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Parents' Socialization of Gender in Children

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Introduction

When parents have a new baby, the first question they typically ask is whether they have a girl or a boy. Children's gender assignment becomes a powerful social identity that shapes children's lives. During early childhood, girls and boys spend much of their time in the home with their families and look to parents and older siblings for guidance. Parents provide children with their first lessons about gender. Possible ways that parents might influence children's gender development include role modeling and encouraging different behaviours and activities in sons and daughters.[1]

Problems

One of the challenges for researchers studying parental socialization is to separate the influences of parents on children and the influences of children on parents.[2] Fifty years ago, when researchers observed correlations between parenting practices and children's behaviour the typical inference was that the parents were influencing the children. However, developmental psychologists now recognize that children also influence their parents' behaviour. Thus, drawing conclusions about causal influences of parental socialization on children's gender

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development must be made carefully.

Key Research Questions

When evaluating the influence of parents on children's gender development, four questions are pertinent:

- Do parents tend to have gender-stereotypical expectations for their children?
- Do parents tend to model traditional gender-role behaviours to their children?
- Do parents tend to encourage gender-stereotyped behaviours and to discourage cross-gender-stereotyped behaviours in their children?
- Do gender-related variations in parents' expectations and behaviour have causal influences on children's gender development?

Research Results

Parents' gender-stereotypical expectations.

Gender-typed expectations may occur regarding personality traits (e.g., "boys are aggressive"), abilities (e.g., "girls are good at reading"), activities, and roles (e.g., "men are scientists").[3] As gender equality has increased in many many cultures during the last several decades, there has been a corresponding increase in adults' endorsement of gender-egalitarian attitudes. There is now more variation among parents with some holding traditional expectations and some expressing egalitarian expectations for their daughters and sons.[4,5] Also, some parents may support egalitarian views about some domains (e.g., occupations) but remain more traditional about other domains (e.g., family roles). Finally, parents (especially fathers) tend to be more rigid in their expectations for sons than daughters.[6]

Parents' gender-role modeling.

One of the dramatic social changes in much of the industrialized world in the last 50 years has been in the entrance of women into the labor force. In contemporary industrialized societies, most women with children work outside of the home. Men's average involvement in childcare and housework has also increased, although domestic responsibilities continue to be handled mostly by women in most dual-career families.[6] Research finds that fathers' childcare involvement is negatively related to children's gender stereotyping. Through active involvement

in childcare, fathers demonstrate that the adult male role may include nurturing as well as instrumental activities.[7]

The potential influence of parental gender-role modeling has also been implicated in studies of children raised by lesbian or gay parents.[8] Compared to children raised in two-parent heterosexual families, children raised by same-gender parents tend be less likely than to endorse certain gender stereotypes. However, when same-gender parents divided labor with one parent as primary caregiver and the other parent as the primary breadwinner, their children were more likely to express stereotyped views about adult roles and occupations.[8]

Parents' differential treatment of daughters and sons.

In many parts of the world, parents with limited financial resources have a strong preference for sons. As a result, priority for resource opportunities ranging from health care to education may be given to sons over daughters.[9] This stark contrast in the differential treatment of sons and daughters is generally not seen in wealthier countries. Nonetheless, there are common ways that parents in these societies may socialize girls and boys differently.

According to one comprehensive review of studies conducted in western countries, the most consistent manner by which parents treat girls and boys differently is through the encouragement of gender-stereotyped activities.[10] This includes the types of toys that parents might purchase or the kinds of activities that they promote. For example, parents are more likely to provide toy vehicles, action figures, and sports equipment for their sons; and they are more likely to give dolls, kitchen sets, and dress-up toys to their daughters. Once children begin to request particular toys (usually by around 3 years of age), it is unclear how much parents are shaping their children's play activity preferences as opposed to acceding to their children's stated preferences.[11]

There are also subtle ways that parents may reinforce gender stereotypes even when they are not overtly encouraging them. This is commonly seen in parents' use of essentialist statements about gender. Examples would be "Girls like dolls" or "Boys like football." In these instances, the parent is expressing what is known as a descriptive stereotype (i.e., describing general patterns or "essences" about each gender) rather than prescriptive stereotype (i.e., stating what should occur). Research suggests that even middle-class mothers who held gender-egalitarian attitudes often used essentialist statements with their preschool-age children. Also, they rarely challenged gender stereotypes (e.g., "It's ok if a girl wants to play basketball").[12,13]

On average, parents in many industrialized cultures are more flexible about the play activities they consider acceptable for daughters than sons.[6,10] (Relatively little research has examined parental attitudes toward girls' and boys' play in non-western or non-industrialized countries.) Also, fathers tend to be more rigid than mothers in encouraging gender-typed play (especially in sons).[6,10] For example, many American parents encourage athletic participation (a masculine-stereotyped activity) in their daughters. In contrast, few parents encourage doll play (a feminine-stereotyped activity) in their sons. Indeed, many parents are alarmed in such cases. However, evidence suggests that some parents are more tolerant of cross-gender-typed behaviours in sons than seen in earlier decades.[4,14]

Research Gaps

More research is needed that addresses the extent and the manner by which parents influence their children's gender development. Previous research has been largely based on correlational designs that do not prove causation. Some associations in behaviour between parents and their biological children may be due to shared genetic influences (e.g., activity level is partly inherited).[2] Well-conducted longitudinal research is best able to address possible casual influences. The relative importance of parents compared to other socializing agents (peer groups, media, teachers, etc.) needs to be examined in more depth. In addition, more research needs to consider indirect forms of parental influence. For example, by encouraging children's involvement in organized activities (e.g., sports teams, science camps), parents can affect their children's experience outside of the family.[15] Finally, we need a better understanding of how cultural contexts shape gender roles in the family and the socialization of girls and boys.[16]

Conclusions

Dramatic transformations in women's and men's roles inside and outside of the family have occurred during the last half century in most of the industrialized world. The traditional image of the two-parent heterosexual family with the father serving as the provider and the mother as the homemaker is no longer the norm in many industrialized countries. Instead, most mothers pursue jobs outside of the home and many fathers are involved in childcare. In addition, many children are raised by single parents and by lesbian/gay parents. Despite these role changes, there remain relatively few truly egalitarian parenting arrangements. Also, studies suggest that parents with gender-egalitarian attitudes may nonetheless act differently with daughters and sons.[12] Longitudinal studies suggest that parents' treatment of sons and daughters may have an influence on some aspects of their gender development.[3,6]

Implications for Parents, Service Providers, and Policy Makers

Parents, service providers, and policy makers may wish to foster more flexible gender roles in children to help them develop a broader repertoire of socioemotional and cognitive skills. Although parents can have an influence on children's gender development, their impact can sometimes be overestimated. Because gender is a social category that organizes virtually every segment of society, there are multiple sources of socialization in children's gender development. Besides parents, these potentially include other family members, peer groups, friends, the media, and teachers.[11] As children get older and become more autonomous, the influences of peers and the media often become especially powerful.

Parents can try to encourage their children to play with a combination of feminine- and masculine-stereotyped toys and play activities during early childhood; however, they may find their efforts run counter to children's attitudes once they are exposed to peers and the media. In addition, parents can be mindful of the kinds of peers with whom their children affiliate. They may be able to foster greater gender-role flexibility through encouragement of organized mixed-gender activities in which girls and boys learn to work together as equals. Finally, parents can make a concerted effort to discuss and challenge gender stereotypes with their children.

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