

Healthy Gender Development and Young Children



A Guide for Early Childhood Programs and Professionals



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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Overview

Healthy Gender Development and Young Children: A Guide for Early Childhood Programs and Professionals offers practical guidance for teachers, caregivers, parents and staff. It draws on decades of research on child and gender development, and experiences of early childhood educators, pediatricians, and mental health professionals.

We hope you find this resource helpful in your work to promote children’s resilience and early learning. As one of the adults in young children’s lives, you can play an important role in guiding children as they explore one of their most pressing questions: Who am I?

This guide is organized by the following topics:

- **What We Know.** Learn about the research regarding healthy gender development and important terms.
- **What Programs Can Do.** Explore strategies for creating a safe and nurturing learning environment for children.
- **What You Can Do.** Practice responding to children’s feelings about their own and each other’s gender expression.
- **Children’s Books That Support Healthy Gender Expression.** Find a selection of children’s books for children ages 2 and up.
- **Related Resources and Selected References.** Discover resources and references about healthy gender development and young children.

What We Know



How Children Learn about Gender Roles

As young children develop, they begin to explore gender roles and what it means to be a boy or a girl. Cultures provide expectations for boys and girls, and children begin learning about gender roles from the norms of their family and cultural background. They also hear messages about gender roles from the larger world around them.

Through their interactions and their play exploration, children begin to define themselves and others in many ways, including gender. Children may ask their parents and teachers questions about gender, take on “boy” and “girl” roles in dramatic play and notice differences between the boys and girls they know. They may choose certain toys based on what they think is right for boys or girls. They may also make statements about toys and activities that they think are only for girls or only for boys (Langlois, & Downs, 1980; O’Brien, Huston, & Risley, 1983; Egan, Perry, & Dannemiller, 2001).

The ability to recognize when things are the same or different is an important skill that children develop over time. It’s only natural that they start asking questions to help them sort out the differences between boys and girls. It’s easy to see how they may think that being a boy means doing some things and liking some things, and being a girl means doing and liking other things.

Gender in Young Children

At birth, a child is legally assigned a gender based on physical biology (female or male). Young children may think of gender as one of many personal characteristics.

Gender Expression

When a child (or adult) chooses activities, behaviors or clothing that our culture defines as typically male or female, it is called gender expression. Choices can be aligned with a person’s biologically assigned gender, like a boy playing with trucks. The choices may also be different, like when a girl plays with trucks.

From a young child’s perspective, playing with a toy or wearing certain clothing simply means “I like this.” Children do not yet have the understanding of how their choices’ may be commonly associated with one gender or another.

From a teacher/staff perspective, making these kinds of choices is part of healthy child development. This is how children express their developing sense of self.

(American Psychological Association, 2015)

While many clear categories exist—a color is not a fruit and a dog is not a tree—many things that may have traditionally been limited to one gender or another are not inherently male or female. We can help children develop an understanding of categories that can include both boys and girls by such simple, straightforward responses as “toys are toys” and “clothes are clothes.” These messages can help children learn that any child can, for example, play with any toy or dress up in any kind of clothing.

A Note about Gender and Play

Gender and Gender Identity

For most children in the United States, gender and gender identity are not so different. Children usually choose toys and activities associated with their physical gender.

Other children choose activities that are associated with another gender. It’s hard for them to understand why they can’t play the games that interest them, or play with the children they like most. From a child’s perspective, that’s like being told that your favorite color has to be red, but you know your favorite color is blue.

(American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015)

Stages of Gender Development in Early Childhood

For more than 50 years, child development researchers have studied how young children learn and think about gender (Kohlberg, 1966; Bem, 1981; Martin & Halverson, 1981; Ruble & Martin, 1998; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum; Trautner, et al., 2003; Miller, et al., 2006; Zosuls et al., 2009).

Children learn the social meanings of gender from adults and culture. Beliefs about activities, interests, and behaviors associated with gender are called “gender norms,” and gender norms are not exactly the same in every community.

Young children look to caring adults to help them understand the expectations of their society and to develop a secure sense of self. Children are more likely to become resilient and successful when they are valued and feel that they belong (AAP Healthy Children, 2015; Kohlberg, 1966; Ramsey, 2004).

Research has identified several stages of gender development:

Infancy. Children observe messages about gender from adults' appearances, activities, and behaviors. Most parents' interactions with their infants are shaped by the child's gender, and this in turn also shapes the child's understanding of gender (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989; Witt, 1997; Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin, & Fabes, 2011).

18–24 months. Toddlers begin to define gender, using messages from many sources. As they develop a sense of self, toddlers look for patterns in their homes and early care settings. Gender is one way to understand group belonging, which is important for secure development (Kuhn, Nash & Brucken, 1978; Langlois & Downs, 1980; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989; Baldwin & Moses, 1996; Witt, 1997; Antill, Cunningham, & Cotton, 2003; Zoslus, et al., 2009).

Ages 3–4. Gender identity takes on more meaning as children begin to focus on all kinds of differences. Children begin to connect the concept “girl” or “boy” to specific attributes. They form stronger rules or expectations for how each gender behaves and looks (Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken 1978; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2004; Halim & Ruble, 2010).

Ages 5–6. At these ages children's thinking may be rigid in many ways. For example, 5- and 6-year-olds are very aware of rules and of the pressure to comply with them. They do so rigidly because they are not yet developmentally ready to think more deeply about the beliefs and values that many rules are based on. For example, as early educators and parents know, the use of “white lies” is still hard for them to understand.



Researchers call these ages the most “rigid” period of gender identity (Weinraub et al., 1984; Egan, Perry, & Dannemiller, 2001; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2009). A child who wants to do or wear things that are not typical of his gender is probably aware that other children find it strange. The persistence of these choices, despite the negative reactions of others, show that these are strong feelings.

Gender rigidity typically declines as children age (Trautner et al., 2005; Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, & Shrout, 2013). With this change, children develop stronger moral impulses about what is “fair” for themselves and other children (Killen & Stangor, 2001).

What Programs Can 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."



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, and parents. 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 . . .”
- 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.



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?”



Engage in Discussions about Healthy Gender Development

Different perceptions among adults, whether staff or parents, of gender development can be used as a basis for discussion. Some staff and parents 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 parents 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.”

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 parents and ask them if they want to talk more about it. Parents 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 parent 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.

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 parents 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.

What You Can Do



Interactions with Children, Staff, and Parents

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 re-direct children to positive activities.
- Practice what you want to say and do. See the examples in the next section 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 ones below (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 a caregiver 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 learning and development.”

“Sometimes parents ask about other children. For example, a parent might say, ‘I heard that Diego calls himself Isabella now, and he wears dresses every day. Why would his parents 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 parents love her, and they are trying to do what is best for her—just as you are doing for your child.”

When a provider wants to talk with a child’s parents or guardians 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?”

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.”



Children's Books that Support Healthy Gender Development



Books for Ages 2 and Up

A Fire Engine for Ruthie. Newman, L. (Ages 2–5).

Nana has dolls and dress-up clothes for Ruthie to play with, but Ruthie would rather have a fire engine.

Of Course They Do! Boys and Girls Can Do Anything. Roger, M.-S, Sol, A., & Jelidi, N. (Ages 2–5).

Attempting to break gender roles, this book depicts boys and girls engaging in activities that are supposedly associated with the opposite sex. Boys cook, jump rope, take care of babies, and dance, while girls play sports and drive cars.

Books for Ages 3 and Up

The Story of Ferdinand. Leaf, M., & Lawson, R. (Ages 3–5).

Ferdinand is the world's most peaceful—and—beloved little bull. While all of the other bulls snort, leap, and butt their heads, Ferdinand is content to just sit and smell the flowers under his favorite cork tree.

Who Has What? All About Girls' Bodies and Boys' Bodies. Harris, R. H., & Westcott, N. B. (Ages 3–7).

Humorous illustrations, conversations between two siblings, and a clear text all reassure young kids that whether they have a girl's body or a boy's, their bodies are perfectly normal, healthy, and wonderful. This is helpful for parents or families when their children start to ask questions about their bodies.

For Ages 4 and Up

Amazing Grace. Hoffman, M. (Ages 4 and up).

Grace loves stories, whether they're from books, movies, or the kind her grandmother tells. So when she gets a chance to play a part in Peter Pan, she knows exactly who she wants to be.

Ballerino Nate. Bradley, K. B., & Alley, R. W. (Ages 4 and up).

Nate decides he wants to dance after attending a recital, but his older brother tells him that boys can't be ballerinas. Nate does wonder why he is the only boy in the class; but with his mom's support, Nate follows his dream.

Jacob's New Dress. Hoffman, S., Hoffman, I., & Case, C. (Ages 4–8).

Jacob loves playing dress-up, when he can be anything he wants to be. Some kids at school say he can't wear "girl" clothes, but Jacob wants to wear a dress. Can he convince his parents to let him wear what he wants?

Kate and the Beanstalk. Osborne, M. P., & Potter, G. (Ages 4–8).

Kate (instead of Jack) trades her family's cow for magic beans and climbs the beanstalk to find a kingdom in the clouds.

My Princess Boy. Kilodavis, C., & DeSimone, S. (Ages 4–8).

Dyson loves pink, sparkly things. Sometimes he wears dresses. Sometimes he wears jeans. He likes to wear his princess tiara, even when climbing trees. He's a Princess Boy.

The Paper Bag Princess. Munsch, R. (Ages 4 and up).

Princess Elizabeth is slated to marry Prince Ronald when a dragon attacks the castle and kidnaps Ronald. In resourceful and humorous fashion, Elizabeth finds the dragon, outsmarts him, and rescues Ronald—who is less than pleased at her un-princess-like appearance.

The Princess Knight. Funke, C. (Ages 4–7).

Despite the taunting of her brothers, Princess Violetta becomes a talented knight, and when her father proposes to give her hand in marriage to the knight who wins a tournament, Violetta uses her brains as well as her brawn to outwit him.

Red: A Crayon's Story. Hall, M. (Ages 4–8).

Red has a bright red label, but he is, in fact, blue. His teacher tries to help him be red (let's draw strawberries!), his mother tries to help him be red by sending him out on a play date with a yellow classmate (go draw a nice orange!), and the scissors try to help him be red by snipping his label so that he has room to breathe. But Red just can't be red, no matter how hard he tries! Finally, a new friend offers a brand-new perspective, and Red discovers what readers have known all along. He's blue!

Related Resources and Selected References



Related Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics' Healthy Children.org: Gender Identity in School

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx>

Eight (8) Positive Ways to Address Children's Gender Identity Issues

<http://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/development/behavioral/gender-identity-issues-children/?slideId=46660>

Gender Spectrum: Resources for Gender Inclusive Schools

<https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources/education-2/#cuatro>

Southern Poverty Law Center—Teaching Tolerance: Not True! Gender Doesn't Limit You!

<http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-32-fall-2007/feature/not-true-gender-doesnt-limit-you>

We Are Different, We Are the Same: Teaching Young Children about Diversity

<http://extension.psu.edu/youth/betterkidcare/knowledge-areas/environment-curriculum/activities/all-activities/we-are-different-we-are-the-same-teaching-young-children-about-diversity>

Welcoming Schools: Developing a Gender Inclusive School

<http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/frame-work-for-developing-a-gender-inclusive-school/>

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