Gender Identity Development in Children

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​What's the Difference Between Gender and Sex?

Being a boy or a girl, for most children, is something that feels very natural. At birth, babies are assigned male or female based on physical characteristics. This refers to the "**sex**" of the child.  When children are able to express themselves, they will declare themselves to be a boy or a girl (or sometimes something in between); this is their "**gender identity**." Most children's gender identity aligns with their biological sex. However, for some children, the match between biological sex and gender identity is not so clear.  This article discusses how parents can promote healthy gender development in children.  See the related article, [Gender Non-Conforming & Transgender Children,​](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Non-Conforming-Transgender-Children.aspx)​ for additional information.

How Does Gender Identity Develop in Children?

Around two-years-old, children become conscious of the physical differences between boys and girls. Before their third birthday, most children are easily able to label themselves as either a boy or a girl. By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity. During this same time of life, children learn gender role behavior—that is, do­ing *"things that boys do"* or *"things that girls do."*

Before the age of three, children can dif­ferentiate [toys](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/How-to-Buy-Safe-Toys.aspx) typically used by boys or girls and begin to play with children of their own gender in activities identified with that gender. For example, a girl may gravitate toward dolls and playing house. By contrast, a boy may play games that are more active and enjoy toy soldiers, blocks, and toy trucks.

What parents can do:

All children need the opportunity to explore different gender roles and different styles of play. Ensure your young child's environment reflects diversity in gender roles and encourages opportunities for everyone. Here are some ideas:

* [Children's books](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Developmental-Milestones-of-Early-Literacy.aspx) or puzzles showing men and women in non-stereotypical and diverse gender roles *(e.g.* [*stay-at-home dads*](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/Pages/Stay-At-Home-Dads.aspx)*,* [*working moms*](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/work-play/Pages/Working-Mothers.aspx)*, male nurses, female police officers, etc.)*
* A wide range of toys for all children, including baby dolls, toy vehicles, action figures, blocks, etc.
* By age six, most children spend the majority of their playtime with members of their own sex and may gravitate towards sports and other activities that area associated with their gender. **It is important to allow children to make choices regarding what sports and other activities they get involved in.**

How Do Children Typically Express Their Gender Identity?

In addition to their choices of toys, games, and sports, children typically express their gender identity in the following ways:

* Clothing or hairstyle
* Preferred name or nickname
* Social behavior that reflects varying degrees of aggression, dominance, dependency, and gentleness.
* Manner and style of behavior and physical gestures and other nonverbal actions identified as masculine or feminine.
* Social relationships, including the gender of [friends](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/work-play/Pages/What-Parents-Can-Do-to-Support-Friendships.aspx), and the people he or she decides to imitate.

**While a child's gender-specific behavior seems to be influenced by their identification with the males and females in their lives, the sense of being a girl or a boy *(i.e. gender identity)* cannot be changed.**

Gender Stereotypes

Over time, society has recognized that stereotypes of masculine and feminine behaviors and characteristics are inaccurate. In the past, girls were only allowed to do feminine things like playing with dolls or cooking. They were expected to be more passive. Boys were expected to be more aggressive and to only show masculine behaviors.

Times have changed:

Our expectations of *"what girls do"* and *"what boys do"* have changed. Girls frequently excel at sports and school subjects traditionally thought of as masculine. Boys frequently excel in artistic subjects once traditionally thought of as feminine. All children show some behaviors that were once thought of as typical for the opposite gender -- no one shows exclusively male or female traits – and this is normal.

When a child's interests and abilities are different from what society expects, he or she is often subjected to discrimination and bullying. It is natural for parents to want their child to be accepted socially. However, children need to feel comfortable with and good about themselves. If your son doesn't excel in sports or even have an interest in them, for example, there will still be many other opportunities and areas in which he can excel. Each child has his own strengths, and at times, they may not conform to society's or your own expectations, but they will still be a source of his current and future success.

Thus, rather than force your child into the mold of current or traditional gender behavior, help him or her fulfill his or her own unique potential. Don't become ex­cessively concerned with whether your child's interests and strengths coincide with the socially defined gender roles of the moment