

GENDER ROLES IN FAMILIES

FALL 2020, ISSUE 1



Gender roles shape nearly all of our social interactions, so what does this mean for families?

“Boys will be boys” *“That’s not lady-like”*

“Boys don’t cry” *“Girls are just more sensitive”*

These are just some of the messages young girls and boys hear at home, at school, and on TV. What children hear about how they should act, what they should wear, and how they should (or shouldn’t) express their emotions shapes how children learn, develop, and think of themselves. As children grow up, these messages shape their family and romantic relationships, how they communicate, and their work-life fit. This newsletter provides an introduction to gender roles and gender role socialization for practitioners working with children and families.

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Why Do Gender Roles Matter?

Gender roles can shape how children learn, develop, and express emotions.

Gender roles (what it means to be a boy, a girl, or somewhere else on the gender spectrum) shape all of our relationships, especially in our families. Gender roles influence how partners share household chores, how family members communicate with one another, and how parents interact with their children. Research shows that there are similarities and differences between the ways mothers and fathers parent their children and this can impact a child's understanding of gender roles. Parents and caregivers shape children's understanding of gender roles through a process called gender role socialization. Gender role socialization impacts all families differently depending on the gender structure of the family, socioeconomic status, culture, and the age range of the children.

Research shows that how parents and caregivers teach children about gender roles can impact their learning outcomes and development:

- Children are often treated differently when both girls and boys are in the household¹.
- Mothers tend to talk more with their daughters than sons, which may be related to girls scoring higher in reading and writing in schools than boys¹.
- Parents often assign chores to their children that are stereotypically for girls or boys *or* make a choice to equally divide chores regardless of gender¹.

Gender roles are the expectations we have about how girls and boys are supposed to look, behave, and communicate.

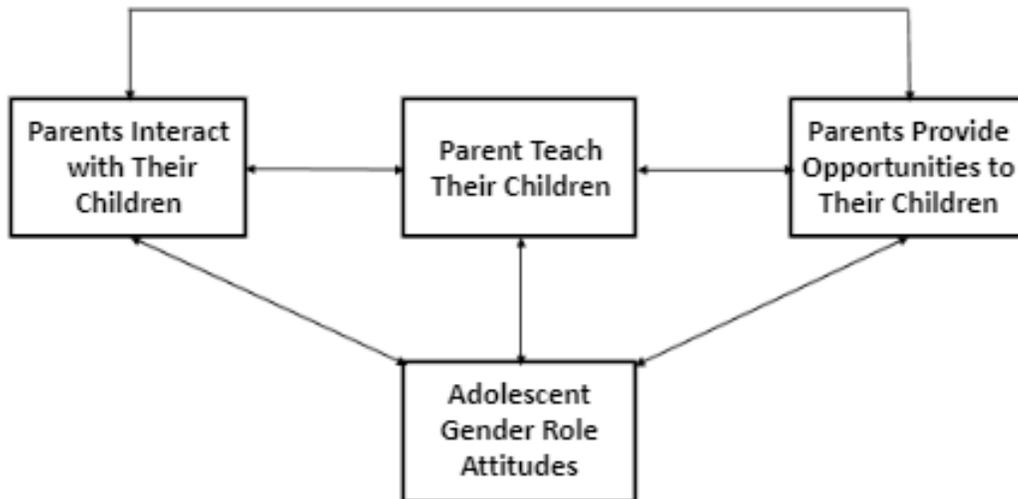
What is Gender Role Socialization?



Gender role socialization is the process of teaching children about socially acceptable behavior for girls and boys. Children hear these messages from their friends, the media, and especially their parents. Parents and caregivers model gender roles and may encourage or discourage certain behavior for girls and boys. These different messages shape a child's understanding of gender roles and who they are *supposed* to be.

Tripartite Model of Socialization: The Role of Parents

The ways that we teach children about gender is part of everything we do in a way that might make it hard to recognize. The Tripartite Model of Socialization³ can be useful to understand and talk about what gender socialization looks like in families.



Parents Interact with Their Children

- Parents socialize gender roles by communicating, modeling behavior, and sharing activities with their children.^{2,3}
- Parents model similar gender roles by equally sharing childrearing responsibilities.
- For example, how parents divide household chores like childrearing, lawn care, or cooking dinner teaches children what being a girl or a boy looks like in a family.

Parents Teach Their Children

- Parents teach their children about gender roles by instructing them about what girls and boys “should” do.
- By encouraging or discouraging their children’s gendered behavior (or behavior that’s expected for girls or boys), parents shape how their children will behave in the future.^{2,4,5,3}
- For example, a boy who is often told that “boys don’t cry” will learn that boys should hide their emotions.

Parents Provide Opportunities to their Children

- Parents socialize gender roles by providing similar or different opportunities to their children³.
- Restricting some opportunities for either girls or boys causes some children to be left out and made to feel different or strange.
- For example, when children are taught that some opportunities are only for either girls or boys, the girls that want to play football or boys that want to be cheerleaders may be teased by their peers.

What does this mean for parents and practitioners?



Although many people today try to treat their children the same, research shows us that stereotypes about gender still shape how we parent and interact with our family members.^{6,7} As practitioners, parents, or caregivers we have the power to shape children's development and learning outcomes by first understanding our own values and then fostering intentional interactions.

Challenge our assumptions

The first step to becoming more intentional about how we socialize gender is to identify which values about gender each of us hold as most important.

Ask yourself:

- What beliefs or values are important to our family about how children should act, regardless of their gender?
- What messages do I want my children to hear about feeling comfortable being who they are?
- What assumptions do I have about what girls and boys like to do, wear, or talk about? Where do those assumptions come from?
- What gender roles am I modeling for my children?
- What kinds of messages are my children getting from TV, their friends, and our community?



Foster intentional interactions

We can all become more aware and intentional about how we are socializing gender roles in children by:

- Engaging in healthy conversations about gender
- Noticing which activities or topics of conversations are shared more with one gender or another
- Seeking out resources to help start these conversations, such as other parents, websites, and books

References, Resources, & Contacts

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Tools and Resources

- The Genderbread person - <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2015/03/the-genderbread-person-v3/>
- Families & the Gender Spectrum - <https://www.genderspectrum.org/explore-topics/parenting-and-family/>
- GenderJabber: Talking to kids about gender - <https://www.genderjabber.org/resources>
- Talking to young kids about gender stereotypes - <https://www.theline.org.au/discussing-gender-stereotypes-at-home>
- Healthy gender development and young children - <https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/healthy-gender-development.pdf>

For more information,
contact Jey Blodgett:
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Try It At Home

To practice having healthy conversations with your children about gender roles, here are a list of books and questions to get started:

Read-alouds

- *Whoever You Are/Quienquiera que seas* by Mem Fox, illustrated by Leslie Staub
- *I Like Myself!/¡Me gusta cómo soy!* by Karen Beaumont, illustrated by David Catrow
- *It's Not the Stork: A Book about Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends/No Es La Ciguena: Un Libro Que Habla Sobre Ninas, Ninos, Bebes, Cuerpos, Familias Y Amigos* by Robie H. Harris, illustrated by Michael Emberley
- *Jacob's New Dress* by Sarah Hoffman and Ian Hoffman, illustrated by Chris Case

Questions

- What are girls/boys in the book allowed to do? What do you think it feels like to be a boy/girl who can't do something because it's for girls/boys? What do you think it feels like to be a girl/boy?
- Have you ever had someone tell you that you couldn't do something because of who you were? How did that make you feel? What could you do if you saw this happen to someone else?
- What can you do to help others know that you like them for who they are?

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