

# Understanding the World of Play- A Qualitative Study on Indian Children

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study attempts to delve deeper into the world of children and gain insights into the games they play, the places they play in and the toys they play with.

**Design/ Methodology/ Approach:** Four focus group discussions were conducted with children among the ages of 8 to 15 with 8 children in each group. Two groups consisted solely of male participants and two groups consisted entirely of female participants.

**Findings:** It was found that play spaces for children were limited due to which children play in compact, more accessible spaces like basements. It was observed that there exists a very clear divide between 'kiddish' and 'non kiddish' games and interest in popular toys like guns waned as children grew older. During the course of discussion it emerged that girls were not comfortable playing in groups with boys as they grew older.

**Research Limitations/ Implications:** Due to the limited sample size in this study, generalizations of the findings to a larger population should be done after further scrutiny.

**Practical implications:** The results in this paper may be useful to practitioners by providing crucial inputs for designing and promoting toys suitable for children.

**Originality/ Value:** This paper serves the dual purpose of presenting the intricacies of play from the point of view of children as active consumers of games and toys and filling the existing knowledge gap while simultaneously helping practitioners deliver added value to their end consumers, i.e. children.

**Keywords:** Children, Play, Qualitative study, Focus Group Discussion, India

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In India, children aged 5 to 14 constitute 19.4% of the total population [29]. 41% of the population is less than the age of 18 [1]. This substantial number coupled with factors like growing awareness, peer influence and pester power of kids in family purchase decisions [41, 17, 26] makes them a sought after segment. In addition to exerting influence on family purchase decisions [41,24,5,38,2] children also have a segment of the market which exclusively caters to them with offerings ranging from toys to apparel, accessories and perfumes.

The market forecast report from the years 2010 to 2020 [39] articulated that Indian toy market being highly fragmented has more than 1000 units in the small scale sector. In the total

market, the organized players account for only 25% of the total toy production in the country. Since the industry has a large number of small and tiny players who are in the unorganized sector, no precise estimate about the market size can be made. While some estimates put the market in the range of Rs 7.5 to 10 bn, others put it at over Rs 20 bn. The current market is estimated at about Rs 25 bn, which also includes electronic games market. The organized toys market is estimated at Rs 9.5 bn. The Indian branded market is dominated by Leo, Funschool, Lego, Ok Play, Walt Disney, Hasbro, Little Tykes, Bruago, Hornbey, Fisher Price, Barbie etc. The market growth rate is expected to be 10.2%. The major product variations are mechanical/construction (24%), dolls (18%), games and puzzles (18%), stuffed/soft (16%), learning (12%) and battery operated/electronic (12%). According to ages, the segment between 5 to 16 years constitutes almost 50% of the total market of toys [39]. Toys however face stiff competition from technology and Gadgets, with children spending around 5 to 8 hours a day on different media [15] leaving no time for play. With advancing age, children become more susceptible to peer group influence for those products that are more conspicuous in nature, such as public luxuries [4] like toys.

This article tries to develop first hand insights into this untapped market by interacting with children and finding their attitudes towards games and play

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Play is an 'innate childhood instinct that is not only enjoyable but also crucial in the learning and development of a child' [16]. From infancy, children world over have the tendency to play with objects that they encounter every day ranging from food to articles like toys, furniture, utensils etc. Studies have shown that play holds a pivotal role in developing various dimensions of a child's personality. In addition to supporting the development of motor skills, language, attention, memory and mental sequencing [20], social engagement, creativity and conflict resolution skills are found to be greatly enhanced through play [8]. However, given the demanding nature of children's school and their schedules, there is a paucity of time

for children to indulge in play, making play an 'unaffordable luxury' [13].

Previous studies have sought to find the meaning of active play in U.K [7]. Play has been studied in terms of time spent, location, nature of activity and type of activity [33]. The motivators, barriers and facilitators of active play of children have also been deliberated upon [8]. Children's interpretation and improvisation of the rules of a game was studied by De Valk et al.[11]. The puzzle solving ability of children when they played alone and when they played in groups on a computer was checked by Inkpen et al., [22] and it was found that children playing together solved more puzzles than children playing by themselves. In India, play patterns in preschool were analyzed [12] in preschool settings. Meera et al., [28] studied play spaces and play materials which were used to play imaginatively in urban India.

In the literature review phase it was found that most studies on play were conducted to find out the nature of play, that is, if the child indulges in structured or unstructured play, imagination while playing, the role of supervision in play etc. Studies have not been conducted considering children as consumers who actively seek out games and toys. Given that the toy industry is growing and there is a simultaneous increase in the awareness and pester power of children, it becomes crucial to gain insights into the kind of toys and games that children play with.

This study seeks to provide a holistic view of children's play in the Indian context with unmediated insights from children as consumers, which will fill the existing knowledge gap and simultaneously be of relevance in the toy industry.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The views of children were found through a focus group discussion where children were encouraged to talk to one another about their play experiences. In a project where theory building is needed, team approach is useful [32]. Focus group discussion was chosen as the research methodology to build theory. Focus group discussion was carried out among 4 groups of children in the metropolitan city of Bangalore, India. Each group comprised of 8 children. They were divided into 2 age groups- 8 to 11 and 12 to 15. In keeping with Myra Summers recommendation to segregate children by sex, [34] the focus group discussions for boys and girls were carried out separately. The duration of the discussion was not more than one hour each [34]. The discussion was carried out in the presence of a moderator who asked relevant questions and steered the conversation in the direction sought by the researcher. The discussions were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Limited and Unsafe play spaces:

Due to lack of open play spaces such as parks and gardens, children resort to playing on roads and basements as supported

by the findings of the Playday 2007 opinion poll [30]. After parks, the street is the second most common place to play. 15% of children and young people play most often in the street, topped only by parks, at 26%. [21]. This is reflected in India too, where it was found in observation studies that children play in spaces like pavements, pathways, staircases, parking areas etc that are not specifically designed for play [28]

This, however, is not encouraged by parents. Younger children, both boys and girls are often not allowed to play on roads because of safety concerns of parents. However, cycling on the lanes was allowed. A few of their parents allow them to play on roads on Sundays as the traffic is lesser on weekends.

Facilitator- "Don't you people go on the road to play?"

Younger boy 1- "No, Father will scold because.."

younger boy 2- "dogs will be there"

younger boy 1- "and vehicles will be coming, my father will scold. Only on the lanes we can cycle"

younger boy 3- "If we play cricket, if we hit the ball it will go and fall on glass so neighbours will scold us"

Younger boy 1- "On Sundays we play on the road"

Younger boy 2- "Everyone will be taking rest because all go for duty every day, Sunday is a resting day"

26% of adults believe that children commonly face the threat of being followed or abducted by strangers when playing outside where they live [30]. Due to this parents impose curfews to prevent children from playing out, especially in the dark.

Younger girl- "We live in an apartment where strangers keep coming and going, I may get lost in the dark. After 7'o'clock I'm not allowed to play."

### 4.2. Gender based Grouping:

A study by Martin et al., in 1999 [27] indicated that children hold gender typed beliefs about play partner preferences and report strong same-sex play partner preferences, which increase with age. Observation studies by Meera et al. in 1999 [28] also found that girls and boys preferred play in segregated gender groups.

During the focus group discussion, it was found that Older Girls have reservations about playing with boys because of the language and attitude of boys. They feel uncomfortable with boys who use bad words.

Older Girl 1- "Boys have a different Language and talk in a very bad manner"

Older Girl 2- "For everything they think its damn cool to speak in bad words"

Older Girl 3- "We play with them, but we maintain limits"

Younger girls also do not play much with boys, excluding their cousins and brothers..

Facilitator- “Do you play with boys?”

Younger Girl 1- “ No, Sometimes, cousin brothers okay, but not other boys”

Facilitator- “Do you see your older sister, older cousins, other girls playing with boys when they are 15-16?”

Younger Girls (unanimously)- “No”

It was accepted that younger girls would stop playing with boys once they grew older. They felt that parents wouldn't encourage playing with boys once they got older. Previous research supports this finding by clarifying that children believe that others would be more likely to approve of their behavior when they played with same-sex peers than with other-sex peers [27].

### 4.3 Modifications

Modifications in games refer to the changes made to the way a game is played. Observation studies by Meera et al. in 1999 [28] found that the modifications in games occur as a response to restrictions posed by the environment. The findings of the focus group discussion also concur with this finding that children are highly innovative when it comes to working around constraints like lack of space.

Additionally, it has been found that modifications are also made to accommodate a varying number of players and sometimes just to add an element of fun.

**4.3.1 Modifications in response to environmental restrictions.** Cricket is a game that has remained immensely popular in India. The format of traditional cricket may vary between test cricket, twenty 20 and the well accepted Indian premier league. [18]. Cricket played conventionally has two teams of eleven players each where one team bats while the other team bowls and fields. The spacing between wickets is required to be 20.12 m [25] which is not realistic while playing in confined spaces such as basements. In order to play cricket in the basement, children modify it into ‘4 line cricket’.

Here the players play by bowling slowly with a soft ball and hitting only fours and not sixes to avoid hitting the lights in the basement.

*Young boys explaining how cricket is played in the basement-*

*Younger boy 1- “4 lines, like only fours, no sixes”*

*Younger boy 2- “ basement you cant play sixes and all”*

*Younger boy 3- “because bulbs will be hanging”*

*Younger boy 1- “just we ll put (the ball) slowly”*

*Younger boy 1- “with the sponge ball”*

4 line Cricket is a game that is enjoyed by older boys aged 12 to 15 also. They draw 4 lines and the enclosed area is considered to be the pitch. The term they give for runs is ‘touch one run’. If the ball touches the bat, it is counted as one

run. If the ball manages to get past the fielders, it is counted as a four.

*Older boys explaining how cricket is played in the basement-*

*Older boy 1- “like draw four lines, (one) bat (-sman), (one) bowl (-er), then 2 fielders, that's it”*

*Facilitator- “okay, then how do you keep score?”*

*Older boy 2-” touch the ball and (it is counted as) one run, and if the ball passes by your pitching, it's a four”.*

Badminton or shuttle is a game played in an open ground where the shuttlecock is hit by two opposing players over a net. Since there is no ceiling limit, the shuttlecock can soar high above the net. When badminton is played in the basement the chances of the shuttlecock striking the ceiling and falling down are very high.

To avoid this badminton is modified into ‘Low Shuttle’ which involves hitting low shots, presumably so that the shuttlecock doesn't hit the ceiling.

facilitator- “ when you go to the basement, what kind of games are played there?”

older girl 1- “like catch and catch, and sometimes we can play low shuttle”

**4.3.2 Modifications based on number of players.** Cricket is played conventionally with 11 players in each team. However when only a few children turn up to play, cricket is played as ‘1pl match’ where there is one batsman, one bowler and the rest, fielders. The batsman is considered as a one person team. Every player gets a turn to bat. The one who scores the maximum runs wins.

*Younger boys explaining how cricket can be played by 4 children-*

*Younger boy 1- “each boy one team”*

*Younger boy 2- “singles”*

*Facilitator- “one batting person, one bowling person, ( prompted by boys) two fielders, okay and then how do you know who won?”*

*younger boy 3- “who will hit more runs, they win”*

Badminton, a game that is played with 2 players is modified to accommodate 3 players. Three players stand in a line and take turns hitting the shuttlecock to each other.

older girl- “three of them stand in a line, and then we play (gestures to three people hitting the shuttlecock to each other), three, three of us play badminton”

**4.3.3 Modifications to increase fun.** Sometimes modifications are also done to increase the fun element. A conventional game like basket ball is modified into a game called poison with its own set of rules. The player tries to shoot the ball through the hoop. If it goes through the hoop once, the player tries to shoot the ball through the hoop again by standing at the place where the ball fell. If the player is

successful in doing this thrice, he/she calls out 'poison' and all other players gather around him/her. He/ she then tries to hit the other players with the ball. Whoever gets hit with the ball is out of the game.

*Older girl 1-* "you can play many games with basket ball. There is this one game, like, you know, first when you shoot like if it goes inside, then where the ball falls you have to go there and from there you should shoot. And if you do that, If it goes inside (the hoop) thrice, everyone comes around you"

*Older girl 2 murmurs -* "poison, poison"

*Older girl 1:* "ya its called poison, so they run and then when you say poison they have to stop. And then you have to, from where you are standing you have to aim the ball, then if it hits them, they are out."

#### 4.4 Time restrictions on Technology use:

Technology is seen as an addictive vice as well as a way to engage children [10]. Parents are worried about digital use displacing more conventional play methods [3]. Most parents monitor or impose time limits on gadget/ technology use.

*Facilitator-* "What about games that you play on electronic Gadgets? Are you allowed to play all those?"

*Younger girl 1-* " Yeah, but with monitoring.....mom says when I'm at home only you play, without my permission or when I am not in the house, you don't play"

With technology and media exposure coming in from every quarter, parents are worried that the child will be exposed to inappropriate content leading them to take measures such as monitoring screen time or setting up firewalls to prevent access to inappropriate content.

#### 4.5 Persuasion Strategies:

Since parents are the final decision makers, children find convincing their parents to buy a toy to be of utmost importance. Children follow various strategies like negotiation, begging and whining, persistence, citing examples from friends, providing what the child considers to be rational arguments, etc.[6] to persuade their parents to comply with their demands. Pleading seems to be a common way to buy games.

*Facilitator-* "So you will have to convince your parents to buy a game. So how do you convince them?"

*boy 1-* "like please"  
(chorus of please)

Children also tend to distort facts by stating that the product is available at a discounted price for a very limited time. They also mark down the existing price and convince parents, so that parents find out the actual price only at the time of purchase.

*boy 1-* "if, if the tab is 6000, ill tell some is 5550"

*boy 2-* " no,ill say actually 8500, they are selling for 5000, 6000 like that"

Even if parents initially refuse to give in to their child's demands, children remain confident that with enough persuasion, parents will eventually buy them toys. Parents also agree to buy a toy if the child gets a good rank or marks.

#### 4.6 'Boring' board games:

Board games are strategy or luck based games that involve the movement of counters across a board according to some pre-set rules. Board games have now largely been digitized [37]. Digital games played on tablets and smartphones are putting pressure on more traditional forms of play, such as board games and puzzles [40].

In the digital age, it takes more variety to keep children engaged. An increasing number of children feel that board games are boring and monotonous. This was reflected in the focus group discussion where many children said that board games were least preferred.

*Facilitator-* " what are the games that you hate to play?"

*Older girl 1-* "board games"

*Facilitator-* "and why?"

*Older girl 1-* " its very boring, for our age we don't really like it, we feel its kiddish"

*Older girl 2-* " all types of board games, its like sitting at one place and like playing the same game 100 times, like one time it is joyful, two times, okay, three times its heights"

*Older girl 3 -* "board games, I don't like playing board games"

*Facilitator-* "okay, okay, why not?"

*Older girl 3-* " you have to sit at one place and play the same thing again and again"

After playing the game once, children find it boring to play the same game again.

#### 4.7 Girls Playing Video Games:

In the sphere of video game experience, studies show that sex differences continue to exist between men and women, favoring males. Men play video games more often, have more experience, and feel more confident in their game playing ability [35].

This trend seems to be reflected among children too. In the focus group discussion, girls reported being comfortable with basic games like bowling, given that they are not very complex, but games like football that involve a larger number of controls are not of much interest to girls. They lost interest once the games increased in complexity. They felt that the games that their male counterparts played were boring sometimes.

*Older girl 2-* " bowling and all is fun on Xbox, but football and these guys games are not nice, its hard to handle it"

*Older girl 3-* " sometimes it gets boring"

*Older girl 4-* "if we make a mistake they (boys) start shouting"

This could be attributed to the finding that boys are better at target-directed motor skills, while girls excel at precision movements -small and quick [14]

#### 4.8 Distinction between “kiddish” and “non-kiddish” games:

Older Children have a clear demarcation between kiddish and non kiddish games. In the subsequent findings, older boys and girls said that they used to play games like beyblade, pokemon etc when they were younger but find these games very kiddish now that they are older.

*Older Girl- “There are many age groups in our gang and their mentality is like, we have to play a kiddish game”*

*Older boys- “We find it ( pillar-pillar, confusion, etc) too kiddish now. There is a game called purple palace, making your own cake and all is kiddish”*

Older children try to stay away from what they term as ‘kiddish games’ as much as possible. This can be either to project an image of maturity or because they lose interest in games that younger children play.

#### 4.9 Dangerous Nerf Guns

Most of the boys felt that guns in general were dangerous because the bullets could hurt people in the eye.

*Younger boy 1- “by mistake it can come backwards, when you are reloading it only if by mistake you press, it will go hurt somebody.”*

Majority of the boys felt that it was better to avoid using guns. In spite of being told that some guns had very soft bullets, the boys were insistent that it would hurt people in their eyes.

*Younger boy 3- “ but it hits the eyeball and all..... if the lenses stick to the sponge means that’s all, eyes will go”*

## 5. DISCUSSION

These findings indicate that children creatively make use of the resources they have at their disposal and come up with innovative games. The toys which they play with should appeal to this creative instinct of children.

Places such as basements, streets etc where children usually play, are considered to be unsafe [28] by parents. Designing play areas that are safe, inexpensive and offer scope for innovation and fun is a challenge that can be addressed by toy manufacturers as a way to promote their offering among children.

It was found that girls are not comfortable playing with boys because of their outburst of profanities. In order to avoid this and to encourage social interactions between boys and girls, toys which monitor the language of children can be created. Every time a child utters an expletive, they toy can make a loud noise which halts the game and brings attention to the

child who uttered the expletive. Putting the child in a situation of temporary unease might dissuade the child from uttering profanities in the future.

Children play games in spaces like basements or streets where it becomes difficult for them to play without hitting lights, windows, vehicles etc. Toys that are designed to steer clear of obstacles, such as a heavy ball which will not go too high and break windows and lights, would be a sought after option. There is no fixed limit on the number of children who play a particular game. Monopoly could be played by 2 children or by 10 children depending upon the availability of players. Providing extra play pieces, tokens or counters will help in accommodating a varying number of players.

Since parents disapprove of spending too much time on digital gadgets fearing that it would make children into couch potatoes, games that subtly bring children away from technology such as games where children have to physically run from one point to another in order to score points, instead of making a virtual character run would be preferred by parents.

Parents are the final decision makers in choosing toys and games for their children. The results of a study by Brusdal, 2007 [9] indicate that parents are not necessarily negative towards their children’s consumption, and in some fields they are willing to spend more than children expect. It also reports that in many situations parents will stretch beyond the children’s expectations if they see the consumption as useful. Games and activities that appeal to the education oriented approach of parents and teach children new things and help them in acquiring knowledge would be preferred by parents [31].

Toy manufacturers can create board games that give certain tasks like dancing, writing a couplet etc and creatively engage the child instead of moving counters endlessly from start to finish. Designing board games that engage the entire family can also enhance the appeal of board games. Board games that bring the family together and ensure that they spend quality time where children learn the concepts of following rules, respect for other players, competition, fair play etc [19] and simultaneously have fun are very much in demand [23].

Girls find video games to be too complex, so to invoke the interest of girls in video games, the game has to be simple. It was found in that girls wanted to play games in which there were strong, bright, resourceful females rather than ones portrayed as victims or people being rescued [14] and that girls often identify with characters in video games and often mimic the main character. Creating video games with a strong storyline with a lot of emphasis on characters, who are on a quest to learn something new or to solve puzzles, with short episodes and frequent rewards to acknowledge progress will appeal to girls.

A notable finding is the clear distinction between kiddish and non kiddish games. Older children refuse to play what they

consider to be kiddish. Suitable market research has to be done before launching a toy in order to see if it is perceived as kiddish. If it is meant for older children but is still perceived as kiddish, the features that are considered to be kiddish should be isolated and the manufacturers should consider removing or adding new elements to these features.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Though the toy industry is fast growing, India contributes very marginally to the global toy industry. Most of the toys that Indian children play with are imported and are not entirely in accordance with what children want. In this article, we have given insights into the how and what Indian children play. We have gone on to discuss the implications of their habits and preferences for toy manufacturers and marketers and suggested a few lines along which toys can be designed so that they appeal to children as well as parents.

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