

Highlighting gender promotes stereotyped views in preschoolers

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In many preschool classrooms, gender is very noticeable—think of the greeting, "Good morning, boys and girls" or the instruction, "Girls line up on this side, boys on that." A new study has found that when teachers call attention to gender in these simple ways, children are more likely to express stereotyped views of what activities are appropriate for boys and girls, and which gender they prefer to play with.

The study, by researchers at The Pennsylvania State University, is published in the November/December 2010 issue of *Child Development*.

The researchers evaluated 57 3- to 5-year-olds at two preschools over a two-week period. The two schools were similar along important dimensions, such as class size, teacher-child ratio, and populations served. In one set of classrooms, teachers were asked to avoid making divisions by sex, which was the policy of the preschool. In the other, teachers were asked to use gendered language and divisions (like lining children up by [gender](#) and asking boys and girls to post their work on separate bulletin boards), but still avoided making statements comparing boys and girls or fostering competition between them (for example, they were asked to avoid saying, "Who can be quieter: [boys](#) or girls?").

At the end of two weeks, the researchers tested the degree to which the children endorsed cultural gender stereotypes (for example, that "only [girls](#)" should play with baby dolls) and asked them about their interest in playing with children of their own and the other sex. The children were also observed during play time to see who they played with.

Children in the classrooms in which teachers avoided characterizations by sex showed no change in responses or behaviors over the two weeks. However, children in the other classrooms showed increases in stereotyped attitudes and decreases in their interest in playing with children of the other sex. They also were observed to play less with children of the other sex.

The findings extend earlier research showing that classroom environments that make divisions by gender lead to increased stereotypes among elementary-school-aged children. By highlighting the powerful effect of [classroom](#) environments on preschool children's gender-related beliefs and behaviors, the findings have implications for how teachers structure classrooms and interact with [children](#).

More information: *Child Development*, Vol. 81, Issue 6

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