

Adding value to boys

Diane Rich looks at how we treat boys and girls differently – and how we might be labelling boys as naughty when they are just normal

Three year old Lucy sat in a supermarket trolley watching her mother choose party accessories. She shrieked when Harry Potter plates were placed in the trolley. *'No mummy. They are for boys. I'm a girl.'* Lucy, never having seen a Harry Potter film or heard a story, was convinced that Harry Potter was unsuitable for girls. No amount of 'Hermione Granger' stories could convince her otherwise. She protested, *'But mummy, the plate is blue.'* *'But mummy, Harry is a boy and boys are for boys, not girls.'* *'But mummy, Harry is always fighting and that's boys.'* Lucy had developed clear rules about girls and boys from her own experiences and the sources around her. Her despairing mother surrendered to the pink Barbie plates demanded by her daughter.

Many parents and other adults treat girls and boys differently. The Equal Opportunities Commission report, *The Development of Gender Roles in Young Children*, confirms that some mothers do this even before they are born.

I have heard expectant parents tenderly refer to their babies, when they move, 'A beautiful Darcy Bussel ballerina,' if a girl, and more assertively to boys as, 'A strong David Beckham.' Such behaviour can continue from pre-birth and beyond. When injured boys need comfort, some alarmingly say, 'No, don't cry. That's for girls,' but comfortably accept crying from injured girls. Parents and professionals can perpetuate and promote gender behaviours through their responses to children. Parents, other adults, educators, community and media images all play a part in helping children learn about being a boy or being a girl. Children also learn from the toys, stories, videos and playthings they are given and the ways these products are marketed. This directly influences behaviour and choices they make. Children also note the acceptable and unacceptable gendered behaviours in their homes and wider communities. They try to make sense of these in their play and mimic these behaviours through their actions and responses.

Four year old Katie responds to her classmate, Simon. Both children started school this term. Katie talks proudly of her Reception class.

'We have to do what the teacher tells us and I'm very good at that. We sit in the same place every day. Simon has to sit next to me because I am very good. He moves about and likes to fidget so I am in charge of him. I am good and he is bad. That is why I am in charge of him.'

Katie has a strong sense of how highly she is valued because she is able to conform to what she perceives to be preferred classroom behaviour, unlike Simon.

Vivian Gussin-Paley (1986) in her book, *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner*, records children's conversation which reflects their perceptions of girls and boys.

Karen: *Girls are nicer than boys.*

Janie: *Boys are bad. Some boys are.*

Paul: *Not bad. Pretend bad. Like bad guys.*

Karen: *My brother is really bad.*

Teacher: *Aren't girls ever bad?*

Paul: *I don't think so. Not very much.*

Teacher: *Why not?*

Paul: *Because they like to colour so much. That's one thing I know. Boys have to practice running.*

Karen: *And they practice being silly.*

Here boys are identified by children as silly and bad simply because they like to run around. Such behaviour, Paley argues, is the universal and natural behaviour of little boys. While girls alternatively, are seen by children as good because they sit still and like to colour. Such behaviour generally comes more naturally to girls at an earlier age than boys. Simon, like many children, particularly boys of his age, finds sitting for periods of time and being restricted to the same daily work space very difficult.

When such restrictions are placed on young children in pre-schools, it is more likely that some will come to school already unfairly labelled as 'difficult', 'naughty' or 'silly'. The message, implicit or otherwise, that the behaviour of girls is favoured over boys is unmissable by children. These labels may stick throughout their early school years and beyond.

From my experience of exploring the theme of gender issues with professionals, differences in the ways girls and boys operate and behave in their settings is confirmed. While educators accept that boys and girls are not discrete homogenous groups, when asked to reflect on how things are in their own settings, most say that generally girls are more frequently seen sitting on chairs engaged in table top activities, in quiet areas, or playing at domestic and caring themes in role play areas. Alternatively, boys prefer to be running around, ideally outside, or working at floor level. Their play themes include monsters, robbers, weapon related superheroes and villain themes. But because nurses, princesses and mummies are thought to be easier to manage than death defying baddies, more positive messages are often unintentionally given to girls than boys. This can be replicated in home and communities too. Consequently, boys pick up the message that what they prefer to play at, and the places they like to play are not valued; that their playing and behaviour is wrong. Levels of

self esteem and their sense of belonging drop. Apart from immediate negative effects this can have on children, it has an impact on ongoing commitment to learning and future levels of achievement.

Guns and princesses

A nursery manager describes her experience of the Queen's Jubilee celebrations in the nursery centre some years back. She set up role play areas to support the Jubilee theme. Boys typically identified with the male roles and played at red arrow pilots, Coldstream Guards, princes, chauffeurs, plain clothed detectives, secret agents, body guards and security men. The manager spoke of challenges when the secret agents had James Bond slants and their play involved guns, play fighting, and high speed car chases.

She described the girls typically identifying with female roles, dressing up to be queens and princesses, making tea parties and tickets for the celebration, or taking babies in buggies to watch a parade. When she collected her Jubilee photos she found that most of them featured the activities of girls. Pictures of boys had been taken, but typically only of those dressed as princesses. This led the manager to reflect on the value she placed not only on the play of girls, but also on the females roles over male roles in play. She became committed to ensuring that the play of both boys and girls was equally valued, equally recorded and equally promoted.

In play children explore, 'Who am I: boy or girl?' They make sense of what this means as they consider the distinctive nature of boys and girls. Inevitably this will involve boys not only exploring male roles, but female roles too and vice versa. Hence, in many settings, boys dress up as princesses or similar. While this may sometimes be because the 'girl' costumes are so enticing, or there are simply no alternative dressing up clothes for boys, it also relates to children making sense of who they are in the world, who else is in the world and what it might be like to be them - male or female. Naturally some children will want to test out different gender roles to further their understanding of the world. Professionals should not discourage this play and may need to support parents who have concerns about this.

In my consultancy work I ask professionals to list the male and female roles that boys and girls typically play at. The list usually includes:

Girls	Boys
babies	babies
hairdressers	builders
mummies	car mechanics
nurses	chefs
nursery nurses	daddies
pop stars	fire fighters
princesses	footballers
secretaries	pilot
supermodels	police
teachers	pop stars
	soldiers

Future life roles children typically represented in girls' and boys' play

In follow up discussions they note two key points. Firstly, boys play at more action roles, which they find challenging. Secondly, both girls and boys not only have the potential to become any of the future roles listed roles, except for princesses, but may encounter any number of the roles, and more, throughout their lives. They agree that children should be able to play at any role they choose. The list is often reorganised to reflect this:

Girls	Either	Boys
	babies	
	builders	
	chefs	
	firefighters	
	footballers	
	hairdressers	
	nurses	
mummies	parents	daddies
	pilot	
	police	
	pop stars	
princesses		
	secretaries	
	soldiers	
	supermodels	
	teachers	
	etc..	

Future life roles children could represent in play

In follow up work educators commit to ensuring that resources and materials for dressing up do not restrict girls or boys from exploring any gender role, nor give messages that some resources, or future roles are specifically for boys or girls. One setting which reviewed their dressing-up clothes for hospital play found that all the outfits were for female nurses. Costume-wise there was no opportunity for boys to play as male nurses, or anyone at all to play as doctors or paramedics. The educators replaced the dressing-up clothes with gender neutral resources; material in blue, white, red, bright yellow and green. Boys became more involved in the hospital role play and could play more easily in roles that related to the hospital theme. Girls and boys played a greater variety of hospital roles and talked about male and female nurses and doctors.

You can promote greater understanding of different gender roles by:

- reflecting your own responses to boys and girls and the impact this may have on them
- providing resources which do not give-out-of-date restrictive gender messages
- allowing children to use materials as they wish, exploring both male and female roles if they choose to
- ensuring that play themes and play styles of both boys and girls are equally valued
- promoting the wide variety of future role options for girls and boys.

Diane Rich runs Rich Learning Opportunities www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk. She is publisher and co-author of 'First hand experiences: what matters to children' which can be ordered on the website, by phone 01473 737405 or fax 01473 737613