

# PARENTS

Eyes on



Centre of Excellence  
for Early Childhood  
Development

STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE  
CLUSTER ON EARLY  
*child development*



**“Gender is one  
of the first social  
categories children  
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## What do we know?

- Gender is one of the first social categories children become aware of.
- Even very young children can distinguish males from females.
- Around the age of 3, most children know their own gender identity and label themselves as either a boy or a girl.
- Young children learn about many gender roles through their parents.
- Some parents expect different attitudes, behaviours and interests from boys and girls. Either directly or indirectly, they teach children what is appropriate for boys and girls through their comments, behaviours and selection of toys and activities.
- Children also shape their own gender development.
  - At age 3, they prefer toys stereotypic of their gender.
  - Once they label themselves as boys or girls, children begin to search for clues about the activities, behaviours and appearance of others of their gender.
  - Often young children act or dress in a highly gender-stereotypical way (e.g., a girl pretending to be a princess) but they may also explore other roles.
- Biological factors also influence gender development. For example, girls who are prenatally exposed to high levels of male hormones (androgens) typically show interest in ‘male-typed’ activities.
- Many children prefer to play with peers of the same gender. This preference increases when they start school.
- Children who have opportunities to play in mixed-gender groups develop skills to interact effectively with both boys and girls.

## Paying attention to...

## What can be done?

... the activities and toys you provide to your child.

- Expose your child to a combination of feminine- and masculine-stereotyped toys and activities (e.g., dolls, cars, dress-up and sports) to increase their range of skills.
- Create playful environments that appeal to both boys and girls instead of play centres designed for one specific gender (e.g., dress-up versus construction centres).

... your own and your child's gender expectations/biases.

- Avoid making gender-stereotyped comments (e.g., "girls should mind their manners" or "boys shouldn't cry").
- Challenge your child's biases and gender stereotypes (e.g., "some boys like to play house," "girls can be good at hockey too.").
- Expose your child to counter-stereotypic models, such as:
  - Stay-at-home fathers
  - Male nurses
  - Policewomen
  - Female truck drivers

... whom your child likes to play with most of the time.

- Structure and organize mixed-gender group activities (e.g., birthday parties, play dates) to ensure your child has opportunities to interact with and learn from boys and girls.



# Information

This information sheet is a publication of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development (SKC-ECD). These organizations identify and summarize the best scientific work on early childhood development. They disseminate this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of gender: early socialization, consult our synthesis and experts' articles on this topic in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at [www.child-encyclopedia.com](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com).

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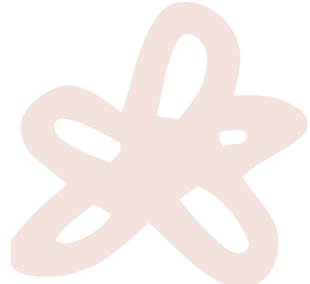
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In this document, the masculine form is used merely to simplify the text. No discrimination is intended.



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