Blue or Pink

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Socialization is the process by which humans learn how to behave acceptably in society. How to conduct oneself in public, to obey teachers and parents, and basic manners are all examples of socialized conduct. In each society, a child has to be taught how to behave in socially acceptable ways, and the responsibility for socially educating a child falls to those closest to the kid. Parents, siblings, other relatives, friends, and teachers participate in the socialization of children.

Gender roles are another culturally determined behavior, a lesson that begins early in life. Hospitals wrap each newborn in the culturally "correct" color for its sex: pink for girls and blue for boys. Young girls receive feminine toys and clothes, while boys obtain masculine presents. Most people in society believe there is a right and wrong way to act, specific to gender, and socialize their children accordingly. As stringent as the please-and-thank-you rule are the warnings that big boys don't cry and young ladies don't sit like that. While societal changes in the last fifty years have eased the strict adherence to past gender roles, many people engage in traditional gender socialization when raising children. Children start learning gender roles at an early age, taught and reinforced by virtually everyone in society. However, the teaching of gender roles has negative consequences for cultures and people.

From birth until death, men and women are held to separate appearance standards based on gender stereotypes. If a woman strays over to the masculine side in appearance or behavior, she risks being seen as less feminine, less desirable as a woman. If a man takes too much interest in shopping, cooking, or other activities deemed feminine, he will be seen as a lesser man, not masculine. Such appearances are important to others: many use outward appearance to determine a person's sex. But appearance matters more when judging a female. Women are praised when they are good-looking or pretty, whereas men are lauded for intelligence and ingenuity.

In "Mirrors," author Lucy Grealy writes about the facial deformity she was left with after surgery to remove her cancerous jaw. Grealy dealt with snide comments all her life, from childhood on. As she reaches adulthood, though, she finds there is a new way in which she is tormented by others. The painful remarks, Grealy says, "weren't thrown at me because I was disfigured, they were thrown at me because I was a disfigured woman" (12). Grealy explains that because she is a woman who is deformed and not pretty, she receives more heckling and name-calling from men. Grealy insinuates that if she were a man with the same facial indentation, she wouldn't be as persecuted as she is now as a woman. Such gender persecution speaks to how women and men are held to different standards in society. Women are revered for beauty and pitied for lack of it. Physical deformities go against the accepted notion in American society that any woman worth her double X chromosome is good-looking. The rude passers-by making comments to Grealy were not questioning her value as a person so much as doubting her worth as a woman in light of her disfigurement. Men are not held to the same beauty standards as women, and these inequalities are distinguished during childhood. Relatives praise young girls for looking pretty in a dress, whereas a boy's appearance may be mentioned, but not valued. Beauty

pageants do not exist for men, only for women. Occasionally, a young boy enters, but the kiddie beauty pageants are almost all little girl competitions, where the ultimate praise for a girl is being crowned the most beautiful girl in the pageant.

All of this emphasis and judgment based on looks alone is detrimental to society in that it places unnecessary pressure on girls and women to look a certain way. Looks and appearance eclipse personality and intelligence. The rise in cosmetic surgery, makeover television shows and the deluge of anti-aging beauty products are both cause and effect of the pressure on females to look beautiful. It seems ridiculous to place such importance on an attribute as fleeting as looks for only one gender. Society not only reinforces this lesson, but teaches it at an early age.

Behavior taught by adult relatives and family friends is reinforced by peers throughout childhood and adolescence, thus ensuring adherence to gender roles. Shopping for toys illustrates the strict rules regarding acceptable behavior based on gender. Separate aisles exist for boys' and girls' toys, and hardly ever are there toys which straddle the line between the sexes. Boys can choose from action oriented toys, toys that can take a lot of abuse and promise adventure. Girls' toys, on the other hand, include dress-up kits, faux makeup kits, even a "First Purse" complete with fake lipstick and mirror. This difference demonstrates the gap between what is acceptable behavior for both genders. Such appearance-oriented toys emphasize a girl's outer shell, the beauty and attractiveness that define femininity in America. Being feminine has long meant maintaining an alluring appearance, and is so central to being female that girls who are pretty are rewarded with increased popularity among peers.

Patricia A. Adler, Steven J. Kless and Peter Adler conducted an observational study of children from 1987 and 1991. The authors gained the children's trust and became more friends than adults, hoping to get truthful answers to the study's questions. In "Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity among Elementary School Boys and Girls," the authors evaluated how children of each gender accumulated popularity among peers. The authors asked the kids what qualities make a person popular in school. The categories that made boys popular included "athletic ability, toughness and relationships with girls" (172). By contrast, the qualities that made girls popular among peers included "the socioeconomic status of her family and physical appearance" (178). Essentially, the boys were considered cool if they excelled at sports, were rough and tumble and could hook up with the girls. The girls were valued if their parents had money, which enabled the girl to have an expensive and trendy wardrobe, and if they were attractive. Every kid wants to be popular: kids equate being liked by peers with self-worth.

Such emphasis on traditional gender qualities to achieve popularity reinforces the lessons first taught by parents and other relatives. Those children who do not hail from affluent backgrounds or who are not athletically capable are placed on a lower rung of the popularity ladder, thus affecting self-esteem at an already vulnerable age. By pigeonholing a person into a gender specific mold, that person may be prevented from fully realizing his or her talents, qualities or abilities. A young male may never discover his ability to cook because his father discourages him from pursuing such a non-masculine activity. Teaching and nursing have always been identified as female occupations. One will never know the number of men who would be wonderful at these professions had they not been

encouraged to become something more manly. Many young girls earn college scholarships through sports only to find that once they graduate, the options for continuing to play are limited to intramural leagues. Men have several professional venues from which to choose whereas women have just one. With the WNBA, the professional basketball league for women players, women are approaching equality in a male-dominated sports world. One cannot help but wonder how many great athletes do not have the opportunity to play sports simply because of gender. By limiting a person's options because of adherence to gender roles, the person and society miss many opportunities.

Studies show that by the time a child reaches the age of 10, he or she recognizes the differences in expectations between genders, indicating that the teaching of gender roles begins at early ages. Children at 10 years of age are able to acknowledge the effect socialization has on a person's development, showing that kids see gender as separate from sex. Using a hypothetical-question-based study involving children ranging in age from four to sixteen, Marianne Taylor has come closer to pinpointing the age (9–10 years old) at which children understand gender stereotyping. In the study, children were shown a picture of a baby boy or girl that lives on an island with all same-sex people or all opposite-sex people. Taylor's study asked children how they thought that baby would act when he or she reached the age of ten. Without using pronouns to describe the fictional baby, the researchers asked questions of what types of activities the fictional ten-year-old would enjoy.

Overwhelmingly, the children not only understood that a boy growing up around all females might like to engage in traditional female activities, but also that he would enjoy doing so because his environment weighed heavier than his gender in his development. Taylor summarizes that "by age 9 or 10 children begin to recognize that environmental factors may influence gender-role development" (1564). These kids know that who a person lives and interacts with can play an important role in how a person acts. At such a young age, these 10-year-olds may not be capable of explaining how or why gender socialization happens, but they have had enough real life experience being influenced by others that gender socialization is accepted as fact. For a young child to recognize gender typing shows that society still relies heavily on traditional gender roles when raising children, placing a line between what is acceptable gender behavior and what is not. The children in the study understand that gender roles are learned, not innate, and that how closely one acts like the typical stereotype of gender results from other's influences.

In today's modern society, the line between the sexes has moved closer to equal, but equality is not quite here yet. Nowadays, more women are breadwinners and more men are homemakers. It is more acceptable for women to want careers before starting a family, and some men are comfortable enough to be stay-at-home dads. These changes mark a flip in previous social standings of men and women. Fifty years ago, only men went to work to earn the household income, and only women stayed home to give birth and raise children. But in the 1960s and 1970s in America came the feminist movement. Women in this country argued for a woman's right to choose: to choose any career, to choose to get married or not, to choose to have children. These feminists wished and fought for a country where men and women were given the same opportunities and where neither sex was looked down upon for their decisions. In an equal world, people wouldn't think less of

a man for raising kids, and a woman wouldn't be considered a bad mother if she decided to return to work after giving birth. With more women achieving higher status in the workplace, plus a country song about the difficulties of being a stay-at-home dad, it may seem as if society has finally embraced fairness in gender roles.

Society has come a long way in sixty years, but this may be as close to equality for the sexes as the world is going to get. Women are still the primary caregivers, cooks, and maids, while many households rely on the man's income to pay the bills. The only way society is going to change is if adults stop demonstrating to children how to act according to gender. The idea that something must be wrong with the person if he or she doesn't conform to traditional gender roles needs to be the core change in gender stereotypes. Parents tell a young girl that she can be anything she wants to be when she grows up but still discourage her from climbing trees. For the sexes to finally be equal, women and men must be held to the same standards. Until society holds each sex in equal light, this world will always have discrimination. In order to make a woman or man truly independent as an adult, all functions should be learned by both sexes: lawn care, cooking, cleaning, vehicle maintenance, and child rearing. Boys shouldn't be looked down upon for choosing to participate in less athletic activities, and girls should be encouraged to be more aggressive. Without equality being taught in childhood, the pattern of divided gender roles will continue to exist.

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