



## **Activity 2 –**

Various theories have been developed to understand the importance of social and cognitive mechanisms involved in the development of sex differences. For example, social learning theory posits that sex differences, such as those found in toy preferences, are due to the differential treatment and reinforcement patterns for boys versus girls from external sources, such as parents (Bandura, 1977; Langlois & Downs, 1980).

Research has shown that parents respond positively to their child when they engage in sex-typical behaviours and respond negatively when their child engages in cross-sex behaviours, such as in play with sex-atypical toys (Caldera et al., 1989; Fagot, 1978; Pasterski et al., 2005). Furthermore, there is evidence that, compared to girls, boys are more strongly discouraged from engaging in sex-atypical behaviours and more strongly encouraged to engage in sex-typical behaviours (Langlois & Downs, 1980; Pasterski et al., 2005).

Various studies have demonstrated the abundance of sex-typical information available to children. For example, parents describe their newborn children in stereotypical ways, despite no appreciable physical differences (Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974) and from young infancy, girls and boys are provided with sex-typical toys, bedroom décor and clothing (Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit, & Cossette, 1990).

In terms of exposure to same-sex models, although children are in general more often with women than with men, Hoffman and Teyber (1985) observed that boys were more often with men compared to girls, and girls were more often with women compared to boys. Social learning theory also emphasises the role of imitation and modelling mechanisms, specifically of same-sex models, in directing sex-typical behaviours (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; Bussey & Bandura, 1984; Perry & Bussey, 1979), with some evidence suggesting a stronger influence in boys than in girls (Bandura et al., 1961).

Imitation and modelling mechanisms can be used to understand toy choice in young children, such that boys and girls observe same-sex models interacting with certain toys and imitate the choices made by these same-sex models. Research has shown that even when observing sex-neutral object choices by adult models, children imitate the choices made by same-sex models (Perry & Bussey, 1979).

Thus, children are not only exposed to highly gendered environments and encouraged by parents and peers to engage in sex-appropriate behaviours, but boys and girls also appear to preferentially imitate the behaviours exhibited by individuals of the same sex.

Watch this video which shows an experiment where adult participants are given a set of boys' and girls' toys and asked to play with a baby who is labelled as either a boy or a girl.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWu44AqF0il>

Think of the toys you used to play with when you were a child:

- Were these toys 'typical' for your sex?
- Do you think you chose to play with these toys or do you think you received encouragement from your environment?
- Can you think of other examples when adults may treat boys and girls differently?

