

GENDER: EARLY SOCIALIZATION

Peer socialization of gender in young boys and girls

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Introduction

By the time children are about 3 years old, they have already begun to form their gender identity.¹ In other words, they are aware of the fact that they are boys or girls and that there are certain behaviours, activities, toys and interests that are played with more often by boys and girls. Gender differences in children's behaviours and interactional patterns also begin to become apparent by this age. For instance, boys are more active, physical and play in larger spaces than girls. In contrast, girls are more compliant, prosocial and play closer to adults than boys.² One important way in which children learn about gender roles and develop gender-typed behaviour and attitudes is through their interactions with peers.³

Problems

As children spend time with other children, they become more alike. Over time, children who are friends tend to become much more similar to each other than chance alone would predict. This is true in regard to gender development – children's gendered behaviour becomes more similar to those they spend time with.⁴ Two processes have been used to explain this similarity. First, children prefer to play with peers who are similar to them. Thus, girls may select other girls because they share similar interests and activities. Second, children may become similar to their friends due to influence, or the tendency of behaviours and interests to spread through social ties over time. Distinguishing between selection and influence effects requires identifying exactly whom children play with and how their peer interactions affect their behaviour and development. This is not easy because one needs detailed longitudinal data on social relationships and individual characteristics – something that is quite demanding, expensive and difficult to obtain.

Key Research Questions

There are several important research questions in this area. These include:

- How do children socialize behaviours in girls and boys? What do children do that encourages or discourages gendered behaviour?
- What makes children susceptible to peer socialization of gender?
- What are the benefits and costs of peer socialization of gender?

Research Results

From an early age, children are interested in and responsive to their peers, and they form meaningful relationships with them.⁵ As children spend more time interacting with their peers, they have opportunities to socialize one another by encouraging or discouraging particular behaviours, by modeling or by creating norms that guide children's behaviours. Gender is salient to young children's own identities and perceptions of others and they socialize each other's gendered behaviours. This might happen directly. For example, one child might tell another child that a particular activity is appropriate for one gender or the other (e.g., "Dolls are for girls" or "No boys allowed in our fort"). Or, it can happen indirectly. For example, the more time children spend time with peers the more similar they become to one another in interests, behaviours, and interactional styles.⁴

To illustrate this, researchers studying U.S. children have found that the more time boys spend playing with other boys, the more boy-like they become. In other words, boys who play frequently with other boys become more active, more dominant, and more aggressive. Similarly, girls who frequently play with other girls engage in behaviours that are more typical of girls.⁶ And, this happens in a fairly short period of time – over the course of just a few months. For example, in the fall of the school year, researchers observed few and small differences in the play behaviours of boys and girls (mean age = 53 months). But by the end of the school year a few months later, boys and girls were noticeably more different and more gender-typed in their play activity and behaviour. This was related to the amount of time they spent playing with same-sex peers; the more they did so in the fall, the more gender-typed they were in the spring.⁶

Boys and girls spend large amounts of time playing with same-sex peers and relatively small amount of time playing with peers of the other sex.^{6,7} This pattern is known as gender segregation.⁸ Gender segregation begins by age 2.5 to 3 years and increases in strength and intensity through the elementary school years.⁹ As a result, children are most likely to be socialized by peers of the same gender. This also means that boys and girls have different experiences and learn skills, competencies, and interests in their interactions with same-sex peers. Boys learn how to get along and play effectively with other boys. In contrast, girls learn how to influence and play more cooperatively with other girls.¹⁰ Over time, these same-gender peer preferences become stronger, strengthening gender segregation and the promotion of gender-typed behaviours and interests. This gender segregation cycle makes it less likely that boys and girls interact and learn from each other, and promotes gender stereotypic beliefs, attitudes, and biases about and towards the other sex.¹¹

Research Gaps

We still know little about exactly how peers socialize young girls' and boys' behaviours. However, much more is known about socialization among same-gender peers than about how other-gender peers socialize children. To understand how peers socialize young girls' and boys' behaviours, independent observers can be trained to determine when children are interacting with one another, who they are interacting with, and what they are

doing together.¹² For instance, observers might note the settings or circumstances that facilitate interactions with peers, whether children play with girls or boys or both, and which girls and boys are involved. They might also note whether the children are engaged in gender-typical activities (e.g., activities that are more frequent for their gender, e.g., for girls, playing with dolls; for boys, playing with trucks) or behaviours (e.g., physically active or calm behaviours), whether peers encourage or discourage children's behaviours, and how children respond to their peers' reactions (e.g., increase or decrease the behaviour, argue, etc.). Longitudinal studies, in which children are observed and followed up over time, are needed to better understand same- and other-gender peer socialization.

Conclusions

Whenever children gather together, there are opportunities for them to socialize one another along gender lines. The research and findings related to peer socialization of young children's gender development suggest that boys and girls grow up in separate social worlds, rarely getting the chance to learn about and learn from each other.^{2,4,8} In addition, there is some speculation that this separation and lack of understanding carries forward into later male-female relationships in adolescence and adulthood.² Basically, children develop skills for interacting with members of their own gender, but the opportunities to develop skills for interacting comfortably and effectively with the other gender are more limited. Gender segregation, whether child- or adult-motivated, may become problematic because children grow up in a gender-integrated society. Families, schools, neighborhood settings, and worksites include members of both genders. To be successful across the range of settings that they will find themselves in, children must be able to interact and relate effectively with both males and females.

Implications for Parents, Service Providers, and Policy Makers

Parents, service providers, and policy makers are advised to help young children structure and organize their peer interactions to maximize the benefits of peer socialization. This is particularly important for interactions with other-gender peers because children need support in understanding gender differences and in gaining comfort with other-gender peers. One way that this can be done is to provide opportunities for children to play positively with both boys and girls in mixed-gender groups. Mixed-gender groups can provide a safe place for learning about similarities and differences across genders and for the development of skills that allow children to interact effectively with both boys and girls.

It also is important to recognize that peer influences associated with gender segregation contribute to gender differences in children's behaviours and attitudes. Separating boys and girls exaggerates these differences, but some people misunderstand this fact. For example, some authors propose that boys and girls are so different from each other that they must be taught in separate classrooms – one for boys and another for girls.^{13,14} Unfortunately, these individuals do not understand that it is peer socialization within gender-segregated groups that contribute to differences between boys and girls in the first place and that separating them in classrooms will only strengthen and reinforce gender-typed behaviours and differences.^{11,15,16} Moreover, gender-segregated classrooms per se do not result in improvements in learning and achievement.¹⁷ Efforts should be directed towards finding ways to bring boys and girls together so that they have positive experiences with each other and develop an enhanced understanding, appreciation and respect of one another.¹⁸

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