

PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S SOCIALIZATION TO GENDER ROLES

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ABSTRACT

In a society rife with gender stereotypes and biases, children regularly learn to adopt gender roles which are not always fair to both sexes. As children move through childhood and into adolescence, they are exposed to many factors which influence their attitudes and behaviors regarding gender roles. These attitudes and behaviors are generally learned first in the home and are then reinforced by the child's peers, school experience, and television viewing. However, the strongest influence on gender role development seems to occur within the family setting, with parents passing on, both overtly and covertly, their own beliefs about gender. This overview of the impact of parental influence on gender role development leads to the suggestion that an androgynous gender role orientation may be more beneficial to children than strict adherence to traditional gender roles.

INTRODUCTION

Children learn at a very early age what it means to be a boy or a girl in our society. Through myriad activities, opportunities, encouragements, discouragements, overt behaviors, covert suggestions, and various forms of guidance, children experience the process of gender role socialization. It is difficult for a child to grow to adulthood without experiencing some form of gender bias or stereotyping, whether it be the expectation that boys are better than girls at math or the idea that only females can nurture children. As children grow and develop, the gender stereotypes they are exposed to at home are reinforced by other elements in their environment and are thus perpetuated throughout childhood and on into adolescence (Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990).

A child's burgeoning sense of self, or self-concept, is a result of the multitude of ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs to which he or she is exposed. The information that surrounds the child and which is internalized comes to the child within the family arena through parent-child interactions, role modeling, reinforcement for desired behaviors, and parental approval or disapproval (Santrock, 1994). As children

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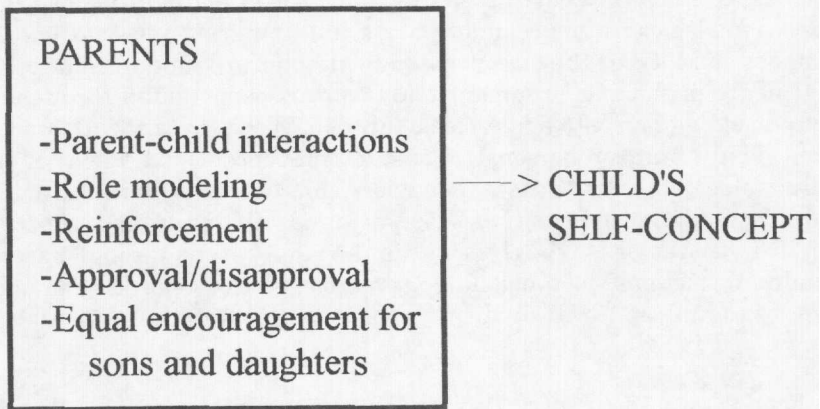
move into the larger world of friends and school, many of their ideas and beliefs are reinforced by those around them. A further reinforcement of acceptable and appropriate behavior is shown to children through the media, in particular, television. Through all these socialization agents, children learn gender stereotyped behavior. As children develop, these stereotypes become firmly entrenched beliefs and thus, are a part of the child's self-concept. Figure 1 illustrates some of the factors involved in parental influence on a child's self concept.

Parental Influence

A child's earliest exposure to what it means to be male or female comes from parents (Lauer & Lauer, 1994; Santrock, 1994; Kaplan, 1991). From the time their children are babies, parents treat sons and daughters differently, dressing infants in gender-specific colors, giving gender-differentiated toys, and expecting different behavior from boys and girls (Thorne, 1993). One study indicates that parents have differential expectations of sons and daughters as early as 24 hours after birth (Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974).

Children internalize parental messages regarding gender at an early age, with awareness of adult sex role differences being found in two-

Figure 1.
Parents' Influence on Child's Self-Concept



year-old children (Weinraub et al., 1984). One study found that children at two and a half years of age use gender stereotypes in negotiating their world and are likely to generalize gender stereotypes to a variety of activities, objects, and occupations (Fagot, Leinbach, & O'Boyle, 1992; Cowan & Hoffman, 1986). Children even deny the reality of what they are seeing when it does not conform to their gender expectations (i.e., a child whose mother is a doctor stating that only men are doctors) (Sheldon, 1990).

Sons have a definite edge as far as parental preference for children is concerned. Most parents prefer male children throughout the world (Steinbacher & Holmes in Basow, 1992, p. 129). Also, people who prefer sons are more likely to use technology for selecting the sex of their child (Steinbacher & Gilroy, 1990). This preference for male children is further emphasized by the finding that parents are more likely to continue having children if they have only girls than if they have only boys (Hoffman, 1977).

Reasons given by women for their preference for sons are to please their husbands, to carry on the family name, and to be a companion to the husband. Reasons for wanting daughters include having a companion for themselves and to have fun dressing a girl and doing her hair (Hoffman, 1977).

Parents encourage their sons and daughters to participate in sex-typed activities, including doll playing and engaging in housekeeping activities for girls and playing with trucks and engaging in sports activities for boys (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990). Children's toy preferences have been found to be significantly related to parental sex-typing (Etaugh & Liss, 1992; Henshaw, Kelly, & Gratton, 1992; Paretto & Sydney, 1984), with parents providing gender-differentiated toys and rewarding play behavior that is gender stereotyped (Carter, 1987). While both mothers and fathers contribute to the gender stereotyping of their children, fathers have been found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than do mothers (Ruble, 1988).

A study of children's rooms has shown that girls' rooms have more pink, dolls, and manipulative toys; boys' rooms have more blue, sports equipment, tools, and vehicles (Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit, & Cossette, 1990). Boys are more likely to have maintenance chores around the house, such as painting and mowing the lawn, while girls are likely to have domestic chores such as cooking and doing the laundry (Basow, 1992). This assignment of household tasks by gender leads children to link certain types of work with gender.

Some studies have suggested that parent shaping as a socializing factor has little impact on a child's sex role development (Lytton & Romney, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1980). Other research, however,

suggests that parents are the primary influence on gender role development during the early years of life (Santrock, 1994; Miller & Lane in Berryman-Fink, Ballard-Reisch, & Newman, 1993; Kaplan, 1991). Because socialization is a two-way interaction, each person in the interaction influences the other (Lewis & Rosenblum, 1974); thus, parents and children engage in reciprocal interaction, with children both responding to and eliciting behaviors (Kaplan, 1991). Also, development is influenced by many social factors, and children may best be understood in terms of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, Alvarez, & Henderson, 1984).

Many studies have shown that parents treat sons and daughters differently (Jacklin, DiPietro, & Maccoby; Woollett, White, & Lyon; Parke & O'Leary, in Hargreaves & Colley, 1986; Snow, Jacklin, & Maccoby, 1983; Power, 1981). The parent-child relationship has effects on development that last well into adulthood. Because of these long-lasting effects, the parent-child relationship is one of the most important developmental factors for the child (Miller & Lane in Berryman-Fink et al., 1993).

Parental attitudes toward their children have a strong impact on their developing sense of self and self-esteem, with parental warmth and support being key factors (Richards, Gitelson, Petersen, & Hartig, 1991). Often, parents send subtle messages regarding gender and what is acceptable for each gender—messages which are internalized by the developing child (Arliss, 1991). Sex role stereotypes are well established in early childhood. Messages about what is appropriate based on gender are so strong, that even when children are exposed to different attitudes and experiences, they will revert to stereotyped choices (Haslett, Geis, & Carter, 1992).

Benefits of Androgynous Gender Role Orientation

While there may be some benefit to adhering to strict gender role stereotypes (i.e., providing a sense of security, facilitating decision making), there are also costs involved in the maintenance of gender role stereotypes. These costs include limiting opportunities for both boys and girls, ignoring talent, and perpetuating unfairness in our society (Beal, 1994). Parents who espouse an egalitarian attitude regarding gender roles are more likely to foster this attitude in their children. Androgynous individuals have been found to have higher self-esteem (Lundy & Rosenberg, 1987; Shaw, 1983; Heilbrun, 1981), higher levels of identity achievement (Orlofsky, 1977), and more flexibility in dating and love relationships (DeLucia, 1987).

Children whose parents have strong egalitarian values tend to be more knowledgeable about nonsex-typed objects and occupations than

are other children (Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). Children whose mothers work outside the home are not as traditional in sex role orientation as those whose mothers stay home (Weinraub, Jaeger, & Hoffman, 1988). In fact, preschool children whose mothers work outside the home experience the world with a sense that everyone in the family gets to become a member of the outside world, and their sense of self includes the knowledge that they have the ability to make choices which are not hindered by gender (Davies & Banks, 1992).

Families with one or more androgynous parents (i.e., a mother who repairs the family car or a father who bakes cookies for the PTA meeting) have been found to score highest in parental warmth and support. These androgynous parents are found to be highly encouraging regarding achievement and developing a sense of self-worth in sons and daughters (Sedney, 1987; Spence & Helmreich, 1980). Because of the strong influence of parents on gender role socialization, those parents who wish to be gender fair and encourage the best in both their sons and daughters would do well to adopt an androgynous gender role orientation and encourage the same in their children.

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