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boys vs. girls

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If you have children or work with them, you've probably heard statements like "Dolls are for girls" or "A fire truck is a boy's toy." At just three years old, how do children know if they are girls or boys? How do they find out their gender? The answer to this question is in some ways simple: gender socialization. In my introduction to sociology course, I learned to approach this concept first by splitting up the term.

So, sociologist Joan Ferrante describes gender as a social distinction based on culturally conceived and learned ideals about appropriate appearance, behavior, and mental and emotional characteristics for male and female. This differs from sex, because sex is a biological distinction, whereas gender is a social characteristic. Socialization, Ferrante writes, is the process by which people develop a sense of self and learn the ways of society in which they live. Therefore, gender socialization is the process of learning the norms of your specific gender.

This concept was on my mind when I recently started a new job at a daycare, and, in the past few weeks, I have been observing the children's gender socialization to see what they say to others and how they react to what others tell them about gender. The first day I observed, I was with the three- to four-year-old class. Damarion,

a younger boy who doesn't attend preschool, wanted to wear a tutu. A four-year-old preschooler, Rhys, came up to him and politely said, "Damarion, skirts are

for girls," just before he went to the kitchen area to play with the dolls. When I followed to ask Rhys where he had learned the "skirt rule," he simply said, "My teacher only allows the girls at school to play dress up with skirts. She tells us that they are for girls," What was I supposed to say to that? I didn't know how to explain to Rhys that it was okay to wear a skirt as a boy without messing up what his preschool teacher had been teaching him. So, I only asked, "So, if you think skirts are for girls, then don't you think that dolls are for girls, too?" Rhys corrected me, saying, "NO! Boys can be daddies and the girls can be the mommies." He then went on with his day. What I took from this interaction was that Rhys has been learning at school that skirts are for girls, and Damarion hasn't. Therefore, Damarion, since he hasn't been told otherwise, thinks wearing skirts is perfectly normal for a young boy.

Another aspect of this interaction that stuck out to me is who had taught Rhys the "skirt rule." His teacher clearly isn't just teaching counting and the alphabet, she is acting as an agent of socialization. Ferrante defines agents of socialization as significant others, primary groups, in-groups and out groups, and institutions that shape our sense of self or social identity, teach us about the groups to which we do and do not belong, help us

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to realize our human capacities, and help us negotiate the social and physical environment we have inherited. In these ways, Rhys's teacher is socializing him to know the social norms of his gender. She is essentially teaching him how to "be" a boy.

On my second day of observation in the daycare center, I was with the five- to six-year-old group on the playground. During "free-play" I noticed Ethan, a kindergartener with four older sisters, crying. I went over to ask him if everything was alright. That was when I overheard another child, Dylan, saying "Ethan plays with Barbies. He must be a girl!" As Ethan began to cry harder, he tried to explain to Dylan that his sisters made him play with Barbies but he wasn't a girl. Dylan just laughed and walked away. I calmed Ethan down and put Dylan in time out. Dylan protested, "I shouldn't be here. I was just letting him know that he can't play with dolls or everyone will think he is a funny bunny." Dylan then explained that this is what his father said if he caught Dylan playing with Barbie dolls. "I was mainly looking out for him. If he keeps this up, everyone will think he's a girl, and he doesn't want that." When older children like Dylan do things that seem out of the social norm, like playing with dolls when they've been told that only girls do that, they can be made fun of. I believe that kids think this is the only distinction between girls and boys—what they play with or how they dress.

It seems that, above and beyond teachers, the most influential people in a child's gender socialization process are their parents. I know from experience that my parents influenced me and my brothers in many ways. My dad once told me "Sis, you can't be fighting with these boys, you will end up getting hurt." The sad thing is, I could keep up with them. And my mom used to ask, "Don't you want to stay home and practice your cheers instead of going with those dirty boys?" But then she would say things like "Black his eye!" or "Do a wheelie!" to my brother. I remember being about seven years old and beating up a little boy in the neighborhood because he was picking on my brother. My mom and dad were proud of me . . . and mad at the same time. My dad could only say, "Girls don't act like this." My response was "Well, Dad, if Bubby [my brother] didn't act like a girl, he could have beaten him up himself. Is he even a boy?" In these situations and others, my parents taught me the social norms of being a girl.

As a daycare teacher, I, too, am an agent of socialization. We at the center are supposed to show all of the children the same amount of attention and console them in the same ways. During observation, though, I realized that this was not the case, even for me. I observed how differently all of the teachers reacted to similar cases. One of my first times in the toddler room, a little girl smacked another little boy, and the little boy hit her back. I went to the little girl to make sure she was okay and to calm her down. I then put the little boy in time out, and scolded him without even asking if he was okay. Why? Because most people believe that girls are more "sensitive," but if you "coddle" boys, they will grow up to be mama's boys (and nobody wants that).

One other big part of socialization deals with mass media and children's toys. Think about it: have you ever seen a boy dressed like a girl on television? The primary characters on television—intentional or unintentional role models—are gender-specific. If you turn on the Disney channel, you're going to see Disney princesses and princess merchandise targeted to female viewers, and it's effective. All of the girls at daycare want to grow up and be princesses. When I asked a group of three-year-olds what they wanted for Christmas, the girls wanted things like Barbies, various princess dolls, and "big girl make-up." Why? Because Barbie shows little girls what it's like to be grown up, and princess dolls are presented as the perfect portrayal of what a little girl wants to grow up to be. Have you ever seen a Barbie that dressed as a tomboy? Have you ever seen a fire fighter doll depicting what it's like to be a "girl"? Barbie shows and teaches girls what they should look like and what they can grow up to be, just as action figures do with boys. The problem is, action figures like those on the *Power Rangers* are often more imaginative and show boys that they can grow up to be big and strong, they can fight for what they believe in (or just to fight).

Between the influences of mass media, parents, teachers, and other kids, gender socialization takes hold early. These are just a few reasons why the children I observed "know" their gender and its appropriate social norms at such a young age.

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