

CHAPTER 9

Learning About Gender Diversity and Fairness

Annie, who is 4 years old, loves running outside. In the classroom, she speaks up in a loud voice and rarely sits still. At circle time, the class is talking about a book we have just read together and the gendered stereotypes we see in it. Annie says, “But, Julie, I don’t like girls.” I am surprised. “Why not, Annie?” I ask. “Cause girls can’t run and shout and have a good time,” she says sadly. “But Annie, you say you’re a girl. And you love to run and shout and have a good time.” “No,” she replies, “I’m a pretend girl.”

Like all social identities, gender identity is imposed externally by society and internally constructed by the child. The first question asked about a new or expected baby is almost always “Is it a boy or a girl?” The answer to that question will affect multiple aspects of the child’s experiences and development for the rest of the child’s life.

Gender is the first core identity that attracts young children’s attention. By age 2, most toddlers call themselves a girl or boy. They don’t yet have understanding of the two words, but they know they are important. By 4, most children clearly state that they are either a girl or boy and have absorbed dominant culture ideas about what boys and girls are supposed to do and how they are supposed to look. They frequently insist that the stereotypical behaviors are right even when those contradict their own experiences or desires (e.g., insisting that boys don’t cry).



Anti-Bias Education in Action: Gender Role Expectations Start Young

Katie and Max attend a program for 2-year-olds. Katie is small with big brown eyes and brown curls. She comes to the toddler room each day dressed in pastel-colored dresses, socks, and barrettes. People often comment with delight that she looks like a “living doll.” Max is affectionately nicknamed “Mack Truck.” He is sturdy, strong, and big for his age. Katie fascinates Max. Every day he waits for her to arrive, runs across the room to her while shouting her name—and pushes her down. Katie usually bursts into tears and the adults gather her up into their arms, comfort her, and take her to another part of the room. Max is sternly told to use his words and not to push and is sometimes shepherded out into the yard to “run off some of his energy.”

After several weeks, the center director steps in. “What do you think Katie is learning from the way you are handling this?” she asks the teachers. “What do you think Max is learning? Can you find a way to help Katie not be a victim? Can you help Max not be the aggressive ‘bad boy’? Let’s figure out how you can support these two children.”

The next day, one of the teachers takes Katie over to the mirror in the playhouse and asks her to copy her as she plants her feet firmly and widely on the ground (stomp, stomp), pushes her hands out in front of her, and says in a clear, firm voice, “Stop it! Don’t push. Stop it! Don’t push!” Katie looks amazed and a little puzzled, but the teacher repeats what she did, encouraging Katie to join in. As several other children come over and imitate the teacher, Katie, tentatively at first, begins to join in. Throughout the day the children play at planting their feet and watching themselves in the mirror as they chant, “Stop it! Don’t push!” Katie becomes more and more animated each time she practices this response.

At home, Katie’s mom continues the “game” with Katie, who on her own adds Max’s name. Two days later, Katie arrives at the center. Racing across the room, Max is greeted by Katie standing firmly on both feet, punching her hands up in front of her body and saying the powerful words loudly, “Stop it, Max! Stop it. Don’t push!” Max is stunned. He collapses on the ground in tears, while Katie triumphantly steps around him and walks over to the art table and sits down.

This time the teachers’ focus is on Max. He is comforted and given words he might use: “Katie, come play,” “Hello, Katie,” or “Here’s a toy we can share.” And over the next weeks the staff works thoughtfully with him, telling him what a friendly, caring child he is, helping him find children to play with, supporting his need for both big motor and companion play. He and Katie never become good friends, but both children have their sense of themselves widened and enriched. And the staff become much more aware of how their language and implicit assumptions had cheated both children out of developing new skills.

Applying Anti-Bias Education Goals to Gender Identity

- Children will express their ideas and positive feelings about their gender identity and be comfortable with their own way of expressing gender. **(Goal 1)**
- Children, regardless of gender identity, will participate in a wide range of activities necessary for their full cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. **(Goal 1)**
- Children will have vocabulary for, and ease in talking about, the great diversity in appearance, emotional expressiveness, and behavior of children across the spectrum of gender expression and identities. **(Goal 2)**
- Children will recognize stereotypical ideas and images and hurtful behaviors directed at their own and others’ gendered identities. They will know that it is not fair to treat people hurtfully because of who they are. **(Goal 3)**
- Children will recognize and respect the power each person has, including themselves, to determine their own gender identity and say who they are, regardless of adult interpretations of their bodies. **(Goal 4)**
- Children will practice skills for supporting gender diversity in their interactions with peers and adults. **(Goal 4)**

The Big Picture: From a Binary to a Multifaceted Understanding of Gender

Historically and currently, a binary perspective—meaning only two options—on being female or male has prevailed in the United States and many other societies, with proscribed sets of rules of behavior, dress, and roles for males and females. These binary, gendered expectations of people influence children’s socialization and early childhood educators’

interactions with children (Butler-Wall et al. 2016; Jaboneta & Curtis 2019). Current thinking reveals a more complex and nuanced understanding of gender development that goes beyond a binary approach and casts greater light on how expectations of traditional femininity and masculinity limit children’s development (Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian 2017; Brown & Stone 2016; Pastel et al. 2019).

The Binary Model of Gender Identity

The prevailing model of gender rests on binary opposites of expected behaviors, attitudes, skills, feelings, appearance, and life outcomes. A range of societal policies, rules, and actions—some built into the law, others part of traditional thinking—spell out these assumptions about gender (Butler-Wall et al. 2016; Rajunov & Duane 2019).

Critically considering common stereotypes about men and women is one way to become more aware of the expectations of a binary gender model. As you read this list, think about where you have seen or experienced these assumptions about people based on their gender:

Men are	Women are
Physically strong	Physically weak
Decision makers	Peacemakers
Key wage earners (may “help out” at home)	Homemakers (may “help” support the family)
Disciplinarians	Nurturers, healers
Driven by desire for achievement	Driven by the desire to be loved
Admired for economic success	Admired for appearance
Potentially violent, dangerous	Potentially victims, in danger
Good at math and science	Good at reading and psychology
Bad at close relationships	Bad at physical relationships
Logical	Emotional
Honorable	Sweet
Energetic	Sentimental
Predatory	Fearful

Of course, it is unlikely that anyone ever acts out *all* the binary gender expectations listed here. And, many people’s lives reflect specific behaviors from both sides of the list. Moreover, the components of a gender binary way of being are not necessarily the ideals for being male and female in all cultural groups in the United States or in all parts of the world. Yet, to one degree or another, everyone experiences the power of binary gender messages about how women and men are supposed to be. Most people have been rewarded or injured by living out or not living out those stereotypical gender characteristics.

Stop & Think: What Did You Learn About Gender Binary Expectations?

- What were your earliest lessons about your gender? What were major messages about behaviors and feelings that were okay for boys but not for girls? Okay for girls but not for boys?
- As a child, what did you like about being the gender you learned to call yourself? Did you feel any conflict between what you liked to do or wanted to do and what you were supposed to do?
- How did the adults in your family divide work and responsibilities by gender? In what ways did your teachers make distinctions based on the gender binary model of being a girl or a boy? Were the lessons about gender you learned at home the same or different from those you were learning at school and other places?
- Do you remember knowing or learning about people who did not conform to binary gender roles? What messages did you receive about these people? How did you feel about them?

A Multifaceted Understanding of Gender

As an early childhood educator, you teach young children who are in the foundational period of developing their gender identities. One necessary step to positively support this development is understanding distinct yet interrelated aspects of gender: **assigned sex, gender role, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality.**

These concepts support a deeper understanding of the young child's internal construction of gender identity and offer a more complete way to guide children's individualized paths in their gender development journey.

Assigned Sex at Birth

Assigned sex at birth refers to the naming of an infant as a boy or a girl based on the first sight of the infant's genitals. Assigning a newborn's sex used to take place only at birth; now it often happens using sonograms toward the end of the fourth month of pregnancy. The assigned sex designation has profound legal implications for the rest of a child's life. However, gender binary assigning of sex does not take into account the many genetic variations beyond XX and XY chromosomes or the many hormonal patterns that impact children prenatally. In addition, some children are born with ambiguous genitals or genetic or hormonal variations and are termed *intersex*. Early childhood educators serve all these children and need to know how to best support children and families as children work to construct their gender identity.

Gender Role

Gender *role* is the way society and families think about, interact with, and treat people based on their assigned sex. A society's expectations of gender roles influences what early childhood educators and families do with and for children (Butler-Wall et al. 2016; Jaboneta & Curtis 2019). This starts during infancy and becomes more evident in the preschool years.

It is necessary to uncover and identify both explicit and implicit assumptions about gender role in order to create learning environments for children based on anti-bias education goals. This means providing an environment that supports *all* children to be physically strong and competent *and* emotionally open and resilient; successful in family life *and* work life; and able to grow their gifts and interests to their full potential. It also means encouraging children to explore a wide range of activities and not be limited to interests, skills, and experience typically considered to be acceptable for only boys or only girls.

Gender Identity

Gender *identity* is one's internal experience of one's gender. It is how one thinks of and comes to name oneself. A person's gender identity may or may not conform to one's assigned sex and may change throughout one's lifetime. Some of the terms that describe gender identity include *cisgender*, *agender*, *transgender*, *nonbinary*, and *gender fluid* (see the glossary for definitions). Terms evolve and vary from one locale to another. Adults and children may also change the pronouns used to describe themselves. Anti-bias education calls on teachers to learn and treat respectfully the gender identity terms families and children use.

Gender Expression

Gender *expression* is the way people present themselves to the world. It includes how they dress, speak, play, and behave. Some children are mainly *gender conforming*, appearing and behaving in ways that mostly match binary expectations. Other children may be *gender creative* or *gender expansive*, dressing, playing, and expressing themselves in ways that push the boundaries of binary expectations. Gender expression may or may not indicate the child's eventual gender identity or sexual orientation. An anti-bias educator acknowledges and supports each child's current gender expression as an important part of the child's developmental journey.

To fully understand gender development in the early years, it is also necessary to distinguish the concepts of *sexuality*, *sexual orientation*, and *sexual behavior* (which come into play more fully as children grow) from the other components of young children's developmental paths. (See the glossary for definitions of these terms). Anxiety about a child's sexuality often underlies a parent's concern that a child playing or dressing contrary to gender binary expectations will set the child up for shaming or bullying and that such play can shape the child's eventual sexual behavior.

During the many years I (Julie) worked directly with children, it was pretty common for some parents to become upset when seeing their child, usually a boy, playing with “the wrong toys” for their gender. The fear that the child would grow up to be gay because of their

play was almost always behind these parents' concerns. I always listened carefully and then reassured the parent that a child's eventual sexuality could not be changed, one way or the other, by the toys they played with or the clothing they liked best. Sometimes my assurances helped. Sometimes they didn't. But at one point, one of my colleagues, who was gay, stopped me and said, "What you didn't say is that if their child *is* gay, he is still their child." With a shock I realized I was unconsciously playing into the biased message that there was something awful about not being heterosexual.

My new message still included the information that toys and clothes neither create nor shift anyone's sexual orientation. But now I also added, "And if it were to become true that your child is gay, he will still be your beautiful, wonderful child. And it will always be your job to love and protect him." Somehow, these words always deepened and changed the conversation and led to more conversations—and to parents being more open to the ways their child was exploring the world.

What's in a Name? Gendered Terms and Pronouns

Many young children, like Annie in the opening vignette, create names beyond the binary terms of girl and boy to describe how they think of own gender identity and how they perceive other people's gender identity. They may use descriptive names such as *inbetweener*, *boy-girl* or *girl-boy*, or *Casey is a she/he*. They may shift pronouns to try to describe nonconforming behavior, such as "Marcus is a boy, but she has long hair and likes to wear barrettes." Pay attention to these terms because they are one indicator of how a child is thinking about gender.

The use of pronouns is one important declaration of how some people identify their gender. For example, instead of using the pronouns *she/her/hers* or *he/him/his*, a person might prefer *they/them/theirs* as more accurate singular pronouns. Others may create new pronouns that do not connect them to a binary gender identity.

Understanding the multifaceted aspects of gender development focuses educators' and families' attention on the young child's internal construction

of identity as well as the external influence of societal and family gender expectations. Anti-bias early childhood programs create a supportive environment in which all children's feelings and explorations about their gender are taken seriously and listened to compassionately and where each child is helped to flourish beyond hurtful stereotypical gender expectations.

Stop & Think: You and New Understandings About Gender Development

- Think about some specific ways in which you do *not* conform to binary gender expectations about how men or women are supposed to be. What is that like for you? What parts feel good? What parts get hard?
- Are there people you know, or know of, whom you admire because they live in ways that are not limited by stereotypical gender assumptions? Why do you admire them?
- What are your current thoughts about this multifaceted model of gender development? Which concepts are most helpful and important to you in relation to yourself? In relation to being an early childhood educator?

Young Children Construct Ideas and Attitudes About Gender

Observing children's behavior and listening to what they have to say is the best way to pay attention to how they are making sense of complicated ideas such as gender.

"She can't be Toby. That's a boy name."

"Boys don't cry," says Carlos fiercely as he watches his friend Tyrone crying about his skinned knee.

"William has long hair and is so pretty! Is he a girl?"

"Rose plays train and trucks all the time. Is she a boy-girl?"