

Gender Differences in the Early Years

Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Do boys and girls develop differently?

There are lots of anecdotes about how different boys and girls are. But, when experts do a meta-analysis of all the studies of gender differences, these are the things that show up consistently:

- Emotional Development: Boys may get upset more easily, and have a harder time self-soothing. Girls show fear earlier: they're more likely to be hesitant if their parents look worried about something.
- Spatial Learning: On average, boys are better at turning objects around in their mind to see how they could fit together differently, and at keeping track of moving objects and predicting motion.
- Physical Skills: Boys *may* be more physical (although girls reach large motor milestones at about the same age). Boys *may* have shorter attention spans.
- Language: Girls are better at perceptual speed tasks: identifying matching objects and pattern identification. They pay more attention to the human voice than boys do. Girls talk earlier.

However, in all areas, all of those differences are *very small*. And kids' temperaments and interests are just as significant. The difference between one boy and another boy is as big as the difference between boys and girls.

There are also transgender and intersex children and adults, and people who do not identify as male *or* female. When thinking about gender difference it may be better to think about differences along a spectrum of gender.

Do people respond differently to boys and girls?

The innate differences may be minor. But adults often *reinforce and amplify* the differences. We encourage kids to do things we expect their gender to be good at and we don't challenge them in other areas, because "girls are just not good at _____, and we all know boys _____ later." Over time, assumptions crystalize into reality.

- Emotional Expression: When girls show fear or cry, they receive empathetic support. But fearful boys are told not to be scared and not to cry. Boys are often perceived as more likely to be angry and aggressive, but that's considered normal for boys. Angry girls are told not to be angry.
- Emotional Development: Some believe girls are more tuned into people from day one – more likely to establish eye contact. But others point out that because newborn boys are fussier on average, their parents are less likely to establish eye contact, so boys don't get as much practice.
- Spatial Learning: Girls are slightly less interested in puzzles and building toys like Legos, so we don't give them as many. That turns into a gap in spatial skills which influences math learning later on.
- Physical: Boys are expected to be more physical and interested in balls and bikes, so when they show these interests, they are actively encouraged. Boys are dressed in clothes they can move well in. Girls are dressed in "pretty" clothes and assumed to be less physically capable and less interested in sports.
- Language: Girls talk younger, so parents talk to them more. Girls may be more interested in sitting still and reading with a parent, so parents read to them more. This puts girls further ahead. If adults see a boy lagging in talking and reading, they shrug it off, "Of course, he's a boy. He'd rather run around."

When do children learn about gender?

- 7 months. Notice difference between male / female voices. 12 months. Notice difference in faces.
- 2 years. Girls begin to play with 'girl toys' and boys with 'boy toys.'
- 2 – 3 years. Begin to label themselves and others as male or female
- 3 – 4 years. Start actively categorizing things as boy things and girl things.

- 4 – 6 years. Say “only boys can do this” or “girls never do that”
- 6 – 7 years. Most will state that gender is constant and doesn’t change.

Toy Selection

Toy selection is where we see a big difference evolve. At 6 – 12 months, boys and girls are interested in the same toys. By 3, boys show a clear preference for “boy toys” (especially ones with wheels), while girls prefer girl toys. This is even more pronounced at 5. Adults don’t tend to encourage boys to spend time with “girl” toys. Girls are encouraged to split their time evenly between boy toys and girl toys. That may be because in our modern U.S. culture, we tell our girls they can do anything – wear pants, do math, climb trees, etc. But we discourage our boys from doing “girly things”. We can create more gender balance by offering a variety of toys.

Helping all children succeed (especially boys)

- Physical movement is essential: give them active chores, ensure they have time for big motor play.
- If you feel they have a shorter attention span, it helps to break big jobs down into smaller tasks, and switch things around when working, alternating activities.
- Take advantage of natural curiosity and desire to fix things by giving problems to solve. Take advantage of their desire to compete to prove their abilities by issuing challenges.
- If you want to connect, do something physical together. Especially if you want to have a “serious talk” with them. Do it while walking side-by-side, not sitting and looking at them.
- When some kids are stressed (especially boys), they have fight-or-flight response. Teach them to move to release anger, and to tighten and relax muscles or shake it off to calm down if they can’t move.

Helping all children succeed (especially girls)

- Encourage physical activity of all kinds. Treat them as a brave, strong, athletic child.
- Encourage them to practice skills that build spatial intelligence – build with blocks, make and use maps, do puzzles. Play with toys that move – cars, paper airplanes, balls – these help predict motion.
- When some kids are stressed (especially girls), they may have an oxytocin-fueled response – they are more likely to turn to other people for support and to help defend from perceived threats (the collect-and-protect response.) Their stress may be quieter and go un-noticed until they begin to cry. Move in close, speak in a calm, quiet voice, and offer support with problem-solving.

Gender Non-Conforming Kids

Gender expression is the clothes we wear and how we present ourselves. Some boys like to wear pink dresses and nail polish, and some girls want to live in blue jeans and short hair. *Gender roles* are about our cultural stereotypes of who should play with dolls and who should play with trucks, who will want to play baseball and who will want to dance ballet. All children explore gender roles and expression as part of understanding their world, and understanding who they are, just as they may pretend to be an astronaut or veterinarian.

Sometimes children have a period where they consistently act in ways that are different than others may expect them to. If your 4 year old daughter loves to play with worms and wants to be a firefighter or your son likes to paint butterflies and wants to be a fairy princess, this is often just a phase they’ll explore and move on from.

Some children, perhaps 1%, are transgender. They may have a *gender identity* that is different than you expected based on what their body looked like at birth. Rather than just wanting to *dress like* or *act like* the other gender for a little while, they may tell you they *are* a different gender. And they may be persistent, consistent and insistent about this. Having supportive family members or supportive people in the community can have a huge long-term impact on the physical and emotional well-being of gender non-conforming kids. Learn more: Talking with Children about Gender Identity <https://gooddayswithkids.com/gender-identity/>