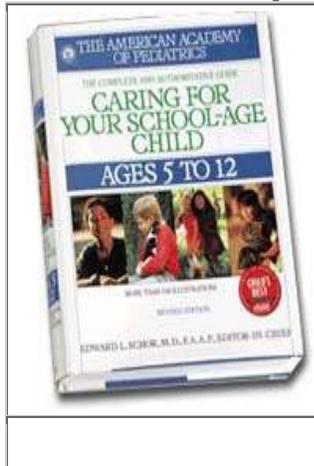




Gender Identity



Even in these "gender-neutral" times, you've probably noticed significant differences between your sons and daughters (besides the obvious physical ones). Your own boys and girls may have varying interests. Their skills and aptitudes may differ. So might their styles of play, and the way they relate to friends.

In fact, boys and girls are different. Researchers, however, disagree on whether these differences are attributable to nature or nurture. Are they the result of genetics? Or is social conditioning primarily responsible? In this ongoing debate, there are no definitive answers. Some investigators believe differences between the sexes can be traced back to the womb, where the developing brains of boys and girls are exposed to varying hormones. But other

investigators insist that these variations are primarily environmental in nature. After all, they say, boys and girls are often treated differently by the adults in their lives, including parents and teachers who often praise them for "gender appropriate" behavior and activities.

Certain gender differences, while present in the first years of life, become even more evident in school-age children. Although most boys and girls have these gender-specific characteristics and patterns of behavior, all boys are not alike, nor are all girls.

The gender-role behavior of children seems to be strongly influenced by their identification with the males and females in their lives. All children pick up characteristics from the men and women around them, incorporating these traits into their own personalities and value systems. They are also influenced by TV and sports heroes and adults in all other activities in their lives. Over time, the combined effect of these many influences may determine many of their masculine and feminine qualities. Perhaps more than any other factor, the subtleties of every child's relationship with his or her father and mother - and the attitudes of the parents toward each other and toward the child - will influence his or her gender-related behaviors.

Gender Identity in Early Childhood

A child's awareness of being a boy or a girl starts in the first year of life. It often begins by 8 to 10 months of age, when youngsters typically discover their genitals. Then, between 1 and 2 years old, children become conscious of physical differences between boys and girls; before their third birthday they are easily able to label themselves as either a boy or a girl as they acquire a strong concept of self. By age 4, children's gender identity is stable, and they know they will always be a boy or a girl.

During this same time of life, children learn gender role behavior - that is, doing things "that boys do" or "that girls do." So while playing house, boys will naturally adopt the father's role and girls the mother's, reflecting whatever differences they've noticed in their own families and in the world around them. Even if both parents work and share family responsibilities equally, your child will still find conventional male and female role models in television, magazines, books, billboards and the families of friends and neighbors. At this age, your son may also be fascinated by his father, older brothers, or other boys in the neighborhood, while your daughter will be drawn to her mother, older sisters and other girls.

Before the age of 3 children can differentiate sex-stereotyped toys that are identified with boys or girls. By 3 years of age they have also become more aware of boy and girl activities, interests and occupations; many begin to play with youngsters of their own sex in activities identified with that sex. For example, you probably saw your daughter gravitating toward dolls, playing house and baking. By contrast, your son may have played more aggressive and active games and might have been attracted to toy soldiers and toy trucks.

By the time they enter kindergarten, children's gender identities are well established.

Children this age will often take this identification process to an extreme. Girls will insist on wearing dresses, nail polish, and makeup to school or to the playground. Boys will strut, be overly assertive and carry pretend guns wherever they go. This behavior reinforces their sense of being male or female.

Gender Identity in Middle Childhood

In middle childhood, gender identification continues to become more firmly established, not only in children's interest in playing more exclusively with youngsters of their own sex, but also in their interest in acting like, looking like, and having things like their same-sex peers. During this time of life you will see your child express his or her gender identity through gender-specific role behavior, some of which began during the preschool years.

All children engage in pretend play. However, the themes of this play tend to differ between the sexes. Boys may assume the role of a heroic character (perhaps one that they've seen on television), and engage in fantasy activities that involve righteous combat or danger. Boys in the middle years are also drawn to toys that move; that's why they like to play with trucks and balls. The play of girls often revolves around school or domestic themes (they may rock their "baby" to sleep or apply a Band-Aid to their doll).

In nearly every culture that has been studied, boys are more aggressive than girls on the playground. One study found that boys spend much of their playtime participating in games, the majority of which are competitive; in fact, during play, fourth- and fifth-grade boys engage in competitive games about 50 percent of the time, compared to one percent for girls. Boys are also very focused on the rules of the games they're playing, and often argue with playmates over them ("You broke the rules!").

Girls tend to settle differences by talking them out. If there are disagreements about the rules, girls are more likely than boys to suggest a compromise, saying "Let's make the rules different, " or "Let's play a different game. " They are less likely to yell at one another, feeling it's more important to maintain the relationship than to prevail during a disagreement. Their games are more inclined to involve turn-taking than those of boys.

Boys are typically allowed and sometimes encouraged to be assertive, outspoken and loud, and their excesses are dismissed with the explanation, "Boys will be boys." However, you should guide your son toward channeling his aggressiveness in constructive ways, including burning off energy in physical play rather than confrontation. Roughhousing and fighting, although common among boys in this age group, tend to decline during the later years of middle childhood.

Keep in mind that children learn from their play, so guide your daughters (and your sons) into a broad array of experiences. They should be given toys and directed into activities that go beyond the stereotypes of their sex. Thus, while it's fine to give your daughter a doll, also present her with traditional boys' toys.

Excerpted from ["Caring for Your School-Age Child: Ages 5-12"](#) Bantam 1999

NOTE: The bold formatting in this document was added by TYFA for emphasis. None of the content of the original publication has been altered in any way.



