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ABSTRACT

To examine parental sex stereotyping of young children, a study was undertaken in spring 1993 of 59 parents and caregivers and their infant and toddler children at child care centers and schools in Arkansas. Interviews and observations were conducted of the parents/caregivers, focusing on the types of toys bought for children, the toys that the family encouraged children to play with, views on allowing children to play with toys traditionally associated with the opposite sex, feelings about names used for both boys and girls (i.e., Jamie, Kelly, etc.), the importance of showing males and females in traditional and/or non-traditional roles, and willingness to fill non-traditional roles at home, although the spouse might perform them better, to provide a model for children. Study findings included the following: (1) 68% of the parents bought toys considered traditional for the child's gender, while 2% bought gender-neutral toys; (2) 75% of the parents' families encouraged children to play with traditional toys, 2% with toys considered non-traditional, and 20% with educational toys; (3) 76% of the parents thought that children should be allowed to play with non-traditional toys; (4) names used for both sexes were disliked by 41% of the parents, citing the possibility of teasing by other children; (5) 37% thought it was important for children to see males and females in traditional roles, 25% in non-traditional, and 32% in both; and (6) 39% were willing to perform a non-traditional task they might not normally perform to provide a model for their children. (BCY)

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A STUDY OF STEREOTYPING
OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

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A STUDY OF STEREOTYPING OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Three year old William accompanied his mother to the doctor's office. A man in a white coat walked by and William said, "Hi, Doc!" Then a woman in a white coat walked by and William greeted her, "Hi, Nurse." William's mother asked him how he knew which individual was a nurse and William replied, "Because doctors are daddies and nurses are mommies." As Piaget warned, young children are so sure of their thoughts, yet so often inaccurately understand the world. William's "nurse" turned out to be his doctor, and vice versa (Carper, 1978).

A stereotype is an idea that people in a given society tend to hold about males and females. In our American culture, it represents an oversimplified opinion that men are to be strong, brave, aggressive, and unemotional, and that females are weak, dependent, affectionate, and somewhat incompetent.

Children as young as two-years old have shown sex-typed behaviors in their play and activities that are explicitly labeled as appropriate for their sex. Children who play in sex-appropriate activities tend to be rewarded for doing so by their peers. Those who play in cross-sexed activities tend to be criticized by their peers or left to play alone. Children show a clear preference for being with and liking the same sexed peers (Maccoby and Jacklin, in press), and this tendency often becomes stronger as children move from the preschool years through the middle elementary school years.

It seems that sex-typing begins even before children are aware of their own gender of male or female. In our culture, adults discriminate between the sexes shortly after the infant's birth. The "pink and blue" treatment may be applied to girls and boys before they leave the hospital. Many parents encourage boys and girls to engage in different types of play and activities even during infancy (Lewis, 1987). Girls are more likely to be given dolls to play with, and parents are more likely to engage in rough-and-tumble play with boy infants than with girl infants. Although parents may provide the earliest discrimination of stereotyping in children's development, peers and teachers shortly join the societal process of responding to and providing feedback about masculine and feminine behavior.

The purpose of this paper is to report an investigation of stereotyping children. Are boys and girls born with gender differences in respect to gender roles? At birth are children programmed to believe that boys are to be more active and aggressive than little girls? Are little girls by nature more gentle? Or is this just a tale that describes adults' expectations?

The basic question to be addressed is that of whether the behavioral differences between the sexes are biologically determined or whether they are learned. Psychologists agree that biological factors contribute to

stereotyping in behavior, but they feel that environmental factors account for most of the sex differences that are reported. Some theorists suggest that gender perceptions grow and develop in interaction with environmental factors and societal models.

Support for the view that biological factors are at play in sex differences in behavior is hard to come by because it is difficult to specify a behavior that is strictly biologically determined. However, there are studies which have shown that male infants at birth are more physically active than females (Phillips, 1978).

A humanistic approach to raising children looks at children as people with a variety of personality, intellectual, physical and emotional traits stretched along a human continuum. Some of these traits may be traditionally thought of as male, others as female. If children are to realize their fullest human potential, they will need a full complement of traits from both ends of this continuum.

Nonsexist parents and educators do not say to a two-year old boy with a scraped knee, "Big boys don't cry," because they know that a scraped knee hurts terribly whether you are a girl or a boy. They do not tell a toddler at her first birthday party, "Little ladies don't make noises" because making noise is one of the delights of childhood, regardless of sex.

Parents who rear their children in a nonsexist environment choose toys, clothes and room decorations that are functional, age appropriate and fun, not sex-typed and rigidly different for girls and boys. They do not dress their girls in pink and then tell them not to get dirty, thereby inhibiting their urge to explore or be physically active. They give blocks to girls as well as boys because blocks teach spatial analytic skills and math concepts better than any other toy. Nonsexist parents will provide paper, scissors and crayons to boys as well as girls because these are the toys that develop small motor skills.

According to Piaget, the stage of a child's cognitive development has a major influence on how the child perceives the environment and organizes its experience. The environmental factors of a child's gender identity is formed during the first three years of life. Since the environment plays an important role in cognitive development and in the gender construction process, the role of professionals working with young children is critical. To influence a change in children's gender schema, professionals will need to examine their own beliefs, values, and teaching practices regarding gender and be willing to make appropriate changes.

METHOD

This research was conducted as part of a human development class project at Arkansas Tech University in the 1993 Spring Semester. Children were selected from local child care centers and area schools. From the pool, 59 parents were randomly chosen to analyze.

The researchers interviewed and observed the caregivers of infants and toddlers, using the following questions.

1. What kinds of toys do you buy for your child?
2. What kinds of toys does your family or your spouse's family encourage your child to play with?
3. Should girls and boys be allowed to play with toys that are traditionally viewed as made for the other sex?
4. How do you feel about names which are either sex names?
5. How important is it for children to see males and females in traditional roles? Nontraditional roles?
6. Would you do a particular job around the house (that is considered a job your spouse should do because of sex) that you dislike and that your spouse is better at just so your child could observe you doing something nontraditional to your sex?

RESULTS

The analysis of the data seemed to indicate that the questions centered on the norm of the traditional family.

1. What type of toys do you buy for your child?

68% - Traditional toys for child's sex

02% - Gender neutral toys

2. What kind of toys does your family or your spouse's family encourage your child to play with?

75% - Traditional

02% - Non-traditional

20% - Educational

Several made the comment that they like to believe that they judged their decisions on what they thought the child wanted.

3. Should children be allowed to play with toys traditionally viewed as made for the opposite sex?

76% - Yes

10% - Non-traditional toys were also important and toys should be fun, not an indicator of gender.

08% - Child should be allowed to choose.

4. How do you feel about names which are either sex? (Examples: Jamie, Syndey, Kelly)

59% - Liked names for either sex. Names are chose based on family ties or simply just liked the name.

41% - Disliked because child could be teased as other gender as child gets older.

5. How important is it for children to see males and females in traditional roles? Non-traditional?

37% - Traditional

25% - Non-traditional

32% - Both. These parents bases their thoughts on the fact that the majority of homes have both parents working outside the home. They want their child to learn to share in the responsibility of the home.

05% - Does not matter either way at this time because of the age of the child.

6. Would you do a particular job around the house that is considered a job your spouse should do because of sex that you dislike and that your spouse is better at just so your child could observe you doing something non-traditional to your sex?

39% - Yes, to prepare for endless possibilities of adulthood.

66% - No, unless it is out of necessity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Parents, teachers, and peers often unknowingly, cause traditional sex differences among children through toy purchases, verbal interactions, and parental responsibility around the home. Affective development is related to the experiences one encounters in his or her environment.

While it helps to understand how your toddler's gender affects his and your behavior, we need to learn not to limit the child based on this knowledge. One parent noted that she buys her child any toy that she wants and does not consider if the toy is for a boy or a girl. Yet, the ATU student who observed this family says the child has many dolls and current favorite toy is a vacuum cleaner.

It is obvious from the result of this survey that parents and caregivers want their children to fit into traditional roles, but at the same time, they want the children to feel comfortable expanding that role without losing the identity of their sex. In our environment, traditional roles in today's households are becoming a past concept. In many families, both parents work outside the home and therefore, the workload at home must be shared. As parents and teachers, we need to teach our children that it takes everyone to cooperate and do their share.

Children do seem to filter our information that runs counter to their expectations or to their stereotypes. To change these preconceptions, children will have to be taught that specific interests are not part of "being a boy" or "being a girl." Being a girl does not mean that one has to be passive and not be able to run very fast. Children need to learn, need to be taught, that specific activities and specific roles are not exclusively assigned to one sex or the other.

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