



Children as Boys or Girls

The very first question people ask about a newborn baby is whether it's a boy or a girl. It seems that people don't know how to treat a baby if they don't know its sex. People do treat boys and girls differently. Many people are rough with boys and gentle with girls. When a baby girl cries, we might say she is whining or fussy. When a baby boy cries, we may say he is angry.

Boys and girls are clearly different. Their bodies are different, and one difference is the person's sex. But a person's *gender* is learned. Gender is what people *think* about being men or women. It also is what people think men and women can and should *do*. These attitudes and behaviors are learned from society and the culture that people live in. Gender is not what we "are" but what we "do."

People's ideas about gender change over time. You probably think differently about gender than what your parents thought about it. Men and women have different roles today than they did 20 years ago. Your children need to live in the worlds of today and tomorrow. You can learn about today's healthy gender roles and teach them to your children.

Children learn about gender from many people. Parents are important in this learning. You teach children about gender in many ways

- You tell children what to do or not to do. (You're a big boy—don't cry!)
- You teach them directly. (Let me show how girls should sit.)
- You let children do certain activities (inviting children either to play football or to help make Thanksgiving dinner).
- You teach by example. (maybe Mom always does the laundry and Dad always does the dishes).

- You show what you expect your boys and girls to do (starting a college fund for both sons and daughters, or expecting a girl to get a C in math and a boy to get an A).

- You use different language with boys and girls (calling a boy strong and calling a girl pushy when they do the same thing).

So parents teach about gender roles in many different ways. Sometimes, you may try to teach children about being a boy or a girl. You may think about it and plan what you want to teach. At other times, you may not even realize that you are giving children messages about gender.

There are problems if children learn that boys and girls can do only certain things. Girls might be good at some things that boys usually do. Boys might be good at things girls usually do. They may learn that they shouldn't do those things. Those children may not get a chance to use their talents. It is not fair for some children to be able to do things when others cannot.

You can help children to use all of their talents. You can help girls learn to do active things and also quiet things. You can teach boys to be gentle and also to compete. Your children do not need to worry about whether activities are "boy things" or "girl things." Children who don't worry about gender roles seem to feel better about themselves. They learn who they are more quickly than other children. They learn to be good at being children, not just being boys or girls.

Sources:

Benokraitis, N. V. (2002). *Marriages and families: Changes, choices, and constraints* (4th ed.). NJ: Prentice Hall.

<http://www.selfhelpmagazine.com/articles/parenting/healthygirls.html>

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