

Childhood Doll Play: Professional Women's Memories
From the US and Ukraine

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Play has many meanings for children. It serves to express and represent the child's perspective and communicates it to others via metaphor. Play weaves together the child's analysis of their past and present with future possibilities. Through play, children experience their affective lives in a relatively safe manner. And they can experiment with their reactions to unhappiness, conflict, and trauma and learn to cope with them more effectively. In this manner, play has great potential for propelling development forward (Solnit, Cohen, & Neubauer, 1993).

Memories of play appear to hold significance for subjects in a study comparing childhood activities and experiences of fifty professional women from Ukraine and the US. This article highlights responses to questions about how these professional women remembered playing with dolls as girls. Doll play questions were included after informal research (Jackson, 1993) with US professional women revealed that those who identified themselves as tomboy girls tended to remember their play with dolls as decidedly idiosyncratic or nonexistent.

I didn't play a nurturing role with them, I was their designer, sewed their clothes, styled their hair, I constructed from wood a doll house and furniture for them to sit in. It was like I was their puppetmaster. I was much more interested in helping Dad repair the car or alarm clocks

When asked which parent they identified with "in terms of character", the majority of subjects (45/50) reported being most like their fathers, and to a life long preference for male co-workers and friends. This was especially true of the Ukrainian sample (25/25). Many of the women liked working beside their fathers or engaging in play that resembled a man's relationship with objects, rather than the warm, nurturing mother's

role.

I didn't play with dolls. I loved stuffed animals, teddy bears were my favorite. I treated them like friends. I preferred dressing up in armor like a knight, or as a cowboy, like all of my male role models.

While most of the US sample identified themselves as tomboys, virtually none of the Ukrainian women accepted that role designation. Most of these women said they were "completely feminine" even though they engaged in stereotypically masculine careers, such as engineer and chief builder. Their memories of play as girls included few images of stereotypically feminine "nurturing mother" play. Most of them remember playing professional roles with their dolls such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, builders, designers, and museum curators.

I was their teacher or doctor, I made their doll house, my favorite activity was war between the fascists and soviets, defense and attack, girls were soldiers and spies.

The nature of the specific memories of doll play among the experimental group was in sharp contrast to the memories of undergraduate female controls. The younger women tended to remember playing with dolls in more typical "nurturing mother" fashion, while a majority (35/50) of the professional women remembered building doll houses, dissecting their dolls, or playing museum curator with their dolls of the world collection. Many of the experimental group did not play with dolls at all, rather preferring hard rubber animals or plastic cowboys and indians figures.

I didn't play with dolls, didn't care for them. I had animal toys I preferred and a real dog. My favorite was a hard life-size rubber cat. I carried it with me everywhere.

I had dolls but my favorite toys were robotman and visible man and stuffed animals which I dressed in human clothes, I was zoo keeper, later I played with real animals, trained them and walked them.

Every woman in the study had dolls during childhood. Most said their dolls sat, unattended on a shelf or in a closet while they busily tended to

their building projects or other activities. One subject wanted a dog but her family would not give her one because of terrible allergies.

I always wanted a dog, but my family wouldn't get me one, so I took one of my dolls, bent the arms and legs out from the body, put a little dog collar around her neck, attached a leash and pulled her around the house like a dog. I rarely played with dolls.

One subject, intensely curious about how dolls were put together, took all of her dolls apart.

I was really interested in dolls' inner workings. When I would get a doll, I'd have it apart in no time, legs and arms soon got lost, so I had a collection of little bodies, no eyes, no hair, no arms, no legs. I was even less interested in putting them back together again. Recently, my mother wanted to get rid of some of my boxes in her attic. I went over and opened one box to find disembodied doll parts: little arms and legs scattered about the box, dollheads without eyes or hair, torsos with empty holes where the little heads, arms, and legs used to be secured. Doll eyes and wigs at the very bottom. Honestly, I am happily married and have two children, neither of whom does this.

These findings are coherent with a major theme from the larger study, that the majority of women in both cultures remembered themselves as different from other girls, as being "an original girl"... on a different path than other girls."

The tone of the women's play resembled neither boys nor girls typical play. Boys' thematic play focuses around destruction, tearing down, crashing, bashing and blowing up of inanimate objects. Girls themes reflect relationships, loss of relationships, inclusion and exclusion of players and virtually none of the bashing characteristic of the boys (Cohen, Marans, Dahl, Marans, & Lewis, 1987).

Patterns and themes from the present study suggest that there is a cool sense of distance, of standing back from personal involvement with dolls.

Many of the subjects engaged in vigorous activity as they played war or cowboy and indians with boys. However, when playing with dolls they take on a cool professional role, other than mother.

It is interesting to note that the professional roles are still present in their lives as adults. Virtually all of the subjects have busy, demanding careers. All but two are married with children. If childhood play is the fertile ground for practicing adult roles and behaviors, then these girls did not practice the mother role. Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, they decided to mother and took on that role. Further investigation into their mothering style seems warranted. Is there any relationship between childhood dollplay themes and later mothering styles for these "original girls"?

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