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Desire to Play With Counterstereotypical Peers Is Related to Gender Stereotypes and Playmate Experiences

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This study investigated the role of children's gender stereotypes and peer playmate experiences in shaping their desire to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical preferences (e.g., a boy who likes dolls or a girl who likes trucks). Children ($N = 95$; 46 girls, 49 boys; 67% White, 18% Black, 8% Latinx, 4% Asian, 3% other; median household income = \$US97,810) who were 4 to 8 years old ($M = 6.11$ years old, $SD = 1.34$) were interviewed about their gender stereotypes about toy preferences, how often they engage in counterstereotypical playmate experiences, and their desire to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences. Children with less gender stereotype-consistent expectations reported more playmate experiences with children who played with toys that were gender counterstereotypical compared to children with more gender stereotype-consistent expectations. Additionally, children with less gender stereotype-consistent expectations reported a greater desire to play with peers who held counterstereotypical toy preferences compared to children with more gender stereotype-consistent expectations. Younger children's reported playmate experiences with peers who liked toys that were gender counterstereotypical and their desire to play with these peers were strongly related to their gender stereotypical expectations (and more so than for older children). Together, these findings indicate that children's gender stereotypes and peer playmate experiences are related to their desire to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences, highlighting the importance of facilitating diverse friendships for promoting inclusive orientations in childhood.


Keywords: gender, stereotypes, peer playmates, group norms, morality


Children hold gender stereotypes about a wide range of topics (Conry-Murray, 2017; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin & Fabes, 2001; Rizzo & Killen, 2018). From as young as three years of age, children expect boys and girls to engage in different types of activities (Ruble et al., 2006; Stoddard & Turiel, 1985), and have gender stereotypes about a range of topics from simple preferences to which occupations are meant for men and women (Baker et al.,


2016; Liben & Bigler, 2002). As an example, children as young as four years of age expect boys to be better at building trucks and girls to be better at building princess dolls, with these gender stereotypes even predicting children's resource allocation decisions (Rizzo & Killen, 2018). Therefore, children's gender stereotypes emerge from a very young age and have implications for contributing to gender-based inequalities.


Given that children hold expectations about gender stereotypical activities (Carter & Patterson, 1982; Conry-Murray, 2017; Rubin et al., 2020; Stoddard & Turiel, 1985), abilities (Rizzo & Killen, 2018), and professions (Baker et al., 2016; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Olsson & Martiny, 2018), cross-gender friendships might be one avenue for reducing gender stereotypes. Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory has served as the basis for many interventions aimed at reducing stereotypes and prejudice, including gender stereotypes (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2020). Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory proposes that multiple, meaningful interactions between members of different groups, under positive conditions and authority sanctions, can foster a reduction of stereotypes and biases between cross-group members (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Indeed, in their meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) found that intergroup contact was strongly related to a reduction in prejudice toward outgroup members.

Therefore, based on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), it would be expected that intergroup gender contact would also lead

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to reduced gender stereotypes and prejudices. However, many contexts of gender contact do not meet the conditions necessary for reducing stereotypical expectations. By age three, children predominantly play with same-gender peers (Ruble et al., 2006). Further, the more children play with same-gender peers in the beginning of the school year, the more likely they are to engage in gender stereotypical behavior at the end of the school year (Martin & Fabes, 2001). Therefore, from an early age, children might engage in a cyclical pattern in which their preferences for same-gender peers who engage in gender stereotypical behavior might further reinforce participation in gender segregated and stereotyped activities and same-gender friendships. Gender segregation and stereotypes are prevalent in the early childhood years (Fabes et al., 2018; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin & Fabes, 2001). Contact with peers who hold gender counterstereotypical preferences might be particularly important for reducing gender stereotypes, improving intergroup attitudes, and encouraging positive intergroup gender contact in the future. Intergroup contact might be challenging, however, given the importance of group dynamics and children's understanding of group norms and expectations.

Group Norms and Group Dynamics

Identification with ingroups is a key component of children's social development, playing a particularly important role in shaping children's decisions about how to behave and whom to play with (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Corsaro, 2020; Nesdale, 2008). Beginning in early childhood, children conceptualize groups primarily in terms of group membership (e.g., gender: "We are girls") rather than group norms (e.g., "My group likes to do x"). As they move into middle childhood (e.g., 6 to 12 years old), however, children begin to recognize the distinction between group norms and group membership and incorporate shared norms and values into their understanding of group dynamics (Rutland & Killen, 2017). Critically, group norms are distinct from group membership, as norms are expectations about the behaviors and conventions that are expected by the group, yet not all members of the group might agree about the types of norms that the group holds (Hardecker et al., 2016; Killen et al., 2016). Similarly, gender stereotypes are frequently reinforced in society despite not being unanimously agreed upon.

Generally, ingroup norms reflect beliefs about how ingroup members are expected to behave, whereas outgroup norms reflect beliefs about how outgroup members are expected to behave (to remain affiliated with their group; Rutland et al., 2015). Research from a developmental subjective group dynamics perspective has shown that children attend carefully to adherence to group norms, which might, at times, lead to greater preference for outgroup members who adhere to ingroup norms than to ingroup members who break group traditions (Abrams et al., 2007; Abrams & Rutland, 2008). For example, in the context of generic norms (e.g., wearing a specific t-shirt to an event), children evaluate ingroup deviant behavior more negatively than outgroup deviant behavior (Rutland et al., 2015). The phenomenon of evaluating ingroup deviant behavior more negatively than outgroup deviant behavior, referred to as the *black sheep effect*, increases between 5 and 12 years of age (Abrams et al., 2014). Further, in morally-relevant contexts, children endorse deviant behavior that promotes equality over deviant behavior that promotes inequality (Cooley & Killen,

2015), reflecting the importance of moral concerns in childhood. Nonetheless, an ingroup deviant might be seen as a threat to group identity, making adherence to the group's norm particularly important for group cohesion.

Furthermore, children as young as 3 years of age protest when an individual violates a group's norm (Rakoczy et al., 2009), reflecting the importance of norm adherence in early childhood. Children's understanding of and decisions regarding norm adherence continue to progress from childhood to adolescence. That is, with age, children recognize that their view about a group norm might be different from how other group members think about it, reflecting knowledge about group dynamics that continues to refine from childhood to early adolescence (e.g., from 9 to 13 years of age; Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Mulvey et al., 2014). Children also know that though they might like an ingroup deviant (someone who rejects their group's norms), the group might not be favorable toward them (Killen et al., 2013). Deviating from group norms is often perceived as a form of disloyalty to the group, and children know that groups might dislike or even go so far as to exclude a member who is disloyal and betrays group expectations (Rutland & Killen, 2017). Thus, one goal of the current study was to investigate children's desires to play with ingroup and outgroup deviants in contexts involving gender stereotypes.

Though previous research has investigated age-related changes in children's evaluations of ingroup and outgroup deviants (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Cooley & Killen, 2015; Mulvey et al., 2014), it remains to be determined how children's own evaluations of, and experiences with, ingroup and outgroup deviant playmate experiences are related to their desires to play with unfamiliar ingroup and outgroup deviants. This distinction is important, as children might negatively evaluate an ingroup deviant's behavior (Abrams & Rutland, 2008) but might still prefer to play with that ingroup deviant over an outgroup deviant due to the saliency of group membership. Furthermore, previous research on children's evaluations of ingroup and outgroup deviants has presented children and adolescents with explicit group norms, such as boys playing football and girls doing ballet (and vice versa; Mulvey & Killen, 2015). In these explicit norm scenarios, participants evaluated whom they liked more, as well as made inclusion and exclusion decisions between ingroup and outgroup members based upon who does or does not conform to the group's explicitly established norms (McGuire et al., 2019; Mulvey & Killen, 2015). However, the current study did not explicitly assign group norms regarding toy preferences. Instead, the current study assessed children's counterstereotypical playmate experiences and attitudes toward peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences, drawing upon widely held societal norms and gender stereotypes and serving as an implicit assessment of adherence to group norms.

Gender Stereotypes and Friendships

Much of the previous work on children's gender playmates have been in the context of the school environment. For example, Martin and Fabes (2001) study documenting children's same-gender peer friendships consisted of observational data collected at the children's school. The school environment has been documented to be highly gender segregated (Bigler, 1995; Ruble et al., 2006) and might not necessarily represent children's peer

playmate preferences in a more unstructured environment, such as at home. Play preferences at home might be shaped by different factors, such as playing with siblings, peers who live nearby, or who are family friends, regardless of gender. Further, choices for toys at home and school might differ. It is therefore important that children's playmate experiences are assessed in multiple environmental contexts.

From an early age, children hold gender stereotypes about activities (Carter & Patterson, 1982; Rubin et al., 2020), abilities (Rizzo & Killen, 2018), and professions (Baker et al., 2016; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Olsson & Martiny, 2018), and engage in behavior and friendships that further reinforce gender stereotypes (Martin & Fabes, 2001). Research on intergroup contact suggests that cross-group contact can serve as one means of reducing prejudice and improving positive feelings and attitudes toward outgroup members (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Indeed, cross-gender friendships are related to having more positive attitudes toward individuals with gender counterstereotypical preferences (Zosuls et al., 2016). Children also protest peer exclusion that is based upon gender stereotypes (Killen et al., 2001). However, research has not investigated the degree to which children's counterstereotypical playmate experiences are related to their own gender stereotypes, and how together these play experiences and stereotypes inform children's peer playmate preferences. This gap in the literature is important to address given that gender stereotypes are salient and early emerging in childhood (Ruble et al., 2006).

The Current Study

Broadly, the current study aimed to document the extent to which children's own gender stereotypes and self-reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences relate to children's desires to play with other counterstereotypical peers in the future. We investigated this aim in several ways. First, we assessed children's gender stereotypical expectations. Second, we measured how frequently children engaged in counterstereotypical play and examined whether these experiences differed depending on the peer's gender group membership. Third, we investigated the relation between children's gender stereotypical expectations and their willingness to befriend a peer with counterstereotypical toy preferences. We also aimed to extend previous research on children's peer playmate experiences by including assessments of children's self-reported experiences with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences both at school and at home to provide a more in-depth representation of children's peer playmate experiences. Through these various measures we aimed to examine the relation between children's gender stereotypical expectations, peer playmate experiences, and desires to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences.

We were interested in young children's (e.g., 4 to 8 year olds) gender stereotypical expectations and peer playmate decisions for several reasons. First, previous research has documented that children in this age-range display strong ingroup gender preferences in their friendship decisions (Martin & Fabes, 2001). Second, children's gender stereotypical expectations develop early in childhood and often persist into adulthood (Liben & Bigler, 2002), yet other research has documented that older children become less rigid in their enforcement of gender stereotypes with age (Ruble et

al., 2006). Furthermore, because our interest was in children's counterstereotypical playmate experiences and desires to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences, we selected an age group where the play preferences and choice of toys would be ecologically valid and directly comparable (across the period of 4 to 8 years children engage in similar types of play and with similar types of toys). Nonetheless, given the many developmental shifts in childhood, we were particularly interested in documenting age-related differences in the relation between young children's reported gender stereotypes, peer playmate experiences, and desires to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences.

Hypotheses

First, in line with previous literature on children's evaluations of group dynamics (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; McGuire et al., 2019), it was expected that children would be more likely to report wanting to play with an outgroup member who plays with the participant's ingroup gender-stereotyped toys (e.g., an outgroup deviant), compared to an ingroup member who plays with the outgroup's gender-stereotyped toys (e.g., an ingroup deviant). Second, we hypothesized that fewer reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences would be related to more stereotype-consistent expectations, and that this would be stronger for younger participants as younger children engage in stereotype-enforcement more than older children (Ruble et al., 2006). Last, we hypothesized that children with more stereotype-consistent expectations (and fewer reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences) would be less likely to want to play with a peer who holds counterstereotypical toy preferences, and that this connection would be stronger for younger participants (Ruble et al., 2006). Given the lack of previous research on this specific topic, it remained an open question whether participant gender differences in children's desires for peer playmates to adhere to stereotypical toy preferences would be documented and thus we did not formulate specific hypotheses regarding potential participant gender differences.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 95$; 46 girls, 49 boys) ranged in age from 4.02 to 8.89 years ($M = 6.11$ years, $SD = 1.34$) and were recruited from elementary, kindergarten, and preschools serving middle-income families in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. We conducted a power analysis for a multiple regression test, as this analysis required the most participants for sufficient power among the analyses we conducted. Previous research with similar designs (McGuire et al., 2019; Mulvey et al., 2016) yielded η_p^2 values ranging from .08 to .20 and Cohen's d values ranging from .7 to 3.3. Further, prior research utilizing the Social Reasoning Developmental (SRD) model on related topics documented medium effects in corresponding power analyses (McGuire et al., 2019; Rizzo & Killen, 2018). Thus, we expected to detect medium effects. The power analysis revealed that to detect a medium effect ($f = .15$) for a fixed model linear multiple regression with power (.8), six predictors, and $\alpha = .05$, a sample size of 98 was appropriate (Faul et al., 2009). All children in the target age range were

invited to participate. Written parental consent and children's verbal assent were obtained for all participants. Schools did not allow for participant racial or income demographic information to be collected. Therefore, we gathered available neighborhood demographic information of the sampling population: 67% White, 18% Black, 8% Latinx, 4% Asian, 3% Other. Based on observations from the research assistants, participant race/ethnicity was approximately representative of the whole school. The median household income of the sampling population was \$US97,810, which was similar to the median families household income (\$US95,336) of the state in which the data were collected (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). This income level provides for a relatively middle-income lifestyle for families given the high cost of living (and particularly housing) associated with the large metropolitan area where the data were collected. Three additional participants were excluded due to experimenter error.

Procedure and Assessments

Procedure

The University of Maryland Institutional Review Board approved all measures for the project "Children's Conceptions of Gender Stereotypes and Merit" (Protocol 708244-2). Trained research assistants interviewed participants individually in a quiet space at their school. Participants were seated at a table and informed that they would "hear some stories and look at some pictures on a laptop." The protocol was administered using Microsoft Office PowerPoint (Version 15). Interviewers recorded participant responses on a paper protocol. Participants were first trained on how to use the Likert-type scales used in the study. The experimental session took approximately 20 min to complete, after which children were escorted to their classrooms.

Assessments

We assessed children's stereotypical expectations, reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences, and desires to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences.

Stereotypical Expectations

To assess the extent that children held stereotypical expectations regarding peers' toy preferences, participants were presented with four trials consisting of paired images depicting a silhouette of a girl or boy peer and feminine- or masculine-stereotyped toys. More specifically, two trials depicted a girl peer (one trial with feminine stereotype-consistent toys and one trial with masculine stereotype-consistent toys) and two trials depicted a boy peer (one trial with feminine stereotype-consistent toys and one trial with masculine stereotype-consistent toys). For example, in the feminine stereotype-consistent trial, participants were asked, "How much do girls like to play with these types of toys [feminine-stereotyped toys depicted]?" Responses were recorded on a Likert-type smiley face scale with values ranging from 1 = *really not like* to 6 = *really like*. Participants reported their responses verbally or by pointing to the smiley face on the screen. A composite variable was created, measuring stereotypical expectations regarding peers' toy preferences across all four trials (Feminine Stereotype-Consistent + Masculine Stereotype-Consistent – Feminine Counterstereotypical – Masculine Counterstereotypical). For example, a

participant who thought that girls "really like" feminine-stereotyped toys (score of 6), that boys "really like" masculine-stereotyped toys (score of 6), that girls "really not like" masculine-stereotyped toys (score of 1), and that boys "really not like" feminine-stereotyped toys (score of 1) would receive a composite score of 10 (e.g., $6 + 6 - 1 - 1 = 10$). Thus, higher composite scores (ranging from –10 to 10) indicate stereotypical expectations that are more consistent with gender stereotypes regarding peers' toy preferences. Going forward, we will refer to such composite scores as reflecting more or less stereotype-consistent expectations.

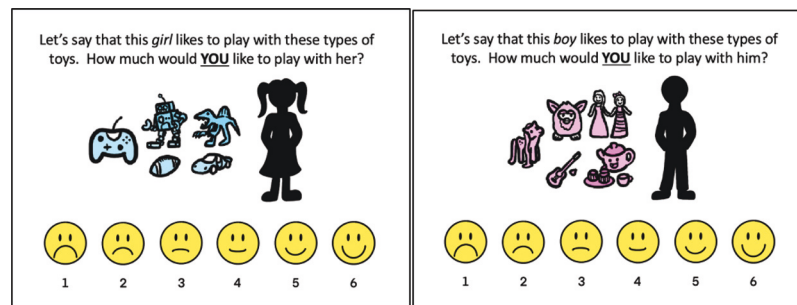
Self-Reported Counterstereotypical Playmate Experiences

To assess participants' reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences, we presented to children four trials consisting of paired images depicting a silhouette of a girl or boy peer and a cluster of feminine- or masculine-stereotyped toys. Two of the trials assessed participants' reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences at home, and the other two assessed reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences at school, resulting in four trials. For example, in the feminine counterstereotypical at home trial, participants were asked, "When you're at home, do you ever play with these types of toys [masculine-stereotyped toys depicted] with girls?" Responses were recorded on a Likert-type frequency scale with values ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *all the time*. Participants reported their responses verbally or by pointing to their response on the screen. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant differences between the school and home assessments. Thus, to test hypotheses regarding overall reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences, a composite variable was created by averaging participants' responses for all four trials. Thus, higher values indicate more reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences (range = 1–5). Similarly, we created composite variables for participants' reported contact with same gender peers playing with opposite gender toys (ingroup deviant playmate experiences), and for reported contact with opposite gender peers playing with same gender toys (outgroup deviant playmate experiences).

Desire to Play

To assess participants' desires to play with peers who have counterstereotypical toy preferences, participants were presented with two trials consisting of paired images depicting a silhouette of a girl or boy and a cluster of feminine- or masculine-stereotyped toys (see Figure 1). In the feminine counterstereotypical trial, participants were asked, "Let's say that this girl likes to play with these types of toys [masculine-stereotyped toys depicted]. How much would you like to play with her?" In the masculine counterstereotypical trial, participants were asked, "Let's say that this boy likes to play with these types of toys [feminine-stereotyped toys depicted]. How much would you like to play with him?" Responses were recorded on a Likert-type smiley face scale with values ranging from 1 = *really do not like* to 6 = *really like*. All participants completed both the feminine counterstereotypical and masculine counterstereotypical trials. Participants reported their responses verbally or by pointing to the smiley face on the screen. A composite variable was also created, measuring total reported desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences, by averaging participants' responses for both trials (total score

Figure 1
Example Protocol for Desire to Play Measure



Note. Slides presented to participants in the feminine counterstereotypical (left) and masculine counterstereotypical (right) trials, which also depict an example of some of the toys that were shown in all three measures. Illustrations by Kathryn M. Yee and Gerrit Wind, Jr. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

range = 1–6). Higher values indicate greater desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences.

Measures

In sum, there were the following three central measures:

Stereotypical expectations—“How much do girls/boys like to play with these types of toys [feminine-stereotyped/masculine-stereotyped toys depicted]?”

Self-reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences—“When you’re at home/school, do you ever play with these types of toys [masculine-stereotyped toys depicted] with girls/[feminine-stereotyped toys depicted] with boys?”

Desire to play—“Let’s say that this girl/boy likes to play with these types of toys [masculine-stereotyped toys depicted/feminine-stereotyped toys depicted]. How much would you like to play with her/him?”

Data Analytic Plan

To test our first hypothesis that participants would report more contact with opposite gender peers playing with same gender toys (e.g., outgroup deviant playmate experiences) than with same gender peers playing with opposite gender toys (e.g., ingroup deviant playmate experiences), we conducted a paired-samples *t* test. Next, and in line with our second hypothesis, we looked to determine whether children with more stereotype-consistent expectations would report fewer reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences, and if this would be stronger among older compared with younger participants. To do so, we conducted a multivariate multiple regression with reported contact with gender ingroup peers playing with outgroup-stereotyped toys (ingroup deviant playmate experiences) and with gender outgroup peers playing with ingroup-stereotyped toys (outgroup deviant playmate experiences) as the two dependent variables. Age, stereotypical expectations, and an age by stereotypical expectations interaction term were entered as the independent variables, with age and stereotypical expectations mean-centered given standard best practices for

such analysis (Aguinis & Gottfredson, 2010). One participant chose not to answer one of the playmate experiences questions, resulting in listwise deletion.

To test our third hypothesis, that children with more stereotype-consistent expectations and children with fewer reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences would be less likely to want to play with a peer with counterstereotypical toy preferences, we examined the relation between age, playmate experiences, stereotypical expectations, and desire to play using stepwise linear regressions. Specifically, given best practices (Aguinis & Gottfredson, 2010), we first analyzed the centered continuous variables for age, reported contact, and stereotypical expectations individually to predict children’s desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences. We then added their interaction terms hierarchically to predict the participants’ desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences (i.e., Step 1: Age; Step 2: Playmate Experiences; Step 3: Stereotypical Expectations; Step 4: Age \times Playmate Experiences; Age \times Stereotypical Expectations; Playmate Experiences \times Stereotypical Expectations). All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27; IBM Corp, 2020). Data and study materials might be available upon request. This study was not preregistered.

Results

Initial analyses examining participant gender differences did not yield any significant effects; thus, participant gender was dropped from the analyses. We conducted bivariate correlations with the outcome variables of interest. As seen in Table 1, with age, children reported fewer ingroup deviant playmate experiences ($r = -.32, p < .01$). As stereotypical expectations increased, reported ingroup ($r = -.44, p < .01$) and outgroup deviant ($r = -.30, p < .01$) playmate experiences decreased. Additionally, as stereotypical expectations increased, children’s desires to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences decreased ($r = -.32, p < .01$). Last, as reported ingroup deviant playmate experiences increased, children’s reported outgroup deviant playmate experiences ($r = .47, p < .01$) and desires to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences ($r = .26, p < .05$) also increased.

Table 1*Pearson Correlation Matrix With Means and Standard Deviations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	6.11	1.35	—	.16	-.32**	-.19	-.04
2. Stereotypical expectations	7.62	2.96		—	-.44**	-.30**	-.32**
3. Ingroup deviant playmate experiences	1.62	1.08			—	.47**	.26*
4. Outgroup deviant playmate experiences	2.02	1.35				—	.12
5. Desire to play	3.38	1.39					—

Note. Means (and standard deviations) and Pearson's correlation coefficients for participants' stereotypical expectations (scale ranged from -10 to 10), reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences with ingroup and outgroup members (scale range = 1-5), and desire to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences (scale range = 1-6).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Relations Among Age, Stereotypical Expectations, and Playmate Experiences

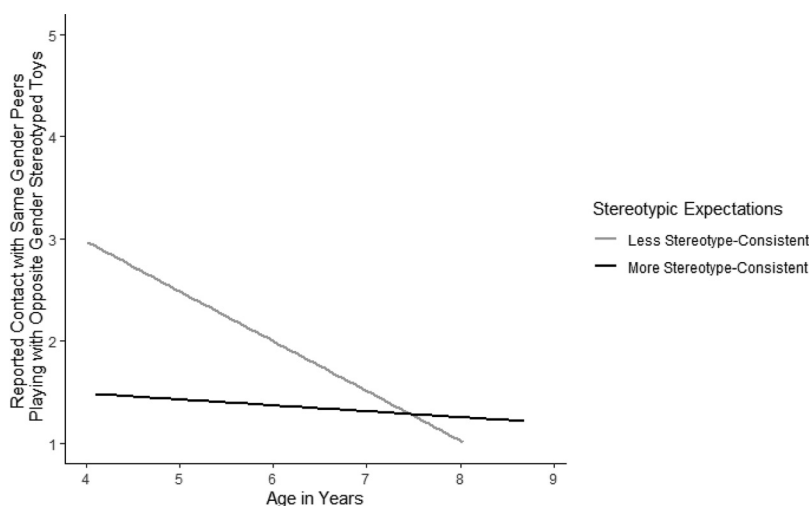
Supporting our first hypothesis, a paired-samples t test revealed that participants reported more counterstereotypical playmate experiences with outgroup peers ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.35$) than with ingroup peers ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(93) = -2.95$, $p = .004$, $d = -.31$. That is, girls reported playing with feminine-stereotyped toys with boys (e.g., outgroup deviant playmate experiences) more than with masculine-stereotyped toys with girls (e.g., ingroup deviant playmate experiences), and vice-versa for boys (participant gender differences were not found). Next, we conducted a multivariate multiple regression.

Ingroup Deviant Playmate Experiences

We found a significant effect for age for children's reported contact with gender ingroup peers and gender outgroup stereotyped toys (ingroup deviant playmate experiences ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -3.02$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$). With age, children reported fewer ingroup deviant playmate experiences. Stereotypical expectations

were also significantly related to children's ingroup deviant playmate experiences ($\beta = -.09$, $t = -2.56$, $p = .012$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$). Participants with more stereotype-consistent expectations regarding peers' toy preferences reported fewer ingroup deviant playmate experiences. Last, a significant interaction between age and stereotypical expectations was found for child-reported ingroup deviant playmate experiences ($\beta = .08$, $t = 3.00$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$; see Figure 2). Simple slopes analyses revealed that the relation between children's gender stereotypes and their reported ingroup deviant playmate experiences was significant for younger participants (children who were one standard deviation below the mean for age [$t = -2.50$, $p = .014$, $d = .53$]), but not for older participants (children who were one standard deviation above the mean for age [$t = .19$, $p > .05$, $d = .04$]). That is, younger participants with less stereotype-consistent expectations had significantly more reported ingroup deviant playmate experiences compared with younger participants with more stereotype-consistent expectations, but stereotypes were not related to older children's reported contact with ingroup peers playing with outgroup stereotyped toys. Notably, however, older participants in general reported minimal ingroup deviant playmate experiences.

Figure 2
Interaction Between Stereotypical Expectations and Age for Children's Reported Contact With Gender Ingroup Peers Playing With Gender Outgroup Stereotyped Toys



Note. Reported contact with same gender peers playing with opposite gender toys (i.e., ingroup deviant playmate experiences) ranges from 1 = *never* to 5 = *all the time*.

Outgroup Deviant Playmate Experiences

Age was not significantly related to children's reported contact with gender outgroup peers and gender ingroup stereotyped toys (outgroup deviant playmate experiences [$\beta = -.15, t = -1.53, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .03$]). However, stereotypical expectations were significantly related to children's reported outgroup deviant playmate experiences ($\beta = -.10, t = -2.01, p = .047, \eta_p^2 = .04$), such that participants with more stereotype-consistent expectations reported fewer outgroup deviant playmate experiences. Counter to our second hypothesis, however, there was not a significant interaction between age and stereotypical expectations for children's reported contact with outgroup peers playing with ingroup stereotyped toys ($\beta = .03, t = .85, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .01$).

Relations Among Age, Playmate Experiences, Stereotypical Expectations, and Desire to Play

To test our third hypothesis, we conducted a stepwise linear regression, and the final model, with all interaction terms included, provided the best fit (see Table 2). Stereotypical expectations were a significant predictor of desires to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences ($\beta = -.30, t = -2.51, p = .014$). Supporting our third hypothesis, as stereotypical expectations decreased, participants' desires to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences increased.

As expected, there was also a significant interaction between age and stereotypical expectations ($\beta = .30, t = 2.41, p = .018$). Simple-slopes analyses revealed that younger participants with more stereotype-consistent expectations were significantly less likely to indicate a desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences ($t = -4.36, p < .001, d = -.93$). In contrast, there was no difference in desires to play for older participants who had more stereotype-consistent expectations compared to older participants with less stereotype-consistent expectations ($t = .04, p > .05, d = .009$; see Figure 3).

Furthermore, we also found a significant interaction between playmate experiences and stereotypical expectations ($\beta = .29, t = 2.13, p = .036$). Supporting our third hypothesis, simple-slopes analyses revealed a significant difference among participants with fewer reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences and more stereotype-consistent expectations compared to participants with fewer reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences and less stereotype-consistent expectations ($t = -6.16, p < .001, d$

$= -1.32$). In contrast, participants with more counterstereotypical playmate experiences did not differ in their desire to play based on having more stereotype-consistent expectations or less stereotype-consistent expectations ($t = 1.31, p > .05, d = .28$; see Figure 4). Age and playmate experiences were not significantly related to children's desires to play with counterstereotypical peers ($ps > .05$), nor was there a significant interaction between age and playmate experiences ($p > .05$).

Discussion

The novel findings for this study demonstrated significant connections between children's stereotypical expectations, their self-reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences, and their desire to play with peers who like counterstereotypical toys. Specifically, we showed that children with less stereotype-consistent expectations reported more counterstereotypical playmate experiences (e.g., played with toy trucks with girls or dolls with boys), and exhibited a greater desire to play with peers who held counterstereotypical toy preferences than did children who held more stereotype-consistent expectations. We also found age-related differences for the relationship between gender stereotypical expectations and reported contact with ingroup peers who played with outgroup stereotypical toys; this relationship was stronger for younger than older children. For instance, younger boys who held less stereotype-consistent expectations reported more instances of playing with dolls with boys compared with younger boys who held more stereotype-consistent expectations. In contrast, older boys did not differ in their reported experiences of playing with dolls with boys based on whether they reported more or less stereotype-consistent expectations. Notably, this might in part be because older participants reported significantly less counterstereotypical playmate experiences, overall, than did younger participants. Furthermore, younger children with more stereotype-consistent expectations were less likely to want to play with a boy who liked dolls or a girl who liked trucks, for example, compared with their same-age peers who displayed less stereotypical expectations. This relationship was not significant for older children.

Past research on children's understanding of group norms has revealed that, with age, children increasingly prefer an outgroup member who follows the norms of the participant's group (i.e., an outgroup deviant) over an ingroup member who follows the norms of the outgroup (i.e., an ingroup deviant; McGuire et al., 2019).

Table 2

Summary of Stepwise Linear Regression for Desire to Play With Peers With Counterstereotypical Toy Preferences

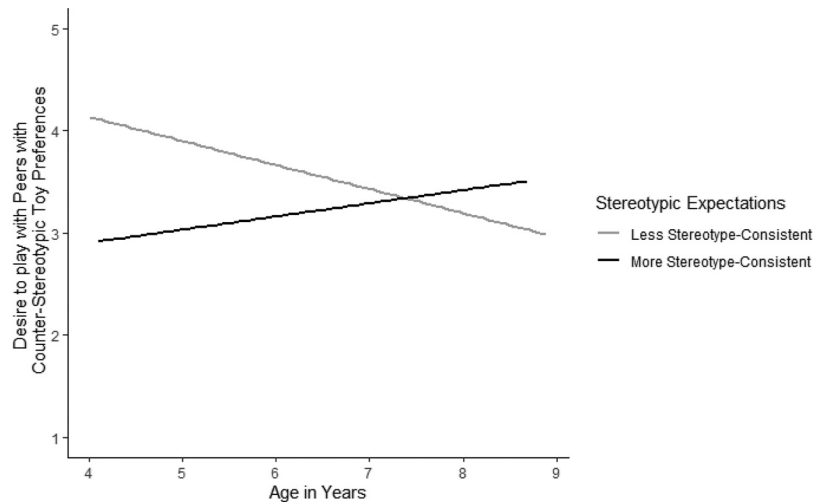
Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Age	-.05	.11	-.05	.01	.11	.01	.03	.10	.03	-.03	.10	-.03
Playmate experiences				.28	.14	.22*	.13	.15	.10	.30	.17	.22
Stereotypical Expectations							-.13	.05	-.29**	-.14	.05	-.30*
Age \times Playmate Experiences										.05	.03	.19
Age \times Stereotypical Expectations										.10	.04	.30*
Playmate Experiences \times Stereotypical Expectations										.02	.009	.29*
R^2		.002			.05			.12			.21	
F for change in R^2		.23			4.12*			7.05**			3.51*	

Note. Age, playmate experiences, and stereotypical expectations were centered.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 3

Interaction Between Children's Stereotypical Expectations and Age on Children's Desire to Play With Peers With Counterstereotypical Toy Preferences



Note. Desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences ranges from 1 = really do not like to 6 = really like.

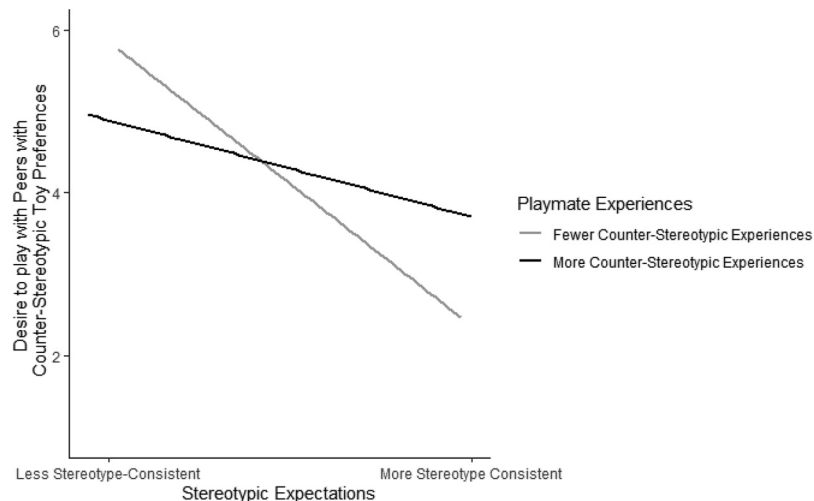
Children also protest norm violations (Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012), and do so even more when ingroup members deviate from norms compared to outgroup members (Schmidt et al., 2012). Findings from our study extend previous literature on preferences and norm enforcement between ingroup and outgroup deviants by assessing children's lived counterstereotypical experiences with ingroup and outgroup members.

Children in the present study reported more experiences playing with opposite-gender peers with ingroup stereotyped toys (i.e.,

outgroup deviant playmate experiences) than playing with same-gender peers with outgroup stereotyped toys (i.e., ingroup deviant playmate experiences). Older children, in particular, reported having little experience playing with same-gender peers and outgroup stereotyped toys (i.e., ingroup deviant playmate experiences). Notably, however, even though older children reported minimal ingroup deviant playmate experiences, they still reasoned about their desires to play with a peer who held counterstereotypical preferences. The variability in reported experiences among older

Figure 4

Interaction Between Children's Stereotypes and Playmate Experiences on Children's Desire to Play With Peers With Counterstereotypical Toy Preferences



Note. Desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences ranged from 1 = really do not like to 6 = really like.

participants was not an obstacle for considering playing with peers who liked to play with toys that differed from traditional gendered expectations.

Further, research utilizing the SRD model has assessed children's evaluations of ingroup deviants and has found that children often endorse deviant peer behavior when the deviant behavior is prosocial (e.g., helping; McGuire et al., 2019), promotes equality (e.g., equally allocating resources; Cooley & Killen, 2015), or allows the deviant to engage in a nonstereotypical activity (Mulvey et al., 2016). Thus, based on previous literature, the ability to reason about deviant peers' preferences and behavior has been well documented. Still, more research needs to be conducted to understand the mechanisms driving ingroup and outgroup deviant playmate experiences. Notably, younger children with less stereotype-consistent expectations reported more ingroup deviant playmate experiences than younger children with more stereotype-consistent expectations, providing a window of opportunity for change.

As previously mentioned, children often engage in same-gender friendships (Martin & Fabes, 2001), as well as develop gender stereotypes at a young age surrounding a myriad of topics, including toy preferences (Liben & Bigler, 2002). Furthermore, the more children engage in same-gender friendships at the beginning of the school year, the more they also engage in gender-segregated play by the end of the school year (Martin & Fabes, 2001), which might contribute to the enforcement of gender stereotypes in childhood. In the current study, although the direct link between children's self-reported playmate experiences and current desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences was not significant, children's gender stereotypical expectations were directly related to their desires to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences. Specifically, children with less stereotype-consistent expectations had a greater desire to play with peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences than participants with more stereotype-consistent expectations. Consistent with prior research that documented that gender stereotypes are especially salient for younger children (Ruble et al., 2006), the present study found a novel connection between younger participants' stereotypical expectations and their desire to play with peers who did not conform to gender stereotypes.

In line with intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), we found that stereotypical expectations were more influential in guiding children's desires to play with peers who held counterstereotypical toy preferences among participants with less reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences compared with participants with more reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences. For instance, girls with little experience playing with girls and toy trucks (i.e., a counterstereotypical playmate experience) were more likely to want to play with a boy who liked dolls if they themselves had less stereotype-consistent expectations compared with more stereotype-consistent expectations. In contrast, girls with more experience playing with girls and toy trucks did not differ in their desire to play with a boy who liked dolls. Thus, more reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences dampened the degree to which children's gender stereotypical expectations about toy preferences were related to their peer playmate preferences. This novel finding is important, as it suggests that interactions with peers who exhibit non-normative behavior, in this case by

having counterstereotypical toy preferences, might lead children to have more inclusive orientations toward others.

Children recognize that ingroup and outgroup deviants might face negative repercussions for not following their group's norms (Rutland & Killen, 2017). These negative repercussions can take the form of exclusion from groups, as well as bullying and negative psychological effects for the group deviants. Indeed, research on gender typicality (i.e., how similar children feel that they are to other members of their gender group) has found that children who are perceived by peers as being atypical are at risk for peer victimization (Horn, 2007; Pauletti et al., 2014). Importantly, Zosuls et al. (2016) found that although elementary-aged girls who self-reported having gender counterstereotypical preferences experienced higher rates of peer victimization compared with girls who self-reported having gender stereotypical preferences, cross-gender friendships had a buffering effect on peer victimization. In other words, contact with cross-gender peers was related to better outcomes for peers with gender counterstereotypical preferences.

Other research has found that children hold more negative attitudes toward individuals with gender counterstereotypical preferences compared with individuals with gender stereotypical preferences (Kwan et al., 2020). For instance, children shared more with a target peer who conformed to gender stereotypes over a target peer who did not conform to gender stereotypes (Kwan et al., 2020). Importantly, however, such biases diminished when participants were shown a target peer who held gender counterstereotypical preferences and who also had positive traits (e.g., a boy who liked to wear pink princess dresses but also earned good grades in school). This finding indicates that positive contact is an important avenue for reducing negative biases (Kwan et al., 2020). Therefore, children's positive exposure to peers who hold counterstereotypical preferences and who deviate from gender norms more generally might be particularly influential in shaping children's attitudes toward others and their willingness to befriend others.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study measured children's reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences and desires to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical toy preferences. Notably, for these assessments, we showed images of a boy or girl and feminine- or masculine-stereotyped toys. It is possible that younger children's playmate preferences in the current study might have been motivated more by toy preferences of the peer than gender group membership of the peer. Presenting more conditions for consideration by children in experimental tasks will help to determine the general relationship between preferences for toys and preferences for playmates with different types of interests. Furthermore, in the present study, it was unclear whether older children's lack of experiences playing with ingroup peers and outgroup stereotyped toys was due to the importance of maintaining group boundaries more broadly (and thus not engaging in counterstereotypical behavior with ingroup peers) or because toys might be a less relevant marker in guiding stereotypes and friendship preferences as children get older. More research is needed to assess whether similar findings generalize to other intergroup contexts.

The current study provides a basis to examine expectations and play preferences for other areas that are often gender-stereotyped

such as sports, dress choices, and academics (e.g., girls who excel in STEM courses), beyond play contexts limited to toys. This will provide a broader understanding of the extent to which children's gender stereotypes and playmate experiences are related. It will also help inform the kinds of activities and interactions that might be most influential in decreasing children's stereotypes and increasing children's inclusive orientations.

Though in the current study we measured children's self-reported counterstereotypical playmate experiences, the means by which children gained such exposure requires further examination. Importantly, children are not solely responsible for choosing what activities they engage in and who they play with. Instead, both caregivers and teachers play influential roles in shaping the types of activities that children engage in when playing with peers. Given that young children have less control over the types of playmates and activities they are exposed to than older children, caregivers and teachers alike should foster environments where children are encouraged to participate in nonstereotypical play activities and where children have the opportunity to engage with peers from a variety of backgrounds and who hold a range of preferences.

Additionally, children's own beliefs influence the types of playmates that they attract. That is, one might expect that children with less stereotype-consistent expectations will engage in counterstereotypical activities more often compared with children with more stereotype-consistent expectations. On the other hand, children's playmate experiences serve to reinforce children's stereotypical expectations, which then reinforce children's gender-segregated playmate experiences. Ultimately, our data cannot speak to causality, nor can our data speak to the reciprocal processes by which children in the current study gained exposure to counterstereotypical playmate experiences, both of which are important avenues for future research to address.

Notably, we relied on children's self-reported contact playing with ingroup and outgroup peers and counterstereotypical toys. Employing other methods for capturing the extent to which children engage in counterstereotypical playmate experiences could be fruitful. For instance, observations of counterstereotypical playmate experiences (e.g., at school) could accompany self-reported counterstereotypical experiences to provide a more well-rounded assessment of children's playmate experiences. Measuring friendship quality as it relates to children's peer playmate preferences and children's stereotypes and inclusive orientations is another salient variable to investigate.

Investigating the bidirectionality of these constructs to better understand the reciprocal relation between children's stereotypical expectations and reported contact with ingroup and outgroup peers and counterstereotypical toys would also be valuable. Testing multiple relationships and contexts adds to the necessity of collecting larger samples to ensure adequate power when testing for complex interactions between multiple variables. One anonymous reviewer suggested that an alternative approach could be to test these hypotheses by separating moderators into individual regressions. This could be helpful for revealing more complexities, but future researchers must pay careful attention to power and sample size because this approach requires alpha adjustments to avoid type I errors.

Implications and Conclusion

The novel findings in this study add to our knowledge of the benefits of cross-gender friendships and counterstereotypical playmate experiences. In the current study, younger children with less stereotype-consistent expectations about toy preferences reported more experiences playing with same gender peers and counterstereotypical toys compared with younger children with more stereotype-consistent expectations. Additionally, children with less stereotype-consistent expectations expressed more desire to play with hypothetical peers with counterstereotypical toy preferences than children with more stereotype-consistent expectations. In line with Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis and with previous research on exposure to and attitudes toward children with gender counterstereotypical preferences (Kwan et al., 2020; Zosuls et al., 2016), findings from the current study indicate that children's stereotypical expectations and counterstereotypical playmate experiences are related to children's inclusive orientations.

Thus, encouraging opportunities for children to engage in a variety of activities (across gender-stereotypical lines) and with peer playmates who hold a variety of preferences (regardless of gender group membership) will be an important avenue for reducing gender stereotypes and facilitating cross-group friendships in childhood. Indeed, research demonstrates that gender-segregated friendships perpetuate gender stereotypes and biases (Fabes et al., 2013; Keener et al., 2013). Fortunately, research has also shown that interventions promote counterstereotypical or gender-integrated friendships among young children (Fabes et al., 2018; Hanish et al., 2021; Mulvey et al., 2020).

The current study provided evidence that children's desires to play with peers who hold counterstereotypical preferences were related to their own reported gender stereotypes, and tangentially related to their peer playmate experiences. For participants who reported more stereotype-consistent expectations, more prior experiences playing with dolls with boys or trucks with girls was related to having a more inclusive orientation toward befriending a peer who deviated from gender norms. Thus, promoting not only cross-gender contact, but also opportunities to participate in counterstereotypical play, is crucial for promoting intergroup friendships and inclusivity in childhood.

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