



Children's Play: A Parental Interview-Based Exploration

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Abstract

Play is critical for children. It makes a substantial contribution to child development. However, children's play is in a state of flux at present. Given that parents are the primary observers of children's daily lives, their narratives provide reliable data on children's play behaviour. Using interviews from 13 mothers (of seven boys and six girls aged between 4 and 12 years), this article examines the nature of children's play in Kerala. The qualitative content analysis of the data, focusing on the play behaviour of children, factors influencing the play, and changes over time, showed that gender differences in play behaviour had been reported to persist across generations. Gender norms, commercial market forces, and the constraints of an urbanised environment had a significant role in shaping children's play environment. No evident difference was noted in the overall play behaviour of children in urban and rural areas. The study implies that there is a need to promote more inclusive play and ensure access to safe play spaces for children.

Keywords: play, gender, parental interview, Kerala

Introduction

Lev Vygotsky, a pioneer of child psychology, assigned play a special place in his theory. He states that play is integral to children's cognitive development and higher mental functions.

"In play, the child is always behaving beyond his/her age, above his/her usual everyday behaviour; in play the child is, as it were, a head above him/herself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his/her usual level" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 74).

Although engaged in all ages, play is most associated with childhood. A good amount of empirical work highlights the centrality of play in child

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development. It contributes to the cognitive (Healey & Mendelsohn, 2019), physical (Janssen, 2014), linguistic (Toseeb et al., 2020), and social-emotional development of children (Yogman et al., 2018). Through play, children construct new learning experiences, which help them develop different skills that cannot be developed through other means (Elkind, 2008).

The significance of play is also rightly recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 of the convention recognises “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.” Furthermore, the committee considered how factors such as urbanization, commercialisation, increasing violence, child labour, and domestic work impact children’s opportunities to enjoy the rights provided under Article 31 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, pp.3).

Essentially, play is a universal activity (Edwards et al., 2001), but its expression varies widely across cultures (Cohen, 2006). Different cultures attach varying values to the role of play in children’s development and thus provide different play opportunities for their children (Holmes, 2011; Roopnarine & Jin, 2012; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). To have a clear understanding of children’s play, it is important to examine how it is practiced and perceived within specific cultural contexts.

In India, there is limited availability of studies on play. A study conducted by Oke et al. (1999) gives a profile of children’s play in urban India. The study reveals that despite harsh urban constraints and social problems, children in urban India snatch their time and space to play by restructuring the content to the context and innovating upon whatever is available to them. In urban India, the play environments which provide maximum opportunity for innovation are often unsafe, while adult-designed safe play areas are not particularly stimulating. Furthermore, adults mainly restrict children’s play to ensure their safety. With modernisation and advancements in technology, conventional games in India are increasingly being replaced by online games. Along with this, increased academic competition has caused children to focus more on schoolwork, assignments, and projects. Ultimately, these changes limit children’s opportunities for outdoor play (Jane & Sharma, 2025). While this cultural context mentions the ‘where’ and ‘how’ of play in India, play is also shaped by universal forces.

Play is shaped by different socio-cultural and environmental factors. An important socio-cultural construct that shapes children’s play is gender. As children enter pre-school, their play patterns become more gendered (Weisgram, 2019). Research has consistently shown a pattern of gender segregation in children’s play, particularly regarding their play styles,

preference for toys (Edwards et al., 2001), and choice of playmates (Rose & Smith, 2018). Studies on children's free play have reported girls and boys playing with gender stereotypical toys together with children of their own sex (MacNaughton, 2006). However, some studies documented girls and boys playing together in some situations (Chapman, 2016), and sometimes challenging gender-stereotyped roles (Wohlwend, 2011).

Over and above the influence of gender, the physical environment of children considerably shapes their play experiences. It is seen that child development centres in industrialised countries earmark more time and resources to creating indoor play environments than to outdoor environments. This may result from limited play spaces or scarce resources (Frost et al., 2008). Various studies have revealed that a dramatic decline has taken place in children's outdoor play over the last few decades (Charan et al., 2024). Their play is severely affected by a lack of play spaces (Diamond et al., 2007). Children play differently outdoors than they play indoors. Research emphasises the advantages of outdoor play that cannot readily be provided indoors (Frost et al., 2008).

Play is now widely recognised as an important field of scholarly inquiry. The number of studies on children's play has increased significantly in the Western context, with systematic research being conducted across disciplines. The establishment of the world's first professorship in play at the University of Cambridge, sponsored by the Lego Foundation (Hall, 2017), reflects this growing academic prominence. However, play continues to be a comparatively under-researched topic in India. Moreover, play is not a static phenomenon. The nature of play has undergone a substantial transformation over time in response to the major changes in social, economic, and environmental conditions. Therefore, research is needed to gain a thorough understanding of play in the current Indian context. The literature consistently demonstrates that play is an important aspect of childhood, and its significance extends beyond childhood. Hence, understanding the nature of children's play in the Indian context, where rapid transformation is reshaping childhood, is particularly relevant.

Given that parents are the primary observers of children's daily lives, their firsthand accounts provide a reliable source of data on play behaviour. This study used semi-structured parental interviews to understand the nature of children's play with an emphasis on possible gender differences and urban-rural disparities, as well as the factors that influence play. Moreover, 12 grandmothers were interviewed to incorporate a generational perspective on play. This study adopts a comprehensive approach to understand play behaviour across childhood holistically. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology (n.d.), childhood is the period between the ages of 2 and 12. As the typical age for enrolling children in structured preschool is around 4

years, this study involved parents of children aged 4 years and above.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Kerala, which is the southernmost state in India. Though Kerala is a part of India, it has some unique characteristics. Kerala has a very high literacy rate relative to the rest of the country (Government of Kerala, 2024). The people of the state have historically had higher educational attainments, one of the key factors in ensuring a higher social status and economic well-being (Cox et al., 2011). In terms of settlement patterns, Kerala has a unique configuration of interspersed cities and villages, with minimal differences between rural and urban areas in terms of amenities.

Thirteen mothers of children aged from 4 to 12 years participated in the study. The participants were selected purposively to ensure that their children were from different age groups, genders, and localities (see Table 1). Participant recruitment was terminated when data saturation was noted in the responses.

As shown in Table 1, six mothers had girls, and seven had boys. Their children belonged to the age range of 4 to 12 years (mean = 7.46, SD = 2.5). Six participants resided in urban areas, and seven in rural areas in Kerala, India. Almost all mothers had completed formal education of 12 years and above. Twelve mothers were homemakers, and one had a white-collar job.

Twelve grandmothers were also interviewed to bring in a generational perspective on play, with an emphasis on how their children played when they were young. Of these, six were maternal grandmothers, and six were paternal grandmothers. The parents and grandmothers lived together in an extended family setup. As the focus was on the reports of mothers, detailed sociodemographic data was not collected from grandmothers.

Table 1: Participant Details

Participant (mothers)	Participant (years of formal education)	Participant occupation	Gender of the child	Age of the child (years; months)	Locality
P1	12	Homemaker	M	8; 1	Rural
P2	15	Homemaker	F	12	Rural
P3	15	Homemaker	F	7; 5	Rural
P4	15	Homemaker	M	6; 1	Rural
P5	9	Homemaker	F	6; 6	Rural
P6	13	Teacher	M	5; 6	Rural
P7	12	Homemaker	F	9; 2	Rural
P8	16	Homemaker	M	7; 7	Urban
P9	15	Homemaker	M	4; 8	Urban
P10	12	Homemaker	M	5; 4	Urban
P11	15	Homemaker	F	6; 4	Urban
P12	14	Homemaker	M	10; 3	Urban
P13	12	Homemaker	F	12; 2	Urban

An interview schedule consisting of 20 open-ended questions guided the semi-structured interview with mothers. A shorter version of the interview was conducted with the grandmothers. The interviews did not probe further into the experience of the grandmothers, because of the difficulties in recollection. To develop the interview schedule, previous literature on the play behaviour of children, as well as personal observations of the researcher, were used as guidance. The questions in the final schedule covered children's play activities, play preferences, play locations, toy preferences, screen time, and parental toy purchases. Due ethical approval was obtained before the study. Interviews were conducted in a private room in their residence. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before they were interviewed.

Participants were informed that they would be asked to describe their child's play behaviour. Mothers were asked to describe their child's play behaviour, and grandmothers to narrate their child's play behaviour when they were young. The interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was conducted in the local language, Malayalam.

The interviews were transcribed in Malayalam, which were then analysed manually in accordance with Erlingsson and Brysiewicz's (2017) content analysis model. The text of the interview was divided into smaller meaningful units and further condensed without losing its original meaning. The condensed units were used for formulating codes. After examining the codes, broader categories and themes were identified. Finally, codes, categories, and themes were determined by ensuring that the data supported the themes coherently and distinctively. The data were analysed in the source language. Finally, the codes, themes, and selected extracts were translated into English.

Results

After the qualitative content analysis, three themes emerged – range of play, toys, and social and environmental influences on play (see Table 2). The results are presented with supporting excerpts from the statements of the respective participants.

Table 2: Themes, Categories, and Codes Identified

Themes	Categories	Codes
Range of play	Play forms and social interactions	Types of play Recreational activities Backyard play Interactions
	Gradual changes in play	Playmates
	Preferences in play	Type of play Playmates

Toys	Toy types and preferences	Name of the toy Favourite toys
	Toy purchase	Criteria
Social and environmental influences	Adult influences	Restrictions
	Media influences	Screen time
	Play accessibility factors	Playmate availability Limited play space

Range of Play

This theme includes the description given by mothers on various forms of play children engaged in, emphasising the nature of their play activities and their social interactions during play. Mothers cited various play activities like physical play, recreational activities, pretend play, object play, and organised play with clear rules. Notably, none of the participants reported their children engaging in traditional games like marbles and hopscotch.

Mothers' accounts indicated children's clear preference for specific types of play. According to their description, children's preference was evenly split between gender-typed and gender-neutral play. The preference for gender-typed play was reported to be more prevalent among boys, and this pattern was more commonly mentioned by rural mothers compared to urban mothers. Mothers of boys specified that their children preferred physical play, like football, cricket, and pretend play with the role of a shopkeeper. In contrast, mothers of girls cited their children's preference for pretend play taking up the role of a homemaker.

The interviews also revealed that children often played with various natural materials available in their backyard, such as mud, leaves, water, sand, coconut shells, flowers, and stones. Both urban and rural mothers cited this form of play. However, one urban mother mentioned the limited opportunities for such play due to changes in their physical environment. According to this parent, "Mud is not available here [around the house], so it is not part of the play. Earlier [he] used to play with mud. Because of paving [the surrounding] with interlocked tiles, mud is not available now" (Participant 10).

Additionally, two mothers – one from an urban and another from a rural area- mentioned not allowing their children to play with natural materials available in the surroundings. The urban mother was concerned about cleanliness and safety. The parent commented as follows: "There are many rats here. It's not safe. Moreover, this is a crowded area, and people spit here. So, cleanliness issues are there" (Participant 12).

Mothers reported that children played with related adults, children living together in the case of a joint family, and peers in their neighbourhood. According to mothers, their sons' play changed depending on the gender of

their playmates. This was reported in the case of three of the seven boys. When they played with girls, they engaged in pretend play, taking on roles such as housekeeper, parent and child, teacher and pupil, and doctor and patient. At the same time, when playing with boys, they engaged in physically active play, such as football and tag. Further, two mothers pointed out that as their boys grew older, their interest in playing with girls seemed to diminish.

The children had a preference for playmates of the same gender, the opposite sex, playmates older than them, or showed no preference, according to the mothers. Children preferring same gender playmates were cited to be constituting the largest group. Preference for same-gender playmates was cited as particularly prevalent among boys, and such a pattern was more commonly mentioned by urban mothers compared to rural mothers. A parent said, "My son has five or six playmates — two boys and the rest girls. He is mostly seen playing with the two boys. Because he is not that interested in playing with the girls" (Participant 1).

The accounts of grandmothers were consistent with those of the mothers regarding diversity in play. The description of grandmothers and mothers revealed that what differentiated the play of the parental generation from the current generation was the presence or absence of traditional play activities, such as hopscotch and marbles.

In essence, as reported by mothers and grandmothers, children's play took various forms. However, some games of the parental generation were reported to be disappearing over time. Gender segregation with respect to playmates and play activity preference was reported more often by mothers of boys in both generations.

Toys

This theme includes mothers' reports on children's toys and the relationship of children with these toys. Their descriptions revealed that toys were an essential part of children's play, and they possessed different kinds of toys. Toys like balls, bicycles, building blocks, soft toys, and puzzles were cited as commonly seen among boys and girls. At the same time, dolls and kitchen sets were cited as commonly found with girls; and guns, small vehicles, and superhero figurines with boys. The description given by mothers indicated that the children of urban and rural areas were having similar kinds of toys. On toy preferences of children, the narratives of mothers revealed clear gendered patterns. Their reports showed that boys preferred toys generally associated with boys, and girls preferred toys associated with girls.

According to mothers, children were excited by new toys, and lost interest in them as their novelty diminished. They also mentioned children's

comfort toys. Their children tended to cherish certain toys even when they were old. Such toys acted as comfort items for them. Notably, all these comfort toys were human or animal figures. They were stuffed toys, small superhero toys, or dolls. A parent described,

Now, his main interest is in superhero toys. He always has them in his hands, and keeps them in his pocket when he goes out. I have seen these toys kept beside him when he goes to bed. Now [he is] particularly fond of Robin, the superhero. (Participant 8).

The narrative of the mothers showed that, among the children who received toys as birthday gifts, a larger proportion received gender-typed toys than others. Interestingly, boys were cited to be receiving gender-typed toys more frequently than girls.

Mothers mentioned various factors they themselves and their partners considered while purchasing toys for their children. Safety, child's interest, price of the toys, interest of the parents, age and gender appropriateness, and educational value of the toys were the commonly cited criteria. Purchasing toys with educational value was more frequently reported by mothers of boys. Such a pattern was commonly expressed by mothers in urban areas. Notably, maternal description revealed instances where they felt their children did not like educational toys. One parent shared, "He [role] plays teacher-child, but he is not very interested [in that play] when I ask his elder playmates to teach him through play. I buy toys for such purposes." (Participant- 4).

The consideration of gender appropriateness when purchasing toys for children is reported slightly more by mothers of boys. One mother mentioned that she had bought a kitchen set for her son when he was younger. She added that she did not care about the gender appropriateness of toys and instead considered her child's interests. However, during the interview she revealed not purchasing princess-themed colouring books for him at a later age (Participant 8). A similar contradiction was noted in the narrative of another mother who stated that she did not consider gender appropriateness when selecting toys for his son. In the interview, she also said, "Seeing his sister's doll, he insists on getting similar toys. But I tell my husband to buy him boys' toys as he is a boy" (Participant 10).

Mothers' accounts revealed their involvement with children in making playthings such as paper boats, glasses, spinners, hats, and watches. They were made of materials like paper, coconut leaves, and tiny coconut fruits. One mother explained her reason for this involvement as follows: "I made some toys using locally available materials two or three times to divert his attention from TV." (Participant 8).

From the narration of mothers and grandmothers, it was clear that the parental generation had fewer toys than the current generation. Notable differences between the types of toys seen among boys and girls have remained consistent with both generations. For example, in the parental and current generations, girls had dolls while boys had guns and small vehicles. Moreover, creating playthings using locally available materials was cited to be prevalent among both generations.

In short, as reported by mothers, toys held a special place in children's play, and their toy preferences reflected gender typing. Unlike their parents' generation, present-day children were cited to have access to a variety of toys regardless of locality. Certain toys were described as a source of comfort for children. In addition, today's parents place greater emphasis on gender appropriateness and the educational value of toys.

Social and Environmental Influences on Play

Mothers acknowledged imposing restrictions on their children's play. Specifically, they mentioned allowing their children to play only in proximity to them. Moreover, there were instances where mothers did not allow their children to play in neighbouring houses. Such restrictions were commonly reported by mothers in urban areas. The major reasons they cited for these restrictions were the fear of injury, safety concerns, fear of today's society, and worries about their children causing problems in other households. Parents expressed their concerns as follows: "Neighbours aren't our people [don't belong to our community]. Furthermore, there is a road [in front of the house]" (Participant 2). "[We] can't trust the present time. People are of different types" (Participant 4).

Mothers pointed out that their children had only a few available playmates, but children preferred playing with many. Compared to boys, girls were reported to have a lower number of playmates available to play with. Further, two rural mothers cited lack of space for outdoor play. In general, mothers mentioned that their children enjoyed playing outside the house. A mother stated that as play with balls gave an opportunity to play outside the house, her son liked such play (Participant 10).

Mothers were worried about children spending much time on screen. They mentioned that children spend a lot of time in front of the screen, either playing video games, watching cartoons, or browsing video-content platforms such as YouTube. This pattern is commonly found in urban areas. According to a parent, "Sometimes, I intentionally turn off the TV to take him outdoors to play. He spends a lot of time watching TV" (Participant 8).

Unlike the children of today's generation, children of the parental generation — especially boys — had more freedom to play away from

home. This freedom allowed them to have an experience of various play spaces, like neighbouring houses, nearby playgrounds, and paddy fields. As a result, they often had more opportunities to find and interact with many playmates.

In essence, the descriptions given by the mothers and grandmothers showed that, compared to the parental generation, play experiences of today's children are impacted by adults' restrictions on where they can play. The limitations regarding outdoor play spaces and playmates further affected their play opportunities. Moreover, increased screen time among the current generation was reported to reduce their time for play.

Discussion

The study found that among boys and girls, in both urban and rural areas, differences were reported in the preferences for play activities (e.g., preference for physical play in boys and pretend play in girls), and both expressed a preference for same-gender playmates and gender-typed toys. The persistence of gendered play patterns was also mentioned in the parental generation. These patterns are well-documented in the existing literature, with studies showing that boys are more likely to prefer physically active and rough-and-tumble play, and girls tend to prefer comparatively passive and quiet play (Frost et al., 2008). Todd et al. (2016) pointed out that boys expressed a preference for cars and diggers (trucks), whereas girls preferred dolls and cooking pots.

These noted differences in play activities, playmate preferences, and toy choices may seem to reflect natural inclinations between boys and girls. However, these patterns found in both generations reflect gender norms and socialisation practices prevalent in society. In contemporary times, their expression is further amplified and materialised through the powerful influence of commercialisation. For instance, when examining toy design, it becomes evident that the market employs a gender binary, which leads to toys being labelled as 'for boys' or 'for girls' (Auster & Mansbach, 2012), and they also use specific cues to define the gender appropriateness of toys (Yeung & Wong, 2018).

A serious implication of these gender-based differences is the kind of toys that are purchased for boys versus girls. In this study, parents were reported to prioritise toys that matched their child's gender, notably mothers with sons. However, studies have shown that gender-typed toy preferences have long-term impacts, resulting in gender-differentiated skills and behaviour throughout the life of children (Weisgram, 2019). A similar pattern was found with educational toys. Mothers with sons mentioned buying educational toys more often than those with daughters. Toys designed for boys are perceived

to be more educational in nature. Thus, children's play is restricted by both gender expectations and market-driven ideas of what is educational.

The findings indicated asymmetry in the enforcement and internalisation of gender boundaries. For instance, boys were reported to receive cross-gender-typed toys as gifts less than girls. Mothers mentioned that boys' interest in playing with girls seemed to diminish as they grew older. This implies that, compared to girls, boys may be experiencing stronger gender socialisation. Such patterns limit children's play experiences by restricting their exposure to different play activities. The findings reflect an adult belief that it is acceptable for girls to play with masculine toys, but not for boys to play with feminine toys (Wood et al., 2002). Thus, the patterns point to the conclusion that masculinity is narrowly defined and actively policed.

There was a noticeable decline in children's outdoor play compared to that of their parental generation. Mothers expressed concerns about children's safety, leading them to impose restrictions on children's outdoor play. Lack of safe outdoor play spaces further reinforces these restrictions. Traditional games such as hopscotch and marbles, which were commonly reported by the parental generation, have largely disappeared among today's children.

The combination of constraints of the physical environment and parental restrictions likely reduces the quality of children's play experiences. Currently, play is often confined to supervised indoor settings. This shift reflects major changes in the environment. Similarly, parents are not arbitrarily restricting play; they are responding to wider contextual factors that compel them to limit children's outdoor activity. Parents perceive outdoors as dangerous, resulting in extremely protective behaviour towards their children. Notably, even though this study was conducted against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, parental reports of restriction were not primarily about fear of the virus. Instead, their concerns centred on social security and general safety in society. This indicates that parental restrictions are rooted in social anxieties about the environment.

The unique socio-developmental context of Kerala should also be considered in interpreting the results of the study. According to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) India Index 2023-24 (NITI Aayog, 2024), Kerala has been considered a frontrunner in gender equality. However, subtle influences of gender in shaping children's play experiences reported across generations suggest that cultural norms of gender differentiation are still evident. This reflects a well-documented paradox in Kerala: even though women in Kerala have attained the highest levels of education, their representation in the workforce remains disproportionately low (Sreekumar, 2007). Prevalence of these kinds of cultural norms may reinforce traditional gendered patterns from childhood through adulthood.

The findings indicated similarities between urban and rural areas in many respects, like the gendered nature of play, toy accessibility, and constraints on play spaces. The similarity in toy accessibility and the constraints on play spaces may be due to Kerala's unique urbanisation patterns. Kerala lacks a clear distinction between rural and urban areas. Instead, there is a continuous blend of these two. Minimal infrastructure disparity is found between urban and rural areas of the State. (Arya & Rejuna, 2024). The similarity found in the gendered nature of play in both areas may indicate that in the Kerala context, gendered socialisation is pervasive regardless of geographical locations. In short, children's play is shaped by different factors like gender norms, commercial market forces and the constraints of an urbanised environment. Among these, gender acts as the primary organising framework in children's play.

One limitation of the study is that it was confined to a specific geographical location, that is, Kerala. However, the participants represented a diverse parental socio-demographic group. Even though this study was conducted within a small geographical region, the focus on Kerala offered a unique opportunity to examine the subtle influence of gender on children's play in a region characterised by high developmental indicators. Another limitation is that the study relied solely on parental reports. Incorporating children's perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of what happens firsthand in play.

Conclusion

The study shows that gender differences in play behaviour have been reported to persist in both generations. The major factors noted to be shaping children's play experiences are gender norms, commercial market forces and the constraints of an urbanised environment. No evident differences are noted in the overall play behaviour of children in urban and rural areas. The major influencing factors are found to operate in a similar manner in both settings. Despite Kerala being considered a frontrunner in gender equality, the study found subtle influence of gender on children's play. This finding calls for direct and intense policy-level interventions. Such interventions should control subtle market cues that perpetuate gendered stereotypes. Awareness programs for parents and educators can foster diverse and inclusive play. Furthermore, the marked decline in children's outdoor play has serious policy implications. Therefore, it is important to ensure free, open, and safe play spaces for both organised and free play.

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