12.3: Gender as a Social Justice Issue

The social impacts of imposing gender roles on children become evident very early in life and usually follow the child as they continue their development. It is most observable when they interact with other members of their age group. A child's peers serve as both an archetype and a sounding board for the proper way to express themselves.

Children are especially apt at noticing when one of their peers violates their established gender role. As Fagot (1990) found, children had a pronounced response when one of their peers violated their established gender role. Same-sex peers acted as the distributors of both rewards for proper gender role behavior and punishments for improper gender role behavior. Boys who preferred to play with dolls rather than trucks were five to six times more likely to be harassed by their peers than those who conformed to the norm. Girls who preferred to play firefighter rather than nurse were ignored rather than criticized. Most importantly, Fagot's study shows the effect of gender segregation on children; boys tended to respond more readily to feedback from other boys while girls likewise responded to feedback from other girls. By surrounding themselves with members of the same sex, children are placing themselves in a situation where they more readily accept and conform to accepted gender roles. A study by Bandura and Bussey shows that kids want to be like others of their sex. They begin labeling objects as "for girls" or "for boys" and conform to what is expected of them. [153]

The attitudes and expectations surrounding gender roles are not typically based on any inherent or natural gender differences, but on gender stereotypes, or oversimplified notions about the attitudes, traits, and behavior patterns of males and females. Gender stereotypes form the basis of sexism, or the prejudiced beliefs that value males over females. [154] This is problematic for all children, but especially those that do not conform to gender roles and/or who are gender diverse.

Let's look a bit more at gender roles and learn how programs can promote equity based on gender and acceptance of all children's gender identity.
What Can Programs Do

Children need a safe and nurturing environment to explore gender and gender expression. It’s important for all children to feel good about who they are and what they can do.

Sometimes we unintentionally expect and encourage particular behaviors and traits based on a child’s gender. For example, adults tend to comment on a girl’s appearance, saying things like “Aren’t you adorable?” or “What a pretty dress!”

On the other hand, comments about boys tend to center on their performance with a focus on abilities, such as “You’re such a good climber!” or “You’re so smart.” As an adult supporting healthy development, you can develop a habit of commenting on who they are as individuals.

You can foster self-esteem in children of any gender by giving all children positive feedback about their unique skills and qualities. For example, you might say to a child, “I noticed how kind you were to your friend when she fell down” or “You were very helpful with clean-up today—you are such a great helper” or “You were such a strong runner on the playground today.”

Bias against Boys in Early Childhood Education Programs

There is an overall goodness-of-fit between girls and early childhood education programs. The early childhood education field reflects a female cultural orientation as “almost all early childhood teachers are women [and] most women seem to prefer behaviors and activities more often attributed to girls than boys.” They also respond to the behavior of boys and girls differently. With girls, teachers tend to overlook behavior that is not appropriate, but with boys they tend to overlook behavior that is appropriate. The results in girls are seemingly more “good” than they may really be. By the same token, the teacher’s patterns of response imply that boys are more “bad” than they may really be.

There is research that shows that early childhood education programs are not serving boys as well as they are girls. Here are some data showing less favorable outcomes for boys:

- While they represent 54% of the preschool population, boys make up 79% of those suspended once, and 82% of those suspended more than once
- Boys are almost five times more likely to be expelled from preschool
- 61% of kindergartners held back are boys

There are differences from gender, both cultural and physical (such as hormonal influences on brain development) that result in boys and girls having different needs. This includes:

- In general, boys’ brains and overall nervous systems develop more slowly than girls’.
- Boys being more physically active, engaging in more rough-and-tumble play, and showing more aggression than girls
- Boys tend to take up more space during both indoor and outdoor activities
- Boys tend to learn well through movement and hands-on activities, while struggling more than girls with memory and language (which results in more challenges with verbal instructions, literacy activities, and tore learning that
What Programs Can Do to Better Serve Boys

Programs can:

- Focus on true developmentally appropriate practices for each and every child; treat each child differently and recognize that developmental variability is natural.
- Have an environment and a curriculum that is play-based, hands-on, and whole-body that addresses the whole child.
- Don’t use threats of withholding something a child enjoys as an incentive to complete a task that they do not enjoy or struggle with.
- Provide many opportunities for children to be successful.
- Destigmatize men in caregiving roles and increase the number of men in early childhood programs.
- Make programs more boy-friendly, including
  - Provide a woodworking center
  - Rework the dramatic play center to include props to support the common themes of boys’ play (construction, community service workers, sports, etc)
  - Make sure books that feature heroes, monsters, vehicles, messy activities, etc. are included in the classroom
  - Have large blocks of time for outdoor activities every day

Train staff on the unique needs of boys and how to meet these needs. This should include “instruction in woodwork, math and science projects, and typically ‘male’ experiences, since many women are uncomfortable or unfamiliar engaging in these activities.”

Create a Learning Environment that Encourages Healthy Gender Development

Children make sense of the world through imagination and play, by observing, imitating, asking questions, and relating to other children and adults (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Here are a few ways you can support these ways of learning:

- Offer a wide range of toys, books, and games that expose children to diverse gender roles. For example, choose activities that show males as caregivers or nurturers or females in traditionally masculine roles, such as firefighters or construction workers.
- Provide dramatic play props that give children the freedom to explore and develop their own sense of gender and gender roles. Recognize that this may feel uncomfortable for some providers, teachers, home visitors, and families. Be ready to have conversations to address the value of this kind of play.
- Avoid assumptions that girls or boys are not interested in an activity that may be typically associated with one gender or the other. For example, invite girls to use dump trucks in the sand table and boys to take care of baby dolls.
- Use inclusive phrases to address your class as a whole, like “Good morning, everyone” instead of “Good morning, boys and girls.” Avoid dividing the class into “boys vs. girls” or “boys on one side, girls on the other” or any other actions that force a child to self-identify as one gender or another. This gives children a sense that they are valued as humans, regardless of their gender. It also helps all children feel included, regardless of whether they identify with a particular gender.
• Develop classroom messages that emphasize gender-neutral language, like “All children can . . .” rather than “Boys don’t . . .” or “Girls don’t . . .” Home visitors can encourage families to use similar messages.

• Help children expand their possibilities—academically, artistically, and emotionally. Use books that celebrate diversity and a variety of choices so that children can see that there are many ways to be a child or an adult. Display images around the room that show people in a wide variety of roles to inspire children to be who they want to be. [162]

![Figure 12.2: This young boy is playing. What might happen if he is told that boys don’t play with dolls?](image)

## Demonstrate Support for Children’s Gender Expression

Almost all children show interest in a wide range of activities, including those that some would associate with one gender or the other. Children’s choices of toys, games, and activities may involve exploration of male and female genders. They may express their own emerging gender identity through their appearance, choice of name or nickname, social relationships, and imitation of adults. Show support for each child’s gender expressions by encouraging all children to make their own choices about how to express themselves.

Regardless of whether they are boys or girls, children may act in ways that others categorize as feminine or masculine: they may be assertive, aggressive, dependent, sensitive, demonstrative, or gentle (Giles & Heyman, 2005).

Research has shown that when girls and boys act assertively, girls tend to be criticized as “bossy,” while boys are more likely to be praised for being leaders (Martin & Halverson, 1981; Theimer, Killen, & Stangorm, 2001; Martin & Ruble, 2004, 2009). To avoid this kind of unintentional gender stereotyping, try to describe rather than label behavior. “I see you have a strong idea, and you need your friends to help with it. Could you let them choose what they want to do?” [164]

## What Programs Can Do to Support Gender-Diverse Children

From the available research, gender is something we are born with. When children identify with a specific gender that is different from the gender assigned at birth (based on physical biology) or who do not identify with either gender, it’s important that they receive gender affirmative care. [165] Some of the American Academy of Pediatrics tips for families can be adapted for early childhood educators:

• Respond in an affirming, supportive way to how children disclose their gender identity to you.
• Accept and love the child as they are.
• Stand up for the child when they are mistreated and ensure that their gender identity or sexual orientation are not made fun of.
• Include books and materials in your classroom that represent gender diverse people.
• Be supportive of the ways the child expresses themself.
• Be on the lookout for danger signs that may indicate a need for mental health support.
• Educate yourself about this form of diversity, just like you do other forms.

It is important to recognize that families will also go through a process of understanding and (hopefully) accepting the child’s identity, thoughts, and feelings. [166]

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**Engage in Discussions about Healthy Gender Development**

Different perceptions among adults, whether staff or families, of gender development can be used as a basis for discussion. Some staff and families may feel uncomfortable with a child’s play when it explores a gender role the adult does not associate with that child’s biological sex. It can be helpful to remember that play is the way that children explore and make meaning of their world. Be prepared to have conversations that honor a range of feelings, make space for questions, address concerns, discuss varied points of view, and offer resources.

You can also offer a developmental perspective on why it’s important to let children explore different gender roles—once you have a sense that families seem open to this. For example, you could start by saying, “I understand that seeing Isaac playing house and wearing an apron in the kitchen makes you feel uncomfortable. Can you tell me a little more about that?”

After you’ve listened, you may decide that it would be helpful to offer some developmental information by saying, for example, “We see this kind of play as a way for Isaac to explore the world around him, try on different ideas, and mirror what he sees family members, community members, or media characters doing.” [167]

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**Understand Developmentally Appropriate Curiosity about Bodies**

Curiosity about people’s bodies is natural for children as they begin to notice differences and think of themselves as a boy or girl. Yet some exploration is not appropriate in an early childhood development program. If questions come up in the bathroom or if children want to learn about their friends’ bodies, let them know that most children have questions about their bodies and the differences between girls’ and boys’ bodies. That way they won’t feel ashamed when you remind them that their bodies are private.

If children demonstrate this kind of natural curiosity in your setting, you can share your observations with the children’s families and ask them if they want to talk more about it. Families may react differently, depending on their comfort level with you and this topic, and on what they’ve discussed with their children at home.

When your relationship with a family is strong and trusting, you might say, “I know this can be uncomfortable to talk about, but I wanted to share an observation I made today. I noticed your child and a friend were talking about their different body parts on the way to the bathroom. I’m wondering if you’ve seen the same kind of curiosity at home and if you’ve talked about it?” If they haven’t, ask if they’d like some ideas about how to answer their children’s questions when
they do come up. Offer resources if they are interested in learning more. [168]

Note: if a teacher is ever suspicious of any type of abuse, they should always speak with a supervisor and parents.

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Understanding Differences Between Gender and Sexual Orientation

Gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Gender identity is about who you feel you are as a person. Sexual orientation is about the gender of the people you are sexually attracted to. A young child’s expression of gender-related preferences (in friends, activities, clothing choices, hairstyle, etc.) does not necessarily predict what their gender identity or sexual orientation will be later in life (American Psychological Association, 2015).

The age at which gender identity becomes established varies. Gender identity for some children may be fairly firm when they are as young as two or three years old (AAP, 2015; Balwin & Moses, 1996; Gender Spectrum, 2012; Zosuls et al., 2009). For others it may be fluid until adolescence and occasionally later.

The age at which an individual becomes aware of their sexual orientation, that is, their feelings of attraction for one gender or the other or both, also varies. Such feelings may emerge during childhood, adolescence, or later in life (Campo-Arias, 2010; Gender Spectrum, 2012). At present, child development experts say there is no way to predict what a child’s sexual orientation or gender identity will be as an adult (Bryan, 2012).

If families or staff members have questions or are concerned about a child’s gender expression, assure them that you and your program are available for ongoing discussions. Family acceptance of a child’s gender identity is a critical factor in the child’s development (AAP, 2015; Gender Spectrum, 2012; Ryan et al, 2010). Whatever a child’s emerging gender identity, one very important message that caring adults can give to young children is that they are healthy, good human beings. Be prepared to share resources that can help family members learn more about gender in young children. [169]

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Handling Gender Bias in the Classroom

Since young children learn by observing our words and actions, consider these strategies when dealing with children’s feelings about their own and each other’s gender expression:

• Share ideas with other providers about how to stop hurtful, gender-related teasing and redirect children to positive activities.
• Practice what you want to say and do. See the examples following this list for interacting with children and adults.
• Know your educational goals and how they are connected to social-emotional well-being in children.
• Help children choose kindness.
• Use instances of teasing as opportunities to help all the children understand other’s feelings and their own.
• Help them understand how their words might make their friends feel.
• Help them to learn to say “I’m sorry” and to show that they really mean it.
• Talk one-on-one with children who have teased another child. They are often confused about the hurt they cause and may be frightened by their own actions. They need to understand that hurting other children is not allowed. But they also need to know that you have confidence that they can learn to control themselves. Be sure to let them know that you are ready to forgive them once they have made a sincere apology.
• Help children to become resilient. Help those who are hurt by teasing to find simple responses to put a stop to it and affirm their positive feelings about themselves.

When you hear children making comments similar to the following ones (in italics), you might consider these responses:

“You can’t play in the kitchen area. You’re a boy!”

• “We can all learn together how to make a recipe and clean up the kitchen.”
• “I’m going to play in the kitchen with any of the children who like to play there.”

“Why does Diego always want to dress like a girl?”

• “There are lots of different ways that boys can dress and lots of different ways that girls can dress.”
• “Clothes are clothes. He likes to wear the clothes that he feels comfortable in.”

“Why does she always play with the boys?”

• “Those are the games that she likes to play, just as there are different games that you like to play.”
• “She can play with whoever she wants to, just like you.”

“You’re a girl!” (said in an insulting tone to a child who identifies as a boy).

• “It’s not okay to call someone a ‘girl’ to make them feel bad.”

“Boys are better at sports than girls.”

• “Some boys and girls are good at sports, and some are not. All children have different things that they are good at.”

When an early childhood educator shares questions similar to the ones below (in italics), you might consider these responses:

“Mercedes uses a boy’s name when they play pretend. Her grandmother said not to let her do that. I can’t go against the grandmother.”

• “Let’s talk this over with her grandmother and learn more about her views on this, why this is important to her, and what she would suggest. We can share our observation that Mercedes seems to know she disapproves, yet still really seems intent on using a boy’s name right now in her pretend play. Maybe then we could share with her our view of this kind of play as a way to use creativity to learn about one’s self and other people. She may still disagree, but getting this dialogue going would be a good start.”

“Zach’s dad makes fun of him when he sees him playing with girls. Zach now gets nervous whenever his father comes to pick him up. What can I say to the dad?”

• “Zach enjoys playing with the other children in our program. We encourage the boys and girls to play together to learn from each other.”

“One of the other teachers punishes Taylor when she acts like a boy. What should I do?”

• “I noticed that you scolded Taylor when she acted like a boy. Can we talk more about why you did that? You might remember that our educational approach encourages all children to play pretend. We believe creativity is a part of..."
Sometimes families ask about other children. For example, a family member might say, “I heard that Diego calls himself Isabella now, and he wears dresses every day. Why would his family let him do that?” How can I answer this question and discourage gossip?

- “Well, normally I would not discuss details about another child, but in this case I have talked with Diego’s dad about this and how he would like us to address these types of questions as they come up. Isabella identifies as a girl and uses female pronouns, such as “she” and “her.” As early educators, we know some children are very clear at young ages that their gender expression is not the one they were assigned at birth based on their biology. Isabella’s family loves her, and they are trying to do what is best for her—just as you are doing for your child.”

When an early childhood educator wants to talk with a child’s family about gender-related teasing, similar to the example below (in italics), you might consider this response:

“A child called a boy a “girl” at school today. It seemed intended as an insult. What can I say?”

- “Your child usually gets along so well with the other children. So when your child called a boy a ‘girl,’ as if that were a bad thing, we wanted to be sure to talk this over with you. Your son is such a leader, and we know he can be a positive one. We want to make sure that the children know that the words ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ aren’t insults, and that this is a safe and secure environment for all of them. Do you have some ideas about how we can work with your son as we work with all the children on this?”

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### Simple Messages You Can Share with All Children

An essential part of children’s school readiness is developing self-confidence and resilience. Research shows that, even in early learning settings, boys and girls perform less well when they have negative concepts about their gender. Comments like “Girls can’t throw!” or “Boys always get into trouble!” can make them doubt their natural abilities (Hartley & Sutton, 2013; Del Rio & Strasser, 2013; Wolter, Braun, & Hannover, 2015).

Early learning environments are important places to teach children language and behavior that helps them all feel good about who they are and how to recover from the hurts they may cause each other.

Look for opportunities to help children practice positive language they can use with each other. Here are some examples that you can use to create your own:

- “Boys and girls can be good at sports/writing/sitting still.”
- “Girls and boys can be friends with each other.”
- “Everybody can play in the kitchen/tool area/swing set.”
- “Running games are for everyone.”
- “Hair is hair. That is how she/he likes it.”
- “Boys and girls can wear what they like at our school.”
- “Colors are colors. There aren’t boy colors or girl colors. All children like different colors.”