

Sexual Identity and Role in Children

How Do These Develop?

*The child is father of the man
And I could wish my days to be
Beyond each to each by natural piety*
—Wordsworth

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“There is a high consistency in the way a school-age child views his sexual role and the way an adult views it. The child’s formation of his sexual identity and role is influenced by many cultural factors and relationships from birth on. It is an integral part of his self-identity and in many areas of his daily life affects his behavior, his attitudes, and his beliefs.”

“**T**HE child is father of the man,” Wordsworth said, and nowhere is this truer than in the area of sexual role and sexual identity; for the adult’s masculinity or femininity is a final product of his biologic maturation, influenced by many interpersonal relationships and cultural factors. In this discussion, “identity” will refer to the child’s recognition of which sex he belongs to, and “role” is applied to the sum total of the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that are prescribed by this identity.

Sexual role varies greatly from culture to culture. The expectation that boys should be aggressive and dominant while girls are passive and nurturant is not universal. Some societies place little emphasis on sexual role differences. Margaret Mead¹² notes that in the Arapesh tribe in New Guinea both boys and girls are reared to be gentle and ready to help others, whereas another tribe in New Guinea, the Mundugumor, raise their boys and girls to be aggressive and hostile. Other cultures stress clear differences in sexual role expectations. Erikson² describes that the Sioux boys have to be aggressive and self-confident to develop the skills of a “hunter after game, women and spirit,” whereas the Sioux girl has a specific prescribed role of serving the hunter. Even in the Sioux childhood games, these roles are clearly defined and no deviation is allowed.

In our own culture and throughout most of the Western world, one finds different sexual role expectations for boys and girls. More deviation is usually allowed for girls, but still

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these allowances are kept within certain bounds. These expectations, together with normal development, determine the masculinity and femininity in children from birth on.

Infancy

Even before a child is born his parents are guessing and wondering about his sex. Once the obstetrician announces to the new parents the sex of their baby, they immediately begin conveying this information to the child and to the world. They send friends and relatives birth announcements which clearly indicate the child's sex. They dress the infant in blue if a boy, and in pink if a girl. They decorate the nursery in an appropriate color and style. They do not refer to the baby as "it," but as "he" or "she."

Furthermore, they align the child's basic self-identity—his given name—with a category of either male or female. If a child's given name is misleading in describing his sexual identity, then he may be subject to much teasing, as for example in the song "A Boy Named Sue." In some societies, the child's surname also has a different ending, depending on the sex (*e.g.*, in Poland, the author would call herself Paluszna).

In addition to these overt messages, the baby receives from his parents many subtle and sometimes unconscious cues which vary according to sex. Parents may bring attitudes from their own childhood. Thus, when boys are the preferred children, the mother may be overjoyed at having a male "heir" but disappointed with a girl. A patient talking about her new baby boy once said to me "a woman is not a woman unless she has given birth to a man." She acknowledged that this was an expression her mother had used.

The attitudes which parents have towards each other also influence how each reacts to the male or female offspring. These subtle cues become obvious as the child gets older but even in infancy the parents' attitude can be transmitted to the baby in a variety of ways. For example, it has been found that nursing mothers handled boys and girls differently.

The mothers who were nursing infant boys tolerated more autonomy, allowing the infant to assert himself in deciding how much he wanted, whereas with baby girls the nursing mothers tended to hover over them, encouraging them to feed in a manner the mother expected, thus stressing conformity.⁹

In another study, the mothers' handling of girl and boy babies was related to subsequent reactions of the babies to the mothers. With six-month old babies, the mothers touched, talked to, and handled the girls more than boys. When the same family groups were observed again at 13 months, the girls touched and talked to their mothers more than did the boys. In the same study, the boys at 13 months were observed to be more aggressive and assertive in the use of toys and in dealing

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with frustration. For example, when confronted with a barrier, the girls cried, whereas the boys tried to remove it.³

Biologic influences are important in sexual roles, as is evident in individuals who have a sex chromosome abnormality. However, the influences that XX or XY chromosomes have on the early development of personality or in the formation of sexual identity or role are very vague. From longitudinal development studies (for example those done by Thomas and Chess¹⁷), it is found that babies have temperamental differences even at birth and that these characteristics persist throughout their lives. Furthermore, there appears to be no correlation between temperament and the sex of the child. This is also substantiated by the studies of Money and associates with hemaphrodites, where the gender role and orientation corresponds with the sex of rearing and not with the chromosomal evidence of male and female sexuality.¹³ Studies by the same authors reaffirm the importance of early

influences on the child's sexual role and identification. They found that when sex reassignment by surgical procedure was done in the first few months of life, the individuals had no significant problems, whereas when this was done later adjustment and personality difficulties in adulthood were frequent.

The Preschool Years

By the time a child is three years old, he can usually reply correctly to the question, "Are you a boy or a girl?" Even by the age of two years, babies can frequently identify girls and boys from a picture book. They seem to identify the sexes by hair styles, clothing, and other external appearances.

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Later on, other culturally determined cues will be used by the child for this differentiation. For example, when talking with a five-year-old boy who was looking at pictures of children, the author was surprised when he incorrectly identified a girl as a boy. The girl wore a dress and she had long hair. When questioned about his error, the child replied simply, "*She's not pretty.*"

Seeing himself as a boy or a girl, the child personalizes his interest in all things pertaining to gender, including anatomic differences, the problem of where babies come from, and a special interest in the parental relationship. This coincides with the development of the oedipal situation, the details of which will not be considered here except that in resolution the little boy decides to model himself after father and eventually marry someone "like mother," and the little girl patterns herself after mother and wishes to marry someone "like father." Thus, by the age of four the child has not only experienced parental molding in how he should behave in his sexual

role, but also he consciously and unconsciously tries to pattern himself in the masculine or feminine image provided by his parents.

The models provided by the parents are most important. It is erroneous to think that the girl needs only a female model and the boy only a male model. Both are very important. From studies done on early development, it is obvious that a consistent nurturing person is necessary for normal development in children of either sex. Without this a baby cannot even reach a stage of forming significant relationships.^{14, 15} This is ordinarily a mother's role, but it could be taken by a nurturant father. In families where the mother instead of being nurturant is aggressive and dominant, both the sons and daughters have problems. The girl finds that the model presented at home does not correspond to the cultural ideal and consequently begins to question her own femininity when she is confronted with outside models. The boy likewise will question his masculinity. In fact, in studies of transsexual adult males and in studies of latency age boys who dress as girls, a high number of mothers showed a considerable degree of masculinity. Some of these mothers even verbalized that at some time in their lives they had a great desire to be a boy.⁴

Perhaps the father's role should be stressed even more, since in our culture the mother is typically blamed for any deviations in the children, whereas in reality the father's role as well as the mother's is crucial. Preschool boys show the strongest identification with fathers who are seen as being both nurturant and powerful. In slightly older boys, the continued absence of a father can have many serious effects. For example, Norwegian boys who had absent fathers not only had a weak identification with the fathers, but also experienced difficulty in getting along with their male peers. Apparently, much of this difficulty centered around the boys not knowing how to play different sports and games.⁷ The importance of boys patterning themselves after an adequate model can also be seen in retrospective studies. For example, in a study of 15 adult men who had exhibited feminine

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behavior as boys, 12 had had a very poor relationship with their father and 11 of these said they saw very little of their father.¹⁰

Just as the boy needs his father as a model, the girl needs her father to test her femininity. The little girl must view her father as available and affectionate in a desexualized way. If she has such a father she can feel that her femininity is desirable and can accept it as something that pleases both parents.¹¹

The Nursery School Period

By the time he reaches nursery school, the child has definite ideas of masculinity and femininity and these are reflected in his overt behavior. Most nursery school personnel will attest to children preferring stereotyped, sex-appropriate play materials. The little girls play dress-up, cooking and doll play, whereas little boys play with trucks, blocks, and more active games. Although little girls are more likely to play sometimes with boys' equipment, it is rather unusual for a boy persistently to play with girls' toys. This is further substantiated by the following experimental data.

In a study dealing with toy and game preferences, the three- and four-year-old boys scored as persistently masculine. The three-year-old girls made *many* masculine selections; the four-year-old girls, far fewer.⁶

In their general behavior, boys play more with boys and girls with girls. They also quarrel more with the same sexed peers. When quarrels develop, boys react more aggressively by either shouting or fighting.¹

Just as there is a sexual difference in aggressive behavior, there is a difference in passive and dependent behavior. In a study of over 500 nursery school children, girls were found to be more dependent on the adult teachers and more introverted in their play than the boys.⁷ By the time a child reaches nursery school, sexual differences in aggression and dependency are already established.

The "Latency" Period of Childhood

During latency, the respective sex roles are still further reinforced. Peers are particularly important in this process. In the mind of

the school-age child, core attributes of masculinity and femininity have become crystallized, and usually will persist until adulthood, with only minimal modifications.

These expected attributes can be divided into two categories: 1) external manifestations, and 2) internal manifestations. The external manifestations deal with the child's notions of what constitutes femininity and masculinity in appearance and overt behavior. The internal manifestations deal with the child's ideas of sex-appropriate feelings and beliefs.

There appears to be considerable uniformity in these beliefs despite recent cultural changes. Basically, school age children think

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girls should be small and pretty, whereas boys should be large and strong; boys should be aggressive, whereas girls should be dependent, passive, and conforming; boys should be interested in mechanical skills and sports, whereas girls should be interested in clothes, dolls, and babies.⁷

Typically, latency-aged children show behavior that corresponds to their belief in what constitutes masculinity and femininity. As a group boys play separately and girls play separately. Occasionally they will play semiaffectionate, semiaggressive games; a girl may chase a boy and try to kiss him. Usually this is not reciprocated, as it is seen as girlish behavior, even though the boy may secretly enjoy being kissed. The boys are more concerned over their masculinity and will avoid anything "girlish" or "sissy." The girls are more free to be tomboys and play rougher games, such as tree climbing or even football. This trend persists until early adolescence, when most girls are as concerned about their femininity as the boys are concerned about their masculinity.

This concern of the latency-aged boy to be masculine brings up an important area in learning. In a study on the influence of masculine, feminine, and neutral tasks on children's achievement, it was shown that boys achieved best on "masculine" tests, had intermediate success in "neutral" tests, and did poorest in "sex-inappropriate" tests. Girls did about equally well on "feminine" and "neutral" tests and significantly lower on "masculine" tests. In actuality, not only did the tests have nothing to do with masculinity or femininity, but they were the *same tests*. The tests were rotated so that at one time the same test was presented as a "masculine test" and at another time as a "feminine test." Thus, it was purely the child's expectations that he should do better on "masculine" tests or she should do better on "feminine" tests that determined the score.¹⁶

These results are especially significant when we look at another study in which both boys and girls in the second grade classified most school objects such as books, blackboard, etc. as being feminine, when they could have chosen masculine, feminine, or neutral. Perhaps the young boys' perception of school as something feminine may partially explain the lack of motivation boys have in the early school years. This, together with a greater aggressiveness and other attributes that boys show, could explain why boys have more difficulty than girls in the first few grades of school.⁸

Adolescence

During preadolescence, the bricks that build the final structure of the adult's sexual role are formed. During adolescence, these are cemented together. The adolescent continually tests and retests his concepts of sexual identity and role, as well as the culture's expectations and taboos connected with that role. To describe the turmoil and tribulations involved in this testing and consolidation would take a paper in itself.

Recapitulation

To summarize, a high consistency exists in the way a school-age child views his sexual

role and the way an adult views it.⁷ The child's formation of his sexual identity and role is influenced by many cultural factors and relationships from birth on. It is an integral part of his self-identity and affects his behavior, his attitudes, and his beliefs in many areas of his daily life.

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