When does childhood end? That is a hard question to answer. Defining the boundaries of childhood (and deciding on the range and limits of our consideration of the sociology of childhood) is a difficult task. Childhood is a social construction that is clearly related to, but not determined by, physical maturation, cultural beliefs about age, and institutional age grading.

For the purposes of this book, childhood includes preadolescence, which is generally defined as the period from 7 to 13 years of age. Given the scope of this book, we will not be able to discuss the transition to adolescence or adolescent peer culture in detail. In the field of sociology, however, adolescence has received much more attention than childhood, and some excellent recent studies look specifically at the transition to adolescence (see Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Eder & Nenga, 2003). In this chapter we will consider adolescents and adolescent peer culture in regard to the role electronic media play in adolescents’ lives. We will also include adolescence in our discussion, in Chapters 10 through 12, of the social problems of children and youth.

In Chapters 7 and 8 we identified two basic themes in children’s peer cultures: (a) communal sharing, the strong desire for sharing and social participation, and (b) control, children’s persistent attempts to actively gain control over their lives. In this chapter, we will discuss how these themes are produced and extended in the peer cultures of preadolescent children. The chapter is especially concerned with how the extensions of these patterns are related to children’s development of unique social selves or identities as they make the transition from childhood to preadolescent
peer cultures. The chapter also examines patterns and processes in the rapidly changing nature of electronic media in the lives of preadolescents and adolescents.

Peer Cultures in Preadolescence

Most of our knowledge of the peer cultures of preadolescent children is the result of research done in Western societies. We know from the research discussed in Chapters 6 through 8, however, that children’s groups are much less age segregated in non-Western societies. Children in these societies who are 7 to 10 years old spend much of their lives in mixed-age groups caring for and playing with younger siblings and other younger children in their local communities. These preadolescents have much less time for peer play in general, as they take on a range of tasks to help support their families. Furthermore, as we will see later in this chapter, research across racial, ethnic, and social class groups in the United States challenges some of the well-documented patterns in the peer cultures of White, middle- and upper-class children. Therefore, we must be careful to keep these differences in mind as we explore the basic themes of sharing and control in the peer cultures of preadolescent children.

Friendship Processes in Preadolescent Peer Cultures

As we saw in Chapter 7, preschool children immensely enjoy the simple act of being with one another and doing things together. They often signal recognition of their ability to carry out joint actions with verbal references to friendship such as “We’re friends, right?” (Corsaro, 2003). However, generating shared meaning and coordinating play are often difficult tasks for young children. Thus, preschoolers spend a great deal of time creating and protecting the shared play and peer routines that provide them with a sense of excitement and emotional security.

Things are different for preadolescents. Children 7 to 10 years of age easily generate and sustain peer activities, but they now collectively produce a set of stratified groups, and issues of acceptance, popularity, and group solidarity become very important. We will explore the importance and complexity of this increasing differentiation in peer relations by examining social participation and friendship processes, the nature and structure of differentiated friendship groups, and friendship, differentiation, gender, and race in preadolescence.
Social Participation and Friendships

In preadolescence, the primarily nonverbal play routines of early childhood (for example, approach-avoidance and other play routines) are gradually replaced by verbal activities that involve planning and reflective evaluation. It is for this reason that T. Chin and Phillips (2003) argued that in the study of preadolescents’ play, we need to determine the intensity of children’s involvement in their activities and not just identify their various activities. In short, Chin and Phillips argued that kids don’t just play; they are collectively involved in their activities, from being absorbed in watching television to the point of knowing and talking about complex plot structures in soap operas, to being engaged in complex sociodramatic play, to exploring novel interactive settings with peers and adults. Chin and Phillips’s research is especially interesting because the authors studied children outside of the school setting—in their homes and neighborhoods during the summer months. These settings can challenge children’s imaginations and interactive skills because there are often no structured activities to turn to as there are in schools or after-school programs. The authors presented a vivid example of two preadolescent girls, Jane and April, who spent much of the summer together. They often pretended that they were sisters and that the scooters they liked to ride were horses.

In the following example, they talk to the researcher about a play scenario in which they pursue husbands on their horses (scooters) but make sure the play does not violate the rules of the church they attend.

Jane said, “Yesterday we were playing that she [April] was dating the sheriff and I was dating the sheriff’s brother.” I [the researcher] didn’t know what to say, so I said that dating the sheriff sounded like fun. Jane added, “And the sheriff’s brother…” I nodded and laughed. They started discussing dating the sheriff and whether or not they should play that game today. They decided to and then debated how old they should pretend to be [they had already chosen to be 13 and 17 for their previous game]. Jane said, “Well you can’t if you’re 13—you can’t date one person until you’re 18. It’s against church standards.” April sighed but nodded and they decided to be 18 and 19.

(T. Chin & Phillips, 2003, p. 165)

This example shows how preadolescent children reflect on the nature of their play and how it relates to their futures and presents. The example also nicely captures the intensity of the play of children who are often together and consider themselves best friends.

Rizzo (1989), in his work in a first-grade classroom, found that developing best friends was a key aspect of peer culture. He reported that
first-grade children appeared to have an internalized concept of friendship that serves multiple functions in peer relations. Specifically, in his yearlong ethnography of first graders, Rizzo found that the children

attempted to determine the existence of friendship by comparing the internal concept with specific features of interactions with frequent playmates, to act in accordance with this concept when with friends, and to object when their friends failed to live up to their expectations. (p. 105)

In short, the children had the beginnings of a reflective awareness of what a friend should be, and they realized that they did not have to wait until they found themselves playing with a peer to have a friend. They could try to control who their friends would be!

Many times, however, the children found that their friendship bids (asking to be one’s friend or being nice to someone) were not accepted and were at times actively rejected. Having a better awareness of what being a friend involves did not ensure that they could develop close friendships. In fact, in Rizzo’s study the most enduring friendships were the result of what could best be termed “local circumstances” of play and peer relations. Children became involved in types of play they enjoyed, and like the preschoolers we discussed earlier, they verbally marked and agreed that they were friends. Unlike the younger children, however, the first graders would maintain these patterns of shared play with certain children over time and come to mark the relationships as special—by considering themselves to be best friends.

Best friends, then, often tried both to protect their friendships from the possible intrusions of others and to expand their friendship groups. It is not surprising that these two processes came into conflict in a variety of ways. First, even though best friends wanted to expand their groups beyond their two-person dyads, they were very sensitive to the possible disruption of the fragile, dyadic best-friend relationships. Therefore, they often displayed jealousy when their best friends played with others without them, and they quarreled with their best friends about the general nature of their play with others.

Rizzo and others see these disputes and conflicts as serving many positive functions, which I will address in the section on disputes, conflict, friendship, and gender. Here, I want to discuss another process in peer relations that develops shortly after best friendships are formed: the increasing differentiation of friendship groups.
Social Differentiation and Friendships

Preadolescent children’s alliances are often linked to changes of positions in friendship groups, providing the children with opportunities to test a series of social identities. Children’s social identities “are thus oriented towards alliances with other children in activities that also separate the children” (Evaldsson, 1993, p. 258). In Rizzo’s study, for example, best friends often tried to expand their groups by constructing clubs, with membership offered to other kids they liked. The children would sometimes give names to these clubs, but the clubs seldom had any real purpose except to provide a way of expanding the friendship group. Some children were not offered membership, and others were rejected, resulting in the beginning of the development of stratified groups.

In Rizzo’s study these groups were rather loosely bound and often broke down and then re-formed. In Evaldsson’s study of the play of Swedish 7- to 10-year-olds in after-school centers, the children formed more stable friendship groups that were centered on different activities in the two centers. In one center, the children highly valued possession of things, skills in acquiring these possessions, and competence in disputes and discussions about these valued objects. In this center the children frequently engaged in physical games, especially marbles, but competence in debating who was good at these games, in disputing issues of fair play, and in discussing who had the best possessions (marbles) was valued as much as competence in actually playing marbles. In the second center, the children’s identities and friendship processes were more relational and emotional. Instead of centering on physical activities, skills, and talk about such activities and skills, the children in the second center were more concerned with appearances, romances, and involvements in secret activities. These values were displayed “in intimate alliances, where comparisons, guessing, teasing and joint laughter support social differentiation” (Evaldsson, 1993, p. 259).

We will return to Evaldsson’s study to look more closely at the nature of these play activities and games in the next section because they nicely illustrate how children address ambiguities, concerns, fears, and conflicts in peer culture. What is of particular interest here, however, is that gender was not a central factor in the differentiation of friendship groups at the two centers she studied. This finding is quite different from the findings of studies of friendship processes among American White, middle- and upper-class preadolescents.
Social Differentiation, Friendships, Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Gender and Peer Relations. As we saw in Chapter 8, many studies have documented increasing gender differentiation in children’s peer interactions beginning at around 5 or 6 years of age and reaching a peak in the early elementary school years (Adler & Adler, 1998; Gottman, 1986; Maccoby, 1999; Oswald, Krappman, Chowdhuri, & von Salisch, 1987; Thorne, 1993). Although there is extensive gender segregation in peer relations in this period, it is rarely complete; most studies show consistent mixed-sex grouping and cross-sex interaction (usually on the order of 10% to 20%) even in the preadolescent period (Thorne, 1993). What is more important for our understanding of peer cultures is not simply the gender segregation that surely occurs in the preadolescent period but the nature of interactive patterns and interpersonal processes within the segregated groups. There is a growing debate about whether girls and boys have different peer cultures.

Thorne argued that a familiar story line runs through the literature on children and gender. “The story opens,” noted Thorne, “by emphasizing patterns of mutual avoidance between boys and girls and then asserts that this daily separation results in, and is perpetuated by, deep and dichotomous gender differences” (1993, p. 89). These differences are seen as both affecting and being affected by the structure and nature of activities in gender-segregated groups. For example, several studies have found that boys interact in larger groups (Lever, 1978), engage in more aggressive and competitive play (Adler & Adler, 1998; R. Best, 1983), and frequently organize their activities and relations around organized sports (Adler & Adler, 1998; Eder & Parker, 1987; G. A. Fine, 1987; Lever, 1978; Thorne, 1993).

In their book Peer Power, a study of children’s peer relations in and out of school in a primarily middle- and upper-middle-class community of about 90,000 people, Adler and Adler (1998) discussed how the nature of these different activities contributes to popularity within the peer cultures of preadolescent boys and girls. They defined popular children as those who are the most influential in setting group opinions and who have the greatest impact on determining the boundaries of membership in the most exclusive social groups.

They found that boys’ and girls’ popularity or rank in the status hierarchy was influenced by several factors. Boys’ popularity revolved around athletic ability, a cult of masculinity or being tough, sophistication in social and interpersonal skills, a culture of coolness or detachment, and in later preadolescence, success in their relations with girls. Girls’ popularity centered on
family background, physical appearance, social skills, precocity or adult-like concerns and style, and good academic performance.

Adler and Adler also identified a rigid clique structure in each age and gender group they studied, with four main strata: the high, wannabe, middle, and low ranks (social isolates). Adler and Adler found the kids in the highest strata to be extremely manipulative and controlling in their relations with peers. The leaders of these popular cliques maintained their power and control by manipulating dynamics of membership inclusion, stigmatizing those in lower groups, and reminding subordinates of their tenuous group membership. Through practices of inclusion and exclusion, the popular cliques held group members, and those wanting to join the group (the wannabes), to stringent and often capricious norms of behavior. For example, one girl, Diane, recalled her inclusion in the popular group and its aftermath:

In fifth grade I came into a new class and I knew nobody. None of my friends from the year before were in my class. So I get to school, a week late, and Tiffany comes up to me and she was like, “Hi Diane, how are you? Where were you? You look so pretty.” And I was like, wow, she’s so nice. And she was being nice for like two weeks, kiss-ass major. And then she started pulling her bitch moves. Maybe it was for a month that she was nice. And so then she had clawed me into her clique and her group, and so she won me over that way, but then she was a bitch to me once I was inside it, and I couldn’t get out because I had no other friends. ’Cause I’d gone in there and already been accepted into the popular clique, so everyone else in the class didn’t like me, so I had nowhere else to go. (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 59)

Diane’s experiences in the popular group were common, but things were quite different in middle-level friendship groups. These groups had lower prestige, but they also had more secure friendships without the manipulations that characterized the popular groups. Also, the middle groups made up a larger percentage of the school, so the manipulative behavior of the popular kids was not the norm. Still, the popular kids were more visible and had more power in the school and also received more attention from the Adlers in their documentation of peer power.

Popular boys were just as controlling and manipulative as girls within their groups and even more likely to make fun of and tease kids in lower groups, especially the social isolates. The Adlers’ identification of mean girls is somewhat surprising but not unique given recent studies (see Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). Girls’ aggression, although often indirect, is often very hurtful to peers and more prevalent than once thought.
These findings raise problems for claims by psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan argued that girls have a “different voice” in that they value relationships and caring as opposed to boys’ concerns with individual rights and abstract notions of justice. Girls are so concerned with maintaining personal relationships that they strive to avoid conflict and negotiate problems indirectly for fear of seeming uncooperative.

Gilligan’s work has led to the general acceptance of the “two-cultures” view of children’s gender socialization, differences in men’s and women’s styles of talk, and the nature of social relationships across gender groups more generally (M. M. Barnes & Vangelisti, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1990). We should not be too quick to accept this view of children’s gender relations, however, as we saw from the Adlers’ work. This view has recently been called into question for several other reasons.

First, most studies have been of White, middle- and upper-class American children. African American and Latino boys and girls are much less separated in their play than White, middle-class children. Also, the nature of peer activities, concerns, and values of African American and Latina girls is different from that of White, middle- and upper-class American girls (Goodwin, 2003; Schofield, 1982; Thorne, 1993). Goodwin, for example, found that African American and Latina girls engage in highly complex physical games and play in which competition and verbal conflict are recurrent and highly valued (1990, 1998). The important point here is not simply that the studies on which the two-cultures view is based have limited generalizability. Rather, the issue is that findings and interpretations in line with the “separate-cultures” view implies that there is something about the very nature of being male or female that leads to these differing values and social relations by gender. The implication is, therefore, that the pattern should be universal. There is little support for such a claim.

It is important to note that the issue runs deeper than possible class and cultural differences in gender relations among children. There is also the problem of interpreting data only in line with the two-cultures view, which stresses very clear-cut, almost dichotomous, sexual differences and perspectives. In many of the studies, exceptions to the general pattern are pushed aside and seldom pursued. Rarely, if ever, is there a search for negative cases. How might things be done differently? How might we go about identifying and interpreting exceptions to the separate-cultures view? Thorne (1993) has argued for the importance of grounding observations in a wider range of social contexts (focusing on the less visible and peripheral as well as on the most conspicuous and dominant groups and settings). We need to study both the core groups of the leaders and the
more peripheral groups of less popular children. Goodwin has championed the intensive microanalysis of naturally occurring events—how children actually go about playing games such as jump rope, discussing friendships, and gossiping in their everyday lives. Goodwin’s point is especially well taken. Even with the recent increase in ethnographic studies of peer relations, there is still a common reliance on reports of children’s activities rather than on direct study of the activities themselves. In the next section we will focus on what preadolescents do in a range of social settings. We will discuss gender relations, and we will explore more generally how children’s activities help them to gain control over their lives and further develop a sense of self and identity.

Goodwin’s work is also important because it sheds light on the importance of race and ethnicity in children’s peer relations. Until recently there have been few studies of children’s friendships and peer relations across racial and ethnic groups. Work by Kimberly Scott (2002, 2003) and Valerie Moore (2001, 2002) has begun to address this neglect. Scott studied peer relations among first- to third-grade children in a middle-class, ethnically diverse elementary school and a poor, predominately African American elementary school. In her research, Scott focused on girls and found that in the middle-class school they played and made friends primarily during lunch periods and recesses. The girls’ friendship groups were primarily segregated by color, with Black and Hispanic girls playing together and White girls playing together, with the exception of one group (a high-status club) of which all the girls aspired to be members. Membership in the club was based primarily on adherence to rules set by club leaders who were always White girls. The leaders decided who could be in the club and set the rules: Don’t be too aggressive, always follow the leader’s directives, and don’t play with boys. To maintain their power, leaders frequently stigmatized one member (or more) of the group as “out girl” (usually for playing with boys but sometimes for arbitrary reasons that were not clearly explained). Furthermore, the out girl was almost always a girl of color. Scott found, through observations and interviews with girls of color, that they often disliked the leaders and their wielding of power but seldom challenged them. Thus, the prestige of belonging to the exclusive club overshadowed the loyalty of the girls to individual friends and the more egalitarian play in their more segregated groups.

Play and friendship at the poor, predominately African American school was communal and egalitarian in that there was little if any exclusion, the girls showed concern for the welfare of their playmates, and they enjoyed sharing toys and food. Nonetheless, as in the middle-class school,
a club did exist. However, this club was inclusive and primarily reflected the structuring of relationships across age groups. Scott noted that the club was not always operative, and when it was not in action club members readily played with nonclub girls. When in action, the main goal of the club seemed to be one of older girls’ socializing younger ones. The club had a “boss” and a leader, and “only second or third grade girls can be leaders because it is believed that older girls ‘know what they doin’ while first grade girls ‘only be runnin’ around’” (K. Scott, 2003, p. 198).

Overall, Scott’s study is fascinating in that we see that the tendency to form hierarchies through clubs existed in both groups but that the nature of the hierarchies varied greatly from exclusion to inclusion, given the overall racial, ethnic, and class makeup of the two schools studied.

Moore’s (2001, 2002) research blends nicely with that of Scott in that Moore studied somewhat older children (6- to 12-year-olds) in summer camps. She labeled one camp typical in that it was similar to many summer camps in orientation and activities, whereas the other was a “cultural awareness” camp in that, in addition to typical camp activities, it had a goal of helping to foster respect and appreciation for cultural diversity. Moore found a good bit of segregation in both camps by age, gender, and especially race and ethnicity. When the White kids at the typical camp did engage kids of color, it was usually to ask them questions about “who they were” in a sense as being different from Whites and White culture. In the “culturally aware” camp, there was a powerful clique of primarily older Black kids (both boys and girls). In this camp, however, there were more instances of kids’ struggling with challenging race-category membership as a legitimate way to establish in- and out-group membership. As a result, there was more instability in and questioning of clique membership as well as some shifting in the clique structure as a result.

Overall, Scott’s and Moore’s research adds race as an important dimension to studies of clique structure and dynamics among preadolescents as seen in the work of Adler and Adler (1998) and others. As Moore noted, her findings suggest

that the peer cultures that kids create in multiracial settings encompass different “lessons” about power and conformity than do those in white settings. Not only does the presence of children of color introduce a wider range of power dynamics into clique structure, but the instability and fluidity regarding conceptions of race that kids of color bring to a setting disrupt easy definitions of “in-group” and “out-group,” thus affecting the social negotiation of identity in that setting. (Moore, 2002, p. 76)
In one of the few studies of race and ethnicity in preadolescent peer culture that looks at Asian children, Nukaga (2008) studied school lunchtime interactions of Korean children at two elementary schools where Asian children were in the majority. She found that Korean children viewed their ethnic food as a symbol of the Korean identity or self and negotiated its meaning and value in interaction with peers. Different forms of food exchange had distinct relevance for marking, maintaining, and muting ethnic boundaries. Gift giving of wet or dry food was used to mark strong friendships and make new friends primarily within the same ethnic and gender group. Sharing of wet food was used to mark weaker friendships of mostly the same ethnic and gender group, whereas sharing of dry food could involve anyone at the school regardless of gender or ethnicity. Trading of wet food never occurred, but trading of dry food was used to mark power relations mainly across ethnicity and gender. At these predominately Korean schools certain kinds of Korean foods (especially dry seaweed) became popular mediums of exchange, which gave a certain degree of power to the Korean children over children of other races or ethnicities given their access to such foods. In fact, Latino and African American children, many of whom qualified for free lunches, had far fewer cultural resources to construct boundaries in ethnic terms.

These findings on peer relations and race and ethnicity are generally in line with other work on race in preadolescence that focuses more on teacher perceptions and school structure and processes that reinforce racial stereotypes, most especially of African American children (Ferguson, 2000; A. Lewis, 2003). Finally, recent research in Europe on interaction among immigrant and majority children (see Evaldsson, 2003; Hall, 2002; Poveda & Marcos, 2005; Rampton, 1995) demonstrates the importance of comparative research on peer relations across racial and ethnic groups.

**Autonomy and Identity in Preadolescent Peer Cultures**

Everyday activities in peer cultures enable preadolescents to negotiate and explore a wide range of norms regarding friendship processes, personal appearance, self-presentation, heterosexual relations, personal aspirations, and relations with adult authority figures. By participating in organized and informal games, verbal play routines, and collaborative
storytelling, preadolescents explore developing norms and expectations about themselves and their place in peer and adult culture without the risk of direct confrontation and embarrassment. Let’s explore these activities, looking at how they relate to friendship relations, conflicts and disputes, and the challenging of adult control and authority.

**Verbal Routines, Games, and Heterosexual Relations**

Like preschool children, preadolescents often engage in play routines that involve communal sharing. However, preadolescents with increased language and cognitive skills have more control over when and how such routines might occur. Thus, in addition to more loosely structured play routines, preadolescents often participate in formal games both spontaneously and in organized settings. Children of this age also talk about their play and games in a reflective way, and they can appreciate the subtle and symbolic aspects of play routines both during and after their enactments. Finally, preadolescent children often address concerns about appearance, self-presentation, and heterosexual relations within play routines and games. In this sense, they use the “as-if” or pretend frame of play and games as a secure base for addressing sensitive and potentially embarrassing concerns, desires, and ambiguities.

**Routines, Verbal Play, and Humor.** Preadolescent children often mark allegiance to friendship bonds through participation in sharing routines. These routines are similar to the general celebration of simply playing together that we saw among preschool children. Here, though, the very nature of participation in the routines forces children to think about their relationship to one another and their place as individuals in a group.

Consider the Israeli sharing routine *xibùdim*, documented by anthropologist Tamar Katriel (1987). Katriel conducted naturalistic observations of the sharing routine and also interviewed 20 preadolescents (ages 9 to 12) and 10 younger children (ages 5 to 7). Xibùdim usually occurred on the way home from school:

A group of five children approaches the falafel stand. One exclaims “I’m buying.” Another counters, “*Bexibùdim! Bexibùdim!*” in a melodious chant. He gets a falafel portion, holds it in his hands, and all take a bite in turn, with a gay clamor. After the third one has eaten, the buyer mutters, “Hey, *beraxmanut*” (with pity) and offers it to the last child. He then eats his falafel, walking along with his friends. (Katriel, 1987, p. 309)
As we can see, this routine has a definite structure: (a) the opening or announcement of an intention to buy a treat by a particular child; (b) the acknowledgment by other children, usually involving the exclamation *Bexibùdim! Bexibùdim!* uttered in a melodious chant; (c) the purchase of the treat by the proposer; (d) the offering and sharing of the treat, with each accompanying child taking a small bite; and (e) the optional recycling of a second round of sharing. The routine involves delicate negotiation in that, as Katriel has noted, the bite size has to be regulated so that everybody gets a share and about half the treat is left for the owner. (This is illustrated by the owner’s request for pity before offering the last bite.) According to Katriel, the sharing of treats in xibùdim “can be viewed as a ritualized gesture that functions to express and regulate social relationships within the peer group” (1987, p. 307). A key element here is the concept of the individual’s respect for others in her or his group of friends; xibùdim is derived from the verb *lexabed*, whose literal meaning is “to respect.” In an interview, an 11-year-old girl explained her insistence on getting a bit of her friend’s treat in this way: “It’s not that I will die if I don’t get a bite of the popsicle, that I will die a day earlier or something, but it is simply... respect, as the word says” (p. 307). This statement, along with the main features of the routine, support Katriel’s insightful interpretation of the routine as a “symbolic sacrifice in which one’s self-interest and primordial greed are controlled and subordinated to an idea of sociality shaped by particular cultural values, such as equality and generalized reciprocity” (p. 318). Finally, on a more concrete level, sharing routines such as xibùdim are fun. Their production “serves to reassert the very existence of children’s peer group culture” as a “celebration of childhood” (p. 318).

Routines like xibùdim also are interesting because they simultaneously assert individual rights and creativity and collective solidarity. Many other activities in preadolescents’ peer cultures possess this characteristic, especially those related to verbal games and humor. For example, preadolescents produce and embellish a wide range of children’s lore—games, jokes, chants, rhymes, riddles, songs, and other verbal routines that are created and transmitted by children over time and across societies. Such lore has been well documented by child folklorists (McDowell, 1979; Opie & Opie, 1959, 1969). These activities are rich with laughter, which serves as a communicative marker. It both signals that the activity at hand is not serious and “also signifies support; others with you” (Frønes, 1995, p. 223).

We saw examples of children’s lore in our earlier discussion of humor among preschool children, as well as in the Italian children’s chanting routine or *cantilena*. However, the humor and verbal play rituals of
preadolescents are often more complex, reflective, and portable than those of preschoolers. Merely saying the words *pee-pee* or *poo-poo* can generate laughter anywhere or anytime among preschoolers. This joke provides little opportunity for reflective awareness or embellishment, however, and its expression in play and games often disrupts the activity at hand. Preadolescent children collect jokes and riddles and practice and embellish their presentations, often embedding the joking and laughter in other peer activities. They try out jokes on older siblings and parents and discover that this audience also can be the source of new additions to their developing repertoires. These jokes and riddles often have a two-step, set-up-and-punch-line structure, which demands a certain level of cognitive decentering (the punch line or solution must be inferred from the set up) and language skills (questions must be asked, words phrased or voiced in a certain way, and so on).

My daughter constantly tried out new jokes on me when she was in elementary school. Here is an example of one she told when she was about 6 years old: “What do you call a train filled with bubble gum?” “I don’t know.” “A Chew-Chew Train!” From an adult point of view, the jokes get better as the child ages. When she was 8, my daughter’s jokes contained elements of indirectness, involving a play on words or some other type of deception in the setup. She learned many of these from other kids but also several from her uncle. Here are two examples:

1. “If there are 20 sick sheep [sounds like ‘26 sheep’] and 1 dies, how many are left?” “25.” “No, 19. I said ‘20 sick sheep!’”

2. “If a plane crashed right on the border between Canada and the United States, where would they bury the survivors?” “I don’t know, probably in their hometowns.” “No, silly, they don’t bury survivors!”

Like the preschool children who laugh over and over again at the mere mention of certain bodily functions, preadolescents like to repeat their jokes again and again and laugh uproariously at the punch line. They are often unconcerned when the joke’s recipient gets the right answer and laugh just as loud at his or her statement of the punch line. Adults, on the other hand, tire of these types of jokes pretty quickly and would rather not hear them even a second time. However, such adult reactions often make repeating the jokes more fun for the children and give them a sense of control over their elders. My daughter would preface many of her jokes (especially several she had heard from her uncle) by saying, “Daddy, pretend you didn’t hear the one about—.” She did this so often that at one
point I threatened to strangle my brother for telling her the jokes. Not fully appreciative of my teasing, she said, “Daddy, you’re not really going to strangle Uncle Joe, are you?”

Games, Secrets, Self, and Interpersonal Relations. Preadolescent children like to play games. They play a variety of games in a wide range of informal and formal settings. Although a great deal of work has documented such games and how children’s participation influences their cognitive, emotional, and social development, studies of children actually playing games are rare. Several fairly recent studies have addressed this neglect.

One example is G. A. Fine’s (1987) study of Little League baseball teams. This work is important because it shows how preadolescent boys’ participation in organized sports over an extended period of time provides them with a number of interactive settings and occasions for the production and maintenance of a local peer culture. During a Little League season, the boys do much more than learn and practice baseball skills and develop a competitive ethos. Interwoven within the culture of baseball is a local peer culture in which the boys develop a strong sense of male bonding and address a wide range of concerns about identity and their perceptions and relations with girls. The boys also use the activities of baseball practice and games as a backdrop for producing, sharing, and acquiring the language, jokes, and lore of preadolescent cultures.

Perhaps some of the best work on children’s games as situated activities is that of Goodwin (1985, 1990) and Evaldsson (1993). By situated activities, these researchers mean games that are produced in real settings with real children who often have long interactional histories. Research that is based on verbal reports of children’s participation in games or that relies on analysis of the form and structure of games abstracted from the actual performances misses this situated aspect. Such research is bloodless, so to speak. It surely tells us something about how children spend their time and about the developmental implications of participating in games with various physical, cognitive, language, and emotional demands. But if one really wants to capture the rich social world of children’s lives and peer cultures, it is necessary to enter their play, to be willing to get your pants dirty and shoes muddy.

This is just what Goodwin and Evaldsson have done. Goodwin has studied the play and games of African American and Latino children in the United States for many years. She has observed, audiovisually recorded, and analyzed these children participating in a wide range of play and games (dramatic role-play, team sports, jump rope, hopscotch,
racing, pitching pennies, and more) in their neighborhoods and in nearby playgrounds. Goodwin has found that the children’s play and games are marked by complex verbal negotiations, disputes, and conflicts through which the children display and develop social identities and organize their peer cultures. We will return to look at Goodwin’s work in detail in the next section, where we consider the importance of conflict and disputes in children’s peer culture. Here, we want to look more carefully at Evaldsson’s study of children’s participation in games in Swedish after-school programs.

Evaldsson studied two programs for 6- to 10-year-old children over an 8-month period. She found that the children repeated games day after day. The children in the Panda center preferred to play and trade marbles, whereas the children at the Bumblebee center often engaged in jump rope. Marbles is a highly complex game. Piaget (1932) analyzed in some depth the game’s contributions to children’s negotiation strategies and their moral development. Evaldsson, on the other hand, focused on how children relied on repeated performances of the game to create a locally shared peer culture and to display and evaluate selves and identities in that culture.

Marbles involves skills in playing the game—that is, aiming and shooting marbles at a hole or at another player’s marbles, quickly anticipating the flow of play, and shouting various restrictions regarding shooting. Evaluating the value of marbles from a competition and trading standpoint is also important. Although the children in the study played marbles in dyads, there was always an audience of nonplayers who observed and often participated in arranging matches, evaluating the play, and negotiating marble trading. Evaldsson found that boys primarily played the games, with girls more actively involved in evaluating the play and trading.

The games and trades had natural histories in that they occurred during the school term, and during this period of time the children came to assess each other in terms of these various skills. In her documentation of the history of marble play as a complex series of situated activities, Evaldsson found that the children’s selves were intimately related to status, which was linked to the possession and negotiated value of marbles as things. In other words, as the children increased and decreased their status in relation to their possession of the valued objects, they used talk to negotiate the value of the objects (1993, p. 133). The whole process was made even more complex by shifting alliances of children in judgments and negotiations during both the playing and the trading of marbles.
Thus, we see the developing notion of identity or self embedded in the collectively produced peer culture.

Jump rope, like marbles, is rule governed, and participants are expected to have a particular orientation to one another during play (Evaldsson, 1993; Goodwin, 1985). Although there is a good bit of variation, the general pattern in jump rope is for two children to hold opposite ends of a rope and turn it for a third child, who jumps when the rope hits the ground. The child who jumps is normally entitled to continue until she misses. When this occurs, the jumper exchanges places with one of the turners, who now has the opportunity to jump. Legitimate misses are the fault of the jumper and not the turner. Therefore, misses are sometimes negotiated to assign fault, and these negotiations can become very heated and complex. Jump rope is competitive because successful jumpers earn high status and often obtain the valued position of “first jumper” in initial rounds of play. However, a most interesting fact of jump rope is that children must cooperate to compete. There is a built-in motivation to turn the rope fairly for jumpers because if one turns too fast or not in synchrony with the beat, there is a chance that when the jumper next becomes a turner, he or she will do the same for the previous offender (Evaldsson, 1993; Goodwin, 1985).

We can see from this description that jump rope is much more complex than some previous studies, like that of Lever (1978), suggest. Lever argued that girls’ games such as jump rope or hopscotch are eventless turn-taking games with much less complex structures than boys’ competitive sports games. Such a misperception is the result of not observing, recording, and carefully analyzing the play of the games themselves. However, the complexity and significance of the games are even more apparent when their production and place in peer culture are examined over long periods of time. For example, in a recent study of the game Four Square among immigrant and native Swedish children, Evaldsson (2003) found that many of the games were gender integrated, and several of the girls were active participants who could play as well as or better than the boys. In her analysis, Evaldsson presented descriptions and visual data that clearly challenge the notion of “throwing like a girl.”

But let’s return to girls’ games and consider a typical game of jump rope in Evaldsson’s (1993) study. She found that in the Bumblebee after-school center, both boys and girls engaged in jump rope activities on a regular basis. The most frequent game was Cradle of Love. This variant of jump rope can be played a number of ways, but the most common variety at Bumblebee was this: A jumper jumps as turners and members of an
audience call out the letters of the alphabet. If the jumper misses on a particular letter, others call out the name of another child or of some media character, who then becomes the potential (or pretend) love interest of the jumper. For example, if Amy misses at the letter $P$, someone may call out “Paul!” Then Amy jumps to the rhyme, “Paul do you love me? Tell me truly aye or nay.” Then the speed of turning is increased and the rhyme continues: “Yes-No Yes-No Yes-No,” with the romantic link confirmed or denied according to when a miss occurs. If a jumper succeeds in moving through the entire alphabet, she can propose the name of the love interest without the constraint of the initial letter. In this case, however, other children quickly offer up potential names for the jumper to evaluate.

We can see that repetitions of this game among boys and girls who spend a lot of time together take on characteristics that have as much to do with their developing relationships toward the opposite sex as they do with their competitive skill in jumping. Let’s look at a more extended example from Evaldsson’s work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRADLE OF LOVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sara has just successfully jumped through the alphabet. She gets to pick a name, and two children suggest Dag (Dan in Swedish), who is one of the most popular boys with girls in first grade. Sara seems a bit embarrassed and quietly says “no.” Then the children suggest comic book characters such as Batman and Superman, and Sara responds “no” to all these suggestions. The children then return to offering names of children in the group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ania:  | Leif? |
| Sara:  | No. |
| Paul:  | Paul? |
| Fred:  | Someone in your class? |
| Paul:  | Axel? |
| Ania:  | Paul? |
| Fred:  | Paul? |
| Sara:  | Nope. |
| Axel:  | Per-Ola? |
Evaldsson suggested that Sara was probably too shy to reveal her true preference for Dag when the name was first suggested. Also, because there was more than one Dag in the group, the matter was somewhat ambiguous. However, Sara clears up the ambiguity later and takes the game seriously when she chooses the boy she is fond of in real life. Now this ordinary, everyday game of jump rope is intensified or transformed as the pretend versus real frame is blurred. This transformation is nicely signaled with the children’s laughing, shouts of “Wooowie,” and teasing.

---

**Paul:** We’ve already had Per-Ola.

**Sara:** Dag [very quietly]. I’ll take Dag then. Yes, Dag then.

**Mona:** Dag in our class?

**Sara:** Nope.

**Ania:** Dag sitting over there in the green cap?

**Paul:** Is that him?

**Sara:** Tuurn!

**Paul:** Him [pointing].

**Fred:** Wowww! Wooowie!

**All:** Dag Do You Love Me

Tell Me Truly Aye or Nay [turning faster now]

Yes-No Yes-No Yes-No Yes-No [turning stops]

Yeeessss!

**Flera:** Yeesss ho ho ho [laughing]

**Fred:** Dag! [Calling to Dag]

**Flera:** Ha ha ho ho ho ho [laughing]

**Rick:** Dag, well that doesn’t necessarily mean Dag.

**Fred:** But she said Dag.

**Ania:** Congrats, Dag!

---

*Source: Adapted from Evaldsson (1993, pp. 117–119).*
of Dag and Sara. In this way, in the midst of the jump rope game, love becomes a public topic that can engage nearly all the children at that center. Sara takes a chance by addressing her real concerns, feelings, and uncertainties about boys, but she is “protected” by the safety of the play frame, which in this case she dares to stretch.

In addition to participating in organized games, preadolescent children also create their own cultural artifacts to organize and share their activities. For example, children at this age often separate themselves from others through the sharing of secrets. Sharing secrets involves activities ranging from verbal whispering to the writing and passing of notes, the establishment of secret clubs, and the production of complex texts and artifacts. The whispering talk and control of space marks the fact that members of a secret club are part of an exclusive group.

The children in Evaldsson’s study produced a number of artifacts related to secrets in their peer culture. These included “love lists” and “fortune-tellers.” Both boys and girls constructed love lists on which they wrote the names of best friends in order of preference. These lists were then shared with selected friends and often became the topic of discussions, teasing, and sometimes disputes. Children created fortune-tellers by folding a sheet of paper into four parts, then folding the corners into the center, and finally folding the paper into four parts again. The folded paper was then arranged to fit two fingers from each hand for opening and closing (Evaldsson, 1993, p. 196; see Exhibit 9.1).

After constructing the fortune-tellers, children painted the different parts various colors and wrote messages in the corners that were concealed by the folds. They often talked together as they decided which messages to write. They then played with the fortune-tellers in dyads, with other children observing. In play, the owner of the fortune-teller asks the other player to choose a number and then counts it out, opening and closing the folds. Then the owner asks for a color and upon hearing the response folds back the corner of that color and reads the message aloud. Most messages either tease or insult the recipient, saying, for example, that he or she looks like a monkey or is in love with a particular child. The children were fascinated with the magic quality of fortune-tellers and greatly appreciated that these artifacts were of their own creation. The creation of and play with fortune-tellers is not restricted to Sweden, of course, as they also have been documented among American children (Knapp & Knapp, 1976). Many readers may have constructed them in their youth. They are similar, of course, to toys such as the Magic Eight Ball and decoder rings.
An important point about both love lists and fortune-tellers is that they are durable creations of peer culture. They not only conceal private information and secrets but make them last longer and allow for their transformation outside the situation of actual use. This transformation often generates a traceable history of their use, which can make them subjects of teasing, debates, and conflicts among peers.

**Disputes, Conflict, Friendships, and Gender**

Many activities that bring preadolescent children together and build friendships are often the source of disputes and conflicts. Rizzo (1989), for example, found that as first graders developed best friendships they set
higher expectations for their friends’ behaviors. These expectations often led to disagreements and arguments. In fact, it is a common lament of many kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers that so-called best friends seem to be fighting all the time! We have to be careful, however, not to accept the adult perspective regarding conflict among young children too readily—most especially the middle-class American adult perspective. Middle-class adults in the United States are often uncomfortable with disputes and conflicts among children. As we saw in our earlier discussion of the peer cultures of preschool children, there is wide variation in the nature and evaluation of conflict and argumentation across cultures and across subcultural groups within American society. Furthermore, recent research documents the positive aspects of conflict and disputes in children’s everyday lives. Let’s look at some of this research, examining first verbal conflicts and disputes in peer relations and then behavioral routines involving cross-gender conflict.

Verbal Disputes and Conflict in Peer Relations

What are some of the causes of conflict and disputes among preadolescents? How are conflicts important in their daily activities and peer cultures? The chief cause may be the increased differentiation in friendship groups in preadolescence, but conflict, especially arguments and teasing, can also bring children together and help organize their activities. In this sense, cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive and often coexist within the same activities (Goodwin, 1990, p. 84). Research on peer conflict among elementary school children shows how disputes are a basic means for constructing social order; cultivating, testing, and maintaining friendships; and developing and displaying social identity (Davies, 1982; Goodwin, 1990, 1998; Katriel, 1985; D. Maynard, 1985; Rizzo, 1989).

Goodwin’s work on preadolescent children’s play and games in neighborhood settings clearly demonstrates the important role of conflict in the organization of peer activities. For example, Goodwin found that the African American children she studied organized their talk to build and highlight opposition. Boys engaged in arguments and ritual insults as a way of dramatizing their play and to construct and display character. Conflicts and disputes seldom reached clear resolution, as disagreements between individual children often expanded into group debates. In short, conflict was enjoyed, even relished, and the children actually cooperated to embellish and extend rounds of arguments and insults.
Furthermore, the children never complained to adults about peer teasing and insults, rarely excluded peers from play, and did not produce rigid status hierarchies.

Let’s take a closer look at Goodwin’s work on conflict among preadolescent African American and Latina girls to capture the tenor of her work. The research is especially important because the everyday lives of these children are seldom carefully studied and are often misunderstood in American social science.

An especially impressive example of research on children’s dispute routines is Goodwin’s (1990) analysis of gossip disputes among Black female preadolescents. Unlike males, in their direct competitive disputes (Goodwin, 1990; Labov, 1972), Black females frequently engage in gossip disputes during which absent parties are evaluated. The airing of such grievances frequently culminates into he-said-she-said confrontations. A he-said-she-said confrontation can be defined as a type of gossip routine that is brought about when one party to a dispute gossips about the other party in his or her absence. The confrontation comes about when the absent party challenges his or her antagonist at a later time. Consider the following example: “In the midst of play, Annette confronts Benita saying: ‘And Arthur said that you said that I was showing off just because I had that blouse on’” (Goodwin, 1990, p. 195).

Annette is speaking to Benita in the present about what Arthur told her in the recent past about what Benita said about Annette in the more remote past. This complex temporal structure is crucial to he-said-she-said exchanges because the accusation locates the statement made by the defendant about the speaker as having been made in the speaker’s absence. Such talking behind one’s back is considered a serious offense in the peer culture. In her analysis, Goodwin specified the complex linguistic structures that the children use in such confrontations to order a field of events, to negotiate identities, and to construct social order. The gossip routine is important because it is inappropriate to insult, command, or accuse others openly in the girls’ peer culture.

Goodwin (1998, 2006) has also carried out comparative studies of disputes and conflicts in preadolescent girls’ games of hopscotch. On the surface, hopscotch seems to be a simple turn-taking game, demanding a fair amount of physical coordination. One person jumps at a time through a grid of squares usually numbered from one to nine. The object is to be the first player to advance a token (rock or bean bag) from the lowest to the highest square and back again. At the start, a player tosses her token from below square one into a square and, while standing on one leg, jumps
from one end of the grid and back again on one foot, avoiding squares where other tokens have been tossed. Where there are two unoccupied squares next to each other, the jumper’s feet should land in the two adjacent blocks. If a player falls down, steps on a line, or steps outside the correct square, she loses her turn.

Hopscotch can involve a great deal of negotiation about the rules. In the hopscotch play of the African American and Latina girls that Goodwin studied, nonjumpers intensely scrutinized the body movements of jumpers and were quick to call out infractions and enforce the rules. Consider the following example:

Lucianda takes her turn, jumping twice in square two and possibly putting her foot on the line of square one. Joy sees the violation and yells, “You out.”

Lucianda shakes her head no, “No, I’m not!”

“You hit the line,” counters Joy. Now Crystal comes over in support of Joy and says, “Yes, you did. You hit the line. You hit the line,” as she points to the line.

Lucianda leans towards Crystal. “I ain’t hit no line!”

“Yes, you did,” shouts Alisha, who has now come over to the group. Crystal supports Alisha, smiling and shaking her head as she points to the spot of the violation, “You did. You s—”

“No, I didn’t,” interrupts Lucianda.

“Yes, you did,” counters Alisha again.

“Didn’t she go like this?” Crystal asks the others. And then looking at Lucianda she says, “You did like this,” as she steps on the line in an imitation of Lucianda’s jump. “You did like that.”

Joy now walks up to the grid and rubs her foot across the line, “Yeah, you hit that line.” Then she taps the line twice with her foot and says, “Right there, honey!”

Finally, another non jumper, Vanessa, comes over and says to Lucianda, “You out now!” (Adapted from Goodwin, 1998, pp. 35–36)

In this example, we see that the girls negotiate and enforce the rules with a great deal of teasing and dramatic flair. In fact, in many cases the stylized disputes and arguments over misses or what were labeled “attempts
to cheat” became more important than the actual play of hopscotch. Rather than simply following the rules or ignoring them, the girls work and play with them, often purposely highlighting opposition (Goodwin, 1998, p. 38).

Things were quite different in the hopscotch play of the middle-class White girls Goodwin observed. Instead of closely observing and evaluating the play, the children paid less attention to misses and mitigated their responses to them. Consider this example:

Linsey, Liz, Kendrick, and Cathleen are playing. Linsey throws her stone and hits a line. Linsey then begins jumping. “Oh! Good job, Linsey! You got it all the way on the 7,” says Liz.

Kendrick clearly sees that Linsey has hit a line with her foot. She shakes her head, “That’s—I think that’s sort of on the line though.” “Uh,” says Liz to Linsey, “your foot’s in the wrong spot.”

“Sorry,” says Kendrick, “that was a good try.”

Later Linsey is jumping again and she makes it through several squares. “You did it!” shouts Cathleen. “Yes!” says Linsey. She then hits a line as she nears the end of her turn.


Some feminist scholars see the mitigated nature of children’s speech of this type as positive, arguing that it demonstrates concern for affiliation and promotes relational solidarity (M. M. Barnes & Vangelisti, 1995; Gilligan, 1982). Goodwin, however, noted that group solidarity can be achieved in a variety of ways. Furthermore, she pointed to a “lack of accountability for one’s action” in the mitigated language style of the middle-class White girls in this example. She argued that interpersonal conflict is often the heart of social life. In fact, conflicts seldom disrupted play in her data; rather, they added spice and flair. In this view, conflict and cooperation are not opposites but overlapping processes that are embedded in the larger ethos of playfulness. Disputes, teasing, and conflict can add a creative tension that increases its enjoyment (Goodwin, 1998).

In her recent book The Hidden Life of Girls, Goodwin (2006) has developed these points even further, which expands her earlier work with
African American boys and girls from Philadelphia and African American and Latina girls from South Carolina. In the latest work she studied the play of girls and boys from a wide range of ethnicities (Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese in a working-class area of Los Angeles and immigrant children of similar backgrounds from Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Azerbaijan living in South Carolina) as well as racially and ethnically mixed, primarily middle-class girls and boys from a Southern California elementary school. As Goodwin found in earlier work, both boys and girls show a preference for disagreement in the play of hopscotch and other games. She noted,

> Emotion is conveyed through affective intensity, vowel lengthening and raised volume. Unlike delayed disagreement observable in adult conversation, the girls, through their intonation and gestures (such as extended finger points) display in a forceful, integrated manner that opposition is occurring, thus countering many of the stereotypical views of female language use. (2006, p. 43)

In the Southern California primary school she studied, Goodwin found that the girls she studied arranged themselves in cliques that were composed of asymmetrical relations on the playground. In maintaining these relations they made use of bald imperatives, accusatory statements invoking age and gender, and pejorative descriptions, and they “generally demonstrated their ability to artfully collaborate to present a position and debate it through clever, appropriate, and forceful comebacks” (2006, p. 119). These findings fly in the face of girls as cooperative and supportive in their peer relations. She also found that the clique of girls she studied challenged the right of boys to control an area of the playground (the soccer field) and negotiated sharing the space with the boys and playground aides who at first resisted such a solution.

Goodwin also added to her earlier work on children’s play of jump rope. In this latest work she again demonstrated the complexity of the game, that both boys and girls played, and that girls were better performers and controlled boys’ participation in cross-gender play. She also found that the girls in the fifth- and sixth-grade clique she studied competed for status through storytelling, verbal assessments of one another, and bragging. Assessments and types of bragging were as direct and competitive as what has been found in boys’ groups but in some ways were more complex as girls who tried to place themselves too far above the group were open to sanction.
We can make one final point about the relationship between conflict and cooperation in children’s play: When children who have spent most of their time in different sociocultural groups come together for play, they often misinterpret each other’s styles. Middle-class White girls, for example, often find the teasing, oppositional style of Latina and African American girls to be threatening, bossy, and mean, whereas African American and Latina girls see the mitigated and polite style of middle-class White girls as patronizing (Rosier, 2000; Schofield, 1982). These findings show the value of research on differences in interpersonal interaction and play styles across sociocultural groups. The identification of sources of misinterpretations can be a first step in improving cross-cultural relations.

Borderwork in Cross-Gender Relations

The relationship among teasing, conflict, and tension in peer relations is probably nowhere more apparent than in cross-gender relations among preadolescents. Girls and boys are often apart at this age, but for certain activities they do work and play together with little obvious attention paid to gender. For example, a number of researchers have found that children often play in mixed-gender groups in neighborhoods, most especially if the playgroups are also mixed in age (Ellis, Rogoff, & Cromer, 1981; Thorne, 1993; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Others have found consistent cross-gender interaction in schools, but it occurs primarily in settings that are not controlled by peer groups such as in classrooms and in extracurricular activities (Thorne, 1993). However, it is in peer-dominated and highly public settings in schools—such as cafeterias and playgrounds—that gender separation is most complete. In fact, many activities and routines of preadolescent children’s peer cultures in these settings seem to be all about gender. In these activities and routines, girls and boys try to make sense of and deal with ambiguities and concerns related to gender differences and relations. Many of these activities involve conflict, disputes, and teasing. Thorne (1993) has captured the complexity of such activities with her discussion and analysis of borderwork.

Borderwork refers to activities that mark and strengthen boundaries between groups. When gender boundaries are activated, “other social definitions get squeezed out by heightened awareness of gender as a dichotomy and of ‘the girls’ and ‘the boys’ as opposite and even antagonistic sides”
In her work in elementary schools, Thorne identified several types of borderwork. The first type is contests between groups of girls and boys. Among the groups Thorne studied, contests were initiated by both children and teachers. Sometimes teachers pitted boys and girls against each other in math and spelling competitions. On one occasion a teacher named the two teams “Beastly Boys” and “Gossipy Girls,” thereby supporting such contests and gender stereotypes (Thorne, 1993, p. 67). Boys and girls would at times play cooperatively in sports games on the playground, but these games were often transformed into boy-girl competitions full of taunts, teasing, and insults usually aimed at the girls.

Another type of borderwork, chasing, is also competitive, but this activity is more symbolic in its affirmation of boundaries between girls and boys. Cross-gender chasing is very similar in structure to the approach-avoidance routines of preschool children that we discussed in Chapter 6. In fact, I observed several instances of cross-gender approach-avoidance play in my work with preschoolers. Among preadolescents, chasing routines usually begin when a child from one gender group taunts members of the other group. These taunts lead to chases that are often accompanied by threats that are seldom carried out. For example, boys may taunt and tease girls, leading the girls to run after the boys and threaten to catch and kiss them. These routines are generally referred to as “chase-and-kiss,” “kiss-chase,” and “kissers and chasers” (Richert, 1990; Thorne, 1993). In her work, Thorne found that the chases had a long history, with children talking about them for days afterward with friends and even parents (1993, p. 69). Children talk about cross-gender chases because this type of borderwork gives rise to lots of tension. Children are experimenting with their growing concerns and desires regarding the opposite sex. In fact, like approach-avoidance play among preschoolers, chasing routines include the children’s marking and acceptance of safety or free zones where children find relief from mounting tensions of the chase. Among the preadolescents, however, safety zones are more than geographical spaces to which children flee to escape threatening agents. For preadolescents, the areas serve as both physical and psychological havens where the children reflect on and talk about the meaning of their experiences. In this way, the preadolescents have more direct control over the meaning of the play and collectively create shared histories of the events.

Thorne found that episodes of chasing sometimes become entwined with rituals of pollution in playground activities. Rituals of pollution are
play routines or rituals in which specific individuals or groups are treated as contaminated (as in “having cooties”). Pollution games have been observed in many parts of the world (Opie & Opie, 1969). Thorne found that variants of “cootie games” were very much a part of cross-gender conflict and teasing in that although “girls and boys may transfer cooties to one another, and girls may give cooties to girls, boys do not generally give cooties to boys” (1993, p. 74). Thus, girls are central to pollution games that contribute to boys’ power and control over them. In fact, boys sometimes treat objects associated with girls as polluting and threatening to their status in all-boy groups.

Although Thorne stressed the power of boys over girls in such pollution games, girls do reflect on the significance of these games and their images of boys. Consider the following example drawn from an Internet chat between two girls about their favorite country and western singer, Bryan White, using the girls’ own writing and punctuation (spelling as well as use of uppercase and lowercase).

**BOYS AND COOTIES**

Posted by GIRL on January 08,

Hi Jen, or jennifer, hahahaha.

arent I funny/I thought so.

sometimes I snort when I laugh isnt that so funny. hahahahahaha,
im 10 and i like bryan. well, not like but you know what I mean. Boyz usually have cooties so I know if bryan does or not.

GIRL thats 10

Reply to GIRL on January 9

Haven’t you learned anything by now? Bry doesn’t have cooties.

There is no such thing as cooties.

Reply to Bryan White Fan (Jennifer)

Posted by GIRL on January 9,

how do you know they don’t have cooties??

the boys at my school do, they eat bugs and pick their nose.
girl

Reply to GIRL, Posted by Bryan White Fan on January 9,

Okay. THEY do have something wrong but very sickening and worse.
This example shows that many preadolescent girls find boys, even those they admire, to possess many negative characteristics; it also displays these unacquainted girls’ appropriation and use of the new technology of the Internet to share their experiences, interests, and beliefs in very creative ways.

Like pollution games, the final type of borderwork, invasions, have much to do with power and dominance of boys over girls. Thorne found a pattern, which has been observed repeatedly in similar studies of preadolescent children’s activities on playgrounds. The boys in Thorne’s study would, individually or in groups, deliberately disrupt the activities of groups of girls (Thorne, 1993, p. 76; also see Grant, 1984; Voss, 1997). Boys ran under girls’ jump ropes, kicked their markers from hopscotch grids, and taunted and teased the girls in attempts to disrupt their play. Although boys much more frequently invaded girls’ space, there were some interesting exceptions to this pattern. First, although some boys specialized in disruptive behavior, the majority of the boys were not drawn to the activity. Thorne suggested that the frequent disrupters may have acted like bullies in their behaviors with peers more generally. Second, Thorne described a small number of fifth- and sixth-grade girls who organized themselves into what she called “troupes” and roamed the playground in search of action. These girls would often chase boys. The leaders of these troupes were often tall, well-developed girls who somewhat intimidated the boys.

These exceptions are important because they draw our attention to the complexity of interpreting the importance of borderwork. Borderwork, like the jump rope activities among the Swedish preadolescents in Evaldsson’s study, is play, but in the play children address issues that are of serious concern. In this way, the key feature of these types of play is ambiguity and tension. However, tension is what makes the activities so appealing to children. In fact, this very tension and ambiguity led Kelle (2000) to challenge Thorne’s assumption that heterosexual desire or interest is a precondition for borderwork. Kelle, on the other hand, found in her study of German preadolescents that information about heterosexual desire and interest was collectively produced in the gender games themselves. Thus, concerns about sexuality are a product of, not a precondition for, borderwork.

Thorne rightly pointed out that a good deal of borderwork tips the balance of power to boys because they are frequently the aggressors, control more space, and seem not to suffer from any negative implications that might be associated with engaging in such rituals. Furthermore, borderwork
often supports gender stereotypes and exaggerates gender differences. As a result, girls are clearly more apt to be adversely affected by the negative elements of borderwork than boys. However, Thorne argued that borderwork does create a space where preadolescent girls and boys can come together to experiment and reflect on how to relate to one another. The trick is how to encourage changes in or set limits to some types of borderwork to preserve that space and the delicate play frame while evening the balance of power, which more often than not now tilts in the boys’ direction.

**Challenging Adult Authority and Norms**

Preadolescents, like preschoolers, see adults as having ultimate power over their everyday lives. Possessed of increased autonomy on the one hand and a lack of adult status on the other, preadolescents continually find themselves at odds with adults. Their challenges to adult authority are at once more subtle and more direct than those of preschoolers, and these challenges are shared and evaluated more reflectively in their peer cultures.

Consider some findings from an innovative study of the hallway behavior of elementary school children by Don Ratcliff (1994). He found that the children most frequently moved about hallways in phalanxes. He defined a phalanx as two or more people side by side, usually facing the same direction and moving at least temporarily toward some presumed destination. Members of phalanxes normally engage in communication as they move.

The general rule in the elementary school was for children to move as quietly as possible in the halls in files, or lines. As a result, moving in phalanxes in hallways was valued in the peer culture because it gave children control of their interactive space, enabled them to talk and be with friends, and allowed them to challenge the authority of teachers all at the same time. Ratcliff found that “kids like phalanxes.” Some children noted that they felt happy, cool, bad, excited, and “as good as anybody else when they were in the phalanx” (1994). In interviews with teachers, Ratcliff found that some teachers saw phalanxes as disruptive but seldom enforced the rule against them. One teacher admitted talking to other teachers in hallway phalanxes and therefore saw it as hypocritical to forbid them. The children were probably well aware of the teachers’ double bind in this situation, and this may have made the behavior even more meaningful and enjoyable for them.
Most preadolescents enjoy getting the upper hand with teachers and parents. They often mock adult rules and imitate and exaggerate adults’ communicative styles in rule enforcement. For example, Parker (1991) talked about middle school basketball players who complained about their coaches’ strict adherence to practice drills. During a practice drill, the players were expected to practice only fundamental basketball moves. As they gathered before practice, the boys would violate this philosophy by dribbling through their legs, throwing passes behind their backs, and taking 30-foot jump shots. Preadolescents also enjoy creating dramas in which they recall past events involving teachers’ and parents’ disciplining them for misbehavior. In these narratives, children often act out the roles of adult authority figures, taking care to precisely capture and mock their voices, expressions, and gestures (Davies, 1982; Eder, 1988; G. A. Fine, 1987). Often, certain children become widely known and popular in peer culture for their ability to impersonate, mock, and make fun of adults.

Unlike preschoolers, who sometimes balk at adult authority and rules but eventually give in, preadolescents are much more likely to stand their ground against adult rules. Preadolescents are especially sensitive to what they see as adult hypocrisy and injustice and band together to demand their rights. In Chapter 4 we saw an example of such resistance in our discussion of the newsboys’ strike in turn-of-the-20th-century America. Several researchers of contemporary preadolescent peer cultures report similar findings (Davies, 1982; Evaldsson, 1993; Thorne, 1993). For some preadolescents the challenging of adult authority goes beyond talking back, arguing, or pointing out injustices. In fact, actively defying adult authority, challenging adult rules, and receiving disciplinary action often comes to be valued among preadolescents. Thus, earning a reputation as a troublemaker can result in higher status in the peer group (Adler & Adler, 1998). Although challenging adult authority and being in trouble was more highly valued among males, Adler and Adler (1998) also found that girls who participated in taboo activities or who belonged to a wild or fast crowd were highly popular in their peer culture.

Finally, as children in contemporary society advance into preadolescence and adolescence they become more immersed in the electronic and digital world of computer games, cell phones, and the Internet. In fact today’s preadolescents and adolescents are the digital generation and can be very intimidating to adults who have fewer digital or electronic skills and less knowledge in this area. This digital divide between youth and
adults raises fears and concerns among many parents, even those who are highly skilled in the electronic media. We next turn to a consideration of the role electronic media and related consumer culture play in the lives of preadolescents and adolescents.

Generation M: Electronic Media in the Lives of Preadolescents and Adolescents

In a recent entry from the comic strip Blondie, Dagwood’s young neighbor Elmo is playing with a fire truck when he gets a call on his cell phone. Dagwood remarks that Elmo has “some slick gadgets.” Elmo responds, “I guess so, Mr. B, but this one doesn’t even download movies,” and he adds, “I feel like I’m going backwards these days.” Dagwood, who is watching TV and does not have a slick cell phone, tells Elmo “to hang in there.” The comic is instructive in several ways. Elmo, a young preadolescent, seems more interested in his truck than the television program that Dagwood is watching, illustrating that children still like to play with toys even if the TV is on. More interesting is the digital divide we see in the generations. Elmo has a slick new cell phone that he can use to make and take calls, send text messages, play music, take pictures, and probably also record movies. However, he bemoans the fact that his phone cannot download movies and that he is going backward in the new technology. It is indeed hard to keep up, but preadolescents and adolescents are in the forefront of staying abreast of the constantly changing digital technology.

Patterns in Media Use

A recent report by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) examines media in the lives of a nationally representative sample of 2,032 third- through twelfth-grade students, ages 8 through 18. It also includes a subsample of 694 respondents who volunteered to complete 7-day media use diaries. The study was conducted from October 2008 until May 2009. It covers a wide variety of types of media use including computers, movies, music, print, television content, and video games. The study focuses on the children’s use of media for entertainment or pleasure and does not include the use of these various sources for activities directly related to schoolwork. The findings are primarily descriptive.
and involve comparison with earlier findings from a 2004 study. Though descriptive, the findings are diverse and complex, and I summarize some of the main patterns here. I then consider other studies of media use that address the effects of various types of media use on children and youth and directly examine the role of media use in the lives of children and youth in the family and with peers.

Rideout et al. noted that during the 5 years between the two studies, “young people have increased the amount of time they spend consuming media by an hour and seventeen minutes daily, from 6:21 to 7:38” (2010, p. 2). When multitasking (using more than one medium at a time) is taken into account, the amount of media use or exposure increases to 10 hours and 45 minutes a day. If we assume children and youth sleep 7 to 8 hours a day, these findings indicate they are linked to electronic media in some way or another more than 65% of their waking hours each day! Although watching television content and listening to music are the most frequent forms of media use, it must be remembered that with changing technologies both of these types of use can be and are accomplished from multiple platforms (televisions, radios, computers, cell phones, and MP3 players).

One of the most interesting findings from the study is the increased possession of new technology platforms. During the 5 years between the two studies, the proportion of 8- to 18-year-olds who own their own cell phones has grown from 39% to 66%, whereas the proportion with iPods or other MP3 players increased even more dramatically, jumping from 18% to 76% (p. 3).

Let’s take a brief look at the findings from the study for each type of media, remembering that with multitasking they are often intertwined. The report finds that children and youth view some form of TV content 4 and a half hours each day. The majority is live TV (59%); 12% is viewed via DVDs, 12% is viewed on cell phones or iPods, 9% is viewed via the Internet, and 8% is viewed via On Demand or recordings from TiVo or some other type of video recorder. Younger children, 8- to 14-year-olds, watch more TV than 15- to 18-year-olds, and many children, especially 7th to 12th graders, multitask (use a computer, read, play video games, send text messages, or listen to music) most or some of the time while watching TV. Not surprisingly, parental restrictions about program content and viewing time decrease with age, with the most restrictions being placed on 8- to 10-year-olds. As noted earlier, there has been a big increase in ownership of cell phones, with 66% of children and youth owning their own phones. The proportion varies by age, from 31% of 8- to 10-year-olds, to 69% of 11- to 14-year-olds, to 85% of 15- to 18-year-olds. Younger children
(8- to 10-year-olds) report using cell phones less frequently and primarily for talking or for listening to music, playing games, or watching TV, with little text messaging. In contrast, older children do more texting than talking. On average, 7th to 12th graders report spending about an hour and a half engaged in sending and receiving texts a day, and all those who text send an average of 118 messages in a typical day! Although not discussed as such in the report, these findings regarding texting imply that children have transformed the use of this new technology originally primarily designed for verbal communication to communication primarily via text. However, we know it is a highly abbreviated form of text often invented by youth and infused with their own meanings in line with their friendships and identities. Clearly, there is a need for in-depth research on this phenomenon. We will consider several studies on youth and texting below.

The study finds that on a typical day, 64% of 8- to 18-year-olds use a computer for entertainment purposes (with 11- to 18-year-olds spending 1 hour and 45 minutes a day on computers, about an hour more than 8- to 10-year-olds). All age groups spend a considerable amount of time playing computer games and visiting websites on the Internet, especially the video website YouTube. However, older children (especially 11- to 14-year-olds) spend nearly a half hour each day social networking on sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Among the older children who engage in social networking, there are no gender differences, but girls remain and participate at such sites for longer amounts of time.

Children’s video game playing is found to have increased in the study, but most of the increase is away from console players, which are still the most popular, to play on handheld games and on cell phones (49% play on consoles such as Wii, PlayStation, or Xbox; 29% play on handheld players; and 23% play on cell phones). Here again we see how cell phone technology affects much of the media use among children and youth. Video game playing peaks among 11- to 14-year-olds (1 hour and 25 minutes per day, compared to about 1 hour a day for 8- to 10-year-olds and 15- to 18-year-olds). Boys spend considerably more time playing video games than girls (1 hour and 37 minutes a day compared to 49 minutes a day). However, almost all of this difference is in regard to play on console games, whereas boys and girls play generally an equal amount of time on handheld games or cell phones. There is a great deal of controversy about violence in video games, which we will discuss more below. The study finds that a large percentage of children and youth (primarily boys) have played the most notorious of violent video games, *Grand Theft Auto,*
despite its M (Mature Audience) rating. Play of this game is more frequent for older compared to younger children (72% of 15- to 18-year-olds, 60% of 11- to 14-year-olds, and 25% of 8- to 10-year-olds report playing the game). The number of younger children having access to and playing the game is surprising and worrisome. However, it is doubtful they are regular players, and it is much like watching an R-rated movie. Thus, playing the game once might be both an act of rebellion against adult rules and a way to impress peers. Not surprisingly, a much higher percentage of boys than girls report playing the game. On the positive side, the study finds that many more young people play music and sports games. New music games such as Guitar Hero and Rock Band show how new technology can bring together different types of media. With these games children and youth have another platform to experience music, but here it is in a more active way of performing rather than just listening.

Children are, however, still avid listeners to music. The study finds that listening to music increases by age from a little more than an hour a day for 8- to 10-year-olds, to 2 hours and 22 minutes for 11- to 14-year-olds, to a little more than 3 hours for 15- to 18-year-olds. Children and youth still listen to music on the radio, but most now listen on iPods and MP3 players. Also more and more, especially older teens, listen on cell phones and computers. Girls listen to music more than boys, but the difference is negligible for listening on iPods and MP3 players, cell phones, and computers. Finally, of all electronic media use, listening to music is most often involved with multitasking. This finding is especially true for 7th to 12th graders. Of this group 73% report that they are most of the time or some of the time involved with other media activities while listening to music.

Finally, the study reports on the more traditional types of media activities, watching movies in theatres and reading. Despite new technologies for watching movies at home (such as HDTV, On Demand, and Blu-ray as well as easier access via Netflix), children and teens report spending the same amount of time watching films in theatres as they did in a study 5 years earlier and more than they did in a study 10 years earlier. The study finds that on a given day about 12% of all children and youth report watching a film in a theatre, and there are few differences by age and gender. Regarding reading for pleasure in terms of types of reading (magazines, newspapers, and books), percentage of those who read, and the amount of time reading, the study finds a major decrease from the last study done 5 years ago. For all print reading the percentage who report
reading of any type for pleasure dropped from 73% to 66%, and the
amount of time reading per day dropped from 43 minutes to 38 minutes. Children and youth are, of course, doing some reading online, but that amount raises total reading only about 2 minutes. The report notes that reading for pleasure continues to be the only media activity that decreases with age. It finds that 8- to 10-year-olds spend an average of 46 minutes a day reading print media, compared to 33 minutes for 15- to 18-year-olds. The difference is entirely accounted for by the fact that younger children spend more time reading books than do their older counterparts. The study offers the explanation that it “may well be that as reading assignments for school become more demanding, the amount of time young people choose to devote to reading outside of school work decreases” (Rideout et al., 2010, p. 31). This explanation is certainly viable, but it could be that reading is still a relatively new skill for young children and they enjoy appropriating something taught to them by adults in school to their own activities in the family and with peers. This may also explain the appeal of many books (for example, the Harry Potter series) that are marketed to younger readers.

Before leaving the study, it is useful to point out some demographic and other patterns regarding most of the media use data. First, for all types of media use (except for print media) the study finds that Black and Hispanic children and youth (controlling for other factors such as age, parent education, and whether the child is from a single- or two-parent family) are heavier users than White children and youth. The difference by race and ethnicity is the greatest for watching television and listening to music. It should also be pointed out that although Blacks and Hispanics read less than Whites, the difference is significant only for reading books. These findings are somewhat surprising as there is a digital divide by class, race, and ethnicity, with more wealthy White children and youth having greater access to computers and cell phones than do lower income minority children and youth (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & McGill, 2008). It could be that the findings are related to sampling techniques in the study. Finally, the study finds that children who spend more time with media (“heavy users”) report lower grades and lower levels of personal contentment compared to moderate and light users. However, it should be noted that the study “cannot establish whether there is a cause and effect relationship between media use and grades, or between media use and personal contentment. And if there are such relationships, they could well run in both directions simultaneously” (Rideout et al., 2010, p. 4).
Effects and Process of Media Use in the Lives of Preadolescents and Adolescents

The descriptive findings reviewed above give us a fascinating look into the fast-changing nature of media use by preadolescents and adolescents. However, outside of reference to some negative effects on academic and psychological health on heavy users of media, the findings tell us little about overall effects of media use and, more important, how media use is integrated into the lives of preadolescents and adolescents. Finally, the Kaiser Family Foundation study focuses only on American children and youth. We know that the increased media use of children and youth is global in nature, and much important research on this issue has taken place in other parts of the world. In this section I review research on media use as part of the lives of children and youth in their families and peer cultures.

Livingstone (2007), in an important article, laid out two differing positions in most theorizing and research on media and children and youth. On one side there are those who see the media as a social problem negatively affecting children in various ways (leading to aggression and violence, early sexuality, obesity, and so on) and set out to identify these effects. This position is in line with the “effects” literature related to children’s symbolic and material culture that we discussed in Chapter 6. On the other side there are those who do not begin with the assumption that a grave social problem exists. Instead these process theorists and researchers (who take a constructivist or cultural studies approach much in line with interpretive reproduction) stress the agency of children and argue that media use must be evaluated in social and cultural context. From this view electronic media can and often do have a positive side in which children and youth enjoy media, use them, and can gain from them.

Results from research based on the social problem or effects model are mixed and generally inconclusive. They are nicely summarized in an article by British scholars Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005, quoted in Livingstone, 2007):

There is consistent evidence that violent imagery in television, film and video, and computer games has substantial short-term effects on arousal, thoughts, and emotions, increasing the likelihood of aggressive or fearful behaviour in younger children, especially in boys. The evidence becomes inconsistent when considering older children and teenagers, and long-term outcomes for all ages. The multifactorial nature of aggression is emphasised,
together with the methodological difficulties of showing causation. Nevertheless, a small but significant association is shown in the research, with an effect size that has a substantial effect on public health. By contrast, only weak evidence from correlation studies links media violence directly to crime. (pp. 6–7)

Results from process studies on electronic media and children and youth based on constructivist or cultural studies approaches, and often using qualitative methods, cannot be so easily summarized (but see Buckingham, 2009; Drotner, 2009; Drotner & Livingstone, 2008; Ito et al., 2010). I will touch on some things we know from studies using this approach for different types of media use in the family and peer group.

Adult family members (most especially parents and particularly mothers; see Horst, 2010, p. 173) have most direct involvement with preadolescents’ and adolescents’ viewing of television or films on DVDs in the family. Such involvement involves both collaborative viewing with children and youth and the control over viewing through rules regarding the types of programming and amount of time viewing can occur. In an observation and interview study of 269 parents and children in 62 families in the United States, Hoover, Clark, Alters, Champ, and Hood (2004; also see Hoover & Clark, 2008) found different themes of media engagement. One theme is distinction in which families use rules about and viewing of media with their children as a way for placing or charting their families compared to others. Some families set themselves apart from what they see as the mainstream culture with regard to media viewing, whereas other families more or less embrace their practices as being a part of mainstream culture. A second theme running through all the families was an acceptance of the inevitability of media; even with controls and negotiation their children would consume and be affected by the media to different degrees. A third theme had to do with the difficulty of establishing a normative definition of “good media” in which families often fell back on defining good media as media seen as inoffensive. However, where some families could easily agree that programs such as Home Improvement met the criteria, there was disagreement among the families regarding edgier or subversive programming such as The Simpsons, which had a great deal of appeal to their children and youth. These themes were in line with another general principle that was generally embraced in the families, and that was “that parenting should involve pedagogy rather than prohibition; that good parenting should involve training children to become active media consumers” (Hoover & Clark, 2008, p. 117).
Results from smaller intensive ethnographies of adolescents’ use of media in the family are reported in Ito et al. (2010). One ethnography focuses on a single-parent, low-income Latino family in which Maxwel, a 14-year-old seventh grader, lives in a studio apartment with his mother Lydia and two older sisters in Los Angeles (Martínez, 2010, pp. 158–162). The family’s media possessions include two televisions (one for broadcast TV and a DVD player and another linked to a Nintendo 64 for video game play) and a digital camera. The family has a computer that was given to them as a gift from a relative, but it has been nonfunctional and in need of repair for some time. Maxwel must negotiate his TV viewing with his mother and sisters but is not unhappy about this and especially enjoys watching Spanish-language soap operas with his mother, who speaks little English. His mother in turn watches sitcoms with her son as she can enjoy the physical humor and improve her English. The digital camera, which is a possession of one of the older daughters, is useful for documenting areas of the house in need of repair (especially the bathroom and kitchen ceilings) to negotiate lower rent. The camera is also highly valued for taking photos of family events and of the family’s participation in an immigrants’ rights march. Here we see a relational approach to media use in the family where there is a positive synergy among family members that makes the most of only minimal electronic resources.

What we know about television viewing among peers is more indirect as it is based primarily on focus group interviews of children and youth rather than ethnographic observations. These interview studies reveal that children and youth have clear notions about what is seen as appropriate content for them by adults (for example, in terms of sex and violence). Preadolescents (7- to 11-year-olds) are more accepting of such views, whereas adolescents are more likely to challenge them as they see themselves as more mature and ready to view such content (see Buckingham, 2009; Kelly, Buckingham, & Davies, 1999). For both preadolescents and adolescents there is an interest in more adult content on television as a sort of forbidden fruit or for the purpose of testing boundaries even if they do not watch such material on a regular basis. The testing of boundaries can be tied directly to peer culture in the sense that viewing adult-oriented television shows or rented DVDs of R-rated movies can be something to brag about or a sign of being “cool” (Adler & Adler, 1998; Olesen, 1999). Also, watching violent or horror movies is a sort of risk management for children and youth in which they challenge themselves emotionally and deal with fears. Here we see a parallel to our discussion in Chapter 7 of the approach-avoidance play of younger children.
Also in line with this theme of testing fears, interview studies of preadolescent and adolescent children show that they distinguish between real and fictional violence and show more concern with being victims of real crime they see perpetrated on news programs than with violence of fictionalized evil characters on television or in movies (Buckingham, 1996; Livingstone, 2007; Nightingale, Dickenson, & Griff, 2000). I encountered an example of this phenomenon in my own work with much younger children in a Head Start program. Several of the children sometimes played a type of approach-avoidance game they called “Nightmare Freddy” based on the horror film series *Nightmare on Elm Street* featuring the evil mass murder Freddy Kruger. I told two of the children, Ramone and Zena, that they should not watch such “scary” movies. Both children scoffed at my concern, noting that these shows are “not scary” because they are “not real.” Ramone explained to me that Freddy has “just got on a costume that makes people scared.” When I asked if these films caused them to have bad dreams, Zena dismissed the notion by explaining that her bad dreams related to real-life concerns: She didn’t have bad dreams about Freddy; she had bad dreams about a mean dog that chased and tried to bite her. Zena and Ramone left little doubt about their ability to distinguish make-believe from real threats, and they displayed highly sophisticated reasoning that was very impressive for children of this age (see Rosier, 2000, p. 104, for a discussion of these data).

Many scholars who do work on electronic media and children and youth point to what they call “moral panics” (Buckingham, 2000; Critcher, 2008). Such panics center on the belief that media expose and corrupt youth with their violent content. These panics are often spurred on by extensive news coverage of violent acts by children and youth such as the Columbine High School shootings. In this discourse about negative effects of media on youth, the argument goes beyond issues of desensitization to violence and increased aggression to one of inciting youth to violent acts. Such moral panics are particularly part of concerns about video games given that the content of the most popular games involves a great deal of violent action.

There are a number of responses to moral panic. Some are sociological, pointing to other structural causes of violence such as inequality and poverty, the wide availability of guns, youth gangs, and drug trafficking, to name just a few. Here authors such as Sternheimer (2003) pointed to the fact that as video game play among children and youth increased dramatically in the 1990s, rates of violent crime decreased. It is interesting, however, that in arguing it is not the media that are the cause of violence
in this case (or at least not video games or films), Sternheimer did feel the news and television media contribute to these moral panics through their sensationalized reporting of high school shootings and the wide coverage they give to research on youth and the media that suggests a connection. We will return to this issue of moral panics when we discuss children as social problems and the social problems of children later in the book. But here I want to focus on what we know about video games and negative effects such as violence and about recent research on the playing of video games by children and youth in cultural context. This latter research shows the many positive and creative aspects of video game play.

In their book *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games*, Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson (2008) reviewed the literature on gaming, violence, and aggression and reported results from their own study on the subject. Kutner and Olson found some indications that high levels of play with Mature Audience–rated video games is correlated with aggression. However, they found there is no conclusive evidence of a causal relation or that game play is correlated with violent crime. In fact, Kutner and Olson concluded, “The strong link between video games violence and real world violence, and the conclusion that video games lead to social isolation and poor interpersonal skills, are drawn from bad or irrelevant research, muddle-headed thinking and unfounded, simplistic news reports” (p. 8).

Kutner and Olson’s book surely does not put an end to the debate about video games and violence, but it does suggest that a more nuanced look at video games in the lives of children and youth is in order. For video games a key is to focus on the lived culture of gaming. As De Castell and Jenson (2003) argued, in “gaming culture, games are not just played, they are talked about, read about, ‘cheated,’ fantasized about, altered, and become models for everyday life and for the formation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (p. 651). Although there is an image of video games’ being the domain of preadolescent and adolescent boys, both the types of games played and who plays them has been diversifying in the United States. Ito and Bittanti (2010), for example, pointed to data from the Entertainment Software Association that “reports that 38 percent of game players are women” (p. 196). They also noted that women “age eighteen or older represent a significantly greater share of the game playing population (30 percent) than boys age seventeen or younger (23 percent)” (p. 196). Still, boys are more likely to have video game consoles in their rooms and play what are termed “first-person shooter” games such as Halo. Girls play these games as well but more often play a wider variety of
games both on consoles and handheld devices and on cell phones. Girls also play the first-person shooter types of games differently than boys, often using a strategy of trying to avoid death or elimination rather than destroying or killing adversaries (Walkerdine, 2009). Walkerdine argued that shooter games are in their design, strategies, and goals much in line with action-hero masculinity, making the task of becoming masculine more straightforward in terms of self-management practices. Girls, on the other hand, “have to pursue the demands of contemporary femininity which blend together traditional masculinity and femininity. Trying to do this while playing games is a very complex and difficult task” (2004, p. 28). Using a relational model of gender and documenting variations in girls’ negotiations and styles while playing video games, Walkerdine’s (2004, 2009) research is highly insightful not only regarding our conceptualization of gender and video games but also about women and new technologies more generally.

Focusing on children actually playing video games in social context, many researchers in the 1980s and 1990s found educational elements (Ito, 2009). More recently, educational researchers have argued that simulation and state-of-the-art games provide important avenues for the development of cognitive skills and literacy development (Gee, 2003, 2008; Shaffer, 2006). Gee argued for

the importance of video games as “action-and-goal directed preparations for, and simulations of, embodied experience.” They are the new technological arena—just as were literacy and computers earlier—around which we can study the mind and externalize some of its most important features to improve human thinking and learning. (2008, p. 203)

Others have investigated the social nature of gaming of different types among preadolescents and adolescents. For example, Horst, Herr-Stephenson, and Robinson (2010) described three genres of children’s and youth’s participation in new media activities: “hanging out,” “messing around,” and “geeking out.” Hanging out is a collaborative and friendship-driven engagement with media, whereas messing around involves more intensive engagement and experimentation in media use. Finally, geeking out refers to an intense commitment or engagement with media technology, often involving considerable expertise in a particular media property, genre, or type of technology (Horst et al., 2010, pp. 35–75).

Regarding video games, hanging out entails emphasis on the social enjoyment of playing games together and is similar in nature to playing
traditional board games. Ito and Bittanti (2010) pointed to the Nitendo Wii as the “emblematic platform for hanging out as gaming practice” along with music games such as Rock Band and Guitar Hero as well as other types of music, dance, and sports games (p. 207). Messing around involves more competitive and committed recreational gaming. This type of gaming is favored by adolescent and young adult males. Although deeply social, it is unlike the hanging out genre in that “game play itself is the impetus and focus for getting together” (Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 211). Here gamers often organize intense and lengthy parties for playing a particular game such as Halo. A 14-year-old boy described how he participated in such a party with 16 kids. A local area network was set up with four Xboxes and four TVs. The boy recounted,

> It was for five hours straight. After the second hour, I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to go out with me and my friend, Josh, just kind of went out and skateboarded a little bit while everybody was playing ‘cause my eyes started to hurt. (Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 212)

Geeking out involves even more investment in play, with structured kinds of social arrangements such as guilds, teams, clans, clubs, and so on. This type of gaming is more common among older teens and young adults developing out of competitive game playing. It also involves what is called “augmented game play” or engagement with the wide range of secondary productions that are part of the knowledge networks surrounding play (for example, cheats, fan sites, modifications, hacks, walkthroughs, game guides, and various websites and blogs; see Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 220). Overall, we see the great complexity of video game culture in these examples and the agency and creativity of youth involved in their participation with this new medium.

In a recent article in the New York Times (Holston, 2008), Russell Hampton, president of Walt Disney Company’s children’s book and magazine publishing unit, recounted an incident that occurred while he was driving his 14-year-old daughter and two of her friends to a play in Los Angeles. The girls were discussing the movie actor Orlando Bloom, and Hampton, whose company produced films in which Bloom had starred, made a comment about him to join in the conversation. In return he heard dismissive sighs from the girls and noticed his daughter rolling her eyes “as if to say, ‘Oh Dad, you are so out of it.’” Shortly after this retort the talking among the girls stopped. Hampton looked in his rearview mirror to see his daughter sending a text message on her phone. He admonished her for being rude and texting while with her friends. His daughter rolled
her eyes again and said, “But, Dad, we’re texting each other and I don’t want you to hear what I’m saying.”

Teens are the consummate mobile telephone users, and most of their use of these devices involves texting rather than talking (Ling & Haddon, 2008; Rideout et al., 2010). Although mobile phones were first purchased by parents for both preadolescents and teens for security purposes, youth soon appropriated these devices to emancipate themselves from parents (in the above example even while being chauffeured in the family car) and to create new and diverse practices in their own peer cultures. Ling and Haddon noted that it is not “an overstatement to say that texting has been a phenomenon that was developed among teens” (2008, p. 140). Teens discovered the advantages of texting when it was free to use and quickly developed creative ways to communicate through the medium they appropriated. Teens’ texting is a global phenomenon, and much of the research on teens and texting has been conducted outside the United States (Ling & Haddon, 2008). As Ling has noted,

> Teens have made text messaging into a common form of interaction. They have learned how to coordinate and indeed microcoordinate interaction via the mobile telephone. They use the camera to share photos of enticing members of the opposite sex and to gather peer opinion on the color of potential clothes purchases. (2007, p. 60).

The mobile phone itself, with its various styles and ring tones, is a fashion statement for teens. Additionally, teens’ use of various lingo, jargon, and emoticons is another way of expressing their identity and style in peer cultures as well as exploring new and intimate relationships (boyd, 2010; Pascoe, 2010). These positive and creative aspects of mobile phone use have been accompanied by more negative elements such as gossiping, bullying, and sexting (Lenhart, 2009; Ling, 2007; Ling & Haddon, 2008). Sexting, or sending sexually suggestive nude or near nude images via text, has raised both adult concern and debate about the legal rights of youth as some teens have been prosecuted for child pornography for sending or having nude images of themselves or peers on cell phones (Lenhart, 2009; “Prosecutors Gone Wild,” 2010).

A study by the Pew Research Center (Lenhart, 2009) reports that 4% of cell-owning teens say they have sent sexually suggestive (nude or nearly nude images) of themselves to someone else via text messaging, whereas 15% have received a sexually suggestive image or video of someone they know. Sexting is usually a part of early courtship among teens as a way of exploring possible romantic and sexual relationships.
or can be an integral part of ongoing romantic relationships. The study finds that teens’ attitudes about sexting vary widely. Some say it is inappropriate, “slutty,” and possibly illegal. A number of females also feel they were pressured into sharing sexual images by boyfriends. On the other hand, many teens view sexting as a safe alternative to real-life sexual activity and see it as common and not a big deal. It is doubtful that parents see sexting as no big deal. However, adults do not share in the everyday peer culture that has appropriated this technology. Still, adults are better able to anticipate the possible legal aspects and how a nude photo or suggestive message sent in confidence can be shared with others or even be used in purposefully negative ways as a result of an acrimonious breakup. Overall, as Ling and Haddon argued, the use of cell phones and text messaging among youth can be seen as “the best and most widespread contemporary example of unanticipated innovation from users” (2008, p. 147).

Although both late preadolescents and teens frequently use text messaging in their social relations, primarily older teens are involved with Internet social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. These sites limit access to those older than 13, but studies have found that children as young as 8 or 9 years old use such sites. These sites (especially Facebook) are also widely used by adults. The use of the sites by teens is primarily driven by peer and friendship relations. Much of what occurs on these sites regarding friendship parallels what we know about teen friendship practices in peer groups in schools (Eder & Nenga, 2003; Kinney, 1993; Milner, 2004). In fact, danah boyd, who has intensively studied peer relations on online sites, argued that despite the perception that online media are enabling teens to reach out to a new set of social relations online, we have found that for the vast majority of teens, the relations fostered in school are by far the most dominant in how they define their peers and friendships. (2010, p. 82)

Still, social networking sites provide new ways to build on and amplify friendships and intimate relationships that primarily exist off-site (boyd, 2010; Pascoe, 2010). Here again we see children and youth appropriating aspects of the adult world to use in ways that meet their peer concerns. In doing so, children and youth are affected by features of this new technology but also gain a certain amount of control over it.

In her work, boyd (2010) found that teens avoid contact with strangers for the most part, but there were exceptions. For example, teens who feel
marginalized or ostracized in school seek out new connections on social networking sites with peers who share their interests (for example, in gaming or creative production) or their isolation and discrimination (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth; see boyd, 2010, p. 90). Most teens, however, use features such as address books and friend or buddy lists to enact and expand friendships. Facebook and MySpace offer incentives for adding people other than close friends, but privacy features can be used to limit those who are not close friends from viewing profiles, leaving comments, and even sending messages. Teens develop general strategies of accepting requests from peers they do not know well to avoid offending them but then limiting their involvement. Teens do monitor each others’ practices when it comes to friend or buddy lists. Those who accept large numbers of requests to be seen as popular are criticized and even labeled as, for example, “MySpace whores” (boyd, 2010, p. 96). Certain features such as the MySpace feature of top friends lead to the public display of friendship hierarchies as teens rank their best friends. For those teens using this feature (usually girls) there is often a great deal of competition, jealousy, and hurt feelings. Some youth use the features but get around this problem by listing family and relatives as best friends or use rotating lists of best friends related to shared activities and interests. boyd found that friendship features of social networking sites force teens to navigate their social lives in new ways, but their overall practices and norms mirror how they go about relating to friends offline. However, when teens choose to perform friendships online these often similar processes become more explicit and public, “providing a broader set of contexts for observing these informal forms of social-evaluation learning” (boyd, 2010, p. 100), thus making “peer negotiations visible in new ways, leading to heightened stakes as well as opportunities to observe and learn about social norms from their peers” (boyd, 2010, p. 100).

Other activities on social networking sites involve gossip and rumors, which could lead to harassment or bullying. Social networking sites lead to gossip and rumors often spreading further and faster than they do in off-site peer and friendship relations, thereby increasing tensions and drama. One 17-year-old male in boyd’s (2010) study noted,

MySpace is a huge drama maker, but when you stick a lot of people in one thing, then it’s... it always causes drama. ‘Cause, like... Myspace is, like, a really big school... school’s filled with drama. Myspace is filled with drama. It’s just when you get people together like that, that’s just how life works and stuff. (p. 105)
Many teens choose to opt out of such gossip and drama by using privacy settings. Others actively participate but do not see the drama created as bullying because it is not physical, premeditated, or persistent. Still, some youth do see such activities as hurtful and a form of bullying, but not as commonplace. In fact, as boyd noted, although drama is common, “teens actually spend much more time and effort trying to preserve harmony, reassure friends, and reaffirm relationships” (p. 110). Overall, boyd believed social media mirror and magnify teen friendship practices. She concluded,

Teens who are growing older together with social media are coconstructing new sets of social norms with their peers and through the efforts of technology developers. The dynamics of social reciprocity and negotiations over popularity and status all are being supported by participation in publics of the networked variety as formative influences in teen life. While we see no indication that social media are changing the fundamental nature of these friendship practices, we do see differences in the intensity of engagement among peers, and conversely, in the relative alienation of parents and teachers from these social worlds. (boyd, 2010, p. 114)

Here again we see the importance of peer culture in line with the orb web model we discussed in Chapter 2. For example, we can see how intergenerational relations are clearly affected by social change related to processes (here in technology and communication) of social reproduction.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter we examined the peer cultures of preadolescent children and defined preadolescence as the period from 7 to 13 years of age. Given the lack of research on preadolescent culture in non-Western societies, and because children in these societies often take on adult responsibilities in preadolescence, our discussion focused primarily on Western societies. We were, however, careful to consider racial, ethnic, and social class differences in our review.

We first considered the relationship among friendship, social differentiation, gender, race, and ethnicity. Preadolescents, compared to preschool children, have developed more stable concepts of friendship, and they strive to make their interactions with peers fit their developing conceptions of how best friends should behave with one another.
One result of these attempts to link cognitive concepts and behavior is increasing social differentiation in the peer culture. As preadolescents forge social alliances and secure friendship relations with peers, they also separate themselves from others. These processes of separation are most apparent in gender differentiation in peer interaction, which reaches its peak in preadolescence. Many theorists argue that gender differentiation affects and is affected by deep, dichotomous, and universal gender differences (that is, by the very nature of being male or female). According to this view, women have a different voice in that they value relationships and caring for others, whereas men are concerned about individual rights and notions of justice. These differences have been found among preadolescents, where studies show that girls’ concerns center on the valuing of compliance and conformity, romantic love, and an ideology of domesticity, whereas boys’ concerns revolve around a cult of masculinity, physical contests, autonomy, and self-reliance. Other theorists challenge this separate-cultures view of peer relations. They argue that the examination of naturally occurring peer interaction in a wide range of social settings and groups reveals a good deal of gender mixing in preadolescent peer relations. Furthermore, these studies of children’s situated activities (activities produced in diverse settings by children who have long interactional histories) document a greater complexity in gender relations in preadolescence, which challenges the separate-cultures view. We also saw in recent studies that children frequently separate themselves by race and ethnicity as well as gender. Much research still needs to be done in this area as it is extremely important for raising awareness about diversity in children’s peer relations in and out of school.

Studies of situated activities also provide important information about preadolescent children’s lore (games, jokes, riddles, songs, and verbal and behavioral routines) and how children in the process of engaging in these activities address issues related to self, identity, and autonomy from adult control. Our discussion of situated activities focused most specifically on children’s games, verbal dispute routines, and cross-gender play and rituals. Evaldsson’s and Goodwin’s studies of the actual play of jump rope and hopscotch within children’s peer cultures over time reveal that these games are much more complex than earlier studies—which focus on the rules and structures of the games—claim. Evaldsson found that preadolescents not only develop certain physical, communicative, and cognitive skills in playing jump rope but also use the game as an arena for addressing personal concerns, feelings, and
uncertainties regarding gender relations. Goodwin’s research demonstrated the importance of cultural variation in the play of games. She found that African American and Latina girls take the rules of hopscotch very seriously, engage in highly complex and dramatic debates about rule enforcement, and tease each other regarding poor performances. This style of play contrasts with that of middle-class White girls, who often overlook rule violations and mitigate their responses to their peers’ miscues. These findings, along with those from Goodwin’s documentation of the complex linguistic structure and importance of conflict rituals such as the he-said-she-said dispute routine, show how conflict and cooperation are often overlapping processes that are embedded in the larger ethos of playfulness. Goodwin’s work also demonstrates the importance of comparative work for documenting differences in preadolescent peer cultures across sociocultural groups.

How conflict can sometimes contribute to the social organization of preadolescent peer relations and can generate creative tension in preadolescent peer relations also is evident in Thorne’s work on borderwork. Borderwork refers to activities that mark and strengthen boundaries between groups. In her study of cross-gender relations among preadolescents, Thorne identified three types of borderwork (contests, chases, and invasions) that heighten the awareness of gender and gender differences. Contests are initiated by children and teachers and transform classroom lessons and peer games into competitions of boys against girls. Chases, like contests, are competitive, but they are more symbolic in their affirmation of boundaries between boys and girls. In chases, boys often taunt and tease girls in line with the aggressive nature of boys’ peer culture, whereas the girls threaten the boys with kissing or affection, resulting in “chase-and-kiss” games. Chases are often intertwined with rituals of pollution, wherein specific groups are treated as contaminated (as in having cooties). It is girls who are normally seen as contaminated in cross-gender chases, and in this way the borderwork often contributes to boys’ power over girls. The final type of borderwork, invasions, also has much to do with power and dominance of boys over girls. Thorne found that some boys invade girls’ space and purposely disrupt their play and taunt and tease them. Despite some exceptions, Thorne concluded that girls are clearly more apt to be adversely affected by the negative elements of borderwork than are boys. Nonetheless, she argued that there are creative elements in borderwork and suggested that it does create a space where preadolescent girls and boys can come together and reflect on how to relate to one another.
Preadolescence is a time when children struggle to gain stable identities, and their peer cultures provide both a sense of autonomy from adults and an arena for dealing with the uncertainties of an increasingly complex world. The many positive features of their peer cultures (for example, verbal routines, games, and enduring friendships) allow preadolescents to hold on to their childhoods a little longer while simultaneously preparing themselves for the transition to adolescence. A crucial factor in preadolescent peer culture is children’s ability to reflect on and evaluate the meaning of their changing worlds in talk with each other and with adults. In this sense, preadolescents become aware of themselves as individual actors in the collective production of their peer cultures. They also come to recognize how their peer cultures affect and are affected by the more general adult world.

Finally, in this chapter we considered what has been termed “Generation M,” or the role of electronic media in the lives of preadolescents and adolescents. We first reviewed recent descriptive studies of patterns in media use by preadolescents and adolescents. We saw that there has been a major increase in the time that children and youth spend in using a variety of media products and platforms in their lives. We also saw that media use is highly complex and rapidly changing with almost constant innovation. Children and youth are clearly media literate, inventive, and savvy. We also examined many recent studies of the effects and processes of media use in the lives of preadolescents and adolescents. These studies capture the complex debates regarding both the positive and the negative effects of electronic media on children's lives. Perhaps more important, the studies demonstrate how youth actively engage, appropriate, and embellish the new media and make it their own, much in line with the notion of interpretive reproduction.