

GENDER SOCIALISATION

Socialisation is the process whereby people acquire the rules of behaviour and the systems of beliefs and attitudes that equip a person to function effectively as a member of society. So, gender socialisation is the process whereby people acquire the rules, beliefs and attitudes appropriate to their particular gender.

It has been said that gender socialisation gives girls roots and boys wings (Myers, 1995). This suggests that girls are socialised to stay at home (tied to the kitchen sink?) and boys are socialised to have adventures! Studies of children's book over the last 50 years have shown that girls are four times more likely to be shown using household objects (e.g. pots & pans) than boys, who are five times more likely to be shown using production objects (e.g. machinery) than girls (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994). The results is, according to a United Nations study (1991), "Everywhere, women do most household work" and "everywhere cooking and dishwashing are the least shared household chores". Such behaviour expectations for males and females define **gender roles**. If you were to answer a question on socialisation, you would include all the arguments about the development of gender roles (e.g. reinforcement, modelling, media, cognitive developmental theories).

In addition, it might be worth looking at the different parenting styles used with boys and girls:

- **Parents encourage sex-typed play activities.** Lytton & Romney (1991) found that although there was little overall evidence that parents reinforce boys and girls differently they did find that there was a significant difference with respect to the encouragement of sex-typed activities. Will et al (1976) presented a boy aged 6 months to adults who were then observed while playing with the infant. The child was presented in sex-typed clothes: half the subject met "Adam" dressed in blue and the other half met "Beth" dressed in pink. Three toys were available: train, doll and fish. They found that the doll was most often handed to "Beth" and "she" received more smiles; there were no sex differences with respect to the other toys. Smith & Lloyd (1978) extended this study and found that "boys" were most likely to be handed a toy hammer while "girls" were most likely to be given a doll. In addition, the boys were encouraged in physical action more than girls. Also, Caldera et al (1989) found that parents gave more positive non-verbal responses to their 18-23 month-old

children for picking up toys when the selected object was sex appropriate and more negative if the object was associated with the opposite sex.

- **Parents encourage sex-typed everyday activities.** Children are differentially reinforced (with smiles, praise etc.) for the kinds of activities traditionally associated with their sex (Fagot, 1978). Girls were positively reinforced for activities such as dancing, dressing up, assisting with domestic tasks whilst boys were reinforced for more gross motor activities.
- **Parents dress their children differently.** This is a visible reminder that parents feel gender is important. Why are infant girls dressed differently from infant boys? Facially and behaviourally it is often very difficult to tell the different genders apart, but you can usually tell at least in some way from the clothes the child is wearing (Jackson, 1992).
- **Parents establish sex-typed physical environments for their children.** From the earliest physical handling boys and girls are treated differently, with boys experiencing more varied stimulation and girls experiencing greater consistency and stability in interaction with their caregivers (Yarrow et al, 1975). The bedrooms of boys and girls even as young as 1 year old are markedly different in decor and contents (Rheingold & Cook, 1975): children may spend a lot of time in their rooms which leads to the conclusion that they must engage in sex-typed play behaviours because the contents of male and female rooms are so different.
- Meece (1987) suggests that schools maintain widely sex-biased practices in terms of the opportunities and advice (including career counselling) they provide.
- Even getting home from school is gender differentiated. Girls are more often picked up from school or instructed to come straight home than boys (Newson & Newson, 1976).

Summary: There is extensive evidence that parents organise children's environments, appearance and activities with gender in mind and that the character of much of everyday life is also highly sex-typed. However, the child also has some choices in this and could be influenced by peers, school, TV etc. The relationship between social context and gender role development (the gender socialisation process) is complex and dynamic (Katz, 1987)