

WHY DO GIRLS LIKE DOLLS AND BOYS LIKE CARS?

ASKED BY Charlie, age 9

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen,
psychologist, says:

It's not that all girls like dolls – there are plenty of girls who are completely bored by dolls – and it's not that all boys like cars – there are plenty of boys who are completely bored by cars. But if you leave toys out on the carpet and film how long children play with each of these two types of toys, more girls than boys play with dolls and more boys than girls play with toy cars.

This could be because their parents, or other adults, have encouraged them to play with one type of toy or the other, or because they've watched other children of the same sex playing with one kind of toy or the other. My own view is that this is only part of the answer. It doesn't completely explain it.

One study found that newborn baby boys look longer at mechanical objects, and newborn baby girls look longer at faces, and these differences are

happening before adults or other children have had a chance to influence what babies are interested in. If these differences in interests can be seen at birth it means that a person's *biology*, before birth (such as their hormones or genes), must be part of the explanation.

A clue that hormones are involved comes from studies of babies followed up from pregnancy, when the so-called 'male hormone', testosterone, is measured in the fluid around the baby. (Both male and female babies produce testosterone while in the womb, but males produce much more of it.) How much testosterone a baby produces predicts their patterns of behaviour (e.g. how much they look at faces) after they are born.

So social experience is important, but so is biology.