Gendered Parenting in Early Childhood: Subtle But Unmistakable if You Know Where to Look

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ABSTRACT—*Gendered parenting refers to parental messages and behaviors that convey information about how girls and boys are supposed to behave. In this article, we show that although gendered socialization is rarely found in broad parenting styles or explicit parenting practices, it is present in implicit parenting practices. Such implicit practices can be directed to the child (direct messages) and take the form of exposing children to different products and responding to children's behaviors differently depending on gender. Implicit gendered parenting practices can also be directed to others or reflect general gendered expressions that are conveyed to the child (indirect messages); these can take the form of gendered evaluations of others' behaviors in the child's presence and modeling gendered roles. We argue that studying these subtle forms of gendered parenting is important to understand gendered child development in light of the changing societal backdrop of gender roles and values.*

KEYWORDS—*gendered parenting; gender stereotypes; early childhood*

Children's sex is a powerful factor shaping their social experiences in terms of parenting, peer relations, and interactions with teachers (1). The earliest nonbiological origins of children's gendered behavior are likely to lie in their first social experiences —interactions with their parents. From the decision to paint a baby's room pink or blue onward, many parents take their young children's sex as a guiding principle for minor and major socialization decisions regardless of their children's individual characteristics and behaviors (2). This is referred to as gendered parenting—the messages children receive from their parents related to how boys and girls should and should not behave— and vary as a function of children's sex. Research has examined gendered parenting in early childhood over the past 40 years, with varying results and conclusions.

DIMENSIONS OF GENDERED PARENTING

Most parents use similar broad parenting styles with sons and daughters (3). A meta-analysis that examined broad parenting categories indicative of parenting styles (4) revealed few differences in how boys and girls were parented. Effect sizes decreased with age, suggesting more gendered parenting in early childhood, but effects in young children were mostly small or absent. Studies conducted since that meta-analysis show similar results, generally reporting no differences in broad parenting styles toward boys and girls regarding warmth (5), sensitive responsiveness (6), or parental control (7). Indeed, one would not expect to find sex differences in these areas of parenting because they reflect dimensions of socialization that are generally relevant to children's development regardless of their sex.

Theories on parents' role in fostering gendered child development focus on more specific parenting practices (rather than broad styles) that express expectations and evaluations related to gender. As soon as a child is identified as a boy or a girl, parents form expectations about the child's interests, skills, and behaviors, and these expectations appear in gendered parenting practices (8). However, when researchers ask parents explicitly whether they would treat their sons and daughters differently, most are not inclined toward gendered parenting practices (9).

Furthermore, our observational research has taught us that explicit messages to children (e.g., dolls are for girls) are rare in societies that value gender equality. This is consistent with the fact that gender stereotypes are mostly implicit and unconscious (10). When gender egalitarianism is dominant in a society, parents are reluctant to report that they have gender-stereotypical

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ideas because they think that such ideas would not be accepted (11).

FOCUSING ON IMPLICIT GENDERED PARENTING PRACTICES

The lack of evidence for sex differences in broad parenting styles or explicit gendered parenting practices has apparently led researchers to assume that gendered parenting is uncommon in families today (4). In this article, we aim to show that gendered socialization is expressed primarily in specific parenting practices (rather than broad parenting styles) and mostly implicitly (rather than explicitly). Implicit gendered parenting practices are covert behaviors and statements by parents that convey messages about differential expectations of girls and boys without stating these messages overtly. These implicit parenting practices can be divided further into direct and indirect messages. Direct messages concern the child and his or her behaviors, skills, and interests. Indirect messages convey information that concerns others or reflects general observations regarding gender that reach the child vicariously. (See Figure 1 for an overview of these distinctions.)

We focus on early childhood because key milestones in gender-related development happen in the first years of life (1), such as distinguishing between males and females (infancy), using gender labels (toddlerhood), and stereotyping by gender (preschool). This means that influences of gendered socialization are particularly relevant in early childhood when children begin to understand major principles of gender as they govern their social worlds.

Direct Messages
Direct gendered parenting practices convey messages about parents' expectations of the child by treating him or her in a certain way based on sex. Research on channeling or shaping examines parenting choices such as the films, books, and commercial products to which they expose their children and that convey gendered messages even if the parents do not endorse such messages explicitly. Especially in early childhood, parents control most of this input. When parents consistently buy female-stereotyped toys (e.g., dolls, tea sets) for their daughters, and male-stereotyped toys (e.g., trains, dinosaurs) for their sons, they implicitly link their children's sex to particular gender roles that are then encouraged as the children play with these toys. Popular commercial products for children are highly gender stereotyped (12), and exposure to such stereotyped products fosters children's gendered cognitions and behaviors (13). By being exposed to different toys and activities through parents' purchasing choices, boys and girls practice different skills, which may partly affect sex differences in later development.

Another line of research examines observations of parents' responses to specific behaviors in their children. Parents' evaluative feedback of children's behaviors—those that are stereotypical versus those that go against stereotype—is a form of gendered parenting that affects children's gender development (14). Generally, mothers respond less negatively to a son's risky and disruptive behaviors (15–17), and are less encouraging of a son's prosocial behaviors (18, 19). This is consistent with the stereotype that boys are risk takers and challenging, but girls are nice to others.

Similarly, in the meta-analysis mentioned earlier (4), the only parenting domain in which effect size was significant was encouragement of sex-typed activities. Inborn sex differences in children's behavior may cause these gendered parenting practices. For example, parents are more likely to use some physical force to discipline boys than girls because boys are more physically active or challenging and therefore elicit such responses from adults (20).

However, sex differences in children's behavior are absent or small in infancy (21) and emerge slowly in early childhood (1).
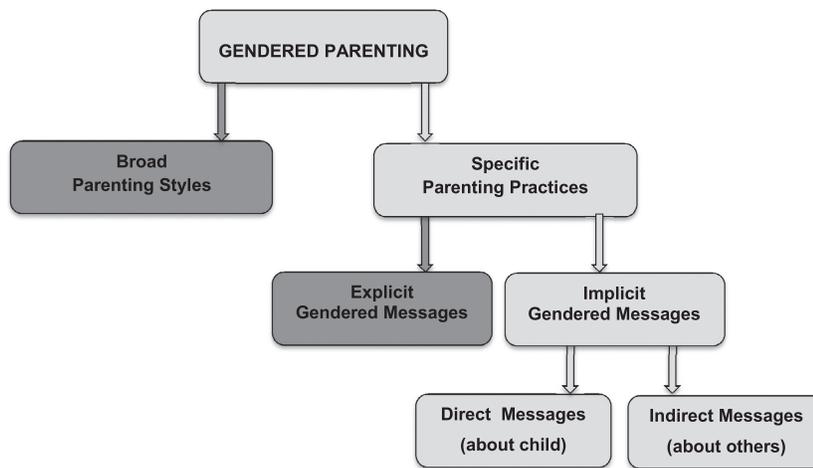

Figure 1. Evidence for (light gray) and against (dark gray) gendered parenting at different levels of parent–child interaction.

In several domains, gendered parenting precedes behavioral differences between boys and girls. In now-classic research, actor babies were treated differently by adults (who had a baby of the same age) based on the pink or blue color of the infants' clothes (i.e., perceived sex) rather than their actual sex (22), showing that parents' gender stereotypes rather than babies' behaviors guide adults' patterns of interaction. In these studies, the parents were largely unaware of their gendered interactions (22). Furthermore, even when sex differences in children's behaviors are absent or accounted for, parents still respond differently to the same behaviors in girls and boys (23, 24).

This work points toward gendered patterns of parental expectations and demands regarding how sons and daughters should or should not behave regarding specific areas of functioning, sending differential messages of approval or disapproval. Consistent with the notion of vicarious social learning (25), children not only pick up on such evaluations when they refer to their own behaviors, they also notice salient social models of gendered behavior as well as gendered evaluative messages regarding others' actions. Next, we discuss indirect gendered evaluative messages by parents.

Indirect Messages

Indirect gendered parenting practices convey gender-stereotyped messages to children about others or about general gendered expectations or opinions. In capturing such processes, researchers often observe parents' responses to materials that contain stimuli that are stereotypical and go against stereotypes. The most frequent way to measure such implicit indirect gendered messages is by asking parents to read books with their children that contain pictures designed to elicit gender-relevant talk. Several types of books have been used, including those featuring gender-neutral animal characters (26) and human characters engaging in gender-related activities that are stereotypical and counterstereotypical (27, 28).

Analyses of mothers' responses when reading these books with their young children reveal clear patterns of gendered messages. For example, in one study, mothers who read to their toddlers commented more positively about drawings of children doing stereotypical activities than about those doing the opposite, and fathers commented more often than mothers to confirm gender stereotypes. Fathers with two boys made fewer negative comments about drawings of boys being mean than about drawings of girls being mean (29). In the same study, both mothers and fathers were more likely to label sad children as female and angry children as male, even though the children were drawn in a gender-neutral way (30). These results show that even though parents rarely make explicit gendered comments to children, they send gendered messages more subtly, by differentially evaluating and labeling stereotypical and counterstereotypical behaviors.

Another form of indirect gendered messages is modeling. Parental modeling is an important source of information about gender roles for children (14). How parents divide tasks within the family influences children's notions of what is typically male or female even when children are not told explicitly about such roles. Because children generally identify more with their same-sex parent, they are motivated to imitate that parent's interests and activities. These processes generalize beyond simple imitation because children infer higher order patterns and behavioral rules from the actions they observe, which may then spark new behaviors that they have not observed directly but that fit the overall picture of gendered behavioral patterns (14). In other words, children develop general ideas and expectations based on observations they not only imitate but use as guidelines for behavior in similar situations. For example, a girl may imitate her mother's household cleaning in play, and then conclude that cleaning is a task for women and assume those chores in other situations, even when this behavior has not been modeled in the other settings. In addition, these inferred patterns guide children's expectations about others and influence their social behavior toward others accordingly. Indeed, children from families with traditional gender roles have more gender-stereotypical expectations (31).

This research describes parenting patterns that are largely independent of behavioral cues from children, such as gendered responses to characters in books and modeling of gender roles. Therefore, these forms of gendered socialization are more likely driven by parents' gendered beliefs than by children's behavioral patterns. According to gender schema theory, parents' gender stereotypes predict the extent to which they engage in gendered parenting, which in turn predicts children's gender stereotypes and gendered behaviors (32). Indeed, in early childhood, parents' gender stereotypes may be associated with gendered parenting (7, 27, 29). Furthermore, in one study with toddlers, fathers with more stereotypical gender attitudes used more physical control (typically seen as appropriate for boys) with sons than with daughters, and this pattern predicted stereotypically greater aggression in sons than in daughters (33).

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

Based on the studies we have reviewed, we recommend several directions for research, including looking at methods; the interplay between implicit and explicit gendered parenting; and cognitive, ideological, and sociocultural mechanisms underlying gendered parenting. Gendered parenting in early childhood occurs mainly in implicit parenting practices, either directly through gendered behaviors and evaluations concerning the child or indirectly through gendered messages about others or general gendered messages conveyed to the child. Studies using picture books highlight the hidden nature of gendered parenting practices: Not only are they mostly implicit (not overtly stated), they are also indirect in that they seemingly do not concern the child but nonetheless contain clear messages about parents' expectations and evaluations of gendered behaviors that

children pick up (25). Therefore, uncovering such subtle patterns requires examining parents' responses to carefully designed stimuli that are not about the target child, but are processed within the context of parenting and convey subtle but salient gendered messages to the child.

Contemporary models of children's gendered development acknowledge both biological and socialization influences, and would be strengthened by considering larger scale societal changes in how gender is viewed, how gender influences how people behave, and how gender is represented in research. These issues feed back into choices regarding dimensions of parenting that are or are not investigated as potential influences on children's gendered development, and as we have suggested, such choices in turn can influence whether gendered socialization processes can be uncovered and dictate the nature of the scientific knowledge that emerges.

Because implicit parenting practices are largely unconscious, they are paradoxically easier to capture than explicit messages, especially in contexts where parents are being observed, directly or indirectly via self-report. In fact, parents are more likely to endorse gender equality explicitly but model and implicitly reinforce behaviors along gendered lines. The impact of explicit teaching is mitigated if other modes of communication convey a different message (14). Few studies have addressed the balance and match between explicit and implicit gendered parenting; exploring this further could provide a more comprehensive understanding of such complex processes.

The mismatch between explicit and implicit messages raises questions about parents' motives for gendered parenting practices. Parents might believe that boys and girls need to be socialized in a way that prepares them for adult gender roles and society's gendered expectations. This explanation seems unlikely as this type of belief suggests an explicit parenting goal that generally does not emerge in explicit measures of parenting practices. However, parents may not want to reveal this goal if they believe it contradicts society's ideology of gender equality. In that case, the belief is not unconscious but may be consciously suppressed in interviews.

Alternatively, parents may not have gendered parenting goals but be victims of unconscious gender stereotypes pervasive in many societies (34). Such stereotypes unconsciously guide perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of events and may lead to unconscious gendered parenting practices. Indeed, in one study, implicit gender stereotypes in mothers were associated with gendered talk in mother–child interactions (29). However, this association was small in size (as it has been in similar studies), suggesting room for other explanations for the origins of gendered parenting practices. Exploring the different mechanisms underlying gendered socialization is an important next step in this research.

At least as important as knowledge about the origins of sex differences and what they mean for theoretical frameworks of gendered development is acknowledging different conceptualizations of gender that link to different values underlying opinions (35). This means that we must study the origins of those conceptualizations and values to understand how and why public and scientific interest in gendered socialization waxes and wanes across the decades. Thus, we advocate for a revival in studying gendered parenting because up-to-date knowledge about this topic is crucial to understanding the behavioral development of children who grow up in societies that periodically undergo various evolutions and revolutions regarding gender roles.

We know little about generalizing findings on gendered parenting beyond Western cultures. Few studies have used observational measures to examine gendered parenting of young children in non-Western cultures or ethnic-minority families of non-Western backgrounds. This is a large gap in the literature, given that gender roles are influenced strongly by cultural and societal contexts. Parents' socioeconomic status also plays a role in the development of gender stereotypes, with people from lower income backgrounds more likely to endorse more traditional gender roles (36) than people from higher income backgrounds. However, because most studies examine primarily middle- to upper-income individuals, they are unlikely to capture the full scope of gendered parenting.

Finally, there are different ideologies about the costs and benefits of gendered parenting. On the positive side, one could argue that gendered parenting teaches children about the reality of gender role expectations in their social environment, which prepares them for socially adaptive functioning and may promote greater well-being. On the negative side, when children are parented based on stereotypes instead of actual abilities and interests, talent may be wasted and people may be forced into lifestyles and careers that deny personal identities, which also affects well-being. Although generally seen as an ideological issue, the question of outcomes of gendered parenting is also an empirical one. Therefore, we hope to see an increase in scientific efforts to understand the origins, nature, and outcomes of gendered parenting in diverse populations, which will contribute to optimal development in both boys and girls.

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