The Separation of Girls and Boys

As every teacher knows, classrooms are busy and dynamic environments. Children’s relationships and interactions at school might even appear to be fluid and constantly changing. But take a closer look and a pattern may become evident: you are likely to often notice boys interacting solely with other boys and girls engaging only with other girls. Researchers refer to this childhood phenomenon of children gravitating toward their own gender as gender separation, and it has been documented to varying degrees in many different cultures throughout the world.

Although children surely benefit from their friendships and frequent interactions with same-gender friends, forming friendships with a diverse group of peers, including children of the other gender, can broaden children’s social experiences and allow them to learn from others who may be different from themselves. They may have opportunities to try new activities and to practice new ways of interacting, understanding, and getting along with others. Aside from building social and emotional skills, diverse and positive peer experiences also play a role in children’s school liking and success. Thus, as Ms. Jones suspected, encouraging girls and boys to sometimes play with other-gender peers can expand their social experiences in positive ways, giving them an important head start toward the development of healthy relationships and productive learning and work environments across childhood and into adulthood.

Developmental patterns

Preschool
For many children, the preschool years mark their first introduction into the world of peers. It is at this same age that children show clear and increasing preferences for playmates of the same gender. Girls seem to exhibit this pattern 6 months or even a year earlier than boys, but by the age of 5, both girls and boys tend to spend the majority of their time with same-gender peers. In fact, classroom observations have indicated that around 60% of preschoolers’ interactions are exclusively with same-gender peers whereas a mere 10% are with only other-gender peers.

Some research has found that younger children are often drawn together into same-gender groups based on the interests that they share or similarities in their play styles. That is, boys may tend to cluster around “male-typed” toys and activities (e.g., cars and construction toys), whereas
girls may come together in play that is more typical of females (e.g., playing with dolls). However, shared interests are not the only cause for this pattern—in fact, gender separation is often evident even when children are engaged in “neutral” tasks such as coloring or working on puzzles. Another factor that may be important is the tendency for children to see themselves as more similar to same-gender peers and thus feel more compatible engaging with them. Because of this, some children may not even try playing with other-sex peers. Moreover, in interviews, preschoolers have reported that they think it is more acceptable to others if they play with peers of their own gender. Thus, aside from shared interests in gender-typed activities, children’s emerging knowledge, beliefs, and “theories” about one another and which behaviors are seen as acceptable also play a role in the development of gender separation early in life.

**Elementary School**

As children progress through the elementary grades, separations between the sexes become more evident—almost any schoolyard will reflect this pattern. Research has found that school-aged children are as much as 11 times more likely to interact with same-gender peers than with other-gender peers. Sometimes children maintain or develop other-gender friendships, but it is rare for a child to play *more* often with peers of the other gender. And, when cross-gender interactions do occur, they are more likely to happen when children are in the company of a same-gender peer than with only those of the other gender. Gender separation at this age may be due in part to the risk of teasing that can occur in these social situations (e.g., “Sarah’s got a boyfriend!”). Childhood teasing and games such as “chase and kiss” or “cooties” often seem to be playful childhood behaviors, but they discourage boys and girls from interacting with one another. Consequently, other-gender playmates that children may have had in their younger years may begin to fade away, and other-gender friendships they may have in other settings (e.g., in their neighborhood) may go “underground” when at school.

**Adolescence**

Generally, it is not until adolescence that boys and girls begin to spend more time with one another. These early other-gender interactions and friendships typically begin in the context of mixed-gender group activities. Across the adolescent years, many girls and boys become more comfortable interacting with one another, and even seeking out new friendships with one another (although same-sex friendships are still more prevalent). These other-gender friendships offer opportunities to learn about the styles and perspectives of the other gender.

**What this means for children’s development**

**Different Interaction Styles**

Girls’ and boys’ peer groups are characterized by different types of activities and ways of interacting. For example, boys often interact in larger groups with a clear social “hierarchy,” have a more aggressive, competitive, and “rough and tumble” style of play, and use more direct strategies to influence others’ behavior (e.g., making direct commands and requests). In contrast, girls tend to play in smaller groups and pairs, play closer to adults (who are then in a better position to both monitor and interact with them), engage in more cooperative forms of play, and use more indirect strategies of influence (e.g., suggestions, compromises).
Because children spend the majority of their time with same-gender peers, they have many more opportunities to experience and practice styles of relating that are most characteristic of their own gender, but fewer occasions to learn the interaction styles of the other gender. Over time, this increased experience interacting with own-gender peers may maintain and even amplify differences between girls and boys. Researchers who observed preschoolers during their natural play throughout the day discovered that children who engage with both genders participate in a wider variety of activities and practice a more diverse set of skills than children who only engage with same-gender peers. These findings suggest that same-gender and other-gender peer experiences are important ways in which children socialize one another. Thus, children can broaden their repertoire of social skills and behaviors by interacting with their own and the other sex.

Research has highlighted the potential benefits of other-gender play and friendships. For example, children with a mix of both same- and other-gender friends show more positive emotions during play, engage in more complex forms of play, are rated by teachers as more socially competent, and are more well-liked by their peers. When interviewed, children report that their other-gender friendships are valuable. In particular, such friendships appear to help them understand new perspectives. Although same-gender peer experiences definitely benefit children, over time and with increasing exclusivity they can lead to the different interaction styles, attitudes, skills, and interests between girls and boys. Research is still needed to better understand what gender separation might mean for children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. Nonetheless, these emerging differences clearly have the potential to affect (and limit) the ways in which boys and girls—and later, men and women—relate to one another.

Across the school year, Ms. Jones has worked to find ways to encourage the boys and girls in her classroom to play with each other. Today, the children are working together to create a class garden. She has gotten the children excited about the project, and on the playground she recruits boys and girls for different gardening jobs, and they are working as a team. At the end of the morning, the children are proud of what they have accomplished. Ms. Jones has found that, over time, it has become easier to engage boys and girls with each other, and they now frequently choose to play together on a regular basis. Although some children need more support than others, Ms. Jones has seen a new and exciting pattern emerge on the playground and in her classroom.

What can we do?

Building peer relationships can be challenging for children. Because children are typically more experienced and comfortable with same-gender peers and might have concerns about being teased for interacting with the other gender, it can be especially difficult for children to initiate and respond to other-gender peer interactions. Adults can play an important role in fostering children’s social skills and facilitating positive peer relationships by providing constructive opportunities for children to interact with other-gender peers.
**Cooperation**

Adults can provide activities and structure them in ways that encourage boys and girls to communicate and relate to one another in positive ways. For example, a simple way to encourage boys and girls to play and interact with each other is to create situations in which they can work together to achieve a common goal, such as when children are assigned a group project. Everyday activities that “mix it up” can also provide valuable opportunities for boys and girls to begin to get to know one another better. For example, having girls and boys share classroom tasks such as clean-up, having them work together in groups or pairs on math problems, or having them sit together during playground or lunchroom activities are all simple strategies that have a big impact on broadening children’s social experiences. Embedding these types of activities into classroom routines that occur on a regular basis can ensure that there are opportunities for interactions between girls and boys to occur often across the day, week, or year. When such experiences are structured and endorsed by adults, some of the reluctance or discomfort that children may initially feel may be diminished.

**Recognizing Opportunities**

Often teachers can facilitate positive girl-boy exchanges spontaneously and powerfully during everyday “teachable moments” or opportunities. For example, teachers can be attuned to boys and girls who share similar interests or skills and use these attributes as a common ground to bring them together. Recognizing and making the most of such opportunities requires teachers to be active and involved in supporting children’s interactions. For example, adults may need to circulate among children as they work and play together to encourage and suggest ways to expand their interactions (e.g., suggest roles each child could take on), to reinforce positive exchanges (e.g., praise children with comments such as “What a great team!”), or to remind children of appropriate behaviors with one another. These strategies might at first require some additional effort, but they can quickly become second nature and part of the range of strategies teachers already have in their repertoires.

**De-Emphasizing Gender**

Equally critical for the classroom is promoting a climate that makes it acceptable and comfortable for boys and girls to be friends and that de-emphasizes gender. Using phrases like, “Good morning, boys and girls!” or using gender to group children for classroom activities or get in line (as when children are asked to line up boy-girl-boy-girl) can subtly reinforce the idea that girls and boys are separate and different, or that one group is more important than the other. Similarly, activities that are structured in a way that teams “girls against boys” reinforce divisions between the genders. Even if teachers try to dispel gender stereotypes during such activities (such as emphasizing when girls win in a male domain, such as science), their efforts might backfire if they have made gender such a prominent feature of the activity in the first place. Instead, teachers should be conscientious to refer to students by labels that unite them, such as “students” and “class”. Thus, at the same time that teachers make a conscious effort to bring girls and boys together (such as having girls and boys sit next to each other), teachers should make sure not to emphasize the gendered nature of what they are doing. For example, when grouping girls and boys, teachers can make an effort to use individual children’s names when forming groups, rather than announcing that groups will be composed of both “girls and boys”. In this way, teachers provide children with the opportunity to work with the other gender without making a “big deal” out of it or even making children aware of gender as a factor in the
teacher’s decisions. By de-emphasizing gender, teachers help children to focus on similarities and the “student” identity that children share.

Additional strategies should be used to make sure that the classroom environment and daily routines are organized in ways that emphasize children’s positive relationships and common ground rather than gender differences or divisions. Teachers should ensure that materials in the classroom (e.g., bulletin boards, posters, books) do not emphasize differences or separateness (e.g., separate bulletin boards for girls and boys), but illustrate the positive relationships that are expected between boys and girls. Teachers can also inadvertently reinforce gender separation when they group toys or other materials according to gender stereotypes, such as when dolls and play kitchens are on one side of the room and trucks and construction toys are on another side of the room. In general, it is beneficial to use gender neutral activities and materials that will appeal to girls and boys.

Conclusions

All children can benefit from more diverse peer experiences. Such experiences give children the opportunity to learn from those who are different from themselves and practice respect and cooperation. With careful planning of activities, support to children in their peer interactions and relationships, and attention to the classroom environment and routine practices, adults can facilitate peer experiences that are positive and successful for all children. When adults encourage boys and girls to spend time with one another and ensure that they are comfortable and successful interacting with one another, children can enjoy new experiences and widen their range of social skills. With a better perspective on the other sex and a broader repertoire of social skills, the experiences children have in classrooms can pave the way for more successful relationships throughout development.

References

NEED TO BRAINSTORM WHICH WOULD BE BEST TO INCLUDE
**Recommendations for teaching practices and classroom activities**

- Refrain from using gender as a label or to organize the classroom. Use greetings such as “Good morning, children!” and find new and varied strategies for seating, lining up, or grouping children—such as by color of clothing, pet ownership, favorite foods or activities, etc. These strategies also allow children to discover the interests that they share—things they may not even know they have in common.
- Ensure that classroom visual materials (e.g., posters, class photos, books) depict boys and girls playing and working together rather than showing solely same-gender groups.
- In the classroom and on the playground, provide a broad range of materials and activities that will engage children with different interests and will appeal to both boys and girls.
- Structure opportunities for boys and girls to work together on common goals, such as using mixed-gender groups to solve science problems together or engaging boys and girls in group projects, such as creating classroom artwork displays.
- Ask boys and girls to work together on classroom tasks (cleaning up, passing out materials, etc) to provide natural opportunities for children to engage with one another.
- Encourage conversations between boys and girls by commenting on their activities and suggesting ways to think about shared interests and or discover more about one another’s individual uniqueness.
- Utilize small groups sometimes rather than large groups (e.g., at circle/group time) to encourage peer-to-peer interactions.
- Praise and reinforce girls and boys for playing and working together in positive ways.
- Communicate about children’s positive other-gender interactions and friendships to families.
- Do not allow children to exclude, insult, or tease one another on the basis of their gender (or, for any reasons!). Even very young children can understand the concept of fairness.

*For more ideas and information, contact [Sanford Harmony Program]*