Chapter 4

Early-Childhood Gender Socialization

BOX 4.1 Dressing Baby: Teaching Masculinity and Femininity through Clothing

Before reading this chapter, pay a visit to one of the department stores in your area. Walk through the infant and toddler departments and take careful note of the differences in clothing available for boys and girls. The most obvious dissimilarity is that girls wear skirts and dresses, and boys don't. But what about contrasts in style, in color or prints, or even in the texture of the fabrics? Are there any differences in the way the clothes are decorated and accessorized? Do any major themes emerge as you compare the clothing? For example, what sorts of messages about masculinity and femininity come across subtly (or not so subtly) through the clothing? How do you think wearing these clothes might affect the ways little girls and boys behave or the kinds of activities they are likely to pursue?

In this chapter we will examine how things such as clothing and toys as well as parental interaction teach very young children about gender. Save your answers to the questions in this exercise and compare them with the research results that we discuss later in the chapter.

Imagine that it is ten years from now. You are married and would like to start a family, but you and your spouse have just been told that you can have only one child. Which would you prefer that child to be: a boy or a girl?

If you are like most American college students, you would prefer your only child to be a boy. Indeed, since the 1930s, researchers have documented that Americans in general have a clear "boy preference" (Coombs 1977; Williamson 1976a). Not only do we prefer boys as only children, but in larger families we also prefer sons to outnumber daughters, and we have a strong preference for sons as firstborns. There is some evidence to suggest that this may be weakening a bit in the United States; for instance, several recent studies have reported an increasing tendency for people to express no preference rather than an explicit son or daughter preference (Steinbacher and Gilroy 1985; Gilroy and Steinbacher 1983; Rent and Rent 1977; Williamson 1977). Outside the United States, however, boy preference remains so strong that in some countries, such as India and Egypt, it is estimated that if parents could choose the sex of their offspring the resulting ratio of boys to girls would range from 162:100 to as high as 495:100 (Williamson 1976a).

It appears, then, that children are born into a world that largely prefers boys over girls. Some of the common reasons that adults give for this preference are that boys carry on the family name (assuming that a daughter will take her husband's name at marriage) and that boys are both easier and cheaper to raise. The small minority that prefers girls seems to value them for their traditional feminine traits: they are supposedly neater, cuddlier, cuter, and more obedient than boys (Williamson 1976b). Although it is uncertain whether children perceive their parents' sex preferences (Williamson 1976a), it is clear that these preferences are closely associated with parental expectations of children's behavior and tend to reflect gender stereotypes.

In this chapter, we will discuss how parents transmit these expectations to their children through **socialization**. Socialization is the process by which society's values and norms, including those pertaining to gender, are taught and learned. This is a lifelong process, but in this chapter, we will concentrate on the socialization that occurs in the early childhood years. We will see that gender socialization is often a conscious effort in that expectations are reinforced with explicit rewards and punishments. But it may also be more subtle, with gender messages relayed implicitly through children's clothing, the way their rooms are decorated, and the toys they are given for play. To begin our discussion, we will examine some of the theories that have been forwarded to explain how very young children acquire their gender identities.

LEARNING GENDER

Research indicates that children as young as two years old are aware of their gender and already adhere to gender stereotypes (Cowan and Hoffman 1986; Kuhn et al. 1978). Obviously, children are presented with gender messages very early in their lives, but how do they come to adopt this information as part of their images of themselves and their understanding of the world around them? In other words, how do little girls learn that they are girls, and how do little boys learn that they are boys? Perhaps more importantly, how do both learn that only boys do certain (masculine) things, and only girls do other (feminine) things? A number of theories have been offered in response to such questions. We will discuss the three major ones: identification theory, social learning theory, and cognitive-developmental theory.

Identification Theory

Identification theory is rooted in the work of the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). According to Freud, children pass through a series of stages in their personality development. During the first two stages, referred to respectively as the *oral* and *anal* stages, boys and girls are fairly similar in their behavior and experiences. For both, their mother is the chief object of their emotions, since she is their primary caretaker and gratifies most of their needs. It is around age four, however, that an important divergence occurs in the personality development of girls and boys. It is at this age that children become aware of their own genitals and of the fact that the genitals of boys and girls are different. This realization signals the start of the third stage of development, the *phallic* stage. It is during the phallic stage that **identification** takes place; that is, children begin to unconsciously model their behavior after that of their same-sex parent, thus learning how to behave in gender-appropriate ways. Significantly, identification does not occur for girls the same way it occurs for boys.

For boys, identification is motivated by what Freud called *castration anx-*

iety. You see, at this age a boy's love for his mother becomes more sexual, and he tends to view his father as his rival (the *Oedipus complex*). What quickly cures him of this jealousy is a glimpse of the female genitalia. Seeing the clitoris, the little boy assumes that all girls have been castrated for some reason, and he fears that a similar fate may befall him if he continues to compete with his father. Boys perceive the formidable size and power of their fathers and conclude that their fathers have the ability to castrate competitors. Consequently, instead of competing with his father, the little boy tries to be more like him and ends up, in a sense, with the best of both worlds:

> [I]n choosing to be like his father, the boy can keep his penis. The boy, however, may still [vicariously] enjoy his mother sexually, through his father. As a result of this . . . identification, the boy begins to take on his father's characteristics, including his [gender] role behaviors (Frieze et al. 1978:98).

In contrast, a girl's identification with her mother is motivated by what Freud called *penis envy*. Penis envy develops in girls upon first sight of the male genitals. Seeing the male's "far superior equipment" as Freud put it (1983/1933:88), the little girl too thinks she has been castrated. She becomes overwhelmed by her sense of incompleteness, her jealousy of boys, and her disdain for her mother and all women since they share her "deformity." Instead, she shifts her love to her father, who does possess the coveted penis, and begins to identify with her mother as a means to win him. Eventually, the girl realizes that she can have a penis in two ways: briefly through intercourse and symbolically by having a baby, especially a baby boy. "The original penis-wish is transformed into a wish for a baby, which leads to love and desire for the man as bearer of the penis and provider of the baby" (Freize et al. 1978:31). However, a female never fully overcomes her feelings of inferiority and envy, which leave indelible marks on her personality:

> Thus, we attribute a larger amount of narcissism to femininity, which also affects women's choice of object, so that to be loved is a stronger need for them than to love. The effect of penis envy has a share, further, in the physical vanity of women, since they are bound to value their charms more highly as a late compensation for their original sexual inferiority. Shame, which is considered to be a feminine characteristic *par excellence* but is far more a matter of convention than might be supposed, has as its purpose, we believe, concealment of genital deficiency. . . . The fact that women must be regarded as having little sense of justice is no doubt related to the predominance of envy in their mental life (Freud 1983/1933:90,92).

Now before you start looking askance at every four-year-old you meet, let us point out that identification theory has received considerable criticism. For one thing, the theory maintains that identification is an unconscious process. As such, we have no objective means to verify it. Instead, we must rely on the psychoanalyst's interpretation of an individual's behavior or his or her memories of childhood. Even if we are willing to trust the memories of individuals, we are

still left with the problem of observer bias. Because the methods of psychoanalysts are extremely subjective, we may question whether their interpretations of individuals' experiences are accurate or whether they simply reflect what the psychoanalyst expects to find in light of identification theory. Besides the clinical reports of psychoanalysts themselves, there is little evidence of the existence of castration anxiety in boys or penis envy in girls (Frieze et al. 1978; Sherman 1971).

Identification theory also portrays the gendered behaviors acquired in early childhood as fixed and stable over time. In other words, the theory leaves little room for personal or social change. However, while it is certainly the case that gender is very resiliant, it is also true that social learning continues throughout our lives and that we may modify our behavior and attitudes as we are exposed to new situations and models.

Finally, it is impossible to overlook the antifemale bias in Freudian identification theory. Females are defined as inadequate; they are jealous, passive, and masochistic according to this perspective. In short, identification theory asserts that women are clearly men's inferiors. At its best, it legitimizes gender inequality; at worst, it is misogynistic and harmful to women.

In light of these serious weaknesses, it is not surprising that some identification theorists have revised Freud's original argument. Erik Erikson (1968), for instance, has offered the provocative suggestion that males harbor some jealousy toward females for their unique ability to bear children. Referring to this phenomenon as *womb envy*, he views it as the underlying reason for men's apparent need to dominate women. Others, such as Karen Horney (1967) and Clara Thompson (1964), place the notion of penis envy in a social context. That is, women are jealous of the male organ only in that it is a symbol of male power in our society. From their point of view, then, women are actually envious of men's higher status and greater freedom.

More recently, Nancy Chodorow (1978) has revised identification theory in an effort to explain why females grow up to be the primary caretakers of children and develop stronger affective ties with their children than males do. She suggests that identification is more difficult for boys, since they must psychologically separate from their mothers and model themselves after a parent who is largely absent from the home, their fathers. Consequently, boys become more emotionally detached and repressed than girls. Girls, in contrast, do not experience this psychological separation. Instead, mothers and daughters maintain an intense ongoing relationship with one another. From this, daughters acquire the psychological capabilities for mothering themselves, and "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (Chodorow 1978:44).

Even though each of these revised arguments raises some interesting possibilities for our understanding of gender learning, all remain largely speculative owing to their untestability and lack of supporting evidence (Lorber et al. 1981). Fortunately, identification theory is not the only explanation of gender learning that has been developed. We will turn now to two others.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory is more straightforward than identification theory in that it focuses on observable events and their consequences rather than on unconscious motives and drives (Tavris and Wade 1984). The basic principles of social learning theory derive from a particular school of thought in psychology known as *behaviorism*. You are probably somewhat familiar with at least one important idea of behaviorism, the notion of **reinforcement**: a behavior consistently followed by a reward will likely occur again, whereas a behavior followed by a punishment will rarely reoccur. So, for example, your dog will probably learn to play Frisbee with you if you give it a biscuit every time it runs to you with the plastic disk in its mouth. Conversely, the dog will stop urinating on your houseplants if you spank it with a rolled newspaper and put it outside each time it squats or lifts a leg near the indoor foliage. According to behaviorists, this same principle of reinforcement applies to the way people learn, including the way they learn gender.

More specifically, social learning theory posits that children acquire their respective gender by being rewarded for gender-appropriate behavior and punished for gender-inappropriate behavior. Often the rewards and punishments are direct and take the form of praise or admonishment. For instance, on a recent shopping excursion, one of the authors overheard a little girl asking her father to buy her a plastic truck. Looking at her with obvious displeasure, he said, "That's for boys. You're not a boy, are you?" Without answering, the little girl put the toy back on the shelf. (Interestingly, research indicates that boys actually receive harsher disapproval for cross-gender behavior than do girls; see, for example, Fagot 1985; Feinman 1981.) Children learn through indirect reinforcement as well. For example, they may learn about the consequences of certain behaviors just by observing the actions of others (Tavris and Wade 1984).

This latter point raises a second important principle of social learning theory: children learn not only through reinforcement, but also by imitating or **modeling** those around them. Of course, the two processes—reinforcement and modeling—go hand-in-hand. Children will be rewarded for imitating some behaviors and punished for imitating others. At the same time, children will most likely imitate those who positively reinforce their behavior. In fact, social learning theorists maintain that children most often model themselves after adults whom they perceive to be warm, friendly, and powerful (i.e., in control of resources or privileges that the child values). More importantly, these theorists predict that children will imitate individuals most like themselves (Bussey and Bandura 1984; Margolin and Peterson 1975; Mischel 1966). Obviously, this includes same-sex parents and older same-sex siblings, but as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, teachers and media personalities also serve as effective models for children.

Social learning theory is appealing. Chances are we have seen reinforcement in practice, and we know that children can be great imitators (sometimes

to the embarrassment of their parents). However, social learning theory is not without difficulties. First, studies of same-sex modeling indicate that children do not consistently imitate their same-sex parent more than their opposite-sex parent (Raskin and Isreal 1981). Rather, sex may be less important in eliciting modeling than other variables, especially the perceived power of the model. For instance, "both boys and girls imitate a cross-sex model when that model controls rewards . . . [and] children imitate the dominant parent, regardless of sex" (Frieze et al. 1978:111). In addition, children tend to imitate a same-sex model only if that model is engaged in gender-appropriate behavior (Perry and Bussey 1979). This finding suggests that children have some knowledge of gender apart from what they acquire through modeling. Finally, social learning theory depicts children as passive recipients of socialization messages. There is evidence, though, that children actively seek out and evaluate information available in their social environment (Bem 1983).

One theory that attempts to address each of these criticisms is called cognitive-developmental theory. Cognitive-developmental theory is the third explanation of gender learning that we will examine in this chapter.

Cognitive-Developmental Theory

Based on the work of psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, cognitive-developmental theory holds that children learn gender (and gender stereotypes) through their mental efforts to organize their social world, rather than through psychosexual processes or rewards and punishments. For the young child who is literally new to the world, life must seem chaotic. Thus, one of the child's first developmental tasks is to try to make sense of all the information he or she receives through observations and interactions in the social environment. According to cognitive developmental theorists, the child accomplishes this by creating **schema** or mental categories. Psychologist Sandra Bem (1983: 603–604) explains in more detail:

> A schema is a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception. A schema functions as an anticipatory structure, a readiness to search for and assimilate incoming information in schema-related terms. Schematic information processing is thus highly selective and enables the individual to impose structure and meaning onto a vast array of incoming stimuli.

Sex is a very useful schema for young children. Why sex? The answer lies in a second major proposition of cognitive-developmental theory: children's interpretations of their world are limited by their level of mental maturity. Early on in their lives, children's thinking tends to be concrete; that is, in organizing their observations and experiences, they rely on simple and obvious cues. Sex is a category that has a variety of obvious physical cues attached to it, such as anatomy, hair length, body and facial hair, dress, and so on. Children first use

the schema of sex to label themselves and to organize their own identities. They then apply the schema to others in an effort to organize traits and behaviors into two classes, masculine or feminine, and they attach values to what they observe—either gender-appropriate ("good") or gender-inappropriate ("bad").

Cognitive-developmental theory helps to explain young children's strong preferences for sex-typed toys and activities and for same-sex friends, as well as why they express rigidly stereotyped ideas about gender (Cann and Palmer 1986; Cowan and Hoffman 1986; O'Brien and Huston 1985). Studies indicate, too, that as children get older and as their cognitive systems mature, they appear to become more flexible with regard to the activities that males and females pursue, at least until they reach adolescence (Stoddart and Turiel 1985; Archer 1984).

Still, cognitive-developmental theory has not escaped criticism. One difficulty centers around the question of the age at which children develop their own gender identities. Cognitive-developmental theorists place this development at between the ages of three and five, but their critics point to research that shows that it may appear sooner and that children as young as two years old subscribe to gender stereotypes (Cowan and Hoffman 1986; Kuhn et al. 1978). A second serious criticism is the charge that, by portraying gender learning as something children basically do themselves, cognitive-developmental theory downplays the critical role of culture in gender socialization. We may agree that children actively seek to organize their social world, but that they use the concept of sex as a primary means for doing so probably has more to do with the culture of the society in which they live than with their level of mental maturity. There are other organizing categories available with obvious physical cues (e.g., race or age), but children use sex instead—not because it's easier, but because in the culture of their society, sexual distinctions are emphasized. As Bem (1983:608–609) explains:

> Nearly all societies teach the developing child two crucial things about gender: first . . . they teach the substantive network of sex-related associations that can come to serve as cognitive schema; second, they teach that the dichotomy between male and female has intensive and extensive relevance to virtually every domain of human experience. The typical American child cannot help observing, for example, that what parents, teachers, and peers consider to be appropriate behavior varies as a function of sex; that toys, clothing, occupations, hobbies, the domestic division of labor—even pronouns—all vary as a function of sex.

This point is especially significant if one values social change, for it "implies that children would be far less likely to become gender-schematic and hence sex-typed if the society were to limit the associative network linked to sex and to temper its insistence on the functional importance of the gender dichotomy" (Bem 1983:609).

Those who take this approach often refer to it as *gender schema theory*, but rather than treating it as a separate explanatory model, we see it as an impor-

tant and much-needed revision to cognitive-developmental theory. In the remaining sections of this chapter, we will examine more carefully the various ways that parents structure their children's world in terms of sex and gender. We think you will come to agree on the basis of this discussion that the "gender schema criticism" is well taken.

GROWING UP FEMININE OR MASCULINE

If you ask parents whether they treat their children differently simply on the basis of sex, most would probably say no, and there is some research to back up their claims. In Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) review of the literature, for instance, no consistent sex differences in parent–infant interaction were found. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that what parents *say* they do and what they *actually* do are often not the same.

It appears, in fact, that gender socialization gets underway shortly after a child is born. Although there are few physiological or behavioral differences between males and females at birth, parents do tend to respond differently to their newborns on the basis of sex. For example, when asked to describe their babies within twenty-four hours of birth, new parents frequently use gender stereotypes. Infant girls are described as tiny, soft, and delicate, but parents of infant boys use adjectives such as strong, alert, and coordinated to describe their babies. Interestingly, fathers provide more stereotyped descriptions than mothers do (Lake 1975; Rubin et al. 1974).

It is not unreasonable for us to suspect that parents' initial stereotyped perceptions of their children may lay the foundation for the differential treatment of sons and daughters. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) did find that parents tend to elicit more gross motor activity from their sons than from their daughters, but there appears to be little if any difference in the amount of affectionate contact between mothers and their sons and daughters. Additional research indicates that parents tend to engage in rougher, more physical play with infant sons than with infant daughters (MacDonald and Parke 1986). In this way, parents may be providing early training for their infant sons to be more independent and aggressive than their daughters.

This pattern continues through the preschool years. For example, Fagot et al. (1985) discovered that adults respond differently to boys' and girls' communicative styles. Although thirteen- and fourteen-month-old children showed no sex differences in their attempts to communicate, adults tended to respond to boys when they "forced attention" by being aggressive, or by crying, whining, and screaming. Similar attempts by girls were usually ignored, but adults were responsive to girls when they used gestures or gentle touching, or when they simply talked. Significantly, when Fagot and her colleagues observed these same children just eleven months later, they saw clear sex differences in their styles of communication: boys were more assertive, whereas girls were more

talkative. In a study with a related theme, Weitzman et al. (1985) found that mothers communicate differently with toddler sons and daughters. They speak to their sons more explicitly, teach and question them more, and use more numbers and action verbs in speaking to them. In short, mothers provide their sons more than their daughters with the kind of verbal stimulation thought to foster cognitive development. What is perhaps as important, however, is the fact that Weitzman and her colleagues included in this study mothers who profess not to adhere to traditional gender stereotypes. Although the differential treatment of sons and daughters was by no means absent, it was less pronounced among these mothers.

The studies discussed so far have been based on samples of white, middle-class, two-parent families, making generalizations with regard to other types of families' socialization practices unreliable at best. Despite the limitations of such studies, they do help to explain why sex differences that are absent in infancy (see Chapter 2) begin to emerge during early childhood. But, as we have already mentioned, gender socialization is accomplished not only through parent–child interaction, but also through the ways parents structure their children's environment. Let's turn, then, to a discussion of this latter aspect of the socialization process, keeping in mind that this research, too, tends to be race- and class-specific. We will return to examine more carefully the variables of race and social class later in the chapter.

The Gender-Specific Nature of Children's Environments

What is the easiest and most accurate way for a stranger to determine the sex of an infant? According to Madeline Shakin and her associates (1985), a baby's clothing provides the best clues. Ninety percent of the infants they observed in suburban shopping malls were dressed in sex-typed clothes. The color of the clothing alone supplied a reliable clue for sex labeling: the vast majority of the girls wore pink or yellow, whereas most boys were dressed in blue or red. The style of children's garments also varies by sex. On special occasions, girls wear dresses trimmed with ruffles and lace and at bedtime, nighties with more of the same; for leisure activities, their slacks sets may be more practical, but chances are they are pastel in color and decorated with motifs such as hearts or flowers. In contrast, boys wear three-piece suits on special occasions and at bedtime, astronaut, athlete, or super-hero pajamas; and for leisure activities, their overalls or slacks sets are in primary colors with sports or military decorations.

All this may seem insignificant, even picky, to you. However, what we must emphasize here is that clothing plays a significant part in gender socialization in two ways. First, by informing others about the sex of the child, clothing sends implicit messages about how the child should be treated. "We know . . . that when someone interacts with a child and a sex label is available, the label functions to direct behavior along the lines of traditional [gender] roles'' (Shakin et al. 1985:956). Second, certain types of clothing encourage or discourage par-

ticular behaviors or activities. Girls in frilly dresses, for example, are discouraged from rough-and-tumble play, whereas boys' physical movement is rarely impeded by their clothing. Boys are expected to be more active than girls are and the styles of the clothing designed for them reflect this gender stereotype. Clothing, then, serves as one of the most basic means by which parents organize their children's world along gender-specific lines.

Parents also more directly construct specific environments for their children with the nurseries, bedrooms, and playrooms that they furnish and decorate. The classic study in this area was conducted by Rheingold and Cook (1975), who actually went into middle-class homes and examined the contents of children's rooms. Their comparison of boys' and girls' rooms is a study of contrasts. Girls' rooms reflected traditional conceptions of femininity, especially in terms of domesticity and motherhood. Their rooms were usually decorated with floral designs and ruffled bedspreads, pillows, curtains, and rugs. They contained an abundance of baby dolls and related items (e.g., doll houses) as well as miniature appliances (e.g., toy stoves). Few of these items were found in boys' rooms where, instead, the decor and contents reflected traditional notions about masculinity. Boys' rooms had more animal motifs and were filled with military toys and athletic equipment. They also had building and vehicular toys (e.g., blocks, trucks, wagons). Importantly, boys had more toys overall as well as more types of toys, including those considered educational. The only items girls were as likely to have as boys were musical instruments and books (although, as we will see shortly, the content of children's books is rarely gender-neutral). Given that similar findings were obtained more than ten years later (Stoneman et al. 1986), it appears that Rheingold and Cook's conclusion remains applicable, at least with regard to the socialization of white, middle-class children:

> The rooms of children constitute a not inconsiderable part of their environment. Here they go to bed and wake up; here they spend some part of every day. Their rooms determine the things they see and find for amusement and instruction. That their rooms have an effect on their present and subsequent behavior can be assumed; a standard is set that may in part account for some differences in the behavior of girls and boys (1975:463).

The Rheingold and Cook study also highlights the importance of toys in a young child's environment. Toys, too, play a major part in gender socialization. Toys not only entertain children, they also teach them particular skills and encourage them to explore through play a variety of roles they may one day occupy as adults. Thus, if we provide boys and girls with different types of toys, we are essentially training them for separate (and unequal) roles as adults. What's more, we are subtly telling them that what they *may* do, as well as what they *can* do, is largely determined (and limited) by their sex.

Are there clear differences in the toys girls and boys are expected to play with and, if so, just what are these differences? Rheingold and Cook's research already answered these questions to some extent, but a quick perusal of most

contemporary toy catalogs further addresses the issue. The toys for sale are frequently pictured with models; pay careful attention to which toys are pictured with female models and which are shown with males. In the catalog we picked up (Best Products Co., Inc. 1986), most of the toys were obviously gender-linked. We found, for instance, that little girls were most frequently shown with dolls or household appliances. The only "dolls" boys were pictured with were "action figures," such as Rambo and Masters of the Universe. On one page, a boy was shown pushing a toy lawn mower that blows bubbles but, almost as if to intentionally delineate for youngsters the "appropriate" sexual division of household labor, a little girl was pictured on the opposite page pushing a toy vacuum cleaner with "dust bunnies" inside the canister. On other pages, little boys were shown writing the ABCs on a chalkboard or examining a leaf under a plastic microscope, while little girls were pictured cooking in a "storybook kitchen" or sleeping peacefully under a bed canopy designed to look like a tent. Even the stuffed animals were gender-linked: a smiling female model cuddled a cheery Popples bear, while a snarling male model held his "pet monster" with "break-apart plastic chains and removable wrist bands."

Even though toy catalogs are directed primarily to parents—in the United States parents make over 70 percent of all toy purchases (Kutner and Levinson 1978)—many children spend considerable time looking at the catalogs and often ask their parents to buy specific toys they see advertised. If the catalog we examined is typical of toy catalogs in general—and we have no reason to doubt that it is—then children are receiving very clear gender messages about the kinds of toys they are supposed to want. These messages are reinforced by the pictures on toy packaging, by the way toy stores often arrange their stock in separate sections for boys and girls (Schwartz and Markham 1985), and by sales personnel who frequently recommend gender-stereotyped toys to potential customers (Ungar 1981; Kutner and Levinson 1978). It is no wonder that by two and a half years of age, children request mostly gender-stereotyped toys (Robinson and Morris 1986). Are they ever really given a choice?

The toys themselves foster different traits and abilities in children, depending on their sex. Toys for boys tend to encourage exploration, manipulation, invention, construction, competition, and aggression. In contrast, girls' toys typically rate high on manipulability, but also creativity, nurturance, and attractiveness (Miller 1987; Bradbard 1985; Peretti and Sydney 1985). As one researcher concluded, "These data support the hypothesis that playing with girls' versus boys' toys may be related to the development of differential cognitive and/or social skills in girls and boys" (Miller 1987:485).

Apart from toys, what other items stand out as a central feature of a child's environment? You may recall from the Rheingold and Cook study that books are one of only two items that boys and girls are equally likely to have. Unfortunately, children's literature has traditionally ignored females or has portrayed males and females in a blatantly stereotyped fashion. For example, Lenore Weitzman and her colleagues (1972) found in their now-classic analysis of award-winning picture books for preschoolers that males were usually depicted as active adventurers and leaders, whereas females were shown as passive followers and helpers. Boys were typically rewarded for their accomplishments and for being smart; girls were rewarded for their good looks. Books that included adult characters showed men doing a wide range of jobs, but women were restricted largely to domestic roles. In about one-third of the books they studied, however, there were no female characters at all.

In a recent replication of the Weitzman research, Williams et al. (1987) noted significant improvements in the visibility of females. Only 12.5 percent of the 1980s books they examined had no females, while a third had females as central characters. Nevertheless, although males and females are now about equal in their appearance in children's literature, the ways they are depicted remains largely unchanged. According to Williams et al. (1987:155), "With respect to role portrayal and characterization, females do not appear to be so much stereotyped as simply colorless. No behavior was shared by a majority of females, while nearly all males were portrayed as independent, persistent, and active. Furthermore, differences in the way males and females are presented is entirely consistent with traditional culture." In short, the gender stereotypes fostered by much toy play continue to be promoted in children's books.

Importantly, considerable attention has been given to the problem of sexism in children's literature, resulting in an effort to change it. Publishers, for instance, have developed guidelines to help authors avoid sexism in their works, and a number of authors and writers' collectives have set to work producing egalitarian books for youngsters. Research on the success of these endeavors is limited, however, and the findings are mixed. On the one hand, it has been argued that the so-called nonsexist picture books frequently advantage female characters at the expense of male characters, thus simply reversing traditional depictions of gender rather than portraying gender equality (St. Peter 1979). On the other hand, Davis (1984) praises the nonsexist books for their depictions of females as highly independent and males as nurturant and nonaggressive. However, he also points out that the nonsexist books continue to reinforce some traditional gender stereotypes in that they still tend to portray females as more emotional and less physically active than males. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether this new genre can overcome the gender biases that have traditionally pervaded children's literature.

One way that writers and publishers have tried to overcome sexism in children's literature is to depict characters as genderless or gender neutral. But recent research casts doubt on the potential success of this approach, since it has been found that parents who read these books to their children almost always label the characters in gender-specific ways. In 95 percent of these cases the labeling is masculine (DeLoache et al. 1987). In this study, the only pictures that prompted feminine labels were those showing an adult helping a child, an interpretation consistent with the gender stereotypes that females need more help than males and that females are more attentive to children. Based on this

research, then, it appears that "picturing characters in a gender-neutral way is actually counterproductive, since the adult 'reading' the picture book with the child is likely to produce an even more gender-biased presentation than the average children's book does" (DeLoache et al. 1987:176).

To summarize our discussion so far, we have seen that virtually every significant dimension of a child's environment—his or her clothing, bedroom, toys, and books—is structured according to cultural expectations of appropriate gendered behavior. If, as cognitive-developmental theorists maintain, young children actively try to organize all the information they receive daily, their parents and other adults are clearly providing them with the means. Despite their claims, even most parents who see themselves as egalitarian tend to provide their children with different experiences and opportunities and to respond to them differently on the basis of sex. Consequently, the children cannot help but conclude that sex is an important social category. By the time they are ready for school, they have already learned to view the world in terms of a dichotomy: his and hers.

THE INTERVENING VARIABLES OF RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS

Again, we must emphasize that much of the research on early-childhood gender socialization has recruited subjects from white, middle- and upper-class, two-parent families. There are indications, however, that the findings of such studies may not be representative of the socialization practices of families of other races and social classes. The work of Janice Hale-Benson is instructive on this point.

Hale-Benson has studied the socialization goals and practices of black families. She emphasizes the dual nature of the socialization that takes place in black households. "One of the challenges Black families must face in socializing their children is to understand and assist their children to function within their peer group. In addition, Black parents must also provide them with the skills and abilities they will need to succeed in the outside society" (1986:64). For both male and female children, black parents stress heavily the importance of hard work, ambition, and achievement. Thus, black children of both sexes tend to be more independent and self-reliant than their white peers. They are also imbued at an early age with a sense of financial responsibility to earn income for themselves and to contribute to the support of their families.

Still, the socialization experiences of young black males and females is not identical. Hale-Benson points out, for example, that among the traits and skills taught to black boys (largely in the context of their peer group) are the ways to move their bodies distinctively, athletic prowess, sexual competence, and street savvy, including how to fight. In contrast, black girls are socialized into "a very strong motherhood orientation," although this does not preclude the general expectation that they will also work outside the home. The development of personal uniqueness or distinctiveness is also emphasized, with special attention given to sexuality, clothing, and body movement.

It is important to note that black children are frequently socialized in social contexts different from traditional white, middle-class family structure. We will return to this point in Chapter 7, but suffice it to say here that black children are often exposed to women and men sharing tasks and assuming collective responsibility. In two-parent black families, women are typically employed outside the home, and men participate in child care. But over half of black children live with just one parent, usually the mother, compared with 18 percent of white children (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families 1987). In black single-parent households, the parent may be aided in the care and socialization of the children by an extended kin and friendship network. In addition, Hale-Benson (1986:53) notes that the black church offers "a kind of extended family fellowship that provides other significant adults to relate to the children, and it also provides material and human resources to the family."

In light of these data, it is not surprising that Hale-Benson and others (e.g., Lewis 1975) have found that black children are not taught to perceive gender in completely bipolar terms. Instead, both males and females are expected to be nurturant and expressive emotionally as well as independent, confident, and assertive. Bardewell et al. (1986) have also found that black children are less gender-stereotyped than white children are. Importantly, Isaaks (1980) obtained similar results in a comparison of Hispanic and white children. However, there is some research that reports contradictory findings. For instance, Gonzalez (1982) and Price-Bonham and Skeen (1982) found at least as much, if not more, gender stereotyping among blacks and Hispanics as among whites.

The picture becomes blurred or more complex when social class is taken into account. For example, there is modest support for the hypothesis that gender stereotyping decreases as one moves up the social class hierarchy (Brooks-Gunn 1986; Seegmiller et al. 1980). However, if parental educational level may be used as an indicator of a family's social class, it appears that gender stereotyping may be greater the higher a family's social class position, at least among whites (Bardewell et al. 1986). Research that examines the interaction of social class with race and ethnicity indicates that the latter is the more important variable; that is, it has a stronger influence on child-rearing practices, although this research did not examine gender socialization specifically (Hale-Benson 1986). We can only conclude that much more research is needed to elucidate the rich diversity of gender socialization practices and their outcomes among various races and social classes.

BY THE TIME A CHILD IS FIVE

At the outset of this chapter, we argued that children are born into a world that largely favors males. Throughout much of the remainder of our discussion, we examined research that indicates that this male preference carries over into parents' and other adults' interactions with children. We have seen here that during early childhood, boys and girls—at least those from white, middle-class

families—are socialized into separate and unequal genders. Little boys are taught independence, problem-solving abilities, assertiveness, and curiosity about their environment—skills that are highly valued in our society. In contrast, little girls are taught dependence, passivity, and domesticity—traits that our society devalues.

We also discussed three theories or explanations of how the process of gender socialization takes place. The first, Freudian identification theory, argues that all children pass through a series of psychosexual stages with the phallic stage being the most critical for the development of gender identity. It is during this phase that boys and girls attempt to resolve their respective Oedipus complexes by identifying with their same-sex parents. However, identification theory's emphasis on the unconscious nature of this process makes it virtually impossible to verify objectively.

The other two theories—social learning theory and cognitive developmental theory—have been tested, and both have received empirical support. Social learning theory maintains that children learn gender the same way they learn other behaviors and attitudes: through reinforcement (i.e., rewards and punishments for specific behaviors) and by imitating adult models. Cognitive developmental theory contends that children acquire gender as they try to make sense of their everyday observations and experiences. Sex is an easy and obvious category or schema for them to use in their organization efforts, especially given that adults themselves differentially structure children's environments according to sex. We have seen here that gender-typed clothing, room furnishings, toys, and books serve both to organize children's environments in terms of a gender dichotomy and to reinforce children for stereotypic gender-appropriate behavior. Taken together, then, social learning and cognitive-developmental theories are helpful in explaining why children as young as two years old already adhere to gender stereotypes and why preschoolers exhibit such strong preferences for gender-typed toys and activities as well as same-sex friends.

May we conclude from this that nonsexist socialization is impossible? Certainly not. Considerable research is underway to evaluate a variety of nonsexist socialization techniques (Lorber 1986). One of the most interesting proposals has been offered by psychologist Sandra Bem (1983:613). She has suggested two strategies for nonsexist socialization. First, she advises parents to retard the young child's knowledge of our culture's traditional messages about gender, while simultaneously teaching him or her that the only definitive differences between males and females are anatomical and reproductive. Second, she suggests that parents provide the child with an alternative schema for organizing and comprehending information. Instead of a sex schema, for example, parents could substitute an "individual-differences" schema that emphasizes the "remarkable variability of individuals within groups." We think proposals such as these have merit and deserve further exploration. However, we must keep in mind that parents are not the only ones responsible for gender socialization. Indeed, as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, schools and the media take up where parents leave off.

KEY TERMS

identification   a central concept of the Freudian-based theory of gender socialization; the process by which boys and girls begin to unconsciously model their behavior after that of their same-sex parent in their efforts to resolve their respective Oedipus complexes

modeling   the process by which children imitate the behavior of their same-sex parent, especially if the parent rewards their imitation or if the parent is perceived by them to be warm, friendly, or powerful; a central concept of the social learning theory of gender socialization

reinforcement   a central principle of the social learning theory of gender socialization which states that a behavior consistently followed by a reward will likely occur again, whereas a behavior followed by a punishment will rarely recur

schema   a central concept of the cognitive-developmental theory of gender socialization; a mental category that organizes and guides an individual's perception and helps the individual assimilate new information

socialization   the process by which a society's values and norms, including those pertaining to gender, are taught and learned

SUGGESTED READINGS

Here we will break with our usual pattern of recommending a number of scholarly works, and instead suggest a few practical guides to the issues that we have raised in this chapter. One work, however, that is both scholarly and practical is Sandra Bem's article, "Gender Schema Theory and Its Implications for Child Development: Raising Gender-aschematic Children in a Gender-schematic Society" (*Signs* 8:598–616). We recommend it for review of the theories of gender socialization we have examined here and for its provocative suggestions for nonsexist child rearing.

A useful reference source for nonsexist children's books is *Books for Today's Children* compiled by Jeanne Bracken and Sharon Wigutoff (published by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York).

The Feminist Book Mart of New York provides a catalog of nonsexist children's books, and author Jack Zipes has compiled an anthology of sixteen feminist retellings of classic fairy tales entitled, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (New York: Methuen, 1986). See also *Tatterhood and Other Tales* edited by Ethel Johnston Phelps, and *My Mother the Mail Carrier* by Inez Maury (with a Spanish translation by Norah Alemany) (from the Feminist Press at the City University of New York).

"Constructive Playthings" available from the company of the same name, 1227 East 119th Street, Grandview, Missouri 64030, is a toy catalog that pictures models engaged in cross-gender behavior.