Supporting Preschoolers’ Positive Peer Relationships

In Arizona, the weather allows children to enjoy outdoor play year-round. No matter what outdoor activities attract children's attention, I often notice the same pattern—boys play with boys, and girls play with girls. One morning, most of the boys gather around the large toy dump trucks, and a group of girls prepares for a birthday party in the sandbox. As the girls make cakes out of wet sand, a boy drives his truck over and stops to watch. Observing his interest, I wonder what I can do to help bring these preschoolers together.

Children thrive in inclusive settings where each child is an important part of the community. When differences are celebrated and similarities discovered, children learn to value themselves, appreciate their peers, and develop meaningful and significant relationships with one another. A sizeable body of research indicates that promoting positive contact and cooperation between people of different groups (e.g., different ethnicity, race, developmental ability, or gender) can improve intergroup attitudes and relationships (Cameron & Rutland 2008; Gaertner et al. 2008).

Often the preschool years mark a child’s introduction to the world of peers and peer relationships. Research supports the notion that children benefit in
many ways from positive peer interactions. In early childhood programs, friendships foster a sense of connection and security and build self-esteem and self-confidence, helping young children adapt more readily to the preschool setting (Dunn 2004; Ladd 2009). Friendships provide important opportunities for children to learn and develop.

During the early years, friendships might appear to be constantly changing. We see 3-year-olds show preferences for playing with particular classmates, but at this age a friend is pretty much anyone with whom a child spends time. Three-year-olds might seek out a peer who is playing with something of interest or be attracted to outward appearances. Sometimes a friendship is motivated simply by physical proximity. We notice children bonding as they sit together at snack time or even when they find a classmate wearing similar clothing. Four- or five-year-olds tend to select friends with common interests and spend time together absorbed in an activity. Older preschoolers are curious about others and make efforts to connect and engage. During this stage, children participate in complex peer play more frequently and for longer stretches of time (Vandell, Nenide, & Van Winkle 2006).

Best practice emphasizes the importance of respecting and promoting diversity in children’s play experiences and friendships (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). A broad range of playmates exposes children to variety in their play experiences. When children try different activities and ways of communicating and interacting, they are better poised to develop the flexibility to interact successfully in a range of social groups and situations. The benefits of diversity in peer relationships are clear. So what can educators do when many children spend their time with only half of their peers—those of their own sex?

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Gender and early peer relationships

As early as the preschool years, children tend to play with and befriend same-sex companions (Mehta & Strough 2009). This is a well-documented phenomenon known as gender segregation, which becomes even more prevalent across the elementary years and generally persists throughout life (Vandell, Nenide, & Van Winkle 2006; Mehta & Strough 2009). Although adults often dismiss gender segregation as part of childhood, one concern is that boys and girls may be socializing in different ways, learning and practicing relationship skills in isolation from one another.

During preschool, the gender composition of peer groups impacts group size, proximity to (and supervision by) adults, and the types of activities in which children engage (Fabes, Martin, & Hanish 2003; Fabes et al. 2003). For example, groups of preschool boys tend to be larger, and they often play farther from adults and engage in more active play than girls’ groups.

Acceptable or effective behaviors in one group may not be the same in a different peer group, and this could impact the success of interactions when children do come together. To illustrate, using an indirect request (“I need a crayon.”) may be more successful with peers who have developed similar communication styles than with those who favor more direct means (“Give me a crayon.”). With time and continual modeling and reinforcement by their same-sex peers, girls and boys in preschool seem to grow progressively different in their styles of behaving and relating—and even in their emerging cognitive and academic interests and skills (Fabes, Hanish, & Martin 2007; Martin & Dinella 2002).

Researchers find that preschoolers who spend the most time in same-sex play are the most gender-stereotypical in their behaviors (e.g., in aggression and activity levels, in play with sex-typed toys, and in sex-typed activities) by the end of the school year (Martin & Fabes 2001).
Why do children segregate?

Children are natural sorters—they tend to group people and things into simple categories in order to make sense of their world. Gender is a particularly salient category for grouping people because it is visual, concrete, and simple (Bigler & Liben 2007). It is also meaningful to preschoolers as they identify with and grow in their understanding of their own gender.

The ability to discriminate social categories such as gender is apparent from infancy, and children often view people perceived to be in the same category as being more similar to one another than they actually are. In fact, preschoolers commonly have essentialist thinking, meaning that they believe there is some innate characteristic that ties members of a group together and makes them similar (Gelman 2004). This leads them to exaggerate differences between people who are in the group and those who are not, making it hard for them to see what they have in common. For example, they may make overgeneralized assumptions that “boys are loud” rather than recognizing that there are some boys and girls who are louder and, conversely, some boys and girls who are more soft-spoken. Presumed similarity to particular peers of the same sex plays a role in preschoolers’ playmate choices (Martin et al. 2011).

From infancy, children begin to develop gender schemas—cognitive representations of “maleness” and “femaleness” (Martin & Ruble 2004). These schemas grow, in large part, from children’s observations of the world and the frequent associations they notice among particular people, behaviors, objects, and roles. Children also create schemas based on the direct or perceived messages they receive from adults, siblings, peers, the media, and others (Martin & Ruble 2004; Blaise & Taylor 2012). They develop a sense of what is “for me” and what is “not for me,” and this can shape their choices and behaviors from the early preschool years (Zosuls, Lurye, & Ruble 2008). Gender schemas motivate behaviors that conform to these ideas, as well as guide assumptions, interpretations, and expectations about the people and experiences that children encounter (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben 2009; Blaise & Taylor 2012).

“Pink is for girls, blue is for boys. That ball is pink, so it’s for girls.”

“Boys like to play with cars. He must also like cars.”

“The girls always play games together in the playhouse. They probably won’t let me play too.”

With this kind of thinking, it is no surprise that girls and boys often form inaccurate ideas about the other sex that can translate into less interest or even reluctance to engage with other-sex peers.

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Bringing boys and girls together

Teachers are in a unique position to cultivate children’s cross-gender interactions and friendships. By intentionally planning and supporting certain experiences, educators can encourage children to build a social world characterized by meaningful relationships with peers of both sexes.

Tune in to social patterns

To purposefully increase engagement and interactions between boys and girls, teachers must tune in to the social patterns in the classroom. Systematic observation methods are useful, such as scanning the room or playground periodically and jotting down which children are playing together and
where. Or teachers might pay attention to the dramatic play area or the sensory table and observe which children move in and out of these spaces and how they engage with one another. Or they might focus on one or two children for a day, noting with whom they interact and how.

Processing classroom observations using prior knowledge of the children and the classroom community guides the teachers’ next approaches. For example, knowing that 4-year-old Madeline tends to play with just a few girls and is easily overwhelmed by noise and activity, the teacher should be thoughtful in deciding when and how to encourage Madeline to interact with peers with whom she might not normally engage, including boys. The teacher might choose a quiet, calm activity such as puzzles, and set up a buddy center for collaborative play. This may gently encourage Madeline to join in play with new classmates. When teachers intentionally use observation and reflection skills over time, the skills become effortless and raise awareness of gender issues when organizing children’s experiences with classmates.

Take action

Teachers can create opportunities that bring boys and girls together—to communicate, cooperate, play, and learn with one another. After noticing a boy and a girl building quietly with blocks next to each other, the teacher might introduce a stuffed dog and wonder aloud if it needs a home. If it becomes apparent through classroom observation that the playhouse and the tool bench tend to polarize children by sex, a teacher could move these materials closer together. She could create an opportunity to combine interests by asking if the playhouse could move these materials closer together. This may gently encourage Madeline to join in play with new classmates. When teachers intentionally use observation and reflection skills over time, the skills become effortless and raise awareness of gender issues when organizing children’s experiences with classmates.

Address exclusion

At choice time in the 4s classroom, Trayvon races to the top of the loft and announces, “I’m a doctor!” “Me too!” exclaims Matthew, who joins him in gathering the doctor tools scattered around the “office.” As Reanna climbs the stairs announcing, “I am a doctor too!” the boys respond in unison, “No girls allowed in the loft!”

Although it’s okay to choose to play alone or with just a few friends, it is not okay to exclude others because they are different. Exclusion also happens when children take on the role of gender police (“We’re playing with our babies, and boys can’t be mommies.”). It is important to address these occurrences. Gender exclusion is just as hurtful and unfair as exclusion based on any other characteristic, leaving children feeling rejected and potentially perpetuating gender stereotypes.

Tip for Bringing Boys and Girls Together

Create an inclusive setting.
- Communicate the expectation that boys and girls can and should be friends.
- Explain your zero tolerance for gender-based (or other) teasing, exclusion, and bullying.
- Be mindful of your words and actions about cross-sex friendships around children.
- Be aware of the information and messages children receive from other sources. For example, eliminate books, posters, and other classroom materials that polarize boys and girls.

Increase contact, cooperation, and collaboration.
- Intentionally plan boy/girl work and play opportunities, including those with a common goal.
- Pair other-sex peers as partners without calling attention to gender.
- Guide and assist children in discovering ways to integrate each others’ ideas.
- Model blending of interests. For example, a group of children engaging in superhero play could be brought together with children playing restaurant to create a superhero restaurant where everyone could be challenged to invent superhero food.

Adjust the environment.
- Adjust activities to promote engagement between other-sex peers. For example, provide opportunities for cross-gender, small-group work focusing on one goal, such as completing a puzzle.
- Organize the classroom to encourage children with different interests to play in closer proximity.
- Provide positive examples of cross-gender relationships through children’s literature and classroom materials.

We might even create girl/boy divisions ourselves—by declaring, for example, that it is the “girls’ turn in the block area” in an effort to encourage girls to expand their play. Such well-intentioned practices serve to separate boys and girls and reinforce the notion that they are different. In fact, just using gendered language in the classroom can send this message as well.

“Boys, please line up at the door.”

“Girls at the square table and boys at the round table for center time.”

“Good morning, boys and girls!”

We wouldn’t use characteristics such as race or religion to label children in such a manner (Blaise & Taylor 2012), so why use gender?
Ensuring that all children feel accepted and welcomed—by everyone—supports a positive classroom environment. In an inclusive classroom, children and teachers celebrate diversity and discover similarities and common interests. When we take action to help children focus on their common interests, we create opportunities for girls and boys to share positive experiences with one another—and this may encourage them to seek each other out in the future.

I hear the boys’ remark to Reanna, then see her begin to climb down. I ask the doctors, “What are those stickers for?” Trayvon answers, “You give them out when you give shots!” I comment that Reanna has stickers too. “We’re all doctors!” they say together. When I tell them that I am a patient ready for my appointment, they all begin working together to care for me. Later at circle time, we talk about how nice it is to include others in our play and how good it feels when we’re included.

Together but apart

At small group time, six preschool children hurry over to the table, excited to juice oranges. I have placed six hand squeezers and cups around the table, along with a large bowl of orange halves. The children each take a seat in front of a squeezer and begin earnestly examining their tool.

When preschool children are together but not engaged with each other and appear to be content in their play, it may be tempting to leave well enough alone. However, we can take action by making simple changes in an activity to orient children to one another and provide opportunities for interaction and collaboration. When girls and boys work and play together in positive ways, they discover common ground and practice negotiation, cooperation, and communication skills with one another.

I wonder how to make the orange squeezer activity more collaborative. After a few minutes, I gather the squeezer and pull out a cup of colored sticks. I hand out the sticks to intentionally form mixed-sex partnerships, and I ask everyone to find the person with the matching color. The children are excited! To encourage teamwork and cooperation, I give one squeezer to each pair of children. The partners immediately start talking and figuring out how to take turns squeezing the oranges and holding the cup.

Friendships

Since the beginning of the school year, 4-year-olds Juan and Rachel have become best friends over dump truck racing and falling down to make each other laugh. One morning Rachel’s father tells me that a play date with Juan is planned for that afternoon. I am surprised to see that Rachel’s face has fallen. She tugs on her father’s sleeve and whispers, “I don’t want to go to Juan’s house.” As Rachel runs off to the swing set, I mention that she seems reluctant about the play date.

Being aware of and reflecting on the messages children hear—whether from the media, peers, parents, or teachers—helps us understand the meaning children make about friendships with the other sex. Clearly, 4-year-olds are not in romantic relationships with one another. However, well-meaning but teasing comments that suggest this (“Oh, look how cute they are together! They’re boyfriend and girlfriend.”) can confuse and embarrass children or even end a friendship. It is important to take action and help children focus on what it means to be a friend (especially if they themselves are the
ones declaring the romance). Additionally, children benefit from seeing examples of girls and boys in healthy, balanced (equal roles), nonromantic relationships. Children’s literature, personal stories, videos, and photographs are wonderful tools for this.

During circle time we talk about friendship—what can be a friend, what makes a good friend, and what you do to be a good friend. I share a story about my daughter Megan’s best friend in kindergarten, David. The children are fascinated, so I promise to bring in a picture of the duo the next day. Although the play date gets cancelled, Rachel and Juan are back dump truck racing together on the playground that afternoon.

Concluding thoughts

Although the long-term consequences of sex segregation and integration remain areas for research, it is clear children benefit from different-gender peer interactions. Such experiences give children opportunities to learn from and about others, to develop attitudes of respect and acceptance, and to broaden their social competence. With intentional planning, attention to classroom environment, activities, and routine practices, and with support for children in their interactions and relationships, teachers can create and foster opportunities for peer experiences between boys and girls. This helps build relationships that are meaningful, positive, and successful for all children.

References


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