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9-17-2015

# Boys and Girls Being Boys and Girls

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**Abstract**

"Are we responsible for the cultural and societal norms about gender that our children identify with, or are such things inevitable?"

Posting about the role of human developmental process in forming gender identity from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/boys-and-girls-being-boys-and-girls/

**Keywords**

In All Things, gender identity, children, stereotype, human biology, self-esteem

**Disciplines**

Christianity | Psychology

**Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

# Boys and Girls Being Boys and Girls

Luralyn Helming

Perhaps no issue causes more consternation for parents than gender. From conception we struggle with whether or not to find out the sex of the baby; once they're born, we receive mixed messages about whether or not to give them things in 'boy' colors or 'girl' colors; we wonder if letting them play with certain toys or do certain things is dooming them to the life of a social misfit. There's just so much anxiety around it all, and parents don't know what they are responsible for or how much any of this matters so their child grows up to be a happy and healthy adult.

To try to get a handle on this, we must clarify what gender is and understand the difference between gender *stereotypes* and gender *identification*.[1] Normally the term *sex* is used to describe the *biological characteristics* of an individual. *Gender* is then used to describe the *socially influenced differences*. This makes gender stereotypes the beliefs we hold about what it means to be considered 'male' or 'female' in a particular society. Gender identity, on the other hand, is our perception of ourselves as either masculine or feminine. A range of factors (appearance, personality characteristics, ability, occupations, etc.) is included in our conceptions of masculinity and femininity or male and female for both gender stereotypes and gender identity.

Gender identity and gender stereotypes are intimately connected: gender identity is in some ways the beliefs about how well or poorly I match my gender stereotypes, and gender stereotypes are influenced by beliefs about myself as an accurate representation of my gender. This interplay develops according to a relatively stable pattern. During some time between the ages of 18 months and three years of age, children label the sexes and begin to define for themselves the behaviors and appearance that makes a person fall into each category.[2] Because they do not yet understand the difference between sex and gender, and because they do not yet understand the permanency of the former, preschoolers view their stereotypes with a great deal of rigidity. They not only make judgments about activities as either male or female, but they also hold strictly to them: behaviors and appearances are either male or female, and they expect everyone to behave in line with those stereotypes.[3]

As children move into middle childhood, they expand their gender stereotypes from behaviors and appearance to less tangible factors like personality traits and ability. They will still mainly pursue activities and identify with characteristics that align with their gender, but they will start to recognize that these stereotypes are more generalities than binding necessities. In doing so, they will not just articulate these stereotypes, but begin to evaluate themselves according to the degree to which they feel they are like others of their gender, their contentedness with their gender, and the pressure they feel to conform to stereotypes. Those who are contented with their gender will increase in self-worth, while those who are discontented decline in self-worth and experience increased loneliness and anxiety.[4]

For a variety of reasons, including the biological changes of puberty as they magnify the gender differences, the effect of those pubertal changes on the perception of the child by others such as their parents, and the beginning of romantic interests and relationships,[5] the transition to adolescence tends to re-intensify gender stereotypes and the value of traditional gender roles. This is strongest in the group that was previously most willing to identify with opposite gender characteristics: early-adolescent girls.[6] While middle-childhood girls are generally more willing to identify with opposite gender characteristics or pursue

opposite-gender interests, during adolescence girls start to ally more closely with what is expected of girls in their culture (although in general girls are still less constrained than boys to engage in stereotypical behavior).

As adolescence progresses, children eventually become less concerned with the perception of others and more concerned with the development of their own identity. This leads to a decrease in gender stereotypes again: for example, during late adolescence, perceptions of other people come to be more strongly related to individual characteristics than to whether or not someone abides by gender stereotypes.

The consistent ebb and flow of the relationship between cultural stereotypes and personal identity can cause us to wonder whether gendered actions are the result of nurture or nature: *Are we responsible for the cultural and societal norms about gender that our children identify with, or are such things inevitable?* Unfortunately, for the ease of parenting, marketing, and policy decisions, the answer is *yes*. Nature and nurture *both* play a role. In fact, their roles are probably so intimately intertwined that we cannot possibly untangle the threads.

For example, research suggests that hormones may provoke the types of play children engage in: male hormones provoke more rambunctious play and female hormones provoke more calm and quiet play. This difference in playing style leads most children to prefer to play with those of the same gender: girls are more likely to play with girls because they prefer calmer and quiet play, whereas boys likely prefer to play with other boys, who prefer more rambunctious and active play. This seems to argue that gender stereotypes are the result of *nature*. However, the more often children play with their same-sex peers, the more they reinforce the gender-typed play with each other; this is then an effect of *nurture*.[7]

The 'nurture' vocabulary can sometimes make us think that gender stereotypes are taught or communicated on purpose, but such things are often communicated unconsciously. For example, parents often engage in differential treatment of children by gender without realizing it: they allow boys to be louder or rougher than girls, or they are more encouraging of children playing with gender appropriate toys. At older ages, parents are more likely to explain boys' successes and failures in school as effort-related and girls' successes and failures in school as ability-related.[8] These parental behaviors are subtle cues to their children of appropriate behavior that are more often than not linked to their sex.

Such subtle cues can have an impact far beyond what could at first be anticipated. Feminine traits such as kindness and compassion, for example, can increase pro-social behavior in all children; evaluation of academics as based on efforts rather than ability will increase the future efforts of any child, thus increasing their likelihood of success in school; and traditionally 'male' toys, such as Legos and models, are believed to be a contributor to males' higher spatial aptitudes later in life because of the experiences they provide.[9]

Examples such as these suggest that providing children with truly well-rounded life experiences regardless of gender stereotypes may prove beneficial to them later in life. But, doing so will require effort on the part of parents to violate gender stereotypes and talk with their children about interests and preferences as guiding rules for decisions rather than following gender stereotypes. However, violating gender stereotypes while they are young may expose children to social censure for the violations and may lead to low self-esteem, especially during early-adolescence. What is a parent to do?

I can't answer that for you. But being more aware of the developmental process helps us realize just how complex the issues involved with the intersection of sex, gender, stereotyping, and identification really are. There are no easy answers or magic bullets that will solve all the problems or untangle this web. All you can do is arm yourself with as much knowledge as you can and do your best to negotiate these minefields in your own life and in the lives of the children you know.

## Footnotes

1. Much of the following is based on Berk, L. E. (2006). Development of sex differences and gender roles. In *Child development* (7th ed., pp.519-555). San Francisco, CA: Pearson. ↵

2. Stipek, D. J., Gralinski, J. H. & Kopp, C. B. (1990). Self-concept development in the toddler years. *Developmental Psychology*, 26, 972-977. ↵

3. While behaviors that align with stereotypes increase as children begin to identify the stereotypes, there are some gender-typed preferences, such a boys' preferences for vehicles and girls' preferences for dolls, that exist before children can identify different sexes. At least some 'gendered' behaviors, then, seem to exist prior to their being understood. ↵

4. Yunger, J. L., Carver, P. R., & Perry, D. G. (2004). Does gender identity influence children's psychological well-being? *Developmental Psychology*, 40, 572-582. ↵

5. Maccoby, E. E. (1998). The two sexes: *Growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press. ↵

6. Huston, A. C. & Alvarez, M. M. (1990). The socialization context of gender role development in early adolescence. In R. Montemayor, G.R. Adams, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *From childhood to adolescence: A transitional period?* (pp. 156-179). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. ↵

7. Maccoby, E. E. (1998). The two sexes: *Growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press. ↵

8. Cole, D. A., Martin, J. M., Peeke, L. A., Seroczvnski, A. D., & Fier, J. (1999). Children's over- and underestimation of academic competence: A longitudinal study of gender differences, depression, and anxiety. *Child Development*, 70, 459-473. Ruble, D. N. & Martin, C. L. (1998). Gender development. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 933-1016). New York: Wiley. ↵

9. Baenninger, M. & Newcombe, N. (1995). Environmental input to the development of sex-related differences in spatial and mathematical ability. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 7, 363-379; Subrahmanyam, K. & Greenfield, P. M. (1996). Effect of video game practice on spatial skills in girls and boys. In P. M. Greenfield & R. R. Cocking (Eds.), *Interacting with video* (pp. 95-114). Norwood, NJ: Ablex. ↵