, but women are still paid lower, do household duties and look after the children whereas men are still seen as the main breadwinner, out at work. This idea is developed from early childhood; from history to date, children role play in this exact manner, girls like to imagine they are at home looking after the baby, spending all day in the kitchen whilst the men are out ' fixing' something, doing labour work.

Media appears to support this idea, by encouraging gender type of toys, e. g. work benches for boys and kitchens for girls, this is also the typical kind of play you would witness in a day nursery. An example of this can be seen in Booklet B, Image one (Jones, R, P. 2007), this shows the young boy taking a dominant role, and a young girl just standing there with her hands clasped together just watching him. It appears children are always dictated to in one way or another, be this by parents, teachers, media, or other adults.

They are not allowed to pick their own path in terms of gender, and appear to have no rights as a child in relation to this. " In the past, most philosophers have asserted that children had either no or limited rights. " (Hill, M. & Tisdall, K. 1997, p. 25) One of the reason for this, is children lack knowledge as they are still developing, limiting their opinions, therefore making it difficult for them to make informed decisions. Ideally an adult's presence is needed to educate a child about life and its ways, according to Locke " only adults are rational". p25) " Blatant gendering of consumers within the mass media is clearly antithetical to the human right to access to diverse material. How can identity be ensured if children are subjected to unabashed stereotyping in the mass media? " (Yelland, N. 1998, p. 104) The rights of children have been an ongoing debate over many years; this did eventually lead to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, " Article 12 of the Convention states that any child (regardless of skin colour, race, sex, background, etc. has a right to voice his or her opinion on issues that may affect him or her. " (Press, J. In Children & Society, p viii) However, this is not always the case, rules may be put in place but are often dismissed and given little importance to, especially where children are concerned, who have no knowledge of their rights, and those who do " are often not taken seriously. " (p. viii) In reality " children have first-hand experience of their lifestyle and of issues that affect them," and should have every right to voice their opinions and live the best way suited to their needs.

It stands that " One of the strongest early influences on gender is the mass toy market, with unprecedented sexual division of toys defined by specific gender traits" (Yelland, N. 1998, p. 105) e. g. Barbie doll. Media has such a

strong influence on children that by the time they are " six or seven" (p1. 05) they are " programmed to spend" their " life as an obedient consumer. " (p. 105) This supports the view that the rights of children are not taken seriously and their best interests are not accounted for, especially in the media. " How can such rights be enacted in a society that demands adherence to trenchant gendered values? (p. 106) In a result gender development is influenced by many external factors. However, Gender development does differ from child to child, the main " changes occur in prenatal development, infancy and childhood". Several independent pieces of research have been done (Schmalz and Kerstetter 2006: Martin and Rubble, 2004: Cherney et al, 2003: Alexander and Hines, 1994) showing that children are aware of gender from an early age, some say as young as 18months, though the majority agree the most significant age of awareness is two.

I believe this awareness is contributed to by the parent/adult, who surrounds the child with gender specific items, such as dolls for girls and cars for boys. Children are born as empty vessels, so pick up and learn only what is around them. If a girl was always surrounded by cars, building tools, construction toys and was treated like she was a boy, then I am certain she would have a different outlook and experience of life as opposed to someone who was treated the opposite.

The attached questionnaire has been devised to identify how strongly influenced children are by gender choices and how much media and peers affect this. Images of different children's toys have been selected which are generally associated to each gender stereotype, these have then been presented to both girls and boys who identify their preference stating why

they would not choose the other and who they would associate them with and why. The children would also be asked about preference in playmates and what kind of toys would be acceptable during their play time out of those images shown.

Such research would show if the statement made by Humphreys and Smith 1984; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987 in Alexander and Hines, 1994 research was still supported in the twentieth century that " children prefer same-sexed playmates" Maccoby, (1998) in Martin & Ruble's research (2004) also says that " one of the most powerful development phenomena is children's striking tendency to segregate by sex when they can choose play partners". It is amazing how children at such a young age are able to group " clothing, colours, toys, occupations and activities into categories of ender" (Clery, Sadorsky & Troseth, 2000; Liben, Bigler & Krogh, 2001; in Martin & Ruble's research (2004). According to Cherney et al (2003) girls toys are more "… creative, nurturing and manipulable while masculine toys were identified as more competitive, aggressive, constructive" "…and reality based. " Such statements helped the selection of the images for the questionnaire; choosing images more domestic orientated and cuddly toys for girls and more vehicle and construction toys for boys.

It was important that when selecting the images many factors were taken into consideration such as the images were age appropriate, sensitive towards disability and not reinforcing racist or sexist stereotypes causing distress to a child. As I would be working with children's perceptions it would be a good idea that all images were clear, simple and easily connected to

gender, if not an annotation would be necessary so that the responses gained from the children were accurate.

All these factors would also apply to the actual questions of the questionnaire. They would need to be clear and related to images, making the structure of the questionnaire as clear as possible, with the questions not only simple and clear but also varied, such as using, open and closed questions, this would keep the child more focused and interested, which is very important when working with children, due to their short attention span.

Using different kind of questions is important not only for keeping children focused but for achieving varied and more accurate results. A closed question does not require any deep thought, it usually is a simple yes or no, enabling you to collect results easily, but an open question needs to be thought about and the answer is varied to the individual's experience, making it difficult to calculate the responses. In this case I have used both formats to make the results more interesting and accurate to each genders view on stereotypes.

The questionnaire would be aimed at children aged 5-6, and the most appropriate place and time to present this kind of questionnaire would be at the end of their first year or start of their second year in primary school, this is for two reasons, easy accessibility of age group and then by this time the children have developed better language and understanding skills, and have had the opportunity to be around different children from varying cultures and gender, allowing them to make decisions and have opinions about different playmates, toys and activities.

This in result would make my research more accurate. When creating my questionnaire it was important to remember children are very vulnerable at this age and are easily influenced, so it is vital a right or wrong answer is not implied, otherwise accurate opinions can not be collected. It is imperative that when conducting any research with children, adults responsible for the child are informed and necessary permission for their participation is gained prior to any commencement.

The research needs to be explained " clearly enough so that anyone asked to take part can make an informed decision about whether they want to consent or refuse? " (Farrell, A. 2005, p. 27) I have including a brief section on this in the beginning of my questionnaire. The media is surrounded of images relating to children and their gender stereotype, so images relating to the area I had chosen were easily accessible. However, on the other hand it was extremely difficult finding books relating to gender specifics connecting to preferences of play and play mates, which I was amazed at being such a strong issue.

I did find some very interesting articles supporting my beliefs of gender lifestyle influences, and even more interesting were the different kind of researches that had been done to support the idea of external influences on opinions and choices made as a child in regards to gender. I learned from all my research that children are empty vessels which need to be guided and educated in life, and what they ultimately behave like in relation to gender is down to social influences. References Books Bukatko, D & Daehler, W, M. (2004) Child Development: A Thematic Approach, 5th ed.

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