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GENDERED SOCIALIZATION IN CHILDHOOD

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES gendered socialization in childhood and its impact on achievement motivation. Preschool children are socialized primarily through family members and those over whom caregivers have some control. As children enter school, however, their world broadens to include teachers, coaches, and a larger pool from which they can choose friends. These children are now influenced by people their primary caregivers don't know as well, and systems (e.g., the school and religious community) over which they have less control. In addition, greater access to television, movies, and books supply these children with gendered expectations from an increasingly larger community.

In this chapter, we will examine the messages these preschool and elementary school children are given through toys selected for them, a gendered division of labor, the education system, the English language, and media (books, television, and movies) regarding their place in the world as boys and girls. We will explore how this socialization impacts their occupational goals and the likelihood they will achieve those goals.

TOY SELECTION

One trip down the aisle of any toy store will convince even the casual observer that boys and girls are encouraged to play with different toys. However, before children are old enough to choose the pink package with the girl on the front or the blue one with the boy, the choices are made for them. Parents and others bearing gifts supply boys with cars and trucks, sports paraphernalia, and tool sets, and they provide girls with dolls, kitchen sets, and toy appliances. If children are less than enthused, someone will encourage her to "rock the baby" or him to "throw the ball."

Preschool boys are often given leeway in picking up the occasional doll or pretending to fix dinner. However, they often age out of this luxury within a few short years. Not long after entering school, they will encounter subtle reprimands and even ridicule for playing with a toy vacuum cleaner or dish set. Girls, however, are given more than leeway; their parents often show pride when they pick up a ball and bat. I've taught many women who boasted of their tomboy days. Any men labeled as sissies haven't announced it in my classes.²

Of course, when children begin playing with other boys and girls, they quickly learn which toys are considered appropriate for their own sex and specifically ask for them. The first time our daughter attended a friend's birthday party, she came home excited about all the Barbie dolls her friend had received and told me the ones she wanted for her own birthday. We entered a new era that day. She would no longer blindly accept the toys we selected for her. From

²For an examination of age as a variable in gendered toy preferences, see Brenda K. Todd et al., "Sex Differences in Children's Toy Preferences: A Systematic Review, Meta-Regression, and Meta-Analysis," *Infant and Child Development* 27, no. 2 (2018).



¹For an examination of the debate surrounding gendered toy marketing, see Cordelia Fine and Emma Rush, "Why Does All the Girls Have to Buy Pink Stuff?' The Ethics and Science of the Gendered Toy Marketing Debate," *Journal of Business Ethics* 149 (2018).

here on, we would work harder to balance out the pink-aisle toys that are the staple of girls' birthday parties.

Students ask me, "What's wrong with any of these toys?" Nothing, I tell them. We gave our daughter a kitchen set *and* a tool set. We gave our son Matchbox cars *and* dolls. My husband and I made a variety of toys available and tried not to push one kind on our daughter and another on our son. It's the restrictiveness, I tell them, that creates the problem.

When the little boy is consistently shamed for picking up a doll or his attention diverted when he pretends to fix dinner, he learns that housework and childcare are women's work. With this message confirmed in everything from commercials to magazine covers, is it any wonder that as a new father he's uncomfortable caring for his own infant? Fearful of holding her, lest she break? He doesn't have the mindset nor the experience to feel comfortable as caregiver to a newborn.

The girl, however, learns that housework and childcare *are* for her and, what's more, are unacceptable for boys. Her mindset tells her, *Boys shouldn't take care of children. They don't know how. I should; I'm better at it.* And in fact, she *will* get better at it than the boys she knows. She will learn what to do with babies: the soft voice to use when they cry, and the way to hold them, give them a bottle, or rock them to sleep.

Now, imagine her as an adult. She and hubby have their first baby. Daddy picks up the newborn for the first time and is scared and clueless. Why is he crying?! I don't know what I'm doing! It's easy for him to assume: Caring for young children is not for me! Handing the baby to Mommy seems the humane thing to do. While she is likely just as scared—because her childhood dolls didn't cry as often or relentlessly as this tiny human!—her mindset tells her, I better figure this out. I'm the Mommy.

So, she does.

And he does not.

The next time baby cries, who picks him up? Probably the one who had more success last time. The Mommy. And after a while, it becomes easier and easier for her because she's getting practice, learning what does and doesn't work. Meanwhile, he's in awe of how she *just knows* what to do! Must be instinct, he says. God's design. He will read somewhere that the best thing he can do for his children is to love their mother, so he goes back to work and tries to stay out of the way. And with that, his status is reduced to auxiliary parent. Support staff.

No surprise then that she's reluctant to leave the baby with Daddy. When she tells her friends that he's watching the little guy, she says it with an eye roll and a playful gritting of the teeth. What she'll find when she gets home is anybody's guess. She better not be gone long!

What is taken as instinct is more likely her having learned childcare skills through countless opportunities to practice them beginning the moment she was given her first doll. And more important, she was given the message early on that childcare was something she could and *should* do. It was her job.

But it doesn't stop there. Believing she is naturally better at meeting her child's needs, she might find it difficult to release infant care to another capable person when she goes back to work. It feels unnatural, a disservice to her child. So, she might do what many others do: switch to part-time work or give up working outside the home entirely while her baby is little. However, removing herself from the workforce will slow her career progression if not derail it entirely. Even the part-time alternative narrows her options, typically to jobs with less responsibility, lower status, reduced pay, and fewer chances for promotion.

Understand that I'm not calling for children to take a backseat to career advancement. Parenting is arguably one of the most important tasks we can take on. In fact, women are told that raising children is far more important than any job, or even *ministry*, they could otherwise pursue. Yet, if it were that simple, couples everywhere would *vie* for who gets to stay home with children. But they don't. In fact, fathers are virtually never told to sideline their work in favor of the more important role as their child's primary caregiver. Why not? Because for men to do so would risk their occupational future and the opportunities that entails.

I've taught this enough to know that this is where a student will remind me that we are all called to serve and to raise good children. Why are women balking at doing something God has called us all to do? To that I say, precisely—we are *all* called to serve, and if we have children, we are called to raise them well. These aren't jobs just assigned to women. Rather, I contend that mothers carry the lion's share of childcare responsibilities because of an inaccurate belief that they are naturally better at it, and that men can't, or shouldn't, learn those skills.

This mindset has far-reaching consequences for the time a mother can devote to ministry or any occupation to which she is called. Doors will close for her that remain open for the father of the same child.

DIVISION OF LABOR

Children observe and often take part in the division of labor at home. Even with more women in the workforce than in previous generations, women still do most of the household work with the same gender differences reflected in children's chore assignments.³ Children typically see men perform outdoor tasks, such as lawn care

³For information on women and housework, see Mylene Lachance-Grzela and Genevieve Bouchard, "Why Do Women Do the Lion's Share Of Housework? A Decade of Research," *Sex Roles* 63 (2010): 777, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9797-z. For information on children's



and building repair, along with indoor maintenance, such as painting or appliance maintenance. They see women care for children and complete indoor chores, such as cleaning, laundry, and food preparation. In this division of labor, women and girls complete tasks that need to be done regularly, sometimes daily. Men and boys do tasks that need to be done sporadically. Grass isn't cut as often as food is prepared or dishes washed. Rooms aren't painted as frequently as clothes are laundered.

A newlywed student told me she and her husband agreed to a similar arrangement before they married. But before long she noticed that her after-work hours were spent cooking, doing laundry, and cleaning while her husband sat in the recliner watching TV. Evidently, he was paying a teenager to mow the grass once a week during warm weather. Until snow fell on the driveway or leaves from the trees, he had completed his share of household responsibilities. They could afford it and, as he reminded her, she had agreed to the arrangement. However, they could not afford to hire someone to do all her chores, nor did he offer to pick up any of them to create a more equitable arrangement. This division of labor results in more work for women and girls, less for men and boys.

What will Dad do with his extra time? He will probably devote it to a job that keeps him away from home for a major portion of each day. He won't need to leave work early to shop for groceries and make dinner, do laundry, or provide homework assistance. Likewise, the son will consider a wide range of career options since even the most time consuming and educationally intensive will not pose an obstacle to his having a family of his own one day. (Incidentally, these careers will probably pay more, too.) He will assume, as will his employer, that someone else will be the primary caregiver

chore assignments, see Sara Raley and Suzanne Bianchi, "Sons, Daughters, and Family Processes: Does Gender of Children Matter?," *Annual Review of Sociology* 32 (2006): 401.



for his young children and at home when the older ones return from school.

This *second shift*⁴ of work awaiting Mother at home often limits the amount of time she will devote to an occupation. When asked to work late or apply for a promotion, she will question the wisdom of being away from home for long periods of time. Who will take the older child to the dentist then soccer practice or make sure the younger one starts on that science project right after piano lessons? Or maybe she won't be asked to work late at all or even considered for a promotion since she has likely voiced to her coworkers and boss the precarious balance she maintains between work and home. When the daughter considers career options, her plans are likely to be as grand as her brother's. At first. The older she gets, however, the more she will consider how many children she wants, and from watching all her mother does, she will tone down her aspirations.

Indeed, daughters of fathers who do more domestic tasks have career aspirations that are less stereotypical than those who do not.⁵ Alyssa Croft and colleagues suggest that these girls might be learning to expect the same from a future partner, freeing them to consider occupations that require more of their time.⁶ Likewise, fathers who do not contribute as much to housework and childcare might implicitly communicate a different set of expectations.

One study of eighteen-year-old women who aspired to maledominated careers found that by the age of twenty-five, 82 percent of them had changed to careers that were either gender-neutral or

⁵Alyssa Croft et al., "The Second Shift Reflected in the Second Generation: Do Parents' Gender Roles at Home Predict Children's Aspirations?," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 7 (2014): 1418. ⁶Croft et al., "Second Shift Reflected," 1426.



⁴The phrase "second shift" was coined by Arlie Hochschild with Anne Machung in the book *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin, 1989). For more information on the second shift today, see Mary Blair-Loy et al., "Stability and Transformation in Gender, Work, and Family: Insights from *The Second Shift* for the Next Quarter Century," *Community, Work, and Family* 18, no. 4 (2015): 435-54.

female-dominated.⁷ The best predictor for the change in career aspirations was their desire for a family-flexible job.⁸ Another study of high-achieving girls ages fifteen to seventeen found that they were less likely to plan for a career when they also planned to have children. They anticipated social pressure to give up work or scale it down to care for their children, and it was already shaping their educational and career plans.⁹ Likewise, another study found young adult women moving toward more traditional, less prestigious careers than they had planned their last year of high school, toward careers that "underutilized their abilities."¹⁰ These findings were illustrated for me recently when a young woman shared that her childhood occupational goals, alongside teaching and motherhood, included being "wife to the president of the United States." Evidently, being president herself was out of the question.

Is it any surprise that when this girl becomes a woman with her own family, her career and ministry goals will take second place to her husband's? It will be a tacit understanding. They won't say it in so many words. Not to each other, not even to themselves. It will just feel *right* somehow. Neither of them will think about how the messages they received shaped their thinking about something as sacred as their work for God.

And speaking of work for God, children who attend church typically witness a division of labor that fits into the parameters they've seen at home. Men serve as leaders. They are pastors, deacons, elders, and music directors. They lead classes for men or ones with both

¹⁰Karen M. O'Brien et al., "Attachment, Separation, and Women's Vocational Development: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 47, no. 3 (2000): 311.



⁷Pamela M. Frome et al., "Why Don't They Want a Male-Dominated Job? An Investigation of Young Women Who Changed Their Occupational Aspirations," *Educational Research and Evaluation* 12, no. 4 (2006): 359.

⁸Frome et al., "Why Don't They Want a Male-Dominated Job?," 359.

⁹Gillian Marks and Diane M. Houston, "The Determinants of Young Women's Intentions About Education, Career Development and Family Life," *Journal of Education and Work* 15, no. 3 (2002): 321.

men and women. Women serve as support. They are church secretaries, fellowship coordinators, and nursery workers. When they lead, they serve as children or youth ministers, teach classes for women, or lead mission organizations. Occasionally, women serve as associate pastors, but often under a man who is identified as the senior pastor. Such a distinction confirms the message children frequently receive at home: women manage children and provide support for men who lead.

Granted, what I describe is not the reality for every man or woman, boy or girl. Fewer families today hold to the traditional roles that have almost dictated occupational choices for previous generations. Yet, as a professor and mentor of young adults, I can attest to this pattern being alive and well among college students today. Young women often bring up their desire for marriage and children as a consideration in whether they will pursue graduate school and careers that require extensive time commitments. While the young men who come to me for career guidance have their share of concerns, I have never in over two decades had one of them tell me they were unsure about whether to pursue their call given their desire to get married and have children.

Never

Not one.

EDUCATION

Imagine you are a child who brings home an A on a math test. Your parents say, "That's great! You're really smart!" Or they say, "That's great! You worked really hard!" Both responses are positive, right? Each communicates congratulations and pride. Yet these two comments differ in ways that are important for achievement motivation.

The first comment communicates that the A in math was earned due to a stable attribute—being smart, something that's part of who

you are and is therefore likely to be repeated. After all, if you're smart today, you'll still be smart next week, next month, next year, and so on.

The second comment suggests that the A is due to an unstable attribute—hard work, something that is situational and therefore could easily change with the next assignment or task. What if you don't have as much time to study the next time or what if the material is just harder and your effort isn't enough?

Of course, either comment might be appropriate at different times with different children. Yet when children succeed in math, parents more often credit their son's success to talent, their daughter's to effort, implying that his success in this "masculine" subject will be repeated, but that hers is more tenuous. As Hannu Raty and colleagues state, "In both mathematics and reading, girls were not entitled to ability-based attribution to the same extent as were boys." 12

To be fair, parents' beliefs might be a holdover from past decades when, on average, boys *did* outscore girls in math, leading many to assume boys had more natural talent in this subject than girls. But recently, this difference is mainly limited to countries where girls receive fewer educational opportunities and where women hold fewer jobs in research.¹³ In fact, some claim that in

¹¹Hannu Raty et al., "Parents' Explanations of Their Child's Performance in Mathematics and Reading: A Replication and Extension of Yee and Eccles," Sex Roles 46, no. 3/4 (2002): 121.

¹²Raty et al., "Parents' Explanations of Their Child's Performance," 121. Findings from this research should not be taken to diminish the value of hard work in academic achievement. In fact, research reveals that a growth mindset, which conceptualizes intelligence as something one can develop rather than existing as a fixed trait, is associated with higher levels of academic achievement. See Susana Claro, David Paunesku, and Carol S. Dweck, "Growth Mindset Tempers the Effects of Poverty on Academic Achievement," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 113, no. 31 (2016): 8664. There appears to be a difference in communicating to someone that their success is due to hard work rather than ability and communicating that intelligence can be developed with effort.

¹³Nicole M. Else-Quest, Janet Shibley Hyde, and Marcia C. Linn, "Cross-national Patterns of Gender Differences in Mathematics: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 1 (2010): 103.

the United States, gender differences no longer exist.¹⁴ What was considered an innate difference is likely a difference in the expectations, opportunities, and encouragement boys and girls receive for mathematical accomplishment.

This hasn't become common knowledge, however, as many teachers and parents still believe boys are more capable in math, and boys tend to show more confidence and less anxiety than girls do in this subject. Such was the case for a woman who recently shared her experience with me. Counselors pushed what they saw as her natural talent in English even though she also made good grades in math and science. However, instead of attributing her grades in these subjects to talent, she was given the message that math and science were difficult subjects and was discouraged from pursuing either.

But does it matter? Won't their scores convince these girls that they aren't mathematically deficient?

Evidently not. Teacher bias has been found to have a detrimental effect on math and science achievement in girls. ¹⁶ Lavy and Sand conclude that such an effect during these early years serves to discourage girls' participation in advanced math in high school, which in turn preempts their pursuing careers in which math is foundational. ¹⁷

¹⁷Lavy and Sand, "On the Origins of Gender Gaps," 263.



¹⁴Janet S. Hyde et al., "Gender Similarities Characterize Math Performance," Science 321, no. 5888 (2008): 495.

¹⁵For information on teachers' beliefs, see Joseph P. Robinson-Cimpian et al., "Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Mathematics Proficiency May Exacerbate Early Gender Gaps in Achievement," *Developmental Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2014): 1279. For information on parents' beliefs, see Jennifer Herbert and Deborah Stipek, "The Emergence of Gender Differences in Children's Perceptions of Their Academic Competence," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 26 (2005): 276. For information on boys' confidence, see Herbert and Stipek, "Emergence of Gender Differences," 290. For information on girls' anxiety, see Else-Quest et al., "Cross-national Patterns of Gender Differences in Mathematics," 122.

¹⁶For information on the effect of teacher bias, see Victor Lavy and Edith Sand, "On the Origins of Gender Gaps in Human Capital: Short- and Long-Term Consequences of Teachers' Biases," *Journal of Public Economics* 167 (2018): 263, and Michela Carlana, "Implicit Stereotypes: Evidence from Teachers' Gender Bias," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134, no. 3 (2019): 1219.

In fact, among eight- and nine-year-old girls, self-confidence in math is driven less by grades and more by their perceptions of teacher evaluation.¹⁸ This suggests that when a girl performs as well as the boys, she will pay less attention to her grade and more to teacher comments, which, given the stereotype, will downplay her natural ability. The boy's confidence, however, is based on a combination of grades and perceived teacher evaluation, 19 which—again, that stereotype—attributes his grades to natural ability. This fosters different levels of self-confidence in children who are equally gifted in the same subject. And self-confidence is important if girls are to persist in math and other areas seen as masculine, such as science and engineering.²⁰ In fact, confidence is so important in these areas that Mau concludes, "Parents, teachers, and counselors must be aware of how their expectations and attitudes affect the math and science achievement of their students and, in turn, affect their students' vocational interests."21

I don't suggest that parents and teachers intentionally foster self-confidence in boys while undermining the same in girls. Yet subtle messages communicate expectations that parents and teachers themselves might not even realize they hold.

For instance, when asked which courses they wanted their children to take in high school, mothers of sons more often than

²¹Mau, "Factors That Influence Persistence," 241.



¹⁸Oliver Dickhauser and Wulf-Uwe Meyer, "Gender Differences in Young Children's Math Ability Attributions," *Psychology Science* 48, no. 1 (2006): 12.

¹⁹Dickhauser and Meyer, "Gender Differences in Young Children's Math," 12.

²⁰For information on the importance of self-confidence in math, see Gail Crombie et al., "Predictors of Young Adolescents' Math Grades and Course Enrollment Intentions: Gender Similarities and Differences," Sex Roles 52, no. 5/6 (2005): 364. For information on the importance of self-confidence in science and engineering, see Wei-Cheng Mau, "Factors that Influence Persistence in Science and Engineering Career Aspirations," The Career Development Quarterly 51 (2003): 241, and Carol A. Heaverlo, Robyn Cooper, and Frankie Santos Lannan, "STEM Development: Predictors for 6th-12th Grade Girls' Interest and Confidence in Science and Math," Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering 19, no. 2 (2013): 121-42.

mothers of daughters selected science.²² Why? They claimed science lacked usefulness for their daughters who were not as good in this subject.²³ As one mother stated: "I didn't put any kind of science because she's not good at science so I don't think she'd grasp it later on."²⁴ This, despite the lack of gender differences in science grades.²⁵ Another study found parents giving three times the explanations to their sons than to their daughters about science exhibits in a museum.²⁶ Given the stereotype of boys' natural talent in "masculine" subjects, parents might believe their investment in boys' learning will provide a greater payoff.

But wait. Does any of this have long-term consequences? Some say it does not. Women are slightly more likely than men to attend college, a fact sometimes touted as proof that inequality has all but ceased.²⁷

However, the academic choices of these students say otherwise. Men are still more likely to graduate with degrees in computer science, engineering, math, the physical sciences, theology and religious studies; women, more often in the biological sciences, family and consumer sciences, and education.²⁸ And among women who

²²Harriet R. Tenenbaum and Dionna May, "Gender in Parent-Child Relationships," in *Gender and Development*, ed. Patrick J. Leman and Harriet R. Tenenbaum (London: Psychology Press, 2014), 6.

²³Tenenbaum and May, "Gender in Parent-Child Relationships," 5-6.

²⁴Tenenbaum and May, "Gender in Parent-Child Relationships," 6.

²⁵Tenenbaum and May, "Gender in Parent-Child Relationships," 5.

²⁶Kevin Crowley et al., "Parents Explain More Often to Boys Than to Girls During Shared Scientific Thinking," *Psychological Science* 12, no. 3 (2001): 258.

²⁷Digest of Education Statistics, "Recent High School Completers and Their Enrollment in College, by Sex and Level of Institution: 1960-2019," National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_302.10.asp.

²⁸For information on degrees conferred to males, see Digest of Education Statistics, "Bachelor's Degrees Conferred to Males by Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity and Field of Study: 2017-2018 and 2018-2019," National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_322.40.asp. For information on degrees conferred to females, see Digest of Education Statistics, "Bachelor's Degrees Conferred to Females by Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity and Field of Study: 2017-2018 and 2018-2019," National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_322.50.asp.

do enter STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) careers, after twelve years, half of them switch to non-STEM occupations.²⁹ The choice of college majors and career aspirations falls along stereotyped lines and is consistent with the gendered messages these individuals have likely received throughout their lives.

Textbooks add another layer to the messages these children receive, namely, that women do not achieve in ways that matter. School books follow the history of men (*White* men, at that) and confine the experiences of women to a few in-text references, sidebars, or chapters on women's issues. One study of twelve introductory American government and politics textbooks found "9% of pages included in-text references to women, 28% of images and 17% of sidebars, tables, figures, and charts included women." Role models for female achievement are scarce. The struggles for equal pay and women's suffrage and against sexual harassment in the workplace are presented as peripheral issues outside the main. Men are the norm; women, the exception. Men accomplish in ways that are notable; women, not so much.

What can we learn here? The stereotype of gender differences in natural ability in math and science persists despite evidence to the contrary. Boys are often told in subtle ways that success in these areas reflects their essence and will continue; girls, that theirs is due to effort and is, therefore, less certain. Girls often receive less attention and instruction even though their success equals that of boys. Since girls' self-confidence is buoyed by feedback, the relative absence of it diminishes their self-perception as talented in these "masculine" subjects and decreases the likelihood they will continue in them. Textbooks confirm that women rarely rank among the achievers.

³⁰Christiane Olivo, "Bringing Women In: Gender and American Government and Politics in Textbooks," *Journal of Political Science Education* 8 (2012): 131.



²⁹Jennifer L. Glass et al., "What's So Special About STEM: A Comparison of Women's Retention in STEM and Professional Occupations," Social Forces 92, no. 2 (2013): 734.

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