INTRODUCTION
The societal message of what it means to be a boy or a girl influences children at an early age, shaping their identities as they develop into adults (1). Parents treat their sons and daughters differently based on what they perceive is appropriate for a boy or a girl. For example, parents dress their infants in gender-specific colors, give them gender-typed toys, and expect different behavior and attitudes from boys and girls (2). Although much of the current research on gender development focuses on children after they are aware of their own gender identity, more recent research has shifted to exploring gender socialization at younger ages. For example, gender-typed toy preferences have been observed in infants as young as 8-months-old (3). The current literature posits that infants’ gender-typed toy preferences are the result of a biological predisposition to attend to and prefer certain types of toys and objects (4). This supposition is limiting because it overlooks the possibility that early gender socialization attempts may influence even very early gender-typical preferences.

Goal
The current study was designed to explore early gender socialization attempts by parents and the impact these attempts may have on infants’ toy preferences. Developmentally appropriate assessments measured infants’ initial toy preference (baseline). Afterward parents interacted with their infants during a play session in which parents encourage play with either trucks or dolls. Toy preference was then reassessed.

EXPERIMENT 1
Experiment 1 examined the effects of parents’ early gender socialization attempts on 4-month-olds’ toy preferences.

Participants
Eleven 4-month-old infants, 5 of which were male, were tested. All infants were Caucasian with parents who had at least some college education.

Procedure
Forced choice preferential looking task. To assess 4-month-olds infants toy preferences, a forced choice preferential looking task (FCPL) was utilized. FCPL tasks require trained observers to distinguish which of two stimuli infants gaze at longest. This task is a well-established assessment tool used by infant researchers to measure visual acuity and visual preferences (5,6). Infants sat in front of a puppet-stage like apparatus and saw four truck and doll pairs (see fig. 1 for an example).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION
Percent of trials in which each toy was preferred was analyzed using a 2 (sex) x 2 (free play condition) x 2 (toy) x 2 (pre-post test) mixed ANOVA. Preliminary results indicated no sex differences, so scores were collapsed. Results indicated no baseline sex differences in toy preference. In fact, at baseline, infants showed no preference for either toy. Interestingly, infants preferred the doll at post-test (p < .04) regardless of the toy they were encouraged to play with during the free play sessions.

CONCLUSIONS
No significant sex differences in toy preference were observed for either age. Furthermore, results indicated that parents’ short-term encouragement of play with a particular toy was relatively ineffective at altering infants’ toy preferences. It may be that parents’ influence on toy preferences occurs only for older aged infants or that parents influence occurs over a longer period of time than was tested in this study. These are questions for future studies.

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REFERENCES