

A LINE ON LIFE

1/28/88, Updated 8/16/02

Learning Your Gender Role *

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You may think it is very simple for a child to understand what it means to be a boy or a girl. However, it is a very complex learning process. There are at least three different steps involved.

First, the child must form a **gender identity**. This goes beyond the fact that a child is *called* a boy or a girl. Although very young children may correctly call themselves boys or girls, they don't see this as a permanent condition. They think that changing their style of dressing or their hair will change their sex. However, as young as 3 years of age, they seem to develop a permanent gender identity.

The second step is learning the **gender role** appropriate for his or her sex. (A role is the expected behavior for any position.) Boys must learn what boys and men do, what they like, even how they think and feel. Likewise, girls must learn the same about girls and women.

Elementary school children are deeply involved in learning gender roles. In their search for "*rules*" of behavior, they tend to develop very rigid stereotypes of men and women. **Stereotypes** are overly narrow ideas that are indiscriminately applied to *all* members of a group without allowing any variation.

Even as adults, most of us have gender role stereotypes. In our society, adults tend to stereotype men as being competent, skillful, aggressive and able to get things done. Women are stereotyped as warm and expressive, tactful, quiet, gentle, aware of others' feelings, and lacking in competence, independence and logic.

These stereotypes are shared by grade school children. In a study of fourth and fifth graders, women were seen as weak, emotional, softhearted, sentimental, sophisticated and affectionate. The same children saw men as strong, robust, aggressive/assertive, cruel, coarse, ambitious and dominant.

The development of these stereotypes can be seen in a 1977 study by psychologist William Damon. He told 4- to 9-year-olds a story of George, a boy who liked to play with dolls. His parents bought him other toys, telling him that only little girls played with dolls, not boys. The children were asked for their comments on this story.

Four-year-olds said it was all right for George to play with dolls if he wanted; there was no rule against it. However, 6-year-olds thought it was wrong for George to play with dolls. They had gone beyond what boys and girls *actually do* to develop rules about what they *ought to do*. By about 9 years, children have a clear idea about what each sex does,

and they still think it is better to follow the gender role. However, they realize that there is no *rule* against George playing with dolls.

Early gender-role typing is a *natural* process. First and second graders are searching for rules – ways of organizing their world. At this age, the same rigidity is seen in their ideas of right and wrong – or the way they follow the rules of any game. Discovering that she is a girl, the 6- to 7-year-old wants clear guidelines on how to be a girl. These guidelines are seen in fairly black-and-white terms. The guidelines loosen slightly until puberty, when they tighten again. In later adolescence and adulthood, they loosen – only to tighten again when adults are raising their own children.

Stereotyped gender roles are artificial ways of restricting certain behaviors to one sex or the other.

Stereotypes for men seem to develop sooner and be more rigidly held. The women's roles are more flexible in our culture, so children have seen women doing different things – being a mother and/or businessperson. On the other hand, the role of men is more *highly valued*. As a whole, regardless of age or sex, people tend to think it is "*good*" to be independent, strong, logical and assertive. In contrast, many feminine qualities are seen as less desirable. Often desirable masculine qualities are defined in terms of being "*non-feminine*."

The final step is developing appropriate **gender-role behavior** – matching their behavior to their gender role. This starts as early as 2 or 3 and is virtually complete by elementary school age. As you know, there is almost total sex segregation in play at school. Depending on how an object is *labeled*, it may be seen as appropriate for their own sex or not. For example, at this age, it is the rare boy who will wear "*girl's shoes*" or ride a "*girl's bike*." Even so, the match is far from perfect. For both children and adults, our *ideas* – gender role concepts – about men and women are much more strictly separated than our actual behavior.

What can you do if your child engages in inappropriate gender-role behavior? Of course, this will vary depending on the age of the child and the type of behavior. Often the behavior will stop, because the peers do not engage in that behavior. If *you* desire a change in behavior, you can suggest more appropriate activities and reward these activities. There is no need to label the inappropriate activities or the children as "*stupid*" or "*sissy*." Such labeling is likely to make the children feel bad or that something is wrong with them, because they engaged in the behavior.

However, inappropriate gender-role behavior does not necessarily need to be stopped. As an example, Rosey Grier – 6'5", 300-pound, former defensive tackle for the Giants and the Rams – is noted for his needlepoint. Do you want to tell him to quit?

* Adapted from Houston, Bee & Rimm's *Essentials of Psychology*, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1985, pages 300-301.