

GENDER ROLES

Parental example and attitudes concerning gender roles are the determining factor in how children feel about and respond to gender issues. Children learn their gender roles mainly by observing adults, especially the parent of the same gender; i.e. girls and moms, boys and dads. They learn as they assist the same-sex parent in the home with household duties and responsibilities. In today's society, there is less and less gender stereotyping. Most people share dual roles. In a preschool setting, it is very important that all children are allowed to play with all toys. Dressing up, playing with blocks, having car races, and playing house are activities for all children.

Children begin to learn about gender at a very early age (two years old). It is not until age four or five that the child really begins to recognize the anatomical or physiological differences. For example, a two- or three-year-old may think that a girl is a boy just because the girl has short hair. If a boy dresses up in a play dress, the boy will become a girl. In fact, one little girl went with her mother to visit a neighbor who just had a brand new baby. The little girl watched as the newborn was given a bath. The mother asked, "Is this baby a boy or a girl?" The little girl responded, "I'm not sure. It's so hard to tell at this age--especially if its not wearing clothes."

During the later preschool years, however, the child knows the anatomical differences between men and women, boys and girls. This knowledge is gained by exploring and most often by innocent role-playing.

When children ask awkward questions, you should remain calm and recognize that this is a time of gender discovery for the child.

(You may wish to refer to the information concerning open, honest communication discussed in the "Teaching Children the Facts of Life" lesson.)