

Gender Role Communication

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Abstract

The following paper investigates several research articles addressing how parents may be communicating standards for gender roles to their children. These studies will be discussed in terms of how they were done and the findings within them. This paper will cover three main points; how parents communicate differently with their sons versus their daughters, what effect this kind of communication has on children and how a child's communication is effected by the way their parents communicate with them. In addition, limitations and implications for further research will also be addressed.

Keywords: gender roles; gender stereotypes; gender communication; parent-child communication

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Communication within families is something that is vital to human development. Not only is family communication formative, it is unavoidable (Adler & Proctor, 2013). More times than not, the first people to communicate with a child is the child's mother and father. According to research, the manner in which parents communicate to their child depends on the gender of the parent and the gender of the child. Moms have a different way of talking to their sons versus their daughters. Dads will also speak to their sons differently than their daughters and furthermore, fathers communicate differently than mothers with their kids. One ecocultural theory suggests that every day conversations amongst parents and children contain encoded layers of messages communicating social roles and expectations based on gender stereotypes (Shinn & O'Brein 2008). The way parents communicate with their children influences their children's perceptions of gender roles. Studies have been conducted to find out how moms and dads are communicating differently with their children, what effect this communication has on the child's perception of their own gender, and how it affects the ways that girls and boys communicate.

Research has pointed out that not only does the way that parents communicate to their children depend on the child's gender, but it is also dependent on the sex of the parent. In one study, parents were videotaped communicating with their 3rd graders for about 6 minutes during a home visit (Shinn & O'Brien, 2008). According to the findings, mothers expressed to both their sons and daughters that it was okay to be sympathetic, soft spoken and express emotions. Mothers put emphasis on words that described feelings and emotions within the story and also told the story in first person making it seem more intimate. Fathers did not convey those same

messages. Instead, fathers told the story using pseudo-scientific information, more assertive type speech and told the story in third person. Parent's conversations also tended to be more extensive with their sons as compared to their daughters and mothers spoke more than fathers in general (Shinn & O'Brien, 2008). Another study by Horan, Houser, & Cowan (2007) focused on a sample of undergraduate college students of various ethnic backgrounds and social classes. For this study, a survey was distributed concerning ways in which the students communicated with each of their parents. The findings were similar to those of Shinn and O'Brien (2008) in concluding that parents spoke more affirmatively or optimistically with female spawn than male spawn. In a third study, parents were prompted to read the same storybook to their sons and then daughters separately. The idea behind the storybook for this study was that bedtime stories are one of the most popular interactions between parents and children (Muchnik & Stavans, 2009). The fathers would read to their sons then to their daughters and the mothers would follow the same procedure. The children in this study ranged in age from 3-7. The study concluded that fathers read the story the same way to each child where mothers stressed emotions presented in the story when reading it to their daughters and stressed more of the actions in the text when reading it to their sons. This study paid special attention to the parent's tone, linguistics, voice, and volume in order to make their conclusions (Muchnik & Stavans, 2009). Another study examining children age 3-6 found that mothers are more open and extensive in conversing with their daughters concerning topics like sexuality, puberty and the stigma associated with women who have children out of wedlock (Martin & Luke, 2010). This study was conducted via anonymous mail in surveys. In comparing the findings of these combined studies, mothers seem to communicate on a deeper emotional level with their daughters which may suggest to the child that females should be more open with expressing their feelings. Fathers came off as more

assertive and spoke less than the mothers. This may suggest to their children that males should be more assertive, less attached and less expressive.

Studies further suggest that parent-child communication has a direct effect on the child's opinion for what may or may not be appropriate for their gender. In one study, children age 3-5 years communicated that they are more comfortable talking with one parent more than the other about the idea of being allowed to "cross-play" or play with toys deemed to be geared toward the gender opposite of their gender (Freeman, 2007). Girls said they felt more comfortable talking to their fathers about cross-play and boys felt more at ease talking to their mothers about it. This study also concluded that preschool age children have a strong sense of ideas about what is masculine and what is feminine based on stereotypical references. Furthermore, this study suggests that girls feel more comfortable talking about masculinity with their fathers whom they associate masculinity with and boys feel more comfortable discussing feminine ideas with their mothers with whom they associate femininity. In the Shinn & O'Brien (2008) study, there was a direct correlation between how much the parents spoke and how much the children spoke. Mothers tended to talk more, therefore their children communicated quantitatively more with them. Martin & Luke's (2010) study concerning mothers talking more to their daughters about sexual topics suggests that this type of communication with girls may lead to society holding a higher standard for women and young girls being responsible in their sexual encounters as compared to the standards for men and young boys. In summary, these studies found that preschool age children associate certain gender related traits to be masculine or feminine based on how their parents encouraged them to play. During play, mothers tended to talk more with their kids where fathers bonded with their children through shared activities.

Each of these studies has suggested that girls are prompted to talk more and communicate on deeper emotional levels, where boys are encouraged to communicate less. According to Martin & Luke (2010), by age 3 children develop a gender identity and by age 5, they have developed a sense of gender constancy (associating objects or ideas more with one gender or the other). In Freeman's (2007) study concerning "cross play", when the children were asked why they did not want to play with a toy in which they associated with the opposite gender, their answers were always the same – they were leery about what their mother or father would think. Children should be encouraged to make decisions based on their interests and not based upon social norms. As a result, children may feel limited in expressing themselves and only communicate in ways they believe to be acceptable based on the roles imposed by communication with their parents (Freeman, 2007).

Although there is some research to go along with the topic of gender role communication amongst parents and children, there is simply not enough of it to determine exactly how children are affected in both the long term and the short term. Many studies focus on the preschool age because it has been determined that that is when children are most susceptible to parental influence and is also the age of discovering and interpreting what their gender is and what it means (Shinn & O'Brien, 2008). Some suggestions for further research might include conducting longitudinal studies on the effects of parent-child communication and influences on gender roles. Other studies might observe different age groups such as toddlers, middle school aged children and high school aged children as well as mature adults. It might be interesting to compare parent-child communication concerning gender roles amongst children of younger parents compared to children of middle aged and older parents.

After reviewing the existing research, the findings suggest that communication between parents and their children does effect the child's perception of gender. The extents of the affects are not fully known or may vary by case. Because most people are parents or will someday become a parent, this matter of gender role communication and the stereotypes that are associated with it may be an important topic for further research.

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