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Toy Culture and Children's Toy Preferences in German-speaking Kindergartens in South Tyrol

In recent decades, interdisciplinary childhood research has seen profound developments: Children are nowadays considered as playing an active role in designing their development. Curiosity, a sense of exploration, interest, and similar faculties, let them become highly motivated to deal with themselves and their living environments.

In a systemic analysis, the mutual interdependencies between childhood development processes and the cultural environment are taken into account more closely. The basic living environments of children are their homes and kindergarten, both with a toy culture of their own.

From an eco-psychological perspective, children and kindergarten are engaged in an intense mutual exchange. This means that children, kindergarten teachers and kindergarten are partners in development; together they form an ecological structure. Every partner in this process constantly transforms the other partners in development, who in turn have a transforming effect on the former. Studies in the educational field should be based on this transactional approach (Hartmann et al.2000).

In order to be able to scientifically analyse such interactions it is necessary to explore the relevant aspects in the living environment of children, such as toy culture at kindergarten and at home. The toy culture includes, among others:

Factors relating to kindergarten staff and the kindergarten provider:

- Toy-equipment
- Quality of toys
- Available budget for the purchase of toys
- Space for play, play areas
- Toy preferences and toy rejections by the kindergarten teachers.

Factors relating to children:

- Toy preferences and toy rejections by the children
- Toy requests by the children
- Participation of children in the selection of toys.

Where do we stand?

International empirical surveys analysing the toy culture at kindergarten as an expression of a specific culture of education in a country have been available for several years. The Swedish study conducted by Almqvist in 1987 (Almqvist 1994) was the first to survey 340 child-care institutions of all types. These institutions accommodate children from the age of 12 months to the first years of schooling up to 8 hours a day. The results of this study have shown that the equipment with toys of the child-care institutions surveyed was highly uniform in the entire country, which Almqvist attributed to the long tradition of Froebel's theory of education in Sweden.

A survey of toys was also performed in France by Brougère in 1993 (Brougère 2000) at a sample of *écoles maternelles publiques*. This nursery school caters to children aged 2-6; however, only one third of all children aged 2-3 attend this institution.

The Swedish survey has encouraged us to carry out a similar empirical survey of Viennese kindergartens in Austria at the University of Vienna, Department of Psychology. The questionnaire used by Almqvist was enlarged and adapted by Wildeis 1999 (2000) to the Austrian situation. As a new element, interviews with children aged 3 to 6 attending kindergarten were introduced in order to record in terms of an transactional approach the opinion of children about toys as those who are actually affected. A further survey is currently being conducted in one of Austria's western provinces.

In 1999, Trebo (Trebo 2000) conducted another survey of toys in German-speaking kindergartens in South Tyrol.

Selected objectives of the study

- Investigation of the toy equipment in the kindergarten
- Toy preferences and toy rejections by the kindergarten teachers
- Toy preferences and toy rejections by boys and girls in the kindergarten
- Toy preferences and toy rejections by boys and girls at home
- Toy request by boys and girls in the kindergarten.

Methodology

Questionnaire

The questionnaire by Wildeis (2000) used for the survey in Vienna was adapted by Trebo (2000) to the situation in South Tyrol and enlarged. The questionnaire contains questions about 224 different play materials which were grouped in 21 toy categories.

Samples

Sample of adults

353 kindergarten teachers leading a group representing all 245 kindergartens in South Tyrol were surveyed in the period May to mid-June 1999.

Sample of children:

644 children aged 4 to 7 from 353 groups were interviewed in the same period.

Results

Framework conditions

Table 1: Kindergarten and groups

Total population		Sample
Kindergarten n	Groups n	Groups n
245	478	353

In South Tyrol there are 245 German-speaking kindergartens with a total of 478 groups. The sample for the survey covered 353 kindergarten groups.

Table 2: Kindergarten providers

Provider	groups n	groups %
Communities	303	86,1
Associations	28	7,9
Cooperatives	15	4,3
Church	6	1,7
Total	352	100,0

The majority of kindergarten providers are local authorities (86%), only a few kindergartens (14%) are run privately.

Table 3: Type of kindergarten groups

Type of Kindergarten groups	groups n	groups %
General groups without handicapped children	284	81,4
General groups with handicapped children	59	16,9
Integrative groups	6	1,7
Total	349	100,0

81% of the kindergarten teachers run a regular group without disabled children, only 17% of the kindergarten teachers stated that they run a regular group which includes disabled children. Only 2% of the sample consisted of integrative groups.

Table 4: Children per group

Children per group	groups n	%
up to 10 children	6	1,7
11- 20 children	202	57,6
more than 20 children	143	40,7
Total	351	100,0
Average 19,3 children per group		

The table shows favourable conditions: more than one half (58%) of all groups consist of 11-20 children, in 41% of all groups there are more than 20 children .

Table 5: Space for children

m2 / child	groups n	%
0,3 - 1,5	12	4,4
1,6 - 2,4	95	34,7
2,5 - 3,6	117	42,7
> 3,6	50	18,2
Total	274	100
Average 2,9 m2 per child		

43% of all groups provide 2.5 – 3.6 m² per child, more than one third of all groups provide 1.6 – 2.4 m² per child, and in one fifth of all kindergartens, every child even has a space of more than 3.6 m²!

Toy culture

Toy equipment

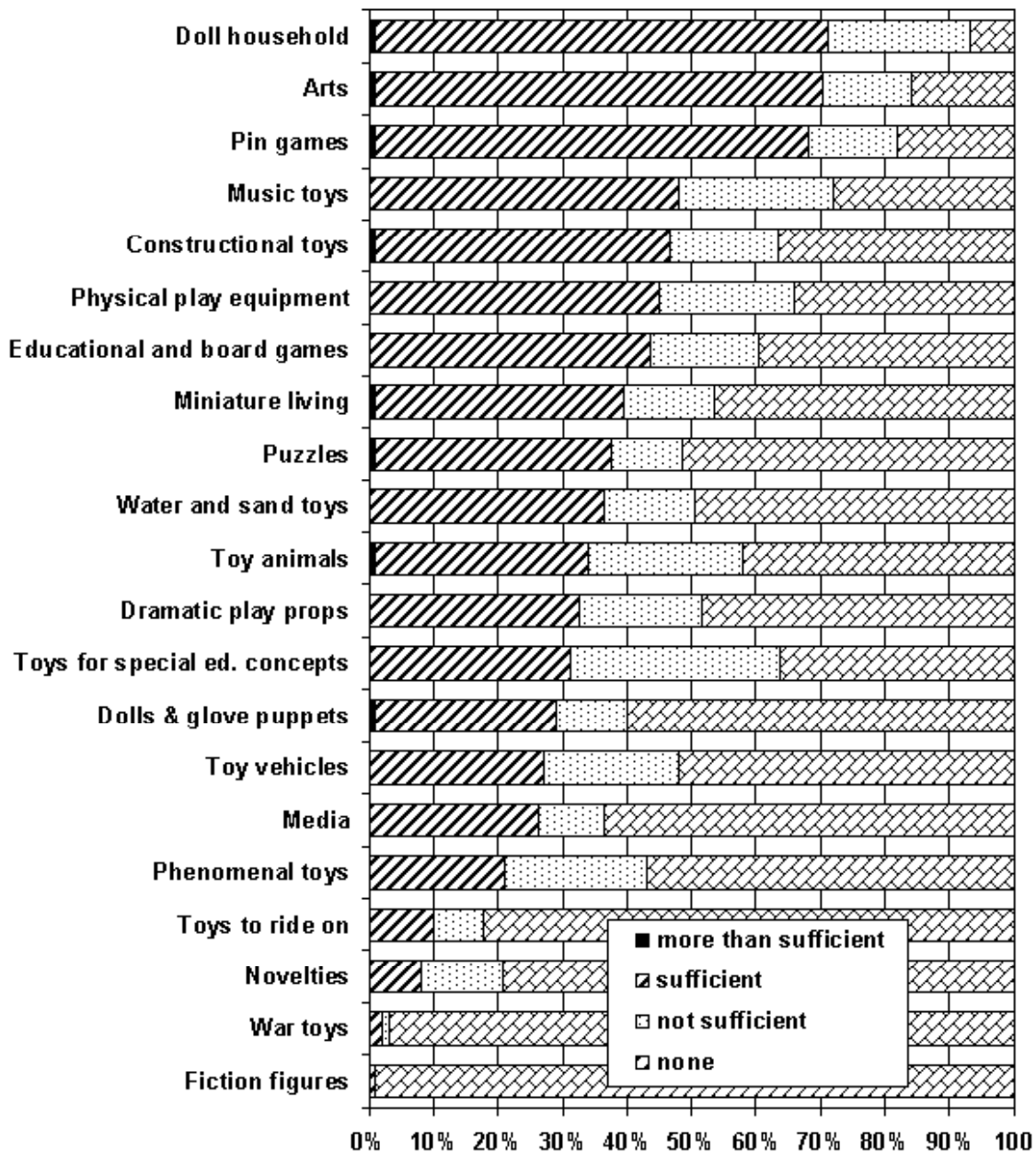


Figure 1: Quantity of toys

The largest quantity of sufficiently available toys (71%) was found in the category of doll household e.g. doll kitchens, doll garments and doll equipment. A similar rate was recorded in the category of arts (materials for drawing, painting, cut and paste, modelling clay, materials from nature and re-usable materials etc. (70%). Puzzles and pin games are equally significant in the equipment of kindergartens with toys: 67% of these games are available at a sufficient degree in the kindergarten groups surveyed, ahead of music toys, constructional toys, physical play equipment, as well as board and educational games, matching and patience games. Fiction figures, war toys such as pistols, rifles, rockets, warriors as well as novelties (masks, rubber reptiles) and vehicles for children (e.g. roller skates, bicycles or mini scooters) are hardly available at all.

Toy rejections by the kindergarten teachers

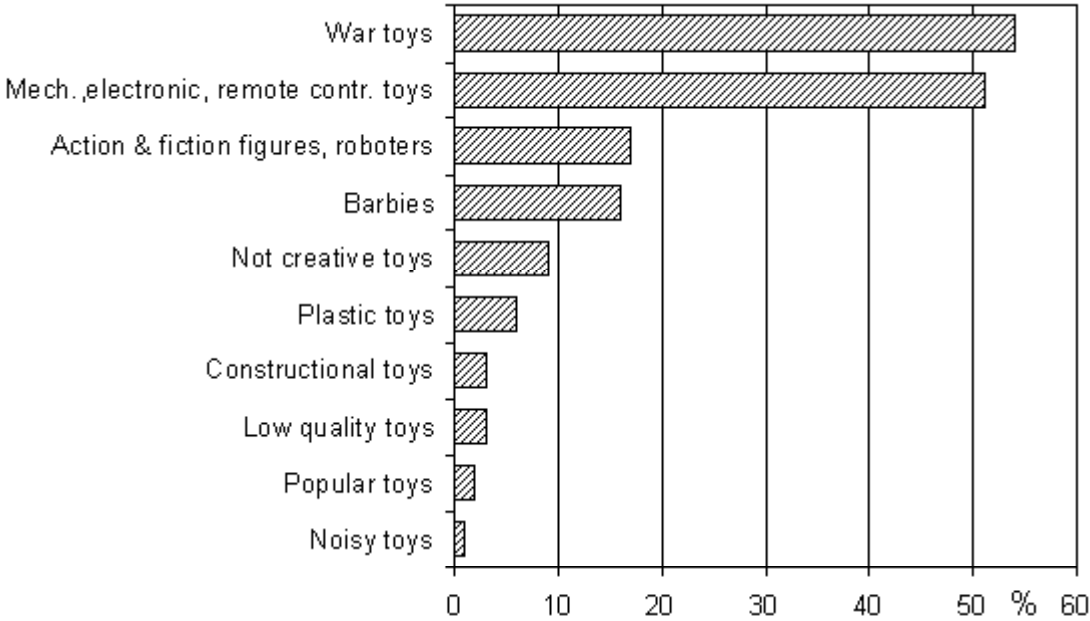


Figure 2: Toys the teachers would never buy for their kindergarten

War toys and battery-operated, electric, remote-controlled and mechanical toys were mentioned most frequently (by more than 50% of all kindergarten teachers). Action and fiction toys and robots (17%) as well as Barbie and her accessories were rejected less frequently. Kindergarten teachers do not seem to mind noise-generating toys.

An analyses of the reasons why kindergarten teachers reject toys clearly revealed that kindergarten teachers want to counteract the restriction of creativity and imagination (43%). 35% consider social education as a major educational goal. Some three fourths of all kindergarten teachers consider the toy materials they reject as being of no educational use.

Approximately one half of those kindergarten teachers who generally allow children to take their own toys to the kindergarten forbid them to bring along certain toys, again mainly war toys (78%) and battery-operated, electric, remote-controlled and mechanical toys (19%). Likewise, they do not fancy toys which are dangerous and might cause injuries (8%), as well as fragile toys and toys of low durability (7%).

Toy preferences and toy rejections by boys and girls in the kindergarten

Table 6: Age and gender of the children

Age	Girls		Boys		Totals	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
4 years	74	22,8	85	26,6	159	24,7
5 years	151	46,6	151	47,2	302	46,9
6 years	99	30,6	82	25,6	181	28,1
7 Years			2	0,6	2	0,3
Total	324	100	320	100	644	100

One boy and one girl each of every kindergarten group were asked about their favourite toys. The majority of the children surveyed were 4-6 years old.

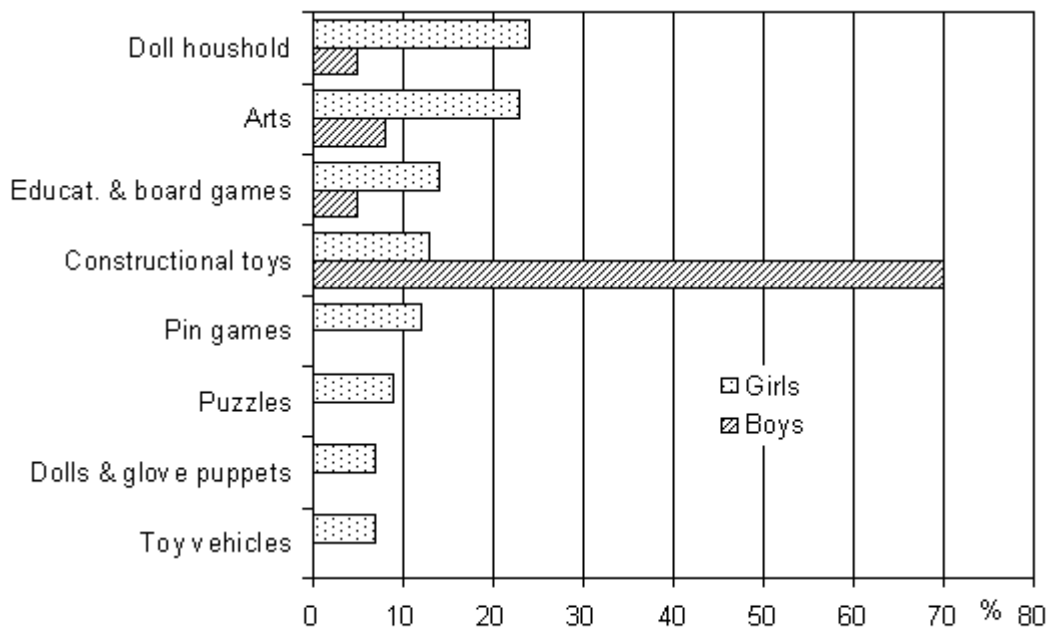


Figure 3: Children's favourite toys in the kindergarten

At kindergarten, girls prefer toys from the doll household (24 %), against a mere 5% of all boys. The overwhelming majority of boys (70%) favour building and construction materials, against a mere 13% of all girls. One fourth of the girls mentioned material for arts such as paint and paper, scissors and glue, modelling clay etc. compared to only 8% of all boys. 14% of all girls mentioned educational and board games as their preferred toys as against 5% of all boys. 12% of the girls surveyed favour pin games, which were not at all mentioned by boys.

When asked why they preferred certain toys at kindergarten, the boys (53%) mentioned at a significantly higher rate than girls (25%) the possibilities for play and the play function ($p=0.001$).

Girls explained their toy preference at a significantly higher rate by the way toys look and feel (appearance) ($p < .001$) as well as by the “make believe” possibility during play ($p = .001$).

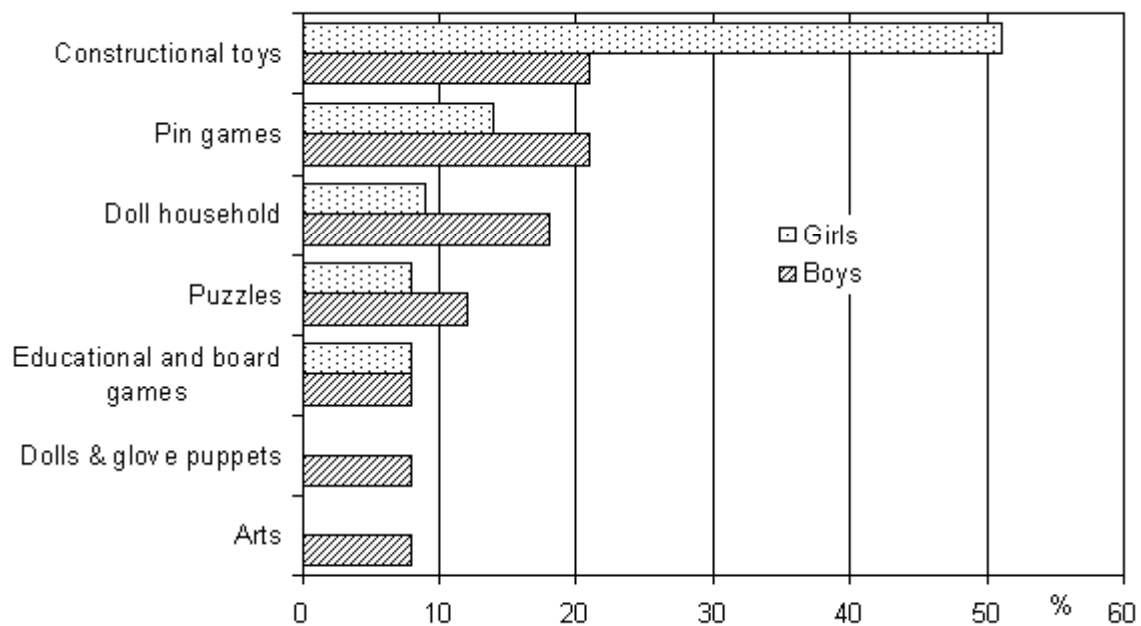


Figure 4: Toys rejected by the children in the kindergarten

Constructional materials were rejected at a significantly higher rate by girls ($p < .001$), whereas boys mentioned play material from the category of the doll household, dolls and hand gloves ($p < .001$), as well as material for arts ($p = .001$) more frequently.

When asking about the reasons why they rejected certain toys at kindergarten, differences according to gender were identified: girls (11%) mentioned quarrels with other children at a significantly higher rate than boys (3%) ($p < .001$).

Boys (13%) explained their rejection of toys more frequently with the long time and the patience required for playing than girls (5%) ($p < .001$).

Approximately 1/6 of the boys and girls rejected toys because they were too heavy, 1/8 of the children considered them to be boring.



Figure 5: Children's favourite toys at home

More than one half of the girls mentioned dolls such as Barbie, Baby Born, hand gloves etc. as their favourite toys at home. Barbie and her accessories accounts for one third of these replies!

Boys prefer construction materials such as Lego, Duplo, Playmobil (37%) as well as toy vehicles (33%) at home. Whereas the boys did not mention dolls at all, at least 10% of the girls stated that they favoured construction material.

The pleasure of playing and interest in the toy were the most frequent responses given by boys ((31%) and girls (27%).

Again, girls mentioned the appearance of the toy (12%) as well as the emotional rapport to the play object (11%) at a significantly higher rate ($p=.005$). Boys, in turn, emphasised the play function (30%) more frequently than girls (20%) ($p=.002$).

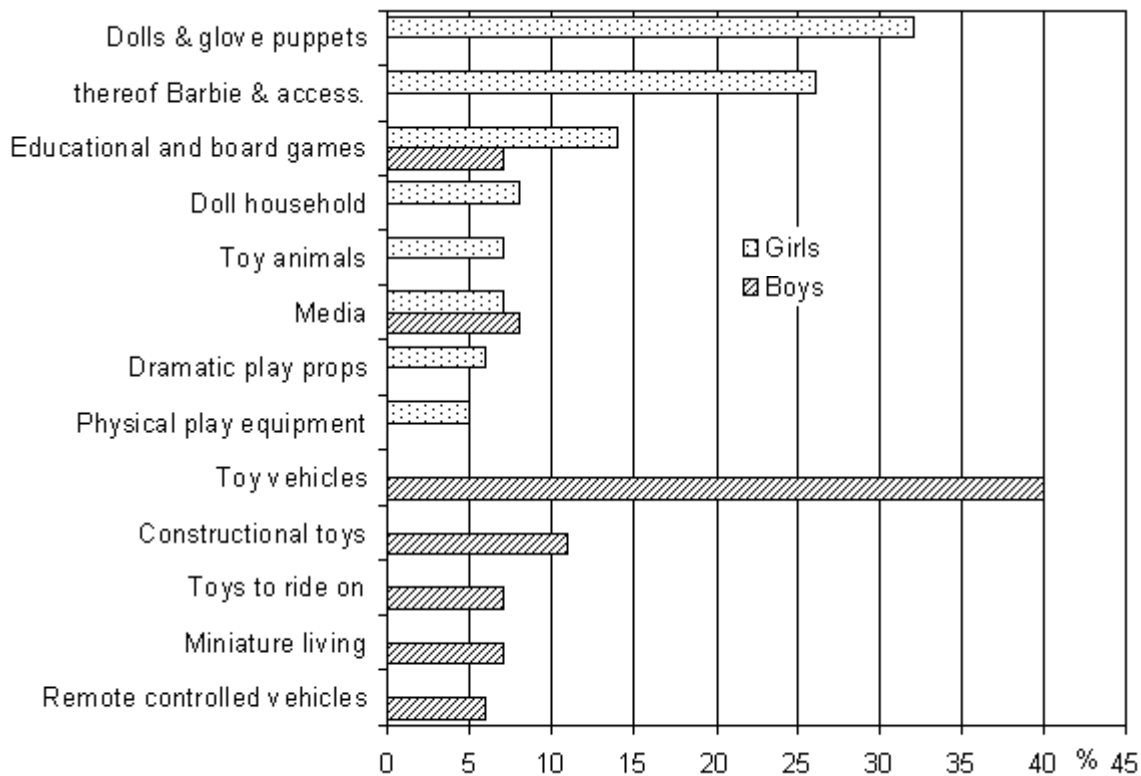


Figure 6: Children's toy requests in the kindergarten

Girls primarily requested dolls, in particular Barbie, dolls with special, battery-operated functions, Baby Born, etc. (32%) for kindergarten, with Barbie accounting for 83% in this category. They equally mentioned board games (14%).

Boys requested first and foremost specific toy vehicles, such as fire engines, ambulances, tractors etc. (40%) and construction materials (11%).

Computers and computer games were requested by 7% of the responding girls and 8% of the responding boys.

Approximately one third of the children justified their toy requests for kindergarten by mentioning the pleasure of playing and because they liked it. The boys mentioned the play function more frequently.

Summary and Conclusions

As in Sweden, Vienna and France, the German-speaking kindergartens in South Tyrol are equipped mostly with traditional toys. There is a multitude and variety of toys in the categories of doll household, arts and crafts materials, picture puzzles and pin games, music toys, constructional toys etc.

As an important complement to this structured play material, we find non-structured material from nature such as stones and pebbles, woods, shells, waste and packaging material like rags, boxes, tins, etc. which are mainly used for arts and crafts, as building and construction materials, and as materials for picture puzzles.

As in Sweden, Vienna and France, the kindergarten teachers reject toys which encourage aggressive play, such as highly structured and popular toys which are heavily commercialised. This includes toys from the commercial media network such as action figures, fashion dolls, figures and board games with popular characters.

Battery-operated toys and electronic games and computers are not allowed in the kindergarten. The kindergarten teachers justify this rejection by arguing that these toys do not encourage creativity and social behaviour and that they do not consider them to be of educational value.

Children, in particular boys, have toy preferences that are contrary to those of kindergarten teachers. While at least one fourth of all girls mentioned the doll household and the arts and crafts materials available at kindergarten as being their favourite toys, boys hardly favour these toys.

More than 2/3 of all boys love construction material most, on account of its play function (because you can build something specific). For girls, it is very important how toys look and feel (e.g. beautiful, soft, colourful ...)

Puzzles and pin games, which are part of the kindergarten's traditional toy equipment, enjoy very little popularity with boys and girls. The time is ripe to reflect on the importance of these games for children today. Having to sit still and to apply extremely fine motor skills corresponds rather to a traditional, bourgeois role cliché, in particular of women, who used to spend a lot of time sewing, embroidering and knitting in former times. At any rate, the children clearly voiced their antipathy with attributes such as "because I don't like it", "because it is too difficult" or "because it is boring".

Gender-specific differences were also found with regard to quarrels about toys, which girls tend to reject more frequently, while boys rather refuse a toy if it takes too long playing with.

Similar to the findings from the study carried out in Vienna, the equipment with toys and media in the German-speaking kindergartens in South Tyrol stands in contrast to the toys children have at home. At home, girls again favour dolls, in particular Barbie with all her accessories which is not available at kindergarten and therefore ranks first in the girls list of desired toys. At home, boys again favour constructional toys and toy vehicles which are evidently rare in the kindergarten in South Tyrol and therefore desired by boys for kindergarten. Asked to give a reason, boys mentioned the play function, while girls stated the pleasure of playing as well as interest.

One may conclude by noting that children, in particular boys, grow up in different toy worlds:

Toy world 1 : the toy world of their homes, where the family fulfils children's wishes for highly commercialised and advertised toys.

Toy world 2: the toy world of kindergarten, which has an educational orientation and is still committed to the tradition of leading educationalists such as Fröbel or Montessori and offers traditional, good-quality play material for children, but categorically rejects war toys, computer games and electronic games as well as fashion dolls, like Barbie.

The fact that virtually all kindergarten teachers are female also has an impact on which type of toys are selected for kindergarten:

The generous availability of dolls and doll equipment reinforces the toy wishes of girls, but on no account those of boys. The rejection of mechanical, remote-controlled toys and action figures by kindergarten teachers does not satisfy the wishes of boys in any way.

Already in 1988, Sutton-Smith pointed out this fact in a critical evaluation of US-American studies on "War Toys and Childhood Aggression". Given the fact that female kindergarten teachers, due to their socialisation, have little experience of their own with toys that trigger aggressions, they tend to forbid rough and tumble play. The boys then react to this ban by reverting to aggressive fantasy games.

Brougère (2000) has criticised the attitude of teachers at the French *écoles maternelles* who tend to over-institutionalise children's play. The teachers would accept only those toys which they knew from their own childhood and which were consistent with tradition. The current play culture of children was excluded from the institutions.

According to Retter (1999) kindergarten with its traditional equipment of toys will remain in our post-modern society a place where children's play largely takes place in a three-dimensional world and where this third dimension is not replaced by the new media, neither in Sweden, nor in Vienna or South Tyrol.

It should be a topic of further studies whether this fact puts children at a disadvantage when growing into the world of the media and consumption, or whether the two worlds of play at kindergarten and at home ideally complement one another.

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