

Play, gender and talk

In the penultimate article in our series on language development in young children, Michael Jones explores the possible influences that gender might have on children's behaviour and communication.

RECENTLY, I was tasked with leading a mark making and language development activity in a pre-school, and was pleased that a large number of girls and boys were keen to be involved. All the children were just coming up to three years of age and one conversation went like this:

- Tariq: 'You a man.'
- Me: 'Yes. That's right.'
- Tariq (pointing to my chin): 'You got hair there.'
- Me: 'Yes. I've got a beard.'
- Tariq: 'My daddy got beard. My daddy got car. My daddy go work. You got car? You go work?'

The mention of cars brought contributions from the other boys, who were all very animated and keen to have their say. In answer to Tariq's question about whether or not I went to work, I explained, very simply, that this was my work – talking and playing with children is what I do for a living. The boys' facial expressions changed from puzzlement, to amusement and then to disbelief. Tariq summed up the feeling of the group: 'You not big girl!'

It was a bit warm in the setting, so I took off my jumper, to reveal a pink polo shirt. The boys looked horrified and shouted: 'He's a girl!' I must admit that I had a good laugh at the boys' reactions, but spent a long time with the staff after the session, discussing gender. These boys were not yet three-years-old, but had already decided that only women can be practitioners and that men must not wear pink. The staff had noted that most boys in the setting actively avoided 'quiet activities', such as sharing books, mark making and table-top activities that involve deep concentration, and favoured more lively activities and, particularly, being outdoors.

My colleagues were not in the least bit surprised that the girls in the setting had more advanced pronunciation, expressive language and social skills than the majority of boys. One practitioner spoke for most of the group when she said: 'Parents have very low expectations of the boys. Girls are expected to be independent and talk a lot, while boys have most things done for them and are expected to be highly active. The girls seem to naturally gravitate towards us adults, to get involved in conversation, while we have to chase after the boys and force them to talk to us!'

What adults believe

For me, this is the strongest influence on young children's language development – what adults

believe. One of the most powerful sets of beliefs held by parents are in relation to gender – how differences between males and females are interpreted and acted on, for example, in assigning different expectations and roles to boys and girls and men and women. Adult perceptions and opinions about possible differences between boys and girls can have a strong influence on how children are expected to behave, which can impact on language development.

When I meet parents and grandparents with boys who are experiencing difficulties with learning to talk, I am often told, with some conviction: 'There's no need to worry. Boys are lazy. He will catch up when he is ready.' I can understand how this perception develops. When I worked as a speech and language therapist, the overwhelming majority of children referred to me with speech and language delay, under the age of three, were boys. Most parents were concerned, but not surprised; because they naturally assumed that their little boys should be very active and, therefore, have poor concentration skills, unless they became absorbed in playing with cars or watching their favourite programmes on television.

We parents often base our child-rearing practices on what we learned from our own parents, as well as the wider community and society we were brought up in. Many of these practices come from generations of accumulated wisdom – for example, in order to grow, children need to have regular nutritious meals, plenty of fresh air and to sleep well. So, if the overwhelming opinion in our family and culture is that girls will be relatively still, keep themselves occupied and enjoy talking together, then that is how the majority will behave. However, if we expect boys to be active, noisy and less talkative, then many boys will have less experience of talking, and be more at risk of language delay.

What adults know

Many parents, and certainly all professionals working with other people's children, look beyond the family, to 'experts' who can help them explore issues in child development and to reach their own conclusions about what is best for children. Here are some statements about how boys and girls learn. They are taken from conferences and workshops I have attended, addressing the concern that many boys in England are failing to develop the language and



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Will their parents' and practitioners' beliefs about gender influence how well these children talk and learn?

literacy skills they need to enable them to achieve well in school and beyond:

- Boys are more aware than girls about whether teachers like them or not.
- Boys' ear canals are narrower than girls', so boys need to be told more times what to do.
- Boys need more praise than girls, so boys can learn about what it is that you want them to do.
- Boys learn visually while girls learn through listening.
- Boys need to know who the leader is, what the rules are, and that these rules will be applied fairly.
- In groups, boys tend to dominate and establish a 'pecking order', while girls tend to be more cooperative [this was said, by me, in a workshop in 2003. I copied the information from a UK government document on implementing the Speaking and Listening curriculum in schools].

Each of the above statements was apparently based on research – apart from mine, which, I am ashamed to say, sounded as if it was true, so seemed worth repeating (which I did with some conviction to a group of 30 teachers, who all took notes). But how accurate are these statements?

Reading about gender differences

During our discussion at the pre-school, one of the practitioners, who was researching gender and language development for her dissertation, produced four very influential books. They are all from a genre of popular psychology books that look closely at male and female

social behaviour and link observed differences to findings from studies of neurology. The authors cite research into differences in the structure and possible functioning of male and female brains, in order to explain why boys and girls behave, talk and learn differently and, therefore, should be taught in different ways.

My colleague made the following quotes from the titles below, and then asked for my views on whether boys and girls should be taught differently:

Gisela Preuschoff: Raising Girls

'At the age of six months, little girls are already more independent than their male companions: they can occupy themselves happily with toys and can comfort themselves with their thumb and muslin.'

'All in all, girls seem to be able to control themselves better than boys. This is also apparent in terms of tantrums... From the age of three, however, girls have fewer tantrums than boys. They also tend to adjust more smoothly to preschool life than boys.'

Steve Biddulph: Steve Biddulph's Raising Girls

'Girls learn to speak in whole sentences and control their fingers, to do neat drawings or even writing, six to twelve months sooner than boys. Girls are ready to start school about a year earlier than boys. Girls do not suffer as much separation anxiety as boys if they have to go to childcare, although this varies a lot with the individual child.'

'Girls' brain development finishes several years before boys finally get there in their early twenties!

It's as if Nature says to girls; you'd better grow up ahead of the game, you will need your wits about you.'

Michael Gurian: Boys & Girls Learn Differently

'Boys get bored more easily than girls; this more often requires more and varying stimulants to keep them attentive. Girls are better at self-managing boredom during instruction and all aspects of education.'

'Girls are generally better listeners than boys, hear more of what's said, and are more receptive to the plethora of details in a lesson or conversation.'

'Boys tend to hear less and more often ask for clear evidence to support a teacher's or other's claim.'

'Girls seem to feel more comfortable with less logical sequencing and more instructional meandering.' [Which I interpret as meaning that girls can be expected to put up with not very well-planned, and certainly not very well-executed, lessons].

The final book was by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Forget Mars and Venus and Discover the Truth About the Opposite Sex*, which the cover describes as being about 'the essential differences between the male and female mind'.

He describes his book in two sentences: 'The female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems.' He later explains that we humans are essentially pursuing two great cognitive quests: To explore and understand the world and to connect with and understand people. Men do one and women do the other. I will leave the reader to predict who does what.

I had done my preparation for this discussion, and brought along two books that counter the received wisdom that because boys' and girls' brains are different, we should have higher expectations for girls and lower ones for boys. I quoted from *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences* by Cordelia Fine, which examines many of the arguments put forward to explain apparent differences between boys and girls, and men and women. In very forthright terms she blows out of the water many accepted notions that have been created about how girls and boys develop, and particularly ideas based on brain differences made visible by brain scans and relative sizes of boys' and girls' brains. It is a very refreshing read!

Next, I offered up *21st Century Girls*, by Sue Palmer, who argues that we need to defend girls from the intense pressure to grow up quickly in modern society. Palmer makes it clear that there are differences between boys and girls, but that certain influences within contemporary western culture make girls particularly vulnerable. She describes differences in the ways that girls and boys think as being influenced largely by parenting: 'There is plenty of evidence that any difference in "thinking style" owes far less to minuscule differences in brain

structure than to the way children are nurtured throughout childhood.'

'In the early months and years, when their brains are developing most rapidly, these minuscule differences seem to make girls more responsive to their adult nurturers.'

'If the received wisdom of the age affects the way mum and dad think about their daughter, the sort of nurture this prompts them to offer could seriously affect the way she learns to think about herself.'

I discussed gender and language development with Bhavna Acharya, a speech and language therapist working in Hounslow, West London. 'I wonder if more boys have delayed language because it is believed that boys are more active than girls, or shouldn't be expected to sit down to take part in activities. Could it be that by accepting this as the norm these boys are not given access to activities that develop their attention and listening? Perhaps they don't have access to the symbolic play activities that girls are encouraged to engage with?

'Parents of boys with language delay, in families with no girls, often explain that there is very little exposure to tea sets, prams, teddies and dolls. The boys do have cars, trains, dinosaurs, action figures and animals, but the boys often run around with them. After all, it can be quite difficult to pretend that your dinosaur and superhero figure are going to sit down and eat cakes, have a cup of tea and then have a bath! As a result, all those wonderful opportunities for developing symbolic play – and the rich language that comes with it – are missed.'

My practitioner colleague went on to get a first class degree.

eye

References

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Key points

- Is it our expectation of a child's general capabilities, based on ingrained gender bias, that is the most powerful determinant of how well, and when, a girl or a boy learn to talk, among other developmental goals?
- These parental/societal expectations will shape how a child thinks about their learning and the activities they engage in, which might then reinforce the ingrained expectations of society