

Gender and Toddlers

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Do boys and girls develop differently?

There are lots of anecdotes about how different boys and girls are. But, when experts do a meta-analysis of all the studies of gender differences, these are the things that show up consistently:

- Emotional Development: Boys may get upset / stressed more easily, and have a harder time self-soothing. Girls show fear earlier: they're more likely to startle, and more likely to slow down when their parents look worried about something.
- Spatial Learning: boys are better at turning objects around in their mind to see how they could fit together differently, and at keeping track of moving objects and predicting motion.
- Physical Skills: Boys *may* be more physical (although girls reach large motor milestones at about the same age). Boys *may* have shorter attention spans.
- Language: Girls are better at perceptual speed tasks: identifying matching objects and pattern identification. They pay more attention to the human voice than boys do. Girls talk earlier.

However, all those differences are *small*. There is just as much variation from one boy to another as there is from a boy to a girl.

Do people respond differently to boys and girls?

There *are* slight biological differences. But we as parents reinforce and amplify the differences. We encourage our children to do the things that we expected they would be good at (boys to throw balls, girls to talk) and we don't challenge them in other areas, because "well, girls are just not as physical, and we all know boys talk later." Our assumptions "crystallize into... self-fulfilling prophecies." (Eliot)

- Emotional Development: Some believe that "girls are more empathic / tuned into people from day one – they are much more likely to establish eye contact." But others point out that because newborn boys are fussier and harder to soothe, their parents are less likely to establish eye contact, so boys don't get as much practice at that skill.
- Emotional Expression: When girls show fear, they receive empathic support. But fearful boys are told not to be scared. Boys are often perceived as more likely to be angry and aggressive, but that's considered normal for boys. Angry girls are told not to be angry.
- Spatial Learning: Girls are slightly less interested in puzzles and building toys. That can turn into a gap in spatial skills which influences learning advanced math later on.
- Physical: Boys are expected to be more physical and interested in balls and bikes, so when they show these interests, they are actively encouraged. Boys are dressed in clothes they can move well in. Girls are dressed in "pretty" clothes, and assumed to be less physically capable.
- Language: It is true that girls talk younger. At 20 months a girl may know 200 words and a boy may know 30. But in a month he'll catch up to where she was! She will always have gotten more practice than he has, though, so she seems further ahead. Girls *may* also read younger, which means parents assume she likes to read. These girls are more likely to read for pleasure – which builds language skills, putting them further ahead. Parents and teachers see a boy lagging in reading and verbal skills and shrug it off with, "But of course, he's a boy."

When do children learn about gender?

- 7 months. Start to tell the difference between male and female voices
- 12 months. Start to tell the difference between male and female faces
- 2 years. Girls begin to play with 'girl toys' and boys with 'boy toys.'
- 2- 3 years. Begin to label themselves and others as male or female
- 3 – 4 years. Start actively categorizing things as boy things and girl things.
- 4 – 6 years. Say "*only* boys can do this" or "girls *never* do that"
- 6 – 7 years. Children understand that gender is constant: boys won't grow up to be women; girls won't be daddies; that person is a man even though he is dressed like a woman.

Toy Selection

Toy selection is where we see a big difference between boys and girls evolve. At 6 – 12 months, boys and girls are interested in mostly the same toys. But by 3, boys show a clear preference for "boy toys" (especially things with wheels), while girls prefer girl toys. This is even more pronounced at 5. Boys spend very little time with "girl" toys. Girls split their time more evenly between boy toys and girl toys. That may be because in our modern culture, we tell our girls they can do anything – wear pants, do math, climb trees, etc. But we discourage our boys from doing "girly things".

Helping boys succeed

- Physical activity is essential: give him active chores, ensure he has time for big motor play.
- Because they may have a shorter attention span, it helps to break big jobs down into smaller tasks, and switch things around when working, alternating activities.
- Take advantage of boys' natural curiosity and desire to fix things by giving problems to solve. Take advantage of his desire to compete to prove his abilities by issuing challenges.
- If you want to connect with a boy, do something physical together. Especially if you want to have a "serious talk" with him. Do it while walking side-by-side, not sitting and looking at him.
- When boys are stressed, they have a fight-or-flight response. Teach him to move around to release anger and stress, and to take slow breaths to calm down when he can't move around.

Helping girls succeed

- Encourage physical activity of all kinds. Treat her as a brave, strong, athletic child.
- Encourage her to practice skills that build spatial intelligence – build with blocks, make and use maps, and play video games that let her "move" through spaces and put pieces together. Play with toys that move – cars, paper airplanes, balls – these help predict motion.
- When girls are stressed, they have an oxytocin-fueled response – they are more likely to turn to other people for support and to help defend from perceived threats (the collect-and-protect response, aka "tend-and-befriend"). Their stress may be quieter and go un-noticed until they begin to cry. A stressed girl may do best when someone moves in close to her, speaking in a calm, quiet voice, and offering support with problem-solving.

Learn more:

- [Pink Brain, Blue Brain](#). By Lise Eliot
- The Real Difference Between Boys and Girls. www.parenting.com/article/real-difference-between-boys-and-girls
- Cognitive Gender Differences by Abigail James. www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Cognitive_Gender/
- More details and source citations at www.gooddayswithkids.com