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ABSTRACT

This study examined the letters that 438 children aged 2 through 12 wrote to "Santa Claus" in care of a local newspaper in 1992. The letters were scored for: (1) number of toys requested; (2) non-toy requests; (3) specific requests for others; (4) intangible requests (i.e., world peace); (5) total toy price; and (6) number of toys costing \$100 or more. Based upon a progression in children's belief in Santa Claus, three age-related groupings were identified as believers (6 and under), transitional (7 to 8), and nonbelievers (9 and over). Toys were classified as masculine, feminine, or neuter; as solitary, interactive, or both; and as faddish (based on a current television or movie character) or non-fad items. Results indicated that girls were more likely than boys to request clothing or functional items. Nonbelievers were less likely to request tangible items than believers. Both girls and boys requested sex-appropriate toys and neutral toys in equal proportions. Based upon the results of previous research, boys have increased their preference for neutral toys, with neutral toys now as popular as sex-typed toys among both sexes. (MDM)

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Content Analysis of Children's Letters to Santa: Toy and Non-Toy Requests

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Content Analysis of Children's Letters to Santa: Toy and Non-Toy Requests

Children's letters to Santa provide a naturalistic method for investigating age-related preferences and the influence of sex-role attitudes on toy requests. Using 1978 Santa letters from Seattle children, Richardson and Simpson (1982) demonstrated how toy choices reinforce socialization of future adult gender roles. They found gender differences to be greater for toys associated with eventual adult status or social structure (i.e., military toys, dolls). A study of Santa letters written by Houston children (Downs, 1983) found girls more likely than boys to request neutral toys, although all children requested more sex-appropriate than sex-inappropriate toys. Similar sex differences in Alabama preschoolers' requests have been found (Bradbard & Parkman, 1984). In contrast, Almqvist (1989) found Swedish children preferred neutral toys, although boys requested more sex-appropriate toys from Santa than did girls. Older children requested more non-toy items.

The present study examined 1992 Santa letters to determine if toy preferences of American children have remained sex-typical or have become more neutral like those of Swedish children. A wider age range was studied in this current research to identify possible developmental changes in preferences.

Method

Sample

A total of 438 children (ages 2 to 12, M age = 92 mos.) responded to a southeastern newspaper's request for letters to Santa. Girls wrote 56% of the letters which were published (unedited) for 2 consecutive weeks prior to Christmas 1992. Children resided in a metropolitan area of one million that ranked 55th in the national television market. Based upon a developmental

progression in children's belief in Santa Claus (Prentice, Manosevitz, & Hubbs, 1978), three age-related groupings were identified as 'believers' (6 and under), 'transitional' (7 to 8), and 'nonbelievers' (9 and over).

Scoring

Letters were scored for (a) number of toys requested, (b) non-toy requests (animals, non-recreational functional items, clothes), (c) specific requests for others, (d) intangible requests (i.e., world peace, shelter for homeless), (e) total toy price, and (f) number of toys over \$100. Prices were obtained from a national toy store chain. Toy location in the store was used to classify toys as masculine, feminine, or neutral. Toys were categorized as being used in solitary play, interactive play, or both. Toys based on a current television or movie character (i.e., Batman, Beauty and the Beast) were classified as fad items. Because number of toy requests varied, the following categories were scored as proportions: (a) masculine, feminine, neutral; (b) solitary, interactive, both; and (c) fad. Interrater reliability of four scorers ranged from .95 to 1.00 ($M = .98$).

Results

Table 1 reports the percentage of letters with requests for one or more items in specified categories. Girls were more likely than boys to request any clothing ($\chi^2(1) = 15.49, p < .001$) or functional items ($\chi^2(1) = 6.05, p < .01$). 'Nonbelievers' were less likely to request any tangible items from Santa ($\chi^2(2) = 35.45, p < .001$), any toys ($\chi^2(2) = 29.67, p < .001$), or any fad toys ($\chi^2(2) = 22.44, p < .001$). However, 'nonbelievers' were noticeably inclined to request more intangible items, while 'believers' rarely requested intangibles and 'transitional' children's requests for intangibles were

intermediate ($\chi^2(2) = 34.82, p < .001$). 'Believers' were least likely to ask Santa for clothes ($\chi^2(2) = 4.80, p = .09$).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Mean scores for each category by gender and age grouping are presented in Table 2. No significant differences were found between girls' and boys' requests for: number of toys, toys over \$100, total toy price, percent of fad toys, number of tangible items, or specific others. However, the average toy price was higher for boys [$F(1, 340) = 7.50, p < .01$]. Girls requested more feminine toys than did boys ($\chi^2(3) = 163.32, p < .001$), while boys requested more masculine toys than girls ($\chi^2(3) = 181.99, p < .001$). No differences in neutral toy requests were found, with both girls and boys equally likely to request sex-appropriate or neutral toys. Girls and boys preferred toys that could be used both interactively or alone. Compared to boys, girls requested more clothing ($\chi^2(8) = 26.34, p < .001$), functional items ($\chi^2(5) = 8.91, p = .11$), pets ($\chi^2(4) = 7.04, p = .13$), and intangibles ($\chi^2(6) = 15.15, p < .01$). 'Believers' requested more toys than other children [$F(2, 374) = 7.94, p < .001$]. However, among children who requested toys, no difference in number of toys was found by age groups, although 'believers' requested toys with the lowest per toy price [$F(2, 285) = 5.03, p < .01$]. 'Nonbelievers' requested fewer tangible items than other children [$F(2, 374) = 3.76, p < .05$] and the most intangible items ($\chi^2(12) = 55.72, p < .001$). No age-related differences were found in requests for: clothes, functional items, pets, or specific others. 'Believers' requested more feminine toys than

expected and 'nonbelievers' requested fewer ($\chi^2(6) = 18.40, p < .01$). A similar pattern was found for masculine toys ($p = .17$). The proportion of neutral toys requested by 'nonbelievers' was nearly twice the expected amount, while neutral toy requests of 'believers' was less than half of that expected ($\chi^2(6) = 31.02, p < .001$).

Discussion

Although children still prefer sex-appropriate to sex-inappropriate toys, American boys have clearly increased their preference for neutral toys in the past 10 years. Neutral toys now appear to be as popular as sex-typed toys among both sexes. This finding may indicate reduced enforcement of stereotyped play choices, especially in older children. It may also reflect increased popularity of less stereotypical computer games.

Another interesting finding was the developmental progression in requests for intangibles. This finding parallels the development of empathy (Hoffman, 1984) when older children can see beyond their isolated world and notice worldly problems. This universal empathy was reflected in older children's increased requests for peace in the world, food for the poor, and homes for the homeless.

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Table 1

Percentage of Letters Requesting One or More of the Specified Items

Requests	Total	Girls	Boys	'Believers' (6 and under)	'Transitional' (7 and 8)	'Nonbelievers' (9 and over)
Tangible Item(s)	83%	84%	82%	92%	89%	64%
Toy(s)	78%	78%	78%	86%	84%	59%
Toy(s) Costing Over \$100 Each	18%	16%	20%	16%	20%	15%
Bad Toy(s)	14%	16%	12%	27%	10%	5%
Clothing	18%	25%	10%	11%	19%	21%
Functional Item(s)	18%	23%	13%	15%	8%	17%
Animal(s)/Pet(s)	9%	10%	7%	9%	10%	5%
Tangible Item(s) for Others	12%	12%	12%	11%	15%	10%
Intangible Item(s)	22%	24%	20%	8%	20%	40%

Note. Column totals exceed 100% because children made requests in multiple categories.

Table 2

Mean Number of Categorized Requests Per Letter by Gender and Age Grouping

	Girls	Boys	'Believers' (6 and under)	'Transitional' (7 and 8)	'Nonbelievers' (9 and over)
# Toys Requested					
all letters	3.43	3.00	3.73	3.03	2.06
(only letters requesting toys)	4.41	3.83	4.34	3.61	3.51
# Toys over \$100 (only letters requesting toys)	.24	.30	.20	.30	.27
Total Toy Price (only letters requesting toys)	\$142.49	\$161.01	\$129.85	\$145.96	\$164.32
Per Toy Price (only letters requesting toys)	\$ 40.35	\$ 52.18	\$ 34.88	\$ 49.69	\$ 54.78
Toy Gender-Typing (only letters requesting toys)					
% Masculine Toys	5%	50%	27%	23%	21%
% Feminine Toys	46%	2%	37%	26%	15%
% Neutral Toys	49%	48%	36%	51%	64%
Intended Toy Use (only letters requesting toys)					
% Solitary Use Only	8%	5%	4%	7%	8%
% Interactive Only	6%	6%	4%	7%	11%
% Both Solitary and Interactive Use	86%	89%	92%	86%	81%

(table continues)

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	Girls	Boys	'Believers' (6 and under)	'Transitional' (7 and 8)	'Nonbelievers' (9 and over)
% Fad Toys (only letters requesting toys)	7%	6%	12%	5%	2%
# Items Requested	4.68	3.65	4.42	4.03	3.07
# Clothing Items	.53	.18	.18	.35	.46
# Functional Items	.35	.18	.22	.23	.27
# Animals/Pets	.14	.09	.14	.14	.07
# Specific Requests for Others	.23	.21	.15	.28	.22
# Intangible Requests	.38	.23	.16	.29	.54

Note. Total number of items requested included toys and all tangible non-toy requests. Intangible requests were not included in total items requested. No monetary value could be readily assigned to intangibles.