

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Parents' and teachers' attitudes towards pre-school boys and girls gender behavior

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Parents and surrounding adults create conditions not only for the physical and safe development of the child but also for the development of his attitudes, and understanding of the world, including gender attitudes and behavior. In this article, we present the study aimed to identify how parents and teachers appraise the gender behavior of preschool boys and girls. **Method:** We studied the results of 474 participants: 316 parents (158 married couples) of preschool children (average age 5.3) and 158 daycare teachers, who communicate with the child almost every day and know him well. One parent described the usual child's gender behavior by answering the Pre-school Activities Inventory (PSAI), and the other parent and daycare teacher were interviewed about the usual child's gender behavior. **Results:** The statistical analysis of the data let us conclude that within one culture parents and other adults communicating with the child appraise the gender behavior of male children similarly. Parents of both genders as well as teachers interpret boys' behavior as more gender-specific than girls' behavior. All surrounding adults interpret girls' behavior as more gender-neutral than boys'. **Conclusion:** There is a difference in attitudes, perceptions, and evaluation of preschool boys' and girls' gender behavior by parents and teachers, which is expressed in leveling the gender specificity of girls' behavior.

**Keywords:** boys; girls; gender behavior; parents; pre-school children; mental health

## 1. Introduction

Adults' social attitudes toward a child's behavior affect not only the child's behavior as well, but also his or her attitudes toward different spheres of life<sup>[1-3]</sup> and even mental health<sup>[4-6]</sup>. The preschool period is characterized by a child's exposure to parental influence. From the very beginning of new life, the social environment provides conditions for personality development and gender identification. For instance, from infancy, parents tend to raise, communicate, and treat boys and girls differently<sup>[7]</sup>. Thus, some studies show that baby boys receive less tactile caresses than girls<sup>[7]</sup>. In addition, even in a family environment, boys from an early age do not have the freedom to express their feelings as easily as girls, but they are less punished for aggression<sup>[8]</sup>. During preschool childhood, parents not only provide their children with gender patterns but also encourage or punish certain behaviors<sup>[3,9,10]</sup>. To a greater extent, this concerns moral issues (such as what is right and what is wrong) and gender-specific behavior<sup>[11]</sup>. Thus, it is parental behavior that largely determines the formation of ideas about the gender role in infancy. One of the milestones of the period is the

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beginning of gender identity formation<sup>[8]</sup>, or gender auto-identification<sup>[12]</sup>. Gender self-consciousness is defined as the awareness of oneself as a representative of a certain gender and, in addition, the ability or inability to regulate one's behavior following gender moral and ethical requirements and attitudes of society<sup>[11]</sup>. So, in our study, we tried to find out how adults perceive, evaluate, and describe the gender behavior of children based on the child's gender. We assume adults' attitudes towards preschool boys' and girls' gender behavior may be relevant to the process of gender identity formation. Understanding the adults' attitudes can complement our knowledge of the process of gender identity formation and may be useful in the practice of a psychologist working with children.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1. Gender auto-identification**

Kashchenko and Agarkov define gender auto-identification through the concept of gender self-consciousness, the attribution of oneself to a certain gender<sup>[12]</sup>. They postulate that the first idea of gender is formed by 1.5–2 years<sup>[12]</sup>. The child tries to build a gender model of behavior based on their interaction with parents (or substitute figures) of both genders. Different social (such as growing up without one parent<sup>[13]</sup> and health (such as mental retardation and delay of speech development) conditions can influence personality development and the formation of gender identity<sup>[12,14]</sup>. Moreover, in addition to referring himself (herself) to a certain gender, the child should be able to represent the social and psychological characteristics of people of each gender, as well as what behaviors may be socially approved of a male or female person<sup>[3,8]</sup> and what behavior or features are not related to a certain gender and, respectively, may be demonstrated by both men and women<sup>[15]</sup>. Modern reality brings adjustments to the process of gender auto-identification. Attribution to a particular gender begins to develop early enough when parents call a child a boy or a girl and encourage certain manifestations of gender. In many cases, the marking of a certain gender begins before birth through the choice of color and the design of the room for the child<sup>[16]</sup>. But recently, the percentage of parents choosing gender-neutral colors has been increasing<sup>[16]</sup>.

### **2.2. The gender identity formation determinants and adults' influence**

Here come many issues of gender auto-identification<sup>[2,17]</sup>, its origins<sup>[18]</sup>, determinants<sup>[10,19,20]</sup>, and possible development tools. Gender toys and parent-modeled games are usually considered among the most obvious and most discussed development tools of gender auto-identification<sup>[7,21]</sup>. If the issues of girls' toys are discussed in the literature in connection with the prevalence of gender images and the lack of models of motherhood among the games of modern girls-preschoolers, the boys playing the father's role<sup>[22]</sup> in children's games is extremely rare and mainly in the games of siblings<sup>[23]</sup>. Typically, boyish activities such as playing with guns and swords (or substitutes for firearms or bladed weapons with tools), trains, cars, airplanes, playing soldiers, war, sports, and power games or romp, climbing trees, fences, sports equipment, interest in real cars, trains, airplanes, technical devices, new places, animals and insects<sup>[24]</sup> contribute to a positive awareness of gender differences and gender-specific behavior<sup>[21]</sup>. Gender typicality has a long-term effect until adolescence influencing the well-being of adolescents<sup>[19]</sup>. Such a specific manifestation of gender self-determination plays a role in the definition of gender orientation in adolescence<sup>[2]</sup>. The most important figure who opens to a boy's typically male classes and interests is the father<sup>[25–27]</sup>. Gender is believed to be a social construct—a cognitive structure influenced by a particular society, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception. Children encode and organize information, including information about themselves, according to the dichotomous scheme of “masculinity-femininity”<sup>[28]</sup>.

This includes data on the anatomy of men and women, their participation in the birth of children, their

social characteristics, their professions and the division of occupations (including at home), and their characteristics and behavior. This male-female dichotomy is the most important of all the classifications of people that exist in human society. Having learned what this dichotomy means, the child sorts all the information into two categories. The next step is for the child to generalize: which attributes are “feminine” and which are “masculine”. An appropriate gender stereotype is being formed—what boys can do how to behave, and what and how girls can do. The one who behaves according to the stereotype has gender typicality—a typical boy or a typical girl<sup>[28]</sup>.

However, the study of the specifics of the formation of the gender identity of the child, its determinants, and the features of the manifestation of gender qualities of the child is one of the most interesting areas of gender research<sup>[7]</sup>. At the same time, there are certain difficulties in distinguishing the gender perceptions and attitudes of children from their real behavior. Even more so, the researchers usually face difficulties in studying gender behavior in young children, since the existing methods have a number of limitations. The main problem of most techniques is the investigation of the child’s preference for any images of gender toys, games, or actions, rather than the child’s actual participation in the game, that is, the child’s actual behavior. Accordingly, they do not take into account the specifics of gender children’s games, since currently the gender boundaries in the role-playing games of children are noticeably erased, and children show interest in those games that are traditionally not related to their gender. Modern toys, games, and activities of children may not be gender-specific. Nevertheless, differences in children’s play persist<sup>[29]</sup>. And it is the differences in preferences in the game that are the hallmark of the gender behavior of preschool children.

### **2.3. Research hypothesizing**

In this context, it’s interesting how parents perceive and interpret their child’s behavior, game, and toy preference in terms of gender. The appraisal of other people who communicate with the child enough to know him or her rather well (nurse, teacher, tutor, or educator) is worth attention because they influence the child’s behavior.

Bearing in mind these issues, we put forward the Goal of our study, which was to study gender specifics in parents’ and teachers’ appraisal of gender behavior in preschool.

In light of the modern transformation of gender stereotypes, our research Hypothesis was that adults interpret boys’ behavior as more gender-specific than girls’ behavior.

The Research Question was how adults interpret boys’ and girls’ gender behavior.

## **3. Materials and methods**

### **3.1. Sample**

Our study was held in 2020–2022 in Russia in the Kemerovo region. Main respondent characteristics are presented in **Table 1**. Parents were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods<sup>[30]</sup>. In this study, all participants were biological parents with preschool children. Individuals who fit the criteria were approached directly through personal contacts. After that pre-school teachers of their children were invited to participate. A total of 474 people participated in the survey, including 316 (158 married couples) parents with children preschoolers; and 158 preschool teachers or educators from the institutions of additional education for preschool children. The average age of fathers was 32.1 years, and mothers—29.9 years. All the participants were living in the Kemerovo Region in Russia. 75% were from urban families from the cities of Kemerovo, Novokuznetsk, and Belovo; 25% were from rural families. All participants were married. 100% of the fathers were employed, as were 48% of mothers. The average number of children

per family was 2.0 (SD = 0.89) and the average age of a child was 5.3 years (SD = 0.7). 38% of the families had one child, 60% had two children, and 2% had three or more children (if there was more than one child in the family, we collected data about all children). Of the children in families, 55% were boys and 45% were girls. Adopted families and gay and lesbian families were not present.

**Table 1.** Main respondent characteristics, N = 474.

Respondent characteristics		Fathers, N = 158	Mothers, N = 158	Teachers, N = 158
<b>The average age (years old)</b>		32.1	29.9	41.7
<b>Permanent residence</b>	Country	75	75	75
	Town	25	25	25
<b>Education</b>	Bachelor's degree (%)	9	11	1
	Graduate degree (%)	32	42	54
	High school diploma (%)	57	46	45
	College attendance (%)	2	1	
<b>Married (%)</b>		100	100	61
<b>Employment (%)</b>		100	48	100
<b>The average age of a child (years old)</b>		5.3	5.3	-
<b>The average age at first childbirth (years old)</b>		28	26	-
<b>The average number of children per family</b>	Two children (%)	38	38	-
	Three or more children (%)	60	60	
	One child (%)	2	2	
<b>Gender of the children</b>	Girls (%)	55	55	-
	Boys (%)	45	45	
<b>Child with special needs (Down's Syndrome) (%)</b>		0.6	0.6	-

All the respondents gave their informed consent before their inclusion in the study. A 15-minute, face-to-face, interview was conducted between September 2020 and January 2022. This gathered data on the basic characteristics of respondents: aspects of demographic information; employment and educational characteristics. All investigated individuals were informed about the aim of the study and about participation being voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who took part in the study. The study was approved by the Departmental Ethics Committee of the author's institution.

### 3.2. Measures

After the interview, one of the parents was asked to answer the Russian version of PSAI. Pre-school Activities Inventory (PSAI) was created in 1993 by a team of authors under the leadership of Golombok and Rust<sup>[11]</sup> from the Psychometrics Centre (the University of Cambridge, UK). PSAI was designed to study both the differences between children of different genders and the differences in gender behavior within each gender, making it interesting to study the difference in gender-role behavior existing in the development of both boys and girls.

The most important difference between this technique and others is that it focuses on actual behavior rather than children's preferences of any images or statements, as the questionnaire was designed to determine the frequency of a child's preferences for various toys, games, and activities.

Since preschool children are not reliable test subjects in the sense of the reliability of answers to abstract questions, the PSAI questionnaire is designed as a series of questions answered by the parent (most often the

mother) of the child or another adult who may be brought in as an expert. This very successful construction of the questionnaire of gender-role behavior for preschool children makes it possible to use the methodology in a wide range of studies of the development of gender-role behavior in boys and girls and allows to identify significant differences in different groups of children and to determine the normative data as well as to assess the gender characteristics of individual children.

The questionnaire is intended for parents of a preschool child from 2.5 to 5 years, who are asked to assess how often the child played with concrete toys (guns, cars, swords jewelry, dolls), how often demonstrated the specified behavior (i.e., played with dolls, nursing, cooking or played soldiers, war, sports, etc.) and showed certain qualities (e.g., interest in power games or love of beautiful things). Among all items of the PSAI evaluated the choice of frequency preferences children typically male and typically female activities, games, or activities. At the same time, the structure of the questionnaire presents obviously “male” and “female” questions. Playing with toys such as guns, trains, and planes, according to the authors of the questionnaire, refers to the typical male types of toys, and the preference for jewelry, dolls, doll clothes, and dishes is considered typical for girls. Games with soldiers, game fights, sports games, climbing trees, and interest in power games are considered to be characteristic of boys, whereas the game of daughter-mother, family roles (for example, parent), playing house (cleaning, cooking), playing with girls with dressing up in girly clothes, and risk avoidance are considered to be characteristic of girls.

The questionnaire consists of three blocks: the first block of questions (7 points) assesses how often the child has played with these toys in the last month; in the second block (11 points), the parent answers how often the child has demonstrated the specified behavior in the last month; in the third block (6 points) determines how often the child shows certain qualities.

Most statement questions have five possible answers: 1) never, 2) rarely, 3) sometimes, 4) often, 5) very often.

Male questions are coded directly, that is, the more often the behavior described in the question is demonstrated by a child, the higher the score, and female questions are reverse-coded. Age adjustment is taken into account to translate into standardized scores.

The result is evaluated taking into account that the higher the score, the more male is the behavior of the child. At the same time, the average norm for boys, both in the English and American and in the Russian samples, is  $60 \pm 10$  points, and for girls  $40 \pm 10$  points<sup>[11]</sup>.

The other parent was asked how they appraise the gender behavior of their child. It was measured by the person's assessment of the statements about his (her) child (e.g., “My child usually demonstrates male behavior” and “My child usually demonstrates female behavior”, “My child usually prefers male games” and “My child usually prefers female games”, “My child likes male toys more than female toys”) using a 10-point scale (from 0—disagree a lot to 10—agree on a lot). Also, teachers or other educators who have known this child for at least 6 months were asked to estimate the gender behavior of this child using this 10-point scale. Verbal informed consent of all the participants was obtained before the interview.

Quantitative data processing was performed using STATISTICA version 10.0 and such methods of statistical data processing as estimation of descriptive statistics, Student's t-test, and methods of correlated analysis were used.

## **4. Results**

Comparison of results using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient obtained using PSAI when interviewing one parent (mother or father) with appraisal obtained in the interviews with the other parent

(which had estimated the gender behavior on a 10-point scale), as well as responses to questionnaires of daycare teachers or other educators (who estimated child’s behavior according to the same scales) showed that there is a direct correlation between the results of PSAI obtained with one parent and appraisals of other parent and teachers. Significant correlation relationships at  $p \leq 0.01$  are presented in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** The results of correlation analyses.

Appraisal of the child’s gender behavior	Correlation coefficient*	
	Boys	Girls
PSAI—Other parent’s asses of child’s male behavior	0.82*	-0.74*
PSAI—Other parent’s asses of child’s female behavior	-0.84*	0.81*
PSAI—Educator’s asses of child’s male behavior	0.91*	-0.57*
PSAI—Educator’s asses of child’s female behavior	-0.76*	0.59*

\* significant at  $p \leq 0.01$ .

So, we can conclude that parents in couples interpret their child’s gender behavior similarly. Also within one culture, the appraisals of the gender behavior of a child are coincident for parents and other adults communicating with the child. The M and SD for the appraisals of children’s behavior by adults (both parents and daycare teachers) are presented in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** Appraisal of Child’s gender behavior by adults.

Appraisal of Child’s gender behavior by adults M (SD):	Fathers, N = 158	Mothers, N = 158	Teachers, N = 158
Boys’ male behavior	9.3 (7.12)	8.2 (9.23)	9.7 (7.45)
Boys’ female behavior	0.4 (8.01)	1.7 (8.78)	0.3 (4.98)
Girls’ female behavior	7.6 (10.67)	6.8 (11.35)	6.7 (8.76)
Girls’ male behavior	3.4 (9.34)	4.4 (8.97)	5.2 (12.77)

However as we have found, the fathers interpret male children’s behavior as more gender-specific than the behavior of female children. And they perceive and allow fewer female tokens in boys’ behavior. This is also true for mothers. But the teachers interpret children’s behavior as more male than boys. The teachers also evaluate girls’ behavior almost equally as feminine and masculine. The adult’s perceptions of children’s behavior create social conditions for the child’s personality development and can determine his(her) attitude to himself, his(her) body, and his(her) gender<sup>[28]</sup>.

Mothers evaluate boys’ behavior as a little less masculine and a little more feminine than fathers and teachers. Fathers appraise girls as more feminine than mothers and teachers (women) do. Mothers and teachers evaluate girls’ behavior as more masculine than fathers do.

Thus, we may conclude that parents of both genders as well as teachers interpret boys’ behavior as more gender-specific (i.e., more suitable for their male gender) than girls’ behavior.

## 5. Discussion

Ratkowska-Pasikowska found that parents’ gender attitudes affect on child’s behavior and attitudes toward different spheres of life<sup>[1]</sup>. Our study helped to show that parents have different attitudes towards boys’ and girls’ gender behavior strictness. This means that they create different conditions for the development of boys and girls, which may be due to a freer attitude to the female gender role or, perhaps, to the attitude of parents to the behavior of preschoolers boys. This requires further study. Interestingly, all the surrounding

adults interpret and perceive boys' behavior as masculine (more gender specific). While girls' behavior is perceived as more gender-neutral. It is this is especially noticeable in teachers' appraisals. May it be determined by the differences of home and pre-school activities? There could be gender role differences in housework and everyday life, but in school children have the same classes without taking gender into account. Some other parameters could moderate attitudes towards persons' children and other people's children. Maybe at such a young age, there are no noticeable cultural tokens of female behavior yet, or in modern culture, women's gender behavioral characteristics are blurred and gender-neutral behavior in girls is allowed and welcomed. Why is this trend not typical for assessing the behavior of boys? However, this study has raised more questions than answers and will be continued with more detailed research and a larger sample. Preferably the sample should be compiled by children from one gender siblings' and both genders siblings' families as well and age difference should be taken into account. It will be of great practical value in providing psychological assistance for parents and families with infants to help them create equal conditions for the personality development of children of different genders and characteristics, as well as for children from one-parent families. Future research should seek to identify how parents' attitudes and interpretation of a child's gender behavior influence on child's mental health; and strategies to successfully address a child's mental health; in different types of families, including adopted families and families with biological parents, families with gay and lesbian parents, one-parent and two-parents families, families with only male or only female children.

## **6. Limitations**

Some limitations of the current study should be mentioned. First, the research method was a nonexperimental design. Second, for practical reasons, all measures for this study relied on reports by external observers. In further studies, gender behavior, for instance, could be evaluated using also child's self-reports (when possible) and independent observation. This will eliminate the influence of shared method variance in the evaluation of the relationships between the variables. Third, the sample may have underrepresented families with more modest incomes. Adopted families and one-parent families, were also not represented. Fourth, this study's use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of the results. Fifth, the somewhat outdated measure may not indicate all current "typical" gender expressions. Finally, the parent could be reporting about the child's behavior by the prevalence of their conservative gender roles and ideas and social desirability. Despite these limitations, the current study furthers our understanding of the adult's interpretation and appraisal of a child's gender behavior, not only parents' but also other adults in the social environment of the child, a sample that has too often been overlooked in previous studies. Future research should seek to identify the impact of these perceptions on children's development.

## **7. Conclusion**

We have found that there is a difference in attitudes, perceptions, and evaluation of preschool boys' and girls' gender behavior by parents and teachers, which is expressed in leveling the gender specificity of girls' behavior. Both parents and teachers coincide in the assessment of children's gender behavior. The surrounding adults interpret and perceive boys' behavior as masculine (more gender specific). Girls' behavior is perceived and interpreted by parents as less gender specific and is interpreted by teachers as more gender-neutral. This let us conclude that our Hypothesis which was that adults interpret boys' behavior as more gender-specific than girls' behavior was supported by the obtained data.

## **Author contributions**

Conceptualization, JB; methodology, JB; software, JB; validation, JB and EE; formal analysis, JB;

investigation, JB and EE; resources, JB; data curation, JB and EE; writing—original draft preparation, JB; writing—review and editing, JB; visualization, JB; supervision, JB; project administration, JB and EE; funding acquisition, JB. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## **Declarations**

Informed Consent from the Participants' Legal Guardians.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants (or parents of participants under 14 years old) included in the study.

## **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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