

SEXUAL VIOLENCE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

BRIEFING PAPER

Modifying Gender Role Stereotypes in Children¹

Gender stereotypes exist in all cultures, conveyed through media messages, television, music, religious and cultural institutions, and even toys.¹ Parents convey expectations of gender role conformity starting in infancy², with one study finding that parents hold gender-typed expectations of their sons and daughters in the first 24 hours following birth.¹ Another found that children show an awareness of their parents' communication about gender roles from two to two-and-a-half years of age³, with the early provision of gender differentiated toy selection typically reflecting parental stereotypes.⁴ These gender stereotypes persist throughout childhood, with parents choosing, and rewarding⁵, certain stereotypical activities for their children, from playing with dolls for girls to sports activities for boys.⁶ Additionally, childhood peers⁴ and teachers play a significant role as children enter school.⁷ While both mothers and fathers contribute to the gender stereotyping of their children, fathers have been found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than mothers.^{8,1}

Within the context of patriarchy, stereotyped gender roles often devalue girls. It has been argued that androgyny later on in life can foster more intimacy in close relationships and mutual respect between the sexes.⁹ In other words, women may express themselves more assertively and men may show more concern and nurturance in contrast to strict gender roles stereotypes. In childhood, boys who embrace rigid masculine stereotypes are prone to exhibiting aggressive behaviour, which may persist as the child matures. Rigid gender role stereotypes have been found in adolescents who report dating violence¹⁰, and young men who endorse rape-tolerant views are more likely to hold traditional gender role stereotypes, particularly depicting women as inferior and men as in charge.¹¹

Key Findings:

- This briefing paper provides an overview of studies undertaken on children's gender role development in the family.
- Gender role stereotypes are powerful moderators of behavior and women's status especially.
- More gender equitable childhoods may lead to more flexible, less violent adolescents and adults.
- The limited research available on modifying gender role stereotypes found little to no impact on shifting parental behaviour and gender stereotypes.
- There is little empirical work available on how best to shift gender roles within families, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

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²DeFRA (1979) defines androgynous parents as, "...those who share child care and job/career responsibilities relatively equally, delineates social and psychological characteristics of the group and discusses societal changes necessary to support them in their role sharing"²²

2 Modifying Gender Role Stereotypes in Children

A gender schema theory has been proposed that asserts that children form gender schemas which are appropriate for men and women based on family cues, i.e, children learn about gender norms and what it means to be male and female from the culture that they live in.¹² It is thought that children simultaneously form an in-group and out-group schema based on gender, categorizing information as 'for me' or 'not for me', based on their gender. According to this theory, children develop the belief that certain activities are either appropriate for girls or boys, such as science being for boys, resulting in girls and boys willing to engage in certain activities, but not in others.⁴

In an analysis on gender roles in families, it was found that parents' gender schemas correlated highly with those of their children, ranging in age from preschool to college years.¹³ The effect size they report is 0.16. Androgynous parents (i.e. people who parent in a gender neutral manner) scored highest in parental warmth and support and it was found that parents who hold androgynous gender roles tend to impart flexibility to their children⁹, foster school performance, and their children – of either gender – display higher self-esteem.¹⁴ Indeed, stereotype knowledge of toddlers appears less pronounced when the mother is unmarried or the father is absent. Interestingly, it has been found that early childhood exposure to flexible stereotypes resulted in more flexible and non-stereotyped occupational preferences when the children turned 18.^{8,13}

School based interventions

There have been some attempts to promote gender role flexibility in the context of academics in school. One study built school-based programs to modify teachers through teacher reinforcement and to train them to avoid stereotyping¹⁵, while another found schools that promote highly structured play environments for girls encourage them to express gender stereotyped behaviors more frequently.¹⁶ Work done within the preschool setting, showing films and reading stories that emphasized gender equality, revealed that the films influenced children's attitudes and beliefs about gender roles, but the stories did not.¹⁷ However, this work found that children exposed to gender-neutral stimuli were less likely to display a gender stereotyped toy preference. In general, it is acknowledged that families and schools, together with social peers, continue to influence the adoption of gender-typed roles, attitudes and activities until the end of adolescence.

Gender role stereotypes are powerful moderators of behavior and women's status especially. Some researchers have found that more androgynous backgrounds in childhood lead to more flexible adolescents and adults.⁹ Given that gender role stereotypes are known to play a role in gender-based violence programs, exploring the shaping of children's stereotype formation especially through their parents, is worthwhile.^{10,11} This briefing paper provides an overview of studies undertaken on children's gender role development in the family and attempts to identify any reports on parenting interventions.

Methodology / Describing interventions

Four search engines were used to collect data. In addition, articles were gathered from review articles on the general topic. Most studies on modifying children's gender stereotyping were undertaken before 1990. Although a small number targeted parents, the majority focused on teachers in childcare or school settings. In addition, some experiments were set up to have a "familiar adult" introduce the experimental stimuli; the idea being that such findings could generalize to any adult in a child's life including a parent. Adult experimenters, therefore, could shape children's gender-oriented attitudes or preferences.² Such findings were understood to be generalizable to adults in the family or the school.

All the studies in the review took part in the United States or Canada, and either in the home, school or laboratory. Some studies used films and stories to modify children's gender role preferences,¹⁷ while others focused on parent-child toy play.¹⁸ In an earlier review² of research modifying gender role-typed behavior and preferences in early childhood, it was found that most researchers anchored their approach in either: social learning theory emphasizing observational learning²³ and cognitive-developmental or constructivist framework (c.f. Vygotsky, 1962).²⁴ How successful the effort it is to transform gender role preferences, beliefs and behaviors may depend on which framework is applied. Social learning should elicit results more quickly than cognitive schematic approaches. If a fundamental change is made to basic underlying schemas, the change may be more enduring. Researchers have not only relied on different theoretical approaches, they have made attempts to modify children's gender schemas. Despite the strong evidence showing parental influence on children's gender role development, there have been very few attempts to alter parents' behavior in the home and document whether such interventions change gender role stereotyped behaviors or preferences in their children.

Results

Due to there being so few studies examining interventions with parents, several school-based interventions are included which, conceivably, could be adapted to other school settings or even the home. The majority of experimental interventions occur in the laboratory or school setting. In total, seven studies were examined.

Studies designed to modify gender roles in children

Study	N	Child age	Target Adult	Intervention	Findings	Grade
Ashton (1983) ¹⁸	32	3-5	None	Non-randomly assigned to condition (no blinding) when adult gives child either a gender stereotyped toy w/book or a gender neutral stimulus.	The main outcome measured was the length of time children looked at the objects after play. The only significant finding was sex x condition with girls looking at stimuli longer if it was feminine. No condition effects.	C
Flerx (1976) ¹⁷	122	3-5 yrs.	None	Children assigned to group in which an egalitarian literature program was conducted for one or more days.	There were at least 2 dependent variables of interest: gender role knowledge and stereotype preferences in toys. No differences on the first; and different on the second showing children exposed to gender-neutral stories prefer gender neutral toys. Pre-post. No random assignment.	C
Huston (1986) ¹⁶	110	7-11 yrs	None	One week summer camp with a series of 3-hr sessions. In some the activities are structured; in others unstructured. Children are compared in the structured and unstructured sessions.	The idea is that adults influence gender roles through structuring setting. Girls preferred structured, boys unstructured. All children bid more for adult attention in the structured (p<.001). Girls demonstrated gender-stereotyped preferences in the structured v. unstructured settings.	C

Raskin & Israel (1981) ²⁵	48	8-10 yrs	None	4 minute exposure to adult male/female models playing w/gender incongruent toys	The main dependent variable was latency or how long the child played with the toy after seeing the model. No significant effect of model behavior although some sex differences. Perhaps too short an exposure.	C
Richer (1988) ²²	unk	6-12 yrs	Teachers	The authors asked students in 1979 and 1986 to draw themselves in an activity and this was coded for fem-masc valence. The intervention is the supposed participation of teachers in many training workshops on gender roles in class.	No significant findings. The process of coding showed no defense against bias, with coders knowing the hypothesis apparently. The null results raise concern that the many educational workshops for teachers are insufficient to alter students' gendered self-schemas.	C
Roddy (1981) ¹⁹	30	M=62.6 mos	Mothers (M)	Home visiting and training mothers to offer gender-neutral toys and materials over 20 sessions. No certainty that mothers complied.	Pre-post findings were non-significant. Mothers did not differ on scores with the Bem Sex Role Inventory and children did not vary in their assessed knowledge of gender roles.	C
Weisgram, Bigler (2006) ²¹	791	12-14 yrs	School	1 hour. Students randomly assigned to conditions including speakers to talk about altruistic motives in going into science.	Girls who heard the presentation showed higher self-efficacy in science scores pre-post. Promising approach to mold the presentation of science as an altruistic venture to appeal to feminine gender roles.	B

Effects of the interventions

Controlled setting: While the overall findings of the studies were discouraging, some studies had positive outcomes. One such study had children aged 7 – 11 years of age in gender-differentiated play contexts with the girls migrating to high structured, adult-supervised play, and boys to low-structured, peer-oriented play.¹⁶ In a follow-up in which children were randomly assigned to “structured” vs. “unstructured” the research team found support for gender-typed behaviours surfacing in even brief play episodes, with girls more compliant, requesting help and making “bids for recognition” in the adult-supervised, highly structured condition. Boys, on the other hand, in the low-structured activity session displayed more dominant behaviors with peers, were more aggressive and issued more commands.

Parenting intervention: The only true parenting intervention study was done with home visits.¹⁹ Investigators trained and prompted the parents to alter the presentation of gender stereotyped toys (replacing them with gender-neutral objects). The parents generally complied, although no data were collected to document their compliance with the protocol. In any event, the findings were null. Children's knowledge of gender roles and their preference for gender stereotyped toys went unchanged, as did their mothers' self description according to the Bem Sex Role Inventory. It is likely that stereotype formation and toy preferences according to gender had already been established and were not easily changed by a brief intervention. Gender attitudes are reinforced every day by peers and often teachers in spite of messages from home.

School-based: The results for school-based programs had mixed results. Programs for older children or teens appeared more successful even with shorter interventions than preschool oriented programs. For instance the two interventions conducted in preschools yielded weak to no significant results.

The one finding of note¹⁸ on children's gender found that girls are more swayed by the gender-neutral toy preference modeling than boys. Another study that suggested girls were adaptable to change²¹ found that teenage girls who attended a group exposed to a woman scientist's presentation scored higher on self-efficacy than girls who did not attend the talk. In particular, the scientist included statements about how altruistic science is – to complement girls' interest in nurturance – which strengthened the effect of the event.

While the above studies yielded some results, one study found no change in children who had been taught by teachers who had received gender –role training due to claims that teachers were treating boys and girls differently, to the detriment of girls.²⁰ However, the author of the study found no difference between the types of pictures children drew of themselves in 1979, before the teacher training, and in 1986, after training. The pictures were coded for gender-typed themes. These weak findings could be attributable to the non-standardized coding of the pictures and the possible variation in the instructions the children received between 1979 and 1986.

Overall, five of the seven studies had null results on the key questions of interest. Only one study²¹ stated that they randomized the youth into different conditions. It therefore appears that studies fail to conform to today's standards of experimental protocol and level of description. They did meet the standards at the time (in the 1970's and 80's), as several of the papers appeared in highly prestigious journals like *Child Development*.

Can interventions be transported cross-culturally?

Since the one parenting intervention reviewed yielded non-significant results,¹⁹ and some of the other interventions show only weak differences between treatment and control, it is unclear whether there is sufficient justification for transporting these programs or even relying on them as potential program models. In addition, gender is construed differently across cultures and transporting a blanket intervention on gender change may not be successful. Certainly gleaned some of the principles which are believed to be universal in gender role socialization would be helpful for cross-cultural applications, but each setting may need to create its own “custom” program.

Some researchers attempted to alter stereotyped beliefs or preferences (as in toys) for children from preschool to high school without parental or teacher involvement. Their efforts led to mostly non-significant results. One exception showed that if adults manipulate the play environment – allowing girls to play in unstructured setting especially – they will promote more independent and peer-oriented play.¹⁶ However, this idea seems quite untransportable, as girls are often encouraged to play near adults for reasons of sexual safety and in some societies sexual threats are immediate. In particular, if girls are encouraged to play out in the fields where boys usually play, their behaviour might be misconstrued in the community. Therefore, out of necessity stereotypes are sometimes created.

Another problem with portability is the exact form of intervention. Trying to implement a program for mothers (or fathers) to reduce their own gender stereo-typed behavior or their reinforcement of gender-typed preferences in their children is hard in any environment. Furthermore, parents think they are fulfilling their parental responsibility when they promote gender role stereotypes; that they are preparing their child for the world's expectations. This would be true in most countries and environments.

Conclusion

Limited studies attempting to modify gender-role stereotypes were identified through this review, and of those identified, very few incorporated parenting interventions, and none did so in any systematic way. Few studies – at any point in the developmental spectrum from toddlers to elementary school students – showed strong effects; most showed that even if change in parental behaviours occurred during the course of the study those gender-typed behaviors re-surfaced soon after. The extent to which such programmes could be transported to other settings remains unknown.

Parents are well-known to be important socializers and there is ample descriptive information in support of that claim. Similarly, there is a strong need for thoughtful programs emphasizing non-sexist play, attitudes, and preferences, but there is little empirical work to support such an approach. Even though adult roles may be changing, it can be safely assumed that most children are still exposed from birth to a continual barrage of traditional gender role stereotypes from the media, their families, and their peers from birth. More research on parenting interventions that include modification of gender roles and its influence on child outcomes is therefore suggested.

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