

**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 are aware of the fact that they are boys or girls and that there are certain behaviours, activities, toys and interests that are more common for members of their own gender. Gender differences in children's behaviours and interaction 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 prosocial and play closer to adults than boys. One important way in which children learn about gender roles and develop gender-typed behaviour and attitudes is through their interactions with peers.

## **Problems**

Like adults, children prefer to spend time with other children who are similar to themselves and segregate themselves from peers who are different. Over time, children who spend time together tend to become much more similar to each other. This is true in regard to gender development –

children's gendered behaviour becomes more pronounced the more that they spend time with same-gender peers. This propensity of boys and girls to prefer and spend time with same-gender peers is one of the most consistent and robust characteristics of children's social development.<sup>4</sup> Initially, girls and boys may select same-gender playmates because of socialization pressures, gender stereotypes, or because of similarities in interests and activities. As children spend more time with same-gender peers, they become even more similar to them due to influence, or the tendency of behaviours and interests to spread through social ties over time and can lead to even more segregation.<sup>2</sup>

# **Key Research Questions**

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

- How do peers socialize behaviours in girls and boys?
- What do peers do that encourages or discourages gendered behaviour?
- What are the consequences 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. As children spend more time interacting with their peers, they have opportunities to socialize one another by encouraging or discouraging particular behaviours, by modeling, and by creating norms that guide children's behaviours. Gender is salient to young children's own identities and perceptions of others, and they frequently use gender to socialize each other's behaviours. 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 by developing a concept as to what kinds of behaviours and interests make one feel part of a gendered peer group.

Researchers in the U.S. have found that the more time boys spend playing with other boys, the more gender-typed 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. These researchers also found a "dosage effect" – the more time children spent with same-gender peers, the more gender-typed their behaviour became.

Boys and girls spend large amounts of time playing with same-gender peers and relatively small amount of time playing with peers of the other gender. <sup>6,7</sup> 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 different skills, competencies, and interests in their interactions with same-gender peers. Boys learn how to get along and play effectively with other boys whereas girls learn how to influence and play more cooperatively with other girls. Over time, these same-gender peer preferences become stronger, strengthening gender segregation and the promotion of gender-typed behaviours and interests. This tendency has been referred to as peer group segregation and makes it less likely that boys and girls interact and learn from one another. 11 Peer group segregation based on gender also promotes gendered stereotypic beliefs, attitudes, and biases about and towards the other gender. In contrast, when children broaden their peer group interactions and spend time with other-gender peers, gender-based biases and negative perceptions are diminished and the range of social skills and competencies are enhanced.11

# **Research Gaps**

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. 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 children are engaged in gender-typical activities (e.g., girls playing with dolls) or behaviours (e.g., boys being physically active), whether peers encourage or discourage children's gendered behaviours, and how children respond to their peers' reactions (e.g., increase or decrease the behaviour, argue, etc.). Additionally, technological advances offer new ways for researchers to study young children's gender-based peer relationships. Developments in data collection devices, such as wearable cameras and sensors, provide researchers with innovative ways to monitor who children are playing with and what they are doing. Longitudinal studies, in which children are followed 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 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. In addition, there is some speculation that this segregation and lack of understanding carries forward into later male-female relationships in adolescence and adulthood. In early childhood, 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-based peer group segregation may become problematic because children grow up in a gender-integrated society. 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, educators, 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. Adults can also make efforts to decrease the salience of gender (avoidance of blue and pink coloring) which has been shown to reduce gender segregation and increase gender integration.<sup>15</sup>

It also is important to recognize that gender segregation contributes to gender differences in children's behaviours and attitudes. When boys and girls spend most of their time with samegender peers, it tends to exaggerate these differences.<sup>6</sup> Efforts to redirect children towards gender-integrated peer play have been successful and doing so has been found to increase more cooperative and positive interactions between boys and girls, which improves classroom climate. <sup>16</sup> Such gender-integrated interactions and relationships help children expend their social competencies, empathy, social problem-solving, and capacity to work effectively across differences, providing benefits that extend beyond the classroom.<sup>11</sup> As such, 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.

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