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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 43(43)

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Publication Date

2021

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Peer reviewed

The Effects of Messages About Intellectual Ability on Children's Activity Preferences

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Abstract

Research shows that there is a strong cultural bias against women: Many people believe that women are less intellectually talented than men (Kirkcaldy et al., 2007; Upson & Friedman, 2012), and these beliefs emerge in childhood. For example, girls as young as six were less motivated than boys to pursue gender-neutral activities that were described as being for children who are “really smart” and more inclined toward activities intended for “hardworking” children (Bian, Cimpian, & Leslie, 2015). This study investigates whether framing activities as stereotypically masculine or feminine alters the impact of messages about intellectual ability on 6- and 7-year-olds’ selection of preferred activities. Preliminary findings (N=75) indicate that making activities stereotypically feminine reduces girls’ preference for “hardworking” over “smart” games. Such results suggest that presenting young girls with toys that are targeted specifically to them might counteract the effects of negative gender stereotypes about intelligence.