

## **Dessa brincadeira você não pode brincar! A brincadeira de papéis na constituição de gênero na educação infantil<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Resumo**

O objetivo, com este artigo, foi compreender, sob princípios encontrados na bibliografia, como se constituem os papéis dos gêneros masculino e feminino na educação infantil. A problemática da pesquisa traduziu-se em entender como a literatura explicita a constituição de tais papéis, bem como entender se as brincadeiras têm papel preponderante. A abordagem metodológica foi qualitativa, com enfoques bibliográfico e exploratório. O exame da literatura deu-se por meio de análise interpretativa, que consistiu em inter-relacionar os dados obtidos com os princípios teóricos da abordagem histórico-cultural. Os resultados indicam que a brincadeira é fundamental para a apropriação dos papéis sociais, pois os meninos e as meninas, ao brincarem, internalizam as funções sociais atribuídas a homens e mulheres. Assim, no trabalho, considerou-se que a constituição de papéis de gênero também ocorre no processo educacional, já que o ato de brincar condiciona os sujeitos a seguirem os modos e papéis sociais desde pequenos.

**Palavras-chave:** Gênero; Brincadeira; Docente; Criança; Educação Infantil.

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## **You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this article was to understand, under principles found in the bibliography, how the roles of the male and female genders in early childhood education are constituted. The problem of the research was to understand how the literature explains the constitution of such roles, as well as games have a preponderant role. The methodological approach was qualitative, with bibliographic and exploratory approaches. The literature was examined through interpretative analysis, which consisted of interrelating the data obtained with the theoretical principles of the historical-cultural approach. The results indicate that play is fundamental for the appropriation of social roles, because boys and girls, when playing, internalize the social functions attributed to men and women. Thus, in the research, it was considered that the constitution of gender roles also occurs in the educational process, since the act of playing conditions the subjects to follow the social modes and roles from an early age.

**Keywords:** Gender; Joke; Teacher; Child; Child education.

## *¡No puedes jugar a este juego! El juego de roles en la constitución del género en la educación infantil*

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### **Resumen**

El objetivo de este artículo fue comprender, a partir de principios encontrados en la bibliografía, cómo se constituyen los roles de género masculino y femenino en la educación infantil. El problema de investigación se tradujo en comprender cómo la literatura explica la constitución de tales roles, así como comprender si los juegos tienen un papel preponderante. El enfoque metodológico fue cualitativo, con enfoques bibliográficos y exploratorios. El examen de la literatura se realizó a través de un análisis interpretativo, que consistió en interrelacionar los datos obtenidos con los principios teóricos del enfoque histórico-cultural. Los resultados indican que el juego es fundamental para la apropiación de los roles sociales, ya que los niños y niñas, al jugar, interiorizan los roles sociales atribuidos a hombres y mujeres. Así, en el trabajo se consideró que la constitución de los roles de género también ocurre en el proceso educativo, ya que el acto de jugar condiciona a los sujetos a seguir los modos y roles sociales desde la infancia.

**Palabras llave:** Género; Juego de roles; Maestro; Niño; Educación Infantil.

## Introduction

The present investigation was part of a larger research project titled “Play and Motor Skills in Early Childhood Education and the Initial Years of Elementary School: Conceptions, Educational Practices, and Contributions to Child Development,” which is linked to the master's thesis titled: “Gender and Education: What Do Male Teachers Think About Their Involvement and Role in Early Childhood Education Institutions” (DUARTE, 2023), focusing on gender relations in teaching practices.

Early Childhood Education already introduces children to attributes and social behaviors for boys and girls in various situations, ranging from play to teaching and learning processes in educational practices. Vianna and Finco (2009) identify that teachers tend to influence play situations, guiding girls towards roles involving care and nurturing, while directing boys towards activities that involve physical engagement, such as sports and work.

The authors assert that the physical characteristics and expected behaviors for boys and girls are reinforced in the daily actions within Early Childhood Education settings, and educators establish, through their practices, the differences between social roles. In other words, they become instruments of social regulation (VIANNA; FINCO, 2009).

Martins (2009) argues that play is crucial in the process of child development; however, this practice is often more evident in teacher discourse than in educational practices. Gaio, Martins, and Alves (2020), in their investigation of gender play from the perspective of Early Childhood Education teachers, identify that school activities reflect the division of labor imposed by the patriarchal system through predefined binary roles.

Given these issues and the problems addressed by this article, the aim was to understand how literature explains the process of forming such roles in Early Childhood Education and to determine if play plays a significant role in the educational process of this teaching cycle. To answer this question, the objective was to understand, based on the literature, how male and female gender roles are constituted in early childhood education.

For the development of the research, support was drawn from authors of the historical-cultural approach, including Elkonin (2009), Vigotski (2008), and Leontiev (2004), as well as authors discussing gender constitution, such as Louro (2004; 2012; 2018).

## Metodology

The research was characterized as a qualitative approach and, according to Bogdan and Bilken (1994), aimed to understand the ways in which people experience and comprehend life; factors linked to the experiences that shape their understanding of society. To develop the investigation, a bibliographic research methodology was adopted, which focuses on capturing the production on the subject (SOUSA; OLIVEIRA; ALVES, 2021). However, the authors caution that it is not enough to simply review the literature; it is necessary to interpret and reflect upon it.

Laboratory or field research necessarily involves preliminary bibliographic research. [...] It is essential for exploratory research, in defining the theme of a work or research, in developing the subject, in citations, and in presenting conclusions. Therefore, while not all students will conduct laboratory or field research, it is equally true that all, without exception, must undertake bibliographic research to prepare the various assignments required (ANDRADE, 2010, p. 25).

Malhotra (2001, p.106) defines exploratory research as “a type of research that primarily aims to provide criteria about the problem situation faced by the researcher and its understanding.”

Thus, searches were conducted on the *Portal de Periódicos da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (Periodicals Portal of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) (Capes), the Scientific Electronic Library (SciELO), and the Google Scholar database using the Publish or Perish software, with a maximum of 100 results set for the search. The metrics Rank and h-index were used in the selection of articles. In all cases, the search equation used was “play and gender and early childhood education.” After retrieving the articles, titles and abstracts were read to reach the final selection.

On the Portal de Periódicos da Capes, using the filter “peer-reviewed journals,” 15 articles were found, of which two were selected. On SciELO, only one article was found, which was not selected; on Google Scholar, after applying the two metrics and reading titles and abstracts, six articles were chosen. The results are identified in Table 1.

**Table 1** – Results of the Literature Review

Authors	Title	Year	Database
Leticia de Freitas <i>et al.</i>	Girls' and Boys' Play: A Look at Gender Issues in Early Childhood Education.	2019	Capes
Eduardo Cólis; Leonardo Souza	Childhoods, Gender, Sexualities: An Investigation-Intervention with Early Childhood Education Teachers.	2020	Capes

You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education

Cássia Furlan; Verônica Müller	Play and Gender Relations: Reflections from Children and Educators	2015	Google Scholar
Angélica Pereira; Ericka Oliveira	Boys' and Girls' Play: Gender Scenes in Early Childhood Education	2016	Google Scholar
Fernanda Ruis; Marcia Perez	Listening to Boys: Gender Relations in Early Childhood Education	2017	Google Scholar
Jainara de Braga; Tcharlata Stinghen; Reginaldo Placido	The Influence of Play on Gender Formation in Childhood	2018	Google Scholar
Camila Campos <i>et al.</i>	Gender-Free Play	2021	Google Scholar
Rosana Matos; Márcio de Oliveira; Alicia Vásquez	Games, Play, and Early Childhood Education: Notes on Gender Construction	2021	Google Scholar

Source: prepared by the authors.

The interpretative analysis of eight articles, based on Minayo (2012), involved interrelating the results obtained after reading the texts with the chosen theoretical principles from studies by Scott (1998); Louro (2004; 2012; 2014); Leontiev (2004); Pino (2005); Vygotsky (2008); Elkonin (2009); Martins (2009); Vianna and Finco (2009); Eliot (2013); Urt and Vital (2018), among other authors, who contributed to the development of the work.

## Play from the Historical-Cultural Perspective

In the historical-cultural perspective of human development adopted in the study, human beings are formed through social interactions that establish the meanings of lived experiences. Such appropriation occurs in a relational process mediated by language, where less experienced individuals learn from others the social modes of behavior (PINO, 2005).

Elkonin (2009) argues that as humans developed language, they adapted to the social realities in which they lived. This was also the case for children, who, according to the author, were engaged in work activities from a very young age. Over time, modes of production evolved, and activities such as hunting, planting, and fishing were assigned to men and women in differentiated ways.

Both play and toys were used to teach children different ways to use tools for work, as a miniature world created for them. For example, girls used dolls to learn about nurturing and managing a household, while boys played with tools designed for defense, hunting, and fishing. In this way, children appropriated the use of objects through play (ELKONIN, 2009).

Elkonin (2009) destaca que a brincadeira é uma prática social, que se desenvolve entre pares, pois uma criança mais experiente, ou um adulto, é que ensina outra criança a brincar, o que possibilita a compressão da realidade em que esse sujeito está inserido.

Thus, what seems to characterize play is to consider it, based on the historical-cultural theory, as a social process. From an early age, through the mediation of adults or older children, we are involved in this activity. The foundation of play is precisely the reality in which the child lives, as it emerges from the conditions of their environment (MARTINS, 2009, p. 35).

It should be noted, based on Duarte, Duarte and Martins (2023), that play is a social practice and is established as a way of appropriating the group's social and cultural ways of acting. Thus, role-playing is part of the process of the subject's constitution. Playful experiences are important for children's development, because it is from social relationships that children derive the content for what they represent in role-playing games, i.e. they internalize what they experience through play and express the meanings given to it, in a constant and growing movement; first on an interpsychological level, i.e. in social relationships, and then on an intrapsychological level, i.e. in an individual process.

In fact, we can identify internalization as a central theoretical construct within the cultural-historical perspective, which refers to the process of human development and learning as incorporation of culture, as mastery of cultural ways of acting, thinking, relating to others, to oneself, and which appears contrary to a naturalistic or innatist perspective (SMOLKA, 2000, p. 27-28, emphasis in the original).

Thus, through play, the child internalizes the world around them, meaning that play is a significant part of their life and effectively contributes to their development. Furthermore, through relationships, play enhances cognitive, social, emotional, and motor qualities, in other words, human qualities. From a historical-cultural perspective, it is emphasized that the presence of others is essential for human development (VYGOTSKY, 2008).

Play involves engaging in enjoyable and playful processes with greater intensity. However, pleasure should not be seen as the defining aspect of play, as it also includes moments of displeasure, such as when the child shows disinterest in the activity or is assigned a role they do not wish to perform. Therefore, what defines play is the interplay between representation and rules (VIGOTSKI, 2008).

In the historical-cultural perspective, it is considered that, when very young, children need to satisfy their needs, and toys are provided for this purpose. When using objects, children do not differentiate between what they perceive visually and the meaning attributed to the object. However,

You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education as children grow a bit older, in the preschool age, they begin to better understand how to act socially, but they still maintain the desire to immediately satisfy their needs, which is not always possible. To address this issue, they engage in pretend play. Activities become guided by ideas according to the meanings assigned to them. Objects cannot be transformed into anything; they must fit the action being represented (ELKONIN, 2009; VIGOTSKI, 2008).

In preschool play, we encounter for the first time a divergence between the semantic field and the visual perception. It seems possible to echo a researcher who suggests that, in play, the idea separates from the object, and the action is triggered by the idea rather than by the object itself. For example, a piece of wood might come to serve as a doll, or a broom handle might become a horse. In such cases, the idea separates from the object; the action, in accordance with the rules, starts to be determined by the ideas rather than by the object itself (VIGOTSKI, 2008, p. 30).

Elkonin (2009) highlights that role play involves unique characteristics, with social relationships appearing as a crucial aspect of the play. The themes of this process are varied but always reflect the child's everyday situations. According to Vygotsky (2008), play allows individuals to achieve higher levels of thinking because the participant must act according to the role they are representing. Considering these aspects, it can be emphasized that one defining characteristic of play is its representations.

Another fundamental aspect of play is the rules. As the child's understanding of their social group's ways of acting expands, they become better able to comprehend social roles. This enhanced understanding allows them to grasp the rules that dictate the intent of the play, thereby adding greater complexity to the activity.

It seems to us that the true evolutionary course progresses from dramatic play to sports games, rather than the reverse. As these activities are repeated countless times in real collective settings, the rules governing successful human interactions gradually emerge. Their reconstitution, devoid of practical utility, forms the content of sports games (ELKONIN, 2009, p.19).

Rule-based play begins when a child can understand the perspective of others and, consequently, grasp the "rules of the game." According to Martins (2009), working with play in school requires pedagogical intentionality that goes beyond viewing play as merely a natural part of childhood. Play allows children to relate, experiment, imagine, and express themselves, helping them understand their place and establish themselves as human beings in the world. (FONTANA; CRUZ, 1997).



## **Constitution of Gender Roles**

According to Ramos (2020), the division between the work of men and women is noticeable, determined by a principle of hierarchy that assigns men the obligation to provide for the family, i.e., a task of greater social relevance. Thus, the social construction of representations about work has been reduced to patterns related to an individual's sexuality, limiting the understanding of gender to biological sex (DUARTE; DUARTE; GIMENEZ; MARTINS, 2022).

Over the years, influenced by feminist debates, there has been a need to analyze this condition and discuss gender relations from a broader perspective. The formation of identity began to be understood as a process of social construction rather than a biological condition (SILVA, 2014).

From a historical-cultural perspective, the individual constructs their identity over time, through humanization. Our humanization develops through social relations, mediated by language, and based on the modes of behavior of each social group and the historical knowledge accumulated by society (PINO, 2005).

Man is not born with the historical acquisitions of humanity. These result from the development of human generations and are not inherent in him or in his natural dispositions but exist in the world around him, in the great works of human culture. Only by appropriating them throughout his life does he acquire truly human properties and faculties. This process places him, so to speak, on the shoulders of previous generations and elevates him far above the animal world (LEONTIEV, 2004, p. 301).

Therefore, schools, academic work, and educational play are practices that help children develop their best human qualities and understand the meanings of social roles (TEIXEIRA; BARCA, 2019). The activities experienced and their meanings are internalized, redefined, and externalized in new social processes, in a constant dialectical process of influencing and being influenced by what is socially lived (URT; VITAL, 2018).

According to Louro (2014), the process of discovering a child's sex by parents from birth already initiates the idea of the individual's career choices, even before the child has developed a sense of self. According to the author, Early Childhood Education should not be a space for reproducing conceptions about gender but should recognize children in a formative period filled with play, interactions, and reactions.

People develop by understanding social roles through interaction with others, as, in the historical-cultural view, the condition of being a subject occurs through relationships, which include school experiences and the conceptions about school held by the family and social environment.

You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education  
These issues are experienced by children from an early age, leading them to attribute meanings to social roles, particularly those related to gender.

At birth, each of us plunges into social life and history, living throughout our existence various roles and social positions, filled with meanings both stable and emerging that come to us through others. Mediated by our social partners, whether close or distant, known or unknown, we progressively integrate into social relationships, learning to recognize ourselves as "people" within them (FONTANA, 2000, p. 222).

Gender, over the years, was initially a category imposed by biological sex, but the discussion gained momentum in Brazil through feminist debates that began in the 1980s. The term "gender" emerged as a means to differentiate not biological sex, but rather the social roles that were assigned to men and women (SCOTT, 1998).

Gonçalves Ferreira and Capristo (2018, p. 128) state that "the role historically assigned by society to men and women is distinct, changing according to the values, norms, and transformations that society is adopting."

Thus, based on Louro (2018), gender is understood as a category historically constructed by individuals and built through historically constituted roles. Gender is observed to be a category integral to the constitution of all human beings, who, upon birth and interaction with their group, are already subjected to the imposition of their social roles.

## Results and discussions

This section presents an analysis of the selected articles to identify the main issues related to the theme under study.

Furlan and Müller (2015), in their article titled *"Play and Gender Relations: Reflections from Children and Educators,"* analyzed what children and educators thought about play and gender issues. The research highlighted the ongoing need to problematize gender and sexuality relations, as the results revealed stereotypes and discrimination that transcend meanings and produce social exclusions.

Pereira and Oliveira (2016), in their text titled *"Boys' and Girls' Play: Gender Scenes in Early Childhood Education,"* sought to understand and problematize gender conceptions in children's play activities at an Early Childhood Education center in Maceió/AL. The authors found that, from an early age, the educational setting helps children to reproduce gender stereotypes in their play, conditioning boys and girls to act according to their social roles. According to them, the school aids

in the production and reproduction of gender-related social roles and establishes the forms of identity for individuals.

Ruis and Perez (2017), in their work titled *"Listening to Boys: Gender Relations in Early Childhood Education,"* aimed to understand the gender representations revealed by two boys in the context of Early Childhood Education. The authors highlighted that boys do not always engage in play in the way adults expect or desire. The research also allowed for the observation of different ways of being a boy, expanding the understanding of gender relations at the early childhood stage.

Braga, Stinghen, and Plácido (2018), in their text titled *"The Influence of Play on Gender Construction in Childhood,"* aimed to examine the impacts of play activities on gender construction. The authors emphasize the need to promote equity and mutual respect between social roles in schools, as schools are initial places of debate where these issues are first observed by individuals. According to the authors, teachers should move beyond traditional cultural ideas and help students transcend normative gender ideas.

Freitas et al. (2019), in their work titled *"Play of Girls and Boys: A Look at Gender Issues in Early Childhood Education,"* discussed an experiential account based on the observations and experiences of four Pedagogy students and an Early Childhood Education teacher within the Institutional Program for Teaching Initiation Scholarships (Pibid). They noted that, while some children seek out activities traditionally associated with their specific gender, there are instances where boys and girls surpass these imposed norms. The research highlights that teachers should allow, facilitate, and encourage children to explore various forms and possibilities of play freely and without stigmas.

Cólis and Souza (2020), in their work titled *"Childhoods, Gender, and Sexualities: An Investigation-Intervention with Early Childhood Education Teachers,"* aimed to understand the process of subjectivation of teachers regarding gender, sexuality, and childhood in their educational practices. They considered the effects of play and the sex/gender mechanisms influencing play mediated by adults. The authors proposed creating a space for training and debate between researchers and educators on gender and sexuality normalizations. They argue that Early Childhood Education holds the potential to challenge the binary reality of play.

Campos et al. (2021), in their article titled *"Play Free of Genders,"* observed how children express gender inequalities concerning specific toys and games. They argued that many teachers are not prepared to break social stereotypes, and most do not encourage students to engage in play associated with the opposite gender, thus contributing to the perpetuation of social stereotypes.

You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education Matos, Oliveira, and Vásquez (2021), in the article *"Games, Play, and Early Childhood Education: Notes on the Construction of Gender,"* discussed the role of games and play in the educational practice of Early Childhood Education, highlighting their contribution to the development and learning about gender. The research revealed that games and play are perceived not only as activities that contribute to the children's overall development but also as opportunities that encourage peer interaction to constructively resolve conflicts, aiming to foster reflective learning.

The bibliographic analysis resulted in two significant analytical perspectives: 1) play as a constituent of the self; 2) the idea of social normativity in play, meaning that boys and girls should play with toys appropriate to their biological sex.

In all eight texts analyzed, the school is highlighted as a means of reproducing social stereotypes, as well as the importance of teachers' roles in managing play interactions and helping children reproduce social patterns. One study indicates that children do not always share the same perspective as adults and notes that they do not always meet expectations regarding play (Freitas et al., 2019).

Early Childhood Education, in its structure, already presents children with the attributes of boys and girls in various situations, ranging from play to teaching and learning processes. Vianna and Finco (2009) describe a tendency among teachers to influence play situations where girls tend to experience caregiving and nurturing roles, while boys engage in more physically intense activities.

Ruis and Perez (2017), like Vianna and Finco (2009), highlight that adults, when educating children, define the differences between social roles through their bodies. The characteristics of the body and the behaviors expected for boys and girls are increasingly reinforced through small gestures and daily actions in Early Childhood Education settings.

Freitas et al. (2019) emphasize that the diverse experiences of boys and girls at this educational stage play a crucial role in their lives, as it introduces the process of schooling where necessary skills are developed and the process of constituting feminine and masculine genders occurs.

Braga, Stingen, and Placido (2018) point out the effective role of teachers in controlling play. Other authors note that the control of bodies, feelings, actions, and movements is prominent at this stage, as childhood regulations frequently occur, imposed by social culture (VIANNA; FINCO, 2009; GIONGO, 2015).

Children establish social roles in Early Childhood Education to please their caregivers, as meeting adult expectations becomes a unique way for the child to socially develop. Pino (2005) discusses that, as a child develops as a subject, they need others and language, with the social function

being a representative sign created by society. Cólis and Souza (2020) emphasize that institutions such as schools, families, and society transmit to children the ways and manners of expressing themselves in society, so masculinities and femininities are constituted from the child's biological birth.

The statement "it's a girl!" or "it's a boy!" [...] initiates a process that is supposed to follow a certain course or direction. The statement, more than a description, can be understood as a definition or decision about a body. Judith Butler (1993) argues that this assertion triggers a whole process of "making" that body female or male. This process is triggered by physical characteristics that are seen as differences and to which cultural meanings are assigned. [...] The act of naming the body occurs within the logic that assumes sex as a "given" prior to culture and attributes to it an immutable, ahistorical, and binary character (LOURO, 2004, p.15, emphasis in the original).

Teachers, whether men or women, contribute to this process by teaching children, through pedagogical mediation, what is typically associated with each gender. For example, when a teacher tells a girl that she shouldn't play with cars or tells a boy that dolls are toys for girls, they exercise control over the child, who, in order to conform to the adult's expectations, will choose not to play with certain toys (VIANNA; FINCO, 2009).

The authors note that even though biological differences are contained within one's sex, girls and boys, interacting in the same environment, are educated differently. Although they may be from the same family or classmates receiving the same education and knowledge, girls are subtly taught to be nurturing through looks, actions, and play, while boys are taught to be dominant. These cultural traditions, rooted in social roles, are passed down from generation to generation through language, which mediates the entire process of subject formation.

Guizzo (2007), when discussing the education of boys in Early Childhood Education, states that a certain type of control is exercised covertly, such as controlling bodies. This control is implemented by schools, teachers, parents, and society, with specific expectations about what these individuals will become in social interactions, as regulatory actions contribute to the formation of the subject and their social constitution.

If we accept that the school not only transmits knowledge, nor merely produces it, but also creates subjects and produces ethnic, gender, and class identities; if we recognize that these identities are being produced through relationships of inequality; if we admit that the school is intrinsically committed to maintaining a divided society and does this daily, with our participation or omission; if we believe that school practice is historically contingent and a political practice, meaning it transforms and can be subverted; and finally, if we are not content with these social divisions, then

You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education we certainly find justification not only to observe but, especially, to try to intervene in the continuation of these inequalities (LOURO, 2004, p. 85-86).

In particular, boys are treated and shaped so that, from a very young age, they can assume their masculinity and, most importantly, practice the sexuality considered politically correct and socially accepted, namely heterosexuality. Boys who do not meet these expectations are treated in a manner analogous to societal views, that is, as different or in need of learning how to be men. Matos, Oliveira, and Vásquez (2021), when discussing play in relation to gender, emphasize the importance of this process for the constitution of the subject, aiming to enhance the appropriation of various social roles.

Pereira and Oliveira (2016) highlight that boys and girls need to fit into certain play activities to undergo an educational process free from prejudice. To fit in, boys must develop skills related to sports, agility, strength, and impetuosity, which are characteristics of masculinity in a patriarchal society, reflecting the view that masculinity is superior to other social roles.

The aversion to feminine activities is also a characteristic of male education. Boys are taught from an early age that playing with dolls is for girls and that they should not engage in such activities; that cooking is a woman's task, leaving no space or freedom for the child to explore both social roles. It is not that being a man excludes performing such functions, but rather that society deems these tasks as feminine, thus the masculine is expressly prohibited from engaging in them.

However, it is important to understand that there is not a single way to experience masculinity (or femininity). Instead, there is a dominant form that is referred to as hegemonic masculinity, which is directly linked to heterosexuality. This form of masculinity, as I have already mentioned, "is constructed in relation to various subordinate masculinities as well as in relation to women" (SABO, 2002, p. 37). I would like to illustrate here some strategies commonly used by adults (family, teachers, etc.) to enforce certain behaviors deemed 'essentially' masculine (GUIZZO, 2007, p. 41, emphasis in original).

We observe that masculinity constitutes a framework that prevents crossing gender boundaries, which is not as pronounced with girls, as it is more acceptable for them to play soccer than for boys to play with dolls (ELIOT, 2013). Research by Guizzo (2007), Eliot (2013), and Duarte, Duarte, and Martins (2022) shows that girls are less hesitant to approach traditionally masculine activities than boys are to engage in feminine ones, due to social disapproval, adult displeasure, and lack of acceptance.

Louro (2012) views the school as a space of reproduction, particularly where differences are highlighted, and it becomes apparent why, from birth, parents impose expectations on their children,



who over time learn to occupy their place in society. Gaio, Martins, and Alves (2020) also see the school as a site of such reproductions and appropriations by both teachers and students, as children, through play, begin to adopt their social roles.

Thus, the institution delineates spaces and demands that children perform differentiated roles. Louro (2012, p. 62) adds that “the school delineates spaces. Using symbols and codes, it asserts what each person can (or cannot) do, it separates and institutes. It informs the place of the small and the large, the boys and the girls.”

Finco (2012) emphasizes that if masculinity and femininity were solely dependent on biological attributes, there would be no need for teachers, parents, and society to engage in a routine of education. There are intense efforts to coerce and shape children within masculine or feminine identities, as failing to do so would undermine the patriarchal society.

Indeed, is it natural for boys and girls to be separated in school for group work and lines? Is it necessary to accept that the choice of toys is inherently different according to sex? How can we then explain that they often mix for play or work? [...]. Curricula, norms, teaching procedures, theories, language, educational materials, and assessment processes are, undoubtedly, places where gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class differences are constructed and, at the same time, are produced by these distinctions (LOURO, 2012, p. 67-68).

Early Childhood Education, according to research by Guizzo (2007); Vianna and Finco (2009); Louro (2012); and Eliot (2013), has been a space for constructing sexualities and identities. Children are coerced, monitored, punished, educated, and normalized to become what the patriarchal society desires boys to be boys and girls to be girls. Gaio, Martins, and Alves (2020) argue that deeper study and understanding are needed from teachers, as initial training is insufficient for deconstructing the binary idea of male and female as something biological and innate to human beings.

Finco (2005) suggests that play is a form of cultural expression, as children learn and practice customs through play. The author highlights that, in the context of play, gender conditions imposed on children become explicit. Even when trying to free themselves from these constraints, children still carry them, whether playing with dolls or engaging in sports.

Felipe (2000), in studying the education of boys and girls, describes that even in the 19th century, education was characterized by concerns about behavior and conduct, with girls being restricted from expressing feelings and being severely controlled socially.

Based on Furlan and Müller (2015), it is evident that masculinity and femininity have been shaped in various ways over time, and that teaching work is part of this process. From a young age,

You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education the formation of the subject occurs, and social roles are initiated in childhood and formalized throughout life.

Arce (2001) describes that being a mother, carrying a child in the womb, and breastfeeding were socially perceived as gifts of women, which made the female figure "sacred" and untouchable, associated with the preservation and care of family and home. The upbringing of girls, as mentioned, is centered on care, with even the toys presented to them contributing to their maternal identity.

The relationship established between a teacher, especially in early childhood education, and domestic work where a woman is symbolically marked as a "natural educator" influences a reductive view that undermines the value of educational work. In this regard, as noted by Arce (2001), women are seen as having innate attributes or a certain predisposition for working with children. This association naturalizes the idea that working with young children requires merely a vocation for nurturing and mothering (CONCEIÇÃO; BERTONCELI, 2017, p. 67).

Teaching in early childhood education exemplifies this process, as over time, it has been established in a precarious manner, which has significantly hindered the development of a teaching identity. Silva and Lage (2021) note that early childhood education emerged with a strong presence of women. In Brazil, the assistentialist approach to this stage also played a role in viewing teaching solely from the perspective of care rather than education. Thus, caregivers did not require formal training for this role (CONCEIÇÃO; BERTONCELI, 2017).

Gaio, Martins, and Alves (2020) remind us that school is a learning space, but it is through play within this environment that children acquire and broaden their perspectives through their experiences. According to the authors, teachers must be properly prepared to facilitate this process.

Based on Souza and Ribeiro (2020), it is crucial to initiate and strengthen gender discussions in all spaces so that individuals can be and act with full freedom to be who they want to be.

The practice of teaching, therefore, is very important because it significantly contributes to the formation of children. It is with the teacher that they learn the initial meanings of work. Thus, ensuring gender diversity is essential so that children can understand that there are no roles exclusive to men or women, but rather roles for human beings, and everyone can perform any activity they choose in society. This approach will contribute effectively to the development of more autonomous and active citizens.

## **Final considerations**

The objective of this study was to understand, based on the literature reviewed, how the roles



of masculine and feminine genders are constituted in Early Childhood Education. It was observed that the literature suggests that children are shaped from a young age to perform roles according to their identity, such as strong boys and docile girls.

The constitution of gender roles is a social construction, meaning that children adopt the social behaviors of more experienced individuals early on and internalize this process into their own lives and ways of being. It is considered that these gender roles are not biological but rather social constructions developed over time.

The bibliographic analysis revealed two important approaches: play as a constitutive element of the subject and the idea of social normativity that influences play, meaning that boys should play with toys considered socially appropriate for them, and similarly, girls should do the same.

The literature also indicates that children who do not conform to binary ideas are often viewed as atypical by society. Boys and girls are expected to develop skills that align with their social roles—boys being impetuous, strong, agile, and skilled, while girls are expected to be docile, caring, nurturing, and maternal. Although these roles are considered socially innate, they are actually constructed through play and social appropriations.

Based on the reviewed literature, we observe that society maintains an aversion to activities associated with the female gender. This aversion is a characteristic of the education of male subjects, where boys are discouraged from playing with "feminine" toys to avoid being perceived as feminized. This perspective reinforces social stereotypes and deepens the differentiation between boys and girls and their social functions.

We argue that the process of appropriating and constituting gender roles in young children occurs primarily through play. Play allows children to internalize and adopt social actions in their daily lives. For example, each time a girl plays with a doll, she develops care and nurturing skills, while each time a boy plays with a ball, he develops strength and agility. These examples are manifestations of societal pressures that dictate these roles from before birth, based on the discovery of biological sex and the anticipated role of the new individual.

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You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education  
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- You can't play this game! Role play in the constitution of gender in early childhood education  
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