

Why Does Gender Matter? Counteracting Stereotypes With Young Children

How do young children's experiences with gender biases affect their development and opportunities for leading successful lives? What can teachers do to counteract these stereotypes?

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Despite current applause for gender equality, children seem to be as stereotypically sex-typed as those of yesteryear.

—Joannie M. Schrof

Stereotypes abound in any society. One way that people in diverse societies try to tolerate differences is to make generalizations that categorize individuals into groups (Keefe, Marshall, & Robeson, 2003). Some of these stereotypes are negative, while others are positive. All stereotypes contribute to a culture of prejudice, which is communicated in word and action to families, communities, and even young children (Derman-Sparks, 2001).

The early gender bias experiences that children encounter can shape their

- attitudes and beliefs related to their development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships,
- access to education equality,
- participation in the corporate work world, as well as
- stifling their physical and psychological well being (Hendrix & Wei, 2009).

For early childhood educators, being aware of the effects of gender stereotypes is particularly critical, because concepts of gender identity are sometimes placed on children even before their birth, with the selection of paint colors for the nursery, for example. Children begin to form concepts of gender beginning around age 2, and most children know if they are a boy or girl by the age of 3 (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

Between the ages of 3 and 5 years, children develop their gender identity and begin to understand what it means to be male or female. Almost immediately after becoming gender aware, children begin developing ste-

reotypes, which they apply to themselves and others, in an attempt to give meaning to and gain understanding about their own identity.

These stereotypes are fairly well developed by 5 years of age, and become rigidly defined between 5 and 7 years of age (Martin & Ruble, 2004), making the preschool years a critical period to deal with gender stereotypes. Stereotypes and sexism limit potential growth and development (Narahara, 1998) because internalizing negative stereotypes impacts self-esteem and ultimately, academic performance. Long-term gender bias effects become most apparent in students during adolescence (Carlson, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2004).

Preschool educators can help children develop a positive sense of their own gender. Teachers who are familiar with the factors that influence gender identity and stereotype development, and who understand the child's active role in gender identity formation, can more effectively counteract and even neutralize gender bias in their classrooms and attempt to prevent the formation of children's gender stereotypes (Zaman, 2007).

Gender Development Theories

Kohlberg (as cited in Martin & Ruble, 2004) was one of the first theorists to address gender as a learned, cognitive concept. His thinking was influenced by Piaget, who portrayed children as active learners who use interactions with their environment to construct an understanding of the world around them (Piaget, 1961). Kohlberg believed that children's cognitive understanding of gender influenced their behavior (Kohlberg, 1981).

These early ideas have been supported by research. In one study, children were asked questions about traditional and



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label themselves as a boy or girl, their preferences for gender-typed play activities and materials begins (Freeman, 2007). This demonstrates the link between play and gender identity formation.

For Vygotsky (1961), imitation and instruction are vital components to children's development. Adults promote this learning by role-modeling behavior, assisting with challenging tasks, and passing along cultural meanings to objects and events, all of which are components of gender development.

Influences on Gender Identity and Stereotypes

Popular culture

Gender stereotypes are pervasive in the media and popular culture (Saltmarsh, 2009). Consumer products inundate children with gender-typed messages on bed sheets, towels, bandages, clothes, school supplies, toys, and furniture (Freeman, 2007). Not only are these products marketed for specific genders, but they are merchandised in stores by gender, creating segregated pink and blue aisles for shopping.

Media portrayals also reinforce stereotypes. Advertising about computers typically depicted men and boys as competent users, engaged in active or professional roles, while women and girls were passive observers or merely posed next to the computer while looking pretty or provocative (McNair, Kirova-Petrova, & Bhargava, 2001). In several European countries, television advertising to children is restricted or banned (Mitchener, 2001).

Movies convey particularly powerful messages about gender roles and stereotyping (Derman-Sparks, 2001). Considering the brand

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non-traditional images of women as portrayed in books. Children as young as 5 were able to use outside knowledge or assumptions to reconcile ideas that conflicted with their world view (Jackson, 2007). They rationalized and used "probably" statements to explain how they came to their conclusions, with or without the use of stereotypes. This research supports Gender-Schema Theory

(Martin & Ruble, 2004), which involves the creation of organized structures of knowledge that influence thinking and behavior.

An alternative, but supplemental view of gender development, is that of gender as a social construct. Through imaginative play, children explore and understand gender roles (Chick, Heilman-Houser, & Hunter, 2002). After children can

strength and saturation of a multimedia company such as Disney, children are particularly susceptible.

Researchers examined the influence of Disney images of women and marriage on the perceptions of young Korean immigrant girls. These girls reported a resigned acceptance to the portrayal of princesses having to face external obstacles to marriage, such as family approval or laws, while princes could marry according to their own will (Lee, 2008). These researchers also noted that the girls associated desirability for a princess with one attribute, such as beauty or a singing voice, whereas princes were desired for their courage, chivalry, or actions (Lee, 2008). Combined with a tradition of female subservience in Korean culture, these young girls appeared to accept their disenfranchisement.

Early childhood education

The role of schools has become more prominent in the lives of children younger than 5 years of age (Sales, Spjeldnes, & Koeshe, 2010). Many children spend up to 10 hours a day in child care (Grafwallner, Fontaine, Torre, & Underhill, 2006). Two main aspects of the early childhood environment influence perceptions of young children's gender and gender stereotypes:

- classroom materials and
- the instruction of teachers (Gee & Gee, 2005).

Several gender inequities were found in one preschool, the most obvious being the proliferation of gender-typed toys, such as pink kitchen sets. Further scrutiny revealed a large proportion of books in the library that showed gender bias of some kind (Chick, Heilman-Houser, & Hunter, 2002).

The classroom environment can affect not only how young children

understand important social issues, such as those of gender, but also what they think about themselves and others. Korean immigrant girls perceived that a woman could not be President of the United States because a classroom poster depicted all male presidents (Lee, 2008).

Teachers have tremendous influence on ideas about gender significance.

Teachers have tremendous influence on how children develop ideas of gender and gender significance. Traditional caregivers typically reinforced gender-stereotyped traits when they praised girls for their clothing, hairstyles, neatness, and helping behaviors, and in contrast praised boys for their strength, physical skill, size, and academic accomplishments (Chick, Heilman-Houser & Hunter, 2002). These teachers used “honey” and “sweetie” to address girls, but said “you guys” when speaking to the entire class (Chick, Heilman-Houser & Hunter, 2002).

While unintentional, a teacher's inherent biases can perpetuate unfair stereotypes and may be manifested in discriminatory classroom practices. For example, one group of teachers perceived girls as passive learners and therefore more “teachable” than boys (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004). Similarly, classroom management techniques may reward obedience versus assertiveness, which puts highly active children at a disadvantage. A teacher's stereotypes may lead to interactions with

children that are neither gender-fair nor gender-congruent (Hyun, 2001).

Males demand and receive more attention from their teachers and therefore receive more specific, instructive feedback from teachers (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004). In comparison, females become less demanding of the teacher's attention; that results in lower levels of achievement and self-esteem, which therefore limits their career goals to more traditional, nurturing, and often lower-paying careers. Males do not escape the gender bias, however, as they are subject to conforming to male stereotypes and experience less nurturing behavior (Zaman, 2007).

Every day, teaching may occur in curriculum areas where positive or negative stereotypes can affect children's concepts of self-competence (Ebach, et al., 2009). One study found that 80% of the observed teachers discouraged preschool girls from using computers by their words and attitudes (McNair, Kirova-Petrova, & Bhargava, 2001). This stereotyping may contribute to young girls' inability to become competent users of technology.

Friends

Children also have been shown to actively create gender identities through interactions with each other (Thorne, 1993). Friendship patterns and peer pressure contribute to gender stereotypes, especially among boys, who have the tendency to self-police peers, ridiculing those who show feminine traits (Morrow, 2006). Children's gender-typed toy preferences are more likely to be exhibited when in the proximity of peers who approve of the gender-typed choices (Hughes, 2003).

Family

In addition to role modeling, families influence gender learning

when they reinforce or discourage specific behaviors, particularly in play. Leaper (2000) found that

- Mothers were more likely than fathers to encourage collaborative play with both sons and daughters.
- Mothers favored affiliative play with daughters, that is, they encouraged interactions that were warm, supportive, and responsive.
- Fathers were more likely than mothers to react negatively to cross-gender behavior, especially with sons.

Teachers can communicate with families and children about their experiences, thoughts, and behaviors and provide resources in the community and schools to assist them in developing healthy gender attitudes (Spjeldnes, Koeshe, & Sales, 2010).

Storytelling is another way that families influence how children learn about gender. Storytelling can familiarize children with valued traits and personal characteristics. Fiese and Skillman (2000) reported several storytelling patterns that can lead children to develop gender-typed traits and values:

- Sons were more likely to be told stories of autonomy and achievement.
- Daughters were more likely to be told stories of relationships or support.
- Fathers more often told stories of mastery and success.
- Mothers' stories were usually a direct expression of emotion.

Family culture and ethnicity also influences children's perceptions of gender. The cultural biases of different ethnic groups may expose children to more deeply ingrained stereotypes than exist in the main-



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stream culture (Robeson, Marshall, & Keefe, 1999). For example, the Asian cultural emphasis on the value of sons can be communicated in subtle or not-so-subtle ways that influence daughters' self-concepts of value and worth as girls (Morrow, 2006).

Children's literature

Books have a tremendous influence on young children (Narahara, 1998). The main characters provide role models and definitions of masculinity and femininity for children. Because children are active and criti-

cal readers, books and their illustrations become a cultural resource for children to learn social norms (Jackson, 2007).

In a study of Newberry and Caldecott award-winning books, male protagonists outnumbered female ones three to one, and 21 out of 25 books contained images of women wearing aprons (Narahara, 1998). These books also contained no Latino or African American main characters. Narahara indicated that it could be assumed that children will

undervalue the importance of their lives if they are unable to identify with characters in books. Images or characters in books can create positive or negative emotions in young children, and when children understand their peers' cultural traditions that are more likely to form a more positive perspective of themselves and others (Nahl & Bilal, 2007).

Consequences of Gender Stereotyping

Activity Choice

Young children often reveal their gender stereotyping in their play. During dramatic play, preschool females are more likely to choose family roles, while males are more likely to choose adventure or action-oriented roles, such as superheroes (Hughes, 2003).

In another study, before intervention, males spent 25% of their time in block play versus 2% in housekeeping areas (Unger, 1981). Females, however, spent 10% of their

time in housekeeping and only 2% in the block area. By combining the spaces and creating a gender-neutral play area, the researchers observed an 8% increase in housekeeping play by the boys and a 9% increase in block play by the girls.

As noted earlier, children apply gender stereotypes to toys by the time they are 3 (Freeman, 2007). In a study conducted with mothers and fathers of 3- to 5-year-old children, children's perceptions of parental approval were found out of alignment with the parents' self-described attitudes.

- Parents demonstrated markedly non-stereotyped attitudes on parent questionnaires about how they would react to their children's cross-gender play.
- The children themselves indicated that their parents would not approve of most cross-gender play, especially for the boys, who thought their fathers would approve of cross-gender choices only 9% of the time.

- When asked, 64% of parents said they would buy their son a doll, 84% would not get upset seeing their son wearing a dress in the dramatic play area, and 92% did not think ballet lessons for a boy would be a mistake.

This study revealed a large discrepancy between the attitudes that parents publicly profess and the subtle messages that their children perceive (Freeman, 2007).

Career Aspirations

Occupation is a major signal of self identity. Gottfredson (2004) proposed that career aspirations originate in the preschool years, and that projecting a concept of a future self can be seen as an attempt to present an existing self-image.

In a study examining career aspirations of 4- and 5-year-old children, researchers coded participants' responses by categorizing occupations as *female*, *male*, or *neutral*, based on the national statistics for that occupation (Care, Denas, & Brown, 2007). They also considered the occupation of the parents. These researchers found that

- there was an early bias associated with identifying with the same-gender adult.
- males aspired to more gender-typed fields than girls, who chose evenly among traditionally male, female, and neutral occupations.
- when asked to nominate jobs that they would not want, both girls and boys rejected more traditionally female occupations than male and neutral careers.



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Skilled teachers encourage cross-gender activities and play in cross-gender centers. Positively reinforce children who are playing with non-stereotyped toys by talking with them and supporting their learning.

The researchers hypothesized that these findings are due to the lower prestige of typically female occupations (Care, Denas, & Brown, 2007), and the significance of that would be profound: Girls as young as 4 have already internalized the belief that women's work is neither as valuable nor as desirable as men's.

Academic Outcomes

The hidden messages that girls receive about math, science, and technology shape their self-concept, confidence, and interest in those subjects (Ebach, et al. 2009). These messages can come from bias in the media, from family or teachers who may exhibit lower expectations for females in these subject areas, or even from the medium itself, as in the case of computer software demonstrating a high level of gender bias favoring males (McNair, Kirova-Petrova, & Bhargava, 2001).

Calling attention to gender identity before an early elementary standardized math test disrupted the academic achievement of females and strengthened the performance of males (Neuville & Croizet, 2007). When gender identity was not emphasized, females performed just as well or better as their male peers in the control group.

The imbalance between male and female characters in children's literature and school reading texts creates a situation where males rarely may be required to cross gender boundaries when reading. In addition, the group socialization of individual readers may reinforce reading preferences by gender. Males as young as 5 taunted other boys for reading a book they designated as a girl's book (Sandholtz & Sandholtz, 2010).

Recommendations for Teachers

The behavior of early childhood educators is a crucial factor in the quality of the learning process (Timmerman & Schreuder, 2008).

Classroom materials

Gender stereotypes and sexism limit children's potential growth and development. Teachers are encouraged to carefully examine classroom environments for the presence of toys that are marketed in ways that encourage single-gender use such as

- Barbie® dolls
- Hot Wheels®
- computers designed for boys

Several Web sites promote furniture specifically designed for males or females (Freeman, 2007). Any materials that promote gender-stereotyped play should either be removed so that the classroom conveys a gender-neutral invitation for all students to enjoy, or discussed with children to ensure that they understand these toys are for males and females.

Critically evaluate books for gender bias.

Picture books provide role models for children in defining standards for feminine and masculine behavior, yet sexism manifests itself in diverse ways in children's literature (Tsao, 2008). Nonsexist books, on the other hand, produce positive changes in self-concept, attitudes, and behavior. Children's gender attitudes may be positively changed through

the reading of appropriate children's literature and other book-related activities (Blumberg, 2008).

Teachers are urged to critically evaluate books for gender bias. However, rather than eliminating all books with stereotypes, teachers can guide children to recognize stereotypes and increase independent critical thinking about gender and perceptions of gender. Making a concerted effort to provide positive, empowered stories and images of diverse characters will activate positive self-concepts for children and promote anti-bias attitudes among the entire class (Derman-Sparks, 2001).

Curriculum

Males typically called out in class eight times more often than females, and sometimes their comments had little to do with the discussion (Walker, 2005). When a male called out, the teacher responded whether or not the comment was insightful or relevant, but when a female called out, she was reminded of the rule about not talking unless called upon. If this happened only once, permanent damage would certainly not be a consequence, but once a day, every day, for 12 years of school would certainly be enough to have a sizeable impact on female students (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

When planning learning experiences, teachers can challenge potential stereotypes by presenting non-traditional images and role models. They might

- request speakers from children's families,
- feature unbiased books and materials, and
- give equal praise and encouragement to females in math and science and males

in creative and language arts (Derman-Sparks, 2001).

Skilled teachers encourage cross-gender activities and play in cross-gender centers. They can also positively reinforce children who are playing with non-stereotyped toys by talking with them and supporting their learning.

Families

Gender differentiation and identity construction begins at home, in that familial practices are often profoundly gendered in terms of relationships and roles (Morrow, 2006). Teachers can help inform families of children by

- demonstrating unbiased interactions and communication, and
- providing coaching and encouragement, while
- respecting cultural differences without judgment or condescension.

Family workshops and information about the long-term effects of gender bias can also increase the awareness and critical thinking about ways that families communicate gender stereotypes to children (Small, 2003).

Implications for Teacher Education

Teachers play a critical role in promoting equitable learning. Findings from national surveys in the U.S. suggest that prospective teachers receive little or no teacher preparation about equity, perhaps due to competing requirements in limited time (Langford, 2006; Sadker, et al., 2007; Sandholtz & Sandholtz, 2010). Consequently, new teachers are often unaware of how their

behavior and the educational materials they use may hinder equitable learning in their classrooms.

In addition, a common misconception of preservice teachers is that only students, not teachers, are responsible for bias in classroom interactions. Novice teachers may enter the profession without the skills to make changes in four key areas:

- school curriculum,
- interaction patterns,
- pedagogical strategies, and
- use of resources.

Prepare teachers to promote equitable teaching.

It is imperative to prepare novice teachers to recognize gender issues and promote equitable teaching (Fulmer, 2010). Teacher educators themselves must be committed to teaching students about gender issues. If only a few teacher educators in an institution address gender issues, preservice teachers receive mixed messages about their importance. The curriculum in high-quality teacher education programs incorporates gender issues.

Although making gender issues a required course may seem like a viable approach, Geist and King (2008) argue that it is problematic for three reasons:

- few programs have available space;
- a separate course may leave important gender dimensions out of educational foundations, methods courses, and field experience; and

- the separation may suggest gender equity is a sidebar for students to the real work of education.

The content of textbooks and instructional materials throughout teacher education courses is critical because of its potential to reduce or, through omission and stereotyping, reinforce biased attitudes and behaviors (Sadker, et al., 2007).

Roles of Administrators

Administrators are urged to establish an ongoing process of introspection and evaluation to help teachers consider how they relate to genders differently. Teachers can then monitor their language and actions in order to eliminate inadvertently biased messages.

Administrators are also advised to consider the consequences of hiring an all-female staff. Program structure should also allow for the maintenance of group gender balance to facilitate opportunities for male/female interaction (Robeson, Marshall, & Keefe, 2003). Additionally, administrators can coordinate in-service opportunities for families and professional development in the areas of anti-bias curriculum and neutralizing gender stereotypes in young children.

Conclusions

The power of self-concept is profound, as is the ability of adults to influence the children around them. Families and teachers are encouraged to conscientiously and actively create a positive learning environment for young children—not just in promoting developmentally appropriate practices to stimulate cognitive, social, emotional, and physical

domains, but also in creating a moral context for what they learn, as well as to help shape a global, multicultural, anti-bias world view.

Young children create and internalize their own meanings of gender, based on the social cues of the adults, environments, and media around them. Adults in turn have a responsibility to ensure that those cues and messages create a healthy understanding of what it means to be male and female (Derman-Sparks, 2001).

By equipping young children with positive messages of empowerment regardless of gender, in addition to the critical thinking skills to identify stereotypes, teachers and families can impart in children self-concept resiliency, even when faced with negative stereotypes (Small, 2003). Those children will then be less likely to perpetuate the stereotypes and can help end the cycle of prejudice.

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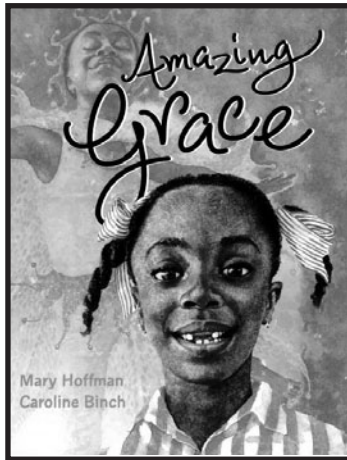
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Extend

These Ideas With Books

Connect Anti-Bias Education With a Children's Book

Anita McLeod



Amazing Grace

written by Mary Hoffman and illustrated by Caroline Binch. (1991). New York: Dial Books for Young Children.

Grace loves to read and act out stories she has heard. When Grace's class decides to perform the play Peter Pan, she knows exactly the role she wants to play—Peter. Her friends tell her she can't be Peter because she's not a boy and she is Black. Her grandmother reminds her she can be anything she wants if she puts her mind to it. After Grace's grandmother takes her to a ballet starring a young woman from Trinidad, Grace practices dancing in her imaginary tutu just like Juliet. When her classmates see her audition for the play, they know she is the perfect Peter. The play is a fantastic success!

Ages: Preschool through second grade

Teaching concepts: self concept, families, storytelling, occupations



PRETEND PLAY: Add a variety of costumes, professional clothing, and props to the dramatic play area. Familiar books can stimulate children's ideas for role-playing.

Encourage children to try a variety of roles and offer guidance if needed to prevent stereotyping of roles.



PRETEND PLAY: Using a puppet stage or table on its side, children use craft-stick puppets to dramatize familiar stories. Children glue their drawings (or cut-outs) of favorite story characters to the stick. Children refer to books, such as *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *Anansi the Spider*, *Amazing Grace*, *Brown Bear Brown Bear*, and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* for story sequence or character roles.



MUSIC & MOVEMENT: Using patterned sentence stems, children complete a sentence such as "I can..." or "I want to..." using invented spelling or dictations for an adult to write. After children illustrate their sentences, they assemble and bind them into a book to place in the book center.



SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL: Children write and decorate invitations to family or community members to share information about what they do. Seek diversity in gender and ethnicity so children hear and see men and women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in many different situations. Look for maintenance workers, electricians, hair stylists, construction workers, orchestra members, dancers, artists, and other occupations.



LITERACY: Using patterned sentence stems, children complete a sentence such as "I can..." or "I want to..." using invented spelling or dictations for an adult to write. After children illustrate their sentences, they assemble and bind them into a book to place in the book center.



LITERACY: Select books representing individuals in a variety of work situations and from a variety of ethnic and gender groups that illustrate how individuals live into their dreams by working hard and never giving up, such as *Mirette on the High Wire*, *Miss Rumphius*, *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt*, *Lady Bug Girl*, *More Than Anything Else*, *Amelia & Eleanor Go for a Ride*, *Snowflake Bentley*, *Martin's Big Words*, and *Art From Her Heart*.

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