

American Academy of Pediatrics



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Gender Identity

Even in these "gender-neutral" times, you've probably noticed significant differences between your sons and daughters (besides the obvious physical ones). Your own boys and girls may have varying interests. Their skills and aptitudes may differ. So might their styles of play, and the way they relate to friends.

In fact, boys and girls are different. Researchers, however, disagree on whether these differences are attributable to nature or nurture. Are they the result of genetics? Or is social conditioning primarily responsible? In this ongoing debate, there are no definitive answers. Some investigators believe differences between the sexes can be traced back to the womb, where the developing brains of boys and girls are exposed to varying hormones. But other investigators insist that these variations are primarily environmental in nature. After all, they say, boys and girls are often treated differently by the adults in their lives, including parents and teachers who often praise them for "gender appropriate" behavior and activities.

Certain gender differences, while present in the first years of life, become even more evident in school-age children. Although most boys and girls have these gender-specific characteristics and patterns of behavior, all boys are not alike, nor are all girls.

Gender Identity in Early Childhood

A child's awareness of being a boy or a girl starts in the first year of life. It often begins by 8 to 10 months of age, when youngsters typically discover their genitals. Then, between 1 and 2 years old, children become conscious of physical differences between boys and girls; before their third birthday they are easily able to label themselves as either a boy or a girl as they acquire a strong concept of self.

By age 4, children's gender identity is stable, and they know they will always be a boy or a girl.

By the time they enter kindergarten, children's gender identities are well established.

NOTE: The child may, as the result of pressure from parents, teachers or peers, suppress their gender identity in an effort to avoid ridicule. However that does not mean the child is uncertain of their own gender identity. It simply indicates that they are beginning to succumb to cultural influences and prejudices that may be negatively affecting their self-esteem.

(Comments in red have been added by TransActive)



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Establishing a sense of self early in life underlies a child's sense of being either a girl or a boy. Parents must accept their child's gender, even if they might have hoped for a child of the other gender. Parents must communicate to their children that they are intact, beautiful, and well-formed. The gender of most infants is known prenatally or immediately at birth. There are endocrinologic and genetic conditions that may result in ambiguity of the external genitalia, making gender assignment difficult initially. Gender *identity* however, is a gradual process that is based on an internal conviction of belonging to either the male or female gender. Gender identity is distinct from gender *role*, which refers to a set of behaviors through which individuals convey to the larger society that they are male or female. Children usually develop a fixed gender identity by 2 to 3 years of age, after which they emphatically perceive themselves as being either a girl or a boy.¹

¹ Carver PR, Yunger JL, Perry DG. Gender identity and adjustment in middle childhood. *Sex Roles*. 2003;49:95-109