

# Diggers and dirt, unicorns and glitter – understanding *gendered play*



*My First  
Five Years*

At My First Five Years, we know play supports children's development. We know children learn about themselves and other people during their first five years and that they explore and develop these ideas through their play. All children are individuals with their own interests and preferred ways of playing.

However, children are influenced by the world around them, and we know that they are developing their understanding of categories used to group people. They will notice that 'boys' and 'girls' are two of these categories, and will begin to link characteristics to these categories based on what they notice in the world around them.[1] Children might begin to make play choices based on their understanding of these cultural stereotypes and how they fit into these categories.

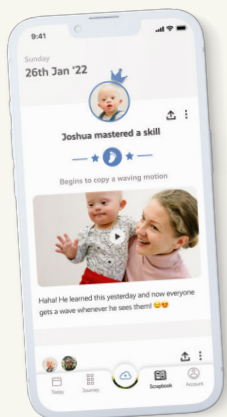


## What do we mean by gender?

Your child is learning about gender and gender roles from the moment they are born, and it is likely that you will see some of what they learn in their play. The World Health Organisation provides a definition of gender which helps to see your child is learning about themselves from the world around them.

***“Gender is used to describe the characteristics of women and men that are socially constructed, while sex refers to those that are biologically determined. People are born female or male but learn to be girls and boys who grow into women and men. This learned behaviour makes up gender identity and determines gender roles.”***

- World Health Organisation.[2]



**Our app will help you to think about how your child develops their understanding of themselves and other people.**



## When do children notice gender?

Babies are interested in people from birth and at around three months old they differentiate between male and female faces.[3] By ten months, babies were found to link objects with either a male or female face.[4] The early connections babies make between objects and gender demonstrate early stereotypes. This research suggests that before your baby's first birthday, they will already have some stereotypical views about gender, based on their experiences. Your toddler will begin to use gender labels and your child is likely to have stereotypical views linked to gender by the time they are three years old.[5]

Judi Mesman and Marleen Groeneveld from Leiden University in the Netherlands have reviewed research about gendered parenting. Gendered parenting describes the messages parents give through their behaviour that provide children with information about how boys and girls are expected to behave. Mesman and Groeneveld found gender socialisation was rarely explicit but was found in implicit practices.

Explicit practices would include statements such as, "Girls don't like blue," or "Boys like football," whereas implicit practices describe things that might not be openly stated, such as the colour chosen for a child's bedroom or the toys your baby plays with and clothes they wear. Gender socialisation might occur through expectations about interests, the products babies and children are bought, or through different responses to children's behaviour according to their gender.



"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."[5]

## Gender schema and play

Psychologist Sandra Bem developed gender schema theory in 1981. She suggested children develop ideas about what it means to be male or female, a gender schema. These schemas then inform their ideas and behaviours, so gender-schematic thinkers will regulate their behaviour to fit into their idea of their gender. Ideas about gender develop from observing the world around them, without children being aware of them.[6] This theory suggests that children make choices about what to play with and how to play based on their gender schema.



Sandra Bem argued for a gender aschematic society, suggesting that individual behaviours and characteristics should not be linked with a particular gender. And recent studies suggest that young people who rate gender-stereotypical traits as of high importance, such as girls should have nice clothes or boys should be tough, have lower levels of wellbeing.[7] This research suggests it is important to provide your child with a broad range of experiences and role models that challenge stereotypical views.



## Why think about gendered play?

When thinking about gendered play, we acknowledge that from around the age of two children might have a gender schema that informs their behaviour and play. When you think about the opportunities you provide for your child to play, it can be helpful to think about gender schema. Does your own gender schema influence what you provide for your child?

If you would like to know more, our co-founder Alistair has written about gender schemas in early years settings in his blog, *Gender Schema, Your Space and You!* ([abccdoes.com](http://abccdoes.com))

As with everything at My First Five Years, this really comes back to thinking about your individual child and their interests. Would your child be more interested in drawing a picture if it were outside with a paintbrush and water on the wall, than inside sitting at a table? Would they rather count figures into a box or learn about counting by collecting sticks or jumping between paving stones?

Download our app for ideas about how you can support your child's learning and development linked to their individual developmental journey.

## Things to think about

- ***Think about how you play with your baby***

Studies have shown that people are more likely to talk to a baby if they think it is a girl, and play physical games if they think the baby is a boy. All babies benefit from face-to-face conversations and appropriate physical play, so think about playing with your baby in a variety of ways.



- **Think about the words you use**

When you talk to your baby, think about whether you would use the same words if they were a boy rather than a girl, or a girl rather than a boy. Do you always comment on your daughter's appearance or your son's strength?

- **Think about your bias**

Your child will learn about gender and other characteristics from watching and listening to the people around them. Think about what they see and hear, and how this might influence their understanding of the possibilities available to them.

- **Give your child a range of toys and objects**

Try to ensure the toys your child has don't reinforce stereotypes. Provide a range of toys and objects that your child can use to recreate familiar situations and explore their interests.



- **Think about the clothes your child wears**

Clothes can make it easier or more difficult for your child to play in a particular way. If you are going to the park, make sure your child is in comfortable clothes that allow them to move easily and that can be washed. If your child is dancing or spinning, a cloak, skirt, dress or bits of fabric can add interest to the spin as they watch the fabric move outwards.

Look at the slogans and images on clothes as these often reinforce gender stereotypes.

- **Think about the books you share**

Think about the images your child sees in books and in the programmes they watch. Showing them male and female characters taking different roles in stories will help your child to see their choices are not limited by their gender.

- **Encourage your child to have male and female friends**

Your child is likely to play with other children who are doing things that interest them. Avoid comments such as, "Ah there's your boyfriend/girlfriend." These might seem cute but also could make having a mixed group of friends seem different or wrong to your child.



- **Think about behaviours you encourage or discourage**

Avoid comments such as "boys don't cry" or "boys will be boys" and praise both boys and girls for being tidy and physically active.



- **Think about your child's interests**

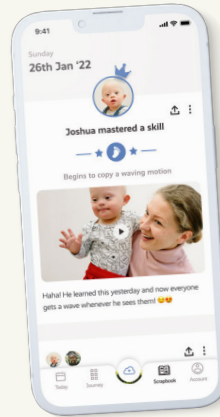
Notice what your child enjoys and support them to explore a range of skills through the things that interest them. If your child loves being outside, don't bring them in to do some writing or counting – take the writing or counting to them.

- **Think about the opportunities you provide to practise and master skills**

Skills and interests can be an area where our own gender bias influences our expectations of our child without us realising. We might give our daughters more opportunities to chat, draw or play imaginatively or our sons more time being physically active.



At My First Five Years, we know there are many ways to develop the skills in our six streams of development. For example, imaginative play does not need to be a quiet tea party with cuddly toys, it could involve an adventure and making a den. Fine motor skills do not need to be developed sitting at a table – you can read some ideas about developing fine motor skills outside in our blog, [Leaves, sticks, fingers and toes - Developing fine motor skills in the woods.](#)



**You can find more ideas to help you support your child's learning and development on our website or download our app today to get personalised ideas linked to the skills your child is likely to be mastering next.**



## Read more

[Home - Let Toys Be Toys](#)

## References

[1] Winkler, E.N. (2009). Children are not colorblind: How young children learn race. *PACE*, 3(3)

[2] World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. (no date). Gender: definitions. Available at: [WHO/Europe | Gender: definitions](#) (Accessed 10th March 2022).

[3] Quinn, P.C., Yahr, J., Kuhn, A., Slater, A.M., Pascali, O. (2002). Representation of the gender of human faces by infants: a preference for female. *Perception*, 31(9):1109-21.

[4] Levy, G.D., & Haaf R.A. (1994). Detection of gender-related categories by 10-month-old infants. *Infant Behavioral. Development*, 17:457-59.

[5] Mesman, J. & Groeneveld, M.G. (2018). Gendered parenting in early childhood: Subtle but unmistakable if you know where to look. *Child Development Perspectives*, 12 (1), 22-27.

[6] Starr, C. & Zurbriggen, E. (2017). Sandra Bem's gender schema theory after 34 years: A review of its reach and impact. *Sex Roles*, 76, 566-578.

[7] Children's Society (1st September 2020). How gender roles and stereotypes affect young people. Available from: [Children's Gender Roles & Stereotypes | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)