

'Boys will be boys' in US, but not in Asia

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A new study shows there is a gender gap when it comes to behavior and self-control in American young children – one that does not appear to exist in children in Asia.

In the United States, girls had higher levels of self-regulation than boys. Self-regulation is defined as [children's](#) ability to control their behavior and impulses, follow directions, and persist on a task. It has been linked to [academic performance](#) and college completion, in past studies by Oregon State University researchers.

In three [Asian countries](#), the [gender gap](#) in the United States was not found when researchers directly assessed the self-regulation of 3-6 year olds. The results appear in the new issue of the journal *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

"These findings suggest that although we often expect girls to be more self-regulated than boys, this may not be the case for Asian children," said Shannon Wanless, lead author of the study.

Wanless began conducting the research during her doctoral studies at Oregon State University under Megan McClelland, an associate professor in OSU's Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families. Wanless is now on the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh.

One interesting part of the researcher's findings: Although there were no [gender differences](#) in self-regulation when the children were directly assessed using a variety of school-readiness tasks, teachers in Asia

perceived girls as performing better on self-regulation even when they actually performed equally to boys.

"Teachers are rating children's behavior in the [classroom environment](#), which has a lot of [distractions](#) and is very stimulating," Wanless said. "It is possible that boys in the Asian countries were able to self-regulate as well as girls when they were in a quiet space (the direct assessment), but were not able to regulate themselves as well in a bustling classroom environment (teacher ratings)."

In addition, McClelland said cultural expectations of girls' behavior versus that of their male peers may be influencing teachers' assessments.

"In general, there is more tolerance for active play in boys than in girls," McClelland said. "Girls are expected to be quiet and not make a fuss. This expectation may be coloring some teachers' perceptions."

The researchers conducted assessments with 814 children in the United States, Taiwan, South Korea and China. Their study showed that U.S. girls had significantly higher self-regulation than boys, but there were no significant gender differences in any Asian societies. In addition, for both genders, directly assessed and teacher-rated self-regulation were related to many aspects of [school readiness](#) in all societies for girls and boys.

"We know from previous research that many Asian children outperform American children in academic achievement," McClelland said.

"Increasingly, we are seeing that there is also a gap when it comes to their ability to control their behavior and persist with tasks."

Wanless said this study paves the way for future research to explore why there is such a large gender gap in the United States, and what can be learned from Asian schools.

"What can we learn from Asian cultural and teaching practices about how we can support girls and boys to be successful in school?" she said. "When we see differences in developmental patterns across countries it suggests that we might want to look at teaching and parenting practices in those countries and think about how they might apply in the [United States](#)."

Both researchers emphasized the importance of working with young children, regardless of gender or culture, on their self-regulation skills. Practicing games such as Simon Says and Red Light, Green Light are a few ways that parents can work with their children to help them learn how to follow instructions, persist on a task, and listen carefully.

"In our study, self-regulation was good for academic achievement for boys and [girls](#)," Wanless said. "That means this skill is important for both genders and we should be supporting self-regulatory development for all children, especially boys. Low self-regulation in preschool has been linked to difficulties in adulthood, so increased focused on supporting young [boys](#)' development can have long-term positive benefits."

More information: The study this story is based on can be found at: hdl.handle.net/1957/38611

Provided by Oregon State University

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