

"I'm a boy but I'm pretending I'm a girl"

by Tiffany Hamlett and Ron Fannin

Cross-gendered play in preschool children

Ms. Clark is preparing to take her 4-year-olds to lunch. Suddenly Stefan's father appears at the classroom door.

"Hello," he says. "I was in the neighborhood and decided to come and eat lunch with Stefan."

All activity in the room stops, as children turn to look at their visitor.

"What a nice surprise," says Ms. Clark. "Stefan's over there."

He looks in the direction she's pointing. His jaw drops. There in the home center is Stefan, wearing a red skirt and silver necklace and carrying a purse.

"Daddy!" the child squeals, throwing down the purse and running to greet him.

Dad is speechless. After a moment, he asks: "What are you doing in those clothes?"

Stefan replies: "It's my turn to be the mommy."

The preschool period is a time of rapid growth and development. One area that shows dramatic changes is gender identity. This article addresses the influence of cross-gendered play on preschoolers' emerging understanding of what it means to be male or female. Cross-gendered play occurs when children pretend to be the opposite sex during socio-dramatic or pretend play.

Play and social development

Between the ages of 1 and 5 years, children will acquire a great number of skills including language, emotional regulation, cognitive strengths, and motor growth. Through daily exploration children learn

Words to know

Cognitive—referring to mental processes such as perception, memory, reasoning, and judgment

Cross-gendered play—play in which children pretend to be the opposite sex—a boy pretending to be a girl, for example.

Schema—the processing of new information and organizing it in the mind so that one has a way of perceiving a situation and responding to it.

Stereotype—an oversimplified and often biased mental picture about the characteristics of a group of people.

about the world around them and gain an understanding of themselves including their gender identity. Positive social interactions, such as play, are often a key element in healthy development (Fantuzzo et al. 2004; Lindsey and Colwell 2003). Through play children are able to act out and process new information as they form schemas, or cognitive categories, of information. Children learn to piece together bits of information to understand their environment as well as themselves. In regard to gender, children use play to understand their own identity and that of others.

Pretend play is a common form of social interaction among preschool children. As language and cognitive skills increase, children typically spend more time engaging in imaginary play either alone or with peers. During pretend play it is common for

children to take on roles that are either real or imagined. Children may pretend to be a dragon one day and a teacher the next.

It is also common for children to take on roles of the opposite sex. For example, a boy may pretend to be a mommy or a girl a daddy. When children engage in this type of play, caregivers often become concerned about children's understanding of their gender role. Caregivers may wonder whether children are confused about their gender and worry that this confusion may carry over into adolescence and adulthood.

When working with young children, we need to keep in mind their developmental level. As they mature, children move through various stages, each with distinct characteristics. In regard to gender, children are not born knowing that they are a boy or girl or what it means to be male or female. To young children, anatomical features are just more parts that need to be sorted into a cognitive schema.

Stages of gender development

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg identified a series of steps through which children progress as they acquire an understanding of their gender and that of others (1966).

In the first stage, preschool children can label individuals as male or female, but these categories are

not stable. Often, gender is ascribed to visual markers such as clothing or hair length. Children at this stage believe that simply changing those features will change the gender. For example, if a child thinks that women wear dresses, then putting on a dress will make a person a woman. Anatomical features are not a consideration because these are not visible in most situations. Therefore, the sex of a person may change based on the outfit or other highly visible characteristics.

In the second stage, children begin to understand that gender is a constant feature; yet they will still indicate that one can switch genders by changing outward appearance (Kohlberg 1966). Children at this stage are more likely to experiment with cross-gendered play to help them understand that gender is constant. At this point in their development children understand that their gender has not been altered when they dress or pretend to be the opposite. By engaging in cross-gendered play at this stage, children enhance their understanding of gender consistency in others.

In the third stage, children understand that sex is a constant feature regardless of outward appearance (Kohlberg 1966). Children may still engage in cross-gendered play as a method to help them understand social role and expectations. However, children at this stage are less likely to exhibit these behaviors



because of the increasing social expectations and gender stereotypic beliefs placed on the child.

Motives behind cross-gendered play

Preschool children act out roles and images they see in their daily lives, including those of parents, caregivers, and siblings (McHale et al. 2003). Children may engage in cross-gendered play as a way to explore behaviors demonstrated by a person of the opposite sex.

Talking, acting, or dressing like a person of the opposite sex typically means that a child admires some of the behavioral aspects or abilities of that

role models. If Molly has no father at home, for example, she may pretend to be a father during play. Similarly, if Adam's grandmother were placed in a rehabilitation center for an extended period, Adam might pretend to be a grandma during play. Once the role models return to the children's lives, such behaviors are likely to decrease.

Benefits of cross-gendered play

As children's understanding of gender develops, they often form rigid stereotypes about appropriate behaviors (Poulin-Doubis et al. 2002). By engaging in cross-gendered play, children learn to take on roles

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person. For example, when Jimmy wears a ballet tutu, he may be showing his fascination with the great leaps made by Odette in a performance of "Swan Lake" he has recently seen. Cross-gendered play does not indicate that Jimmy's confused about his own gender. Nor does it mean that he wishes he were or believes he is the opposite sex any more than another boy believes he's a dragon.

A second reason children will often engage in cross-gendered play is the lack or absence of specific

and characteristics that go against the stereotype for their gender.

Boys may learn to be more caring and nurturing, while girls may become more assertive. Such traits enhance the development of children and may guide them to explore professions typically dominated by the opposite gender.

Research indicates that any type of pretend play enhances multiple areas of development including cognition, language, and self-awareness (Cutting



and Dunn 2006; Russ 2003). Therefore, it's important that children be allowed to engage in pretend play on a regular basis to enhance their development as well as their understanding of the environment.

Supporting all play

Cross-gendered play is a natural part of development. It's unwise for teachers and parents to shame or embarrass children for engaging in it. This does not mean that a caregiver or parent has to push children into such play either.

When children engage in pretend play, they often carry out their scenarios without comments from adults. Forbidding a certain kind of play can make it all the more enticing. Ideally, caregivers will treat cross-gendered play in the same way they treat other types of pretend play. Being free to engage in cross-gendered play, children can explore until they understand the gender role and then move on.

How long children engage in cross-gendered pretend play varies by child. The majority of children outgrow this form of play by the time they enter elementary school.

Having the freedom to explore and engage in cross-gendered play helps children understand their own gender identity and the gender roles in their environment.

Quick tips for caregivers

Caregivers and parents often have a difficult time dealing with cross-gendered play, yet will accept other forms of fantasy play for prolonged periods. For example, Mr. Gomez may be perfectly willing to go along with Alberto acting like a puppy for several months. But he will discourage Alberto from acting like a girl.

Here are a few points to keep in mind:

- Cross-gendered play is a typical part of development for preschool children.
- Children move through a series of stages in gender development. Each stage may bring a readjustment period in which cross-gendered play may increase.
- Children use cross-gendered play to help them develop schemas of male and female roles.
- Engaging in cross-gendered play does not mean that children will want to be the opposite sex or that they do not understand they are a boy or girl.

- Allowing children to freely engage in cross-gendered play will help them understand gender roles at a faster rate and will let them move on to a new task to master.

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