

Fall 2019

CHALLENGING NORMATIVE GENDER
WITHIN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE



SEX ≠ GENDER ≠ SEXUALITY

If you are a parent, are planning to become a parent, are expecting, or care for children, it is important to understand that the child(ren) in your care may identify themselves in unexpected ways. From a foundational standpoint, understanding the differences between sex, gender, and sexuality is a good place to start.

Sex is a biological assignment that is given at birth. Alternatively, **gender** is how one identifies, regardless of their reproductive organs. Finally, **sexuality** is related to who one is attracted to, and is in no way related to one's sex or gender (Little and McGivern, 2016). When keeping these distinctions in mind, you may observe a shift in the expectations you have for your child(ren).

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In this issue, we explore the ways in which children come to understand gender through socialization. We will also provide readers with some realistic tools for challenging gender normativity as a means for modeling inclusivity.

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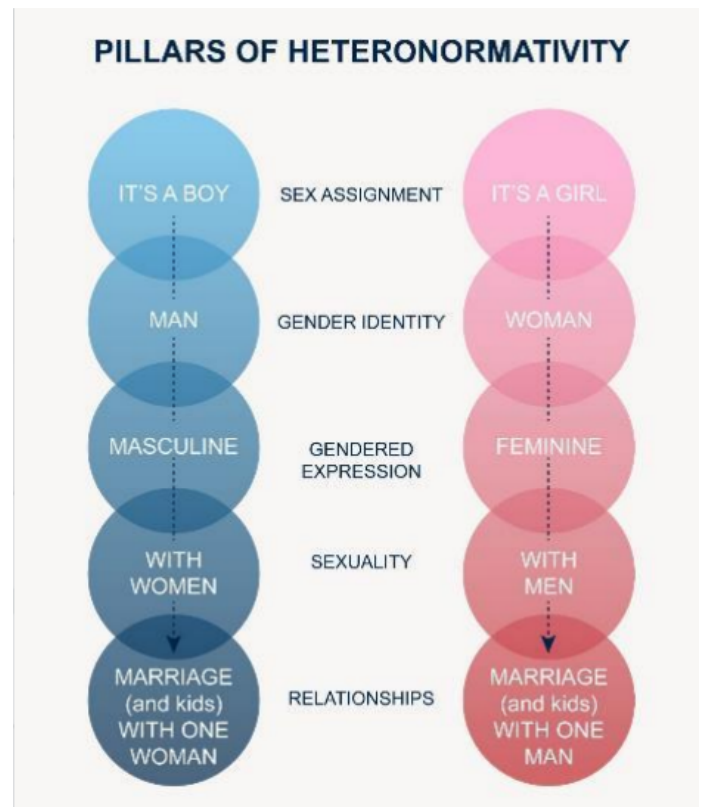
SOCIALIZATION & NORMATIVITY



We came to understand our own gender by the time we were two years old (Kane, 2006, p. 177). We also contribute to how our the children with whom we engage understand gender. From the first anatomical ultrasound, many parents in modern society begin making plans for their child based on the sex assigned. During this most exciting stage, we frequently "choose gender-based colors, clothing, and toys for the newborn" (Kilmartin and Smiler, 2015, p. 70). This evidences that we are setting the earliest possible expectations for children, how they will self-identify, and how they will express themselves.

Gender identity is just one example of normative expectations we burden children with. Kids are even pressured to comply with heteronormative standards, which tend to be male-female relationships, which tend to be male-female relationships. Those who challenge norms such as these face scrutiny and bullying,

particularly in social and academic environments (Rosen and Nofziger, 2018, pp. 296, 298, 312). Through socialization, children and teenagers quickly learn that these are the consequences for failing to conform to heteronormative standards. Interestingly, "homo-sexuality is about gender conformity... and so, **anti-gay sentiments become a short-hand method for gender policing**" (Kimmel, 2008, p. 76). Thus, regardless of how children come to self-identify in terms of their gender and sexuality, it is worth considering the differences that might be made by fostering an environment of acceptance and inclusion. Not only will this have the direct benefit of making them feel safe to be the most authentic versions of themselves, but it will also indirectly enable them to acquire a true sense of the value that comes with accepting others exactly as they are.

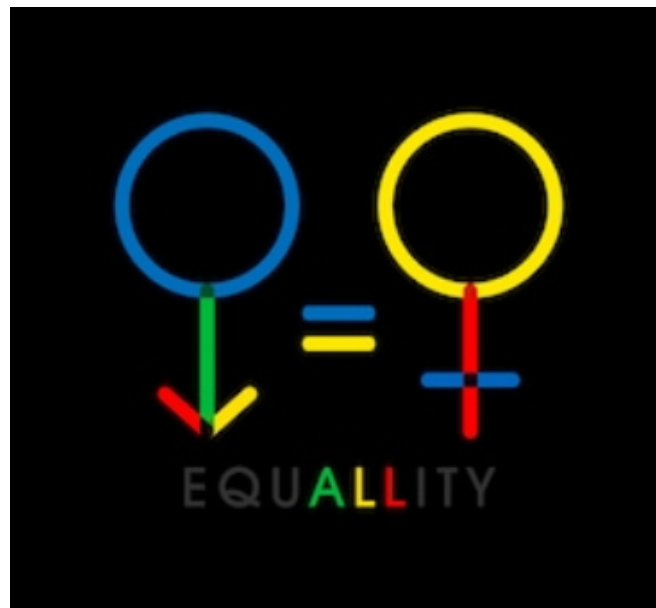


MODELING GENDER EQUITY

TEACHING CHILDREN ACCEPTANCE THROUGH ACTION

An extensive component of children's learning occurs through modeling. They observe and mimic the behaviors they see (Maccoby, 2000, pp. 399-400). Significant impressions are left on the youngest minds.

"Children under 6 years old take in everything without effort, just as a sponge soaks up water" (as cited by Davies, 2019, p.4). From this, we can reasonably deduce that the effects of modeling are perhaps the most powerful when children observe someone they deeply admire, or, if their observations occur over an



**"Children under 6 years old take in everything without effort, just as a sponge soaks up water."
- Simone Davies, 2019**

extensive period of time. Therefore, it is crucial that we are ever-mindful of what the little people in the room might be observing. Moreover, we must be cognizant about how our own views of gender are influencing them as they develop. This requires that we carefully examine their environments on a regular basis. We may also need to deconstruct our own biases, language usage, and explore the ways in which we came to understand gender within our own family systems and schooling.



EMBRACING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

ZOOMING IN ON HOW WE CAN PREVENT BOYS FROM BECOMING UNHEALTHY MEN

The pressures that boys face to comply with gender norms presents this with dilemmas unique from females. Through socialization, boys are taught that they must be assertive, action-oriented, hard-working, athletic, powerful, and above all else, they must never - ever - behave in a way that might be perceived as feminine (Kilmartin and Smiler, 2015, pp. 5-7). When males step out of the bounds of masculinity (and they will), they at great risk of gender policing. Gender policing has enormous reach and home environments certainly are not exempt (pp. 72-73).

Boys and men *must* strive to meet an impossible standard of masculinity, no matter the cost to their happiness, quality of life, and self-worth. These pressures associated with hegemonic masculinity have resulted in American



men having "stressed-out romantic relationships, physical health problems, and a growing epidemic of loneliness" (Vedantam, et al, 2019). Thus, rigid standards for masculinity are directly correlated to emotional and physical well-being. If we wish to mitigate these effects, we must start by encouraging children, including boys, to express their emotions through productive and healthy means.



It is ideal for caregivers to allow and encourage that all feelings be embraced. That is not to say that we should allow all *behavior*. "We [can] step in if necessary to stop any inappropriate behavior. [For instance, with toddlers], we often need to act as [their] prefrontal cortex (the rational part of their brain), which is still developing." We can also help guide them on how to "disagree with others in a respectful way" (Davies, 2019, p. 101) and encourage them to explore what they are feeling and why. With fundamental skills such as these, we are setting children up for healthier socio-emotional development and better health outcomes as adults.

A NON-BINARY TAKE ON PLAY, ACTIVITIES & ACADEMIA

COMBATING PERSISTENT GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS

There are a variety of environments to which children are exposed that are fundamental aspects of their ongoing socialization. For instance, a study conducted by Angela Meah and Peter Jackson found that "men are increasingly involved in domestic tasks such as cooking[; however,] they have entered the space of the kitchen largely on their own terms, as a lifestyle choice, rather than taking primary responsibility for the routine work of feeding the family, which still falls mostly on women" (2013, p. 592). Moreover, and despite there being "no proven differences in intelligence between the sexes" (Carter, 2005, p. 193), gender-based assumptions are frequently made about academic abilities and competencies. For example, boys tend to be credited with having better math skills (Rands, 2009, p. 424). Such generalizations



influence children, how they envision their professional futures, and what roles they see themselves having within the domestic sphere. In fact, **"from the outset, we [are] dividing up social roles... on the basis of sex/gender assignment"** (Manne, 2018, p. 292). Consequently, by age six, girls' confidence in their own intellectual abilities plummet (p. 293). Thus, the onus is on us if we wish to shift the dichotomous paradigm that boys are destined to be one thing and girls are destined to be another. No child should have such a narrow perspective of their future, but rather, they should have a perspective that is boundless.

We can each contribute to shifting this paradigm by moving our intentions away from gendered thinking and towards non-binary thinking. This may require small changes such as seeking out toys and activities that are not gendered. Similarly, we might make an effort to trust "that [children] intrinsically [know] what they need to be working on to develop as they should, [so we aim to] provide them with a rich environment to explore... and [develop] along their unique path" (Davies, 2019, p. 86). Ultimately, this boils down to respecting children exactly for who they are from the very start.



- Carter, P. (2005). Between a “soft” and a “hard” place. In Spade, J. Z., & Valentine, C. G. (2011). *The kaleidoscope of gender: Prisms, patterns, and possibilities* (3rd ed.). (pp. 192-202). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage / Pine Forge Press.
In the introduction of her essay, Carter addresses the myth that males and females have different academic strengths. This serves as useful evidence in supporting claims related to debunking these myths.
- Davies, S. (2019). *The Montessori toddler: A parent's guide to raising a curious and responsible human being*. New York, NY: Workman Publishing.
This Montessori-themed parenting handbook is geared towards parenting toddlers, which is a crucial stage in childhood development and socialization. Davies articulately explains the importance of looking at a child's environment through their lens, keeping in mind how their brain development influences their behavior. Though this is not a sociological source per se, it is very much aligned with matters related to how seemingly insignificant experiences impact children as they grow and develop.
- Kane, E. (2006). “No way my boys are going to be like that!”: Parents' responses to children's gender nonconformity. In Spade, J. Z., & Valentine, C. G. (2011). *The kaleidoscope of gender: Prisms, patterns, and possibilities* (3rd ed.). (pp. 176-184). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage / Pine Forge Press.
Kane's expertise on how children are socialized proves useful when arguing that awareness of gender identity occurs early in life.
- Kilmartin, C. (2015). *The masculine self* (Fifth edition.). Cornwall on Hudson, NY: Sloan Publishing.
Along with a variety of topics related to masculinities, this textbook offers insight into how socialization of children impacts their emotional development and emotional intelligence. Moreover, it includes information about Robert Brannon's work on masculine themes, and how these themes confine males throughout their lives. This perspective is useful in exposing the roots of hegemonic masculinity.
- Kimmel, M. S. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men* (First edition.). New York: Harper.
As an academic and sociologist who specializes in gender studies, Kimmel's work serves as an excellent resource for exploring the process of socialization and how gender policing occurs in social circles.
- Little, W., & McGivern, R. (2016). Chapter 12. *Gender, sex, and sexuality – Introduction to sociology – 1st Canadian edition*. Retrieved October 25, 2019, from <https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontosociology/chapter/chapter12-gender-sex-and-sexuality/>
Little and McGivern offer a formal, academic understanding of fundamental concepts in the fields of sociology and gender and sexuality studies. By outlining common terminology, readers may gain a better understanding of themselves and others.
- Maccoby, E. E. (2000). Perspectives on gender development. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 24(4), 398–406.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/016502500750037946>
Maccoby explores the intersection of childhood development and gender while taking into consideration the process of socialization and the impacts of modeling on children. This serves as useful evidence for arguing that children mimic those in their environment.
- Manne, K. (2018). *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
As an Assistant Professor of Philosophy who studies gender dynamics within society, Manne offers useful context regarding the greater social impacts of gendered behavior. While this book largely focuses on misogynistic behaviors and the realities of living in a patriarchal society, she also briefly explores how we come into our social roles.

- Meah, A., & Jackson, P. (2013). Crowded kitchens: The 'democratisation' of domesticity? *Gender, Place & Culture*, 20(5), 578–596.**
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.701202>
Meah and Jackson's study provides useful evidence regarding modern gender dynamics within the domestic sphere. This evidence will prove beneficial in arguing how children are influenced by their caregivers.
- Rands, K. E. (2009). Considering transgender people in education: A gender-complex approach. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60(4), 419–431.**
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109341475>
Rands explores the challenges faced by young students who are gender non-conforming and how these challenges impact their education and their psyche. This piece will be useful when evidencing how biases work their way into academic settings.
- Rosen, N. L., & Nofziger, S. (2019). Boys, bullying, and gender roles: How hegemonic masculinity shapes bullying behavior. *Gender Issues*, 36(3), 295–318.**
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-018-9226-0>
Rosen and Nofzinger use evidence-based data to analyze the gendered experiences of children in academic social circles. This information provides a useful perspective of the consequences children might face when they challenge normative standards.
- Vedantam, S., Cohen, R., & Boyle, T. (2019). *How Toxic Masculinity Affects Men*. In *Hidden Brain*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/11/769538697/guys-we-have-a-problem-how-american-masculinity-creates-lonely-men>
In this episode of "Hidden Brain," Vedantam connects the enormous pressures associated with masculinity to emotional health matters men face in adulthood. This helps to understand what is at stake in how boys are socialized within the scope of gender normativity.**

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