

Do toddlers pick up gender roles during play?

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The differences in mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children, particularly in play situations, may influence toddlers' associations of specific behaviors with male and female genders. According to Eric Lindsey from Penn State Berks in the US, and his colleagues, context, gender of the parent and gender of the child combine in a complex pattern to shape parent-child interaction. Their findings¹ are published online in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

The authors looked at how a situation involving caring for the physical and emotional needs of a child - here, sharing a snack - is likely to produce very different types of verbal interaction from both parent and child compared to a play situation. Lindsey and team used data from 80 families recruited from two small cities in Kansas, as part of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. Parents and their [children](#) were videotaped during a 15-minute parent-child play session and a 10-minute parent-child snack (the caregiving session). The researchers looked at differences in the way play and caregiving were initiated verbally, and how the participants responded - also verbally - to this initiation, for mother-son, mother-daughter, father-son and father-daughter combinations.

They found that the quality of verbal interactions between parents and their toddlers was dependent on the context. In the snack situation, the focus of the interaction was on parent authority and management of the child's behavior i.e. it was a parent-centered context. In contrast, the play context was much more child-centered with more equal interactions

between parents and their toddlers.

When it came to comparing boys' and girls' [verbal communication](#) behaviors, the authors found very little difference between the two sexes. Children seemed to pick up cues and adapt their behavior according to the situation, irrespective of their gender. In play situations, the children were more involved in determining the direction of the interaction whereas they accepted that parents were in charge during the snack situation.

Perhaps most significantly, mothers' and fathers' behaviors differed more in the play context than in the snack context. During play, fathers were more assertive whereas mothers displayed more facilitative and cooperative behaviors; in the caregiving situation their behaviors were much more similar. The authors suggest that children may pick up on these different behaviors and associate them with gender roles in the family i.e. males are more assertive whereas females are more compliant and flexible.

The authors conclude: "It would appear that children in the same family have different experiences in their play interactions with their mothers and fathers. Such differences may teach children indirect lessons about [gender roles](#) and reinforced gender typed patterns of behavior that they then carry into contexts outside of the family."

More information: Lindsey EW et al (2010). Gender differences in mother-toddler and father-toddler verbal initiations and responses during a caregiving and play context. Sex Roles
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