

Do Girls Learn Gender Stereotypes at School?

By David Knuckey



Gender Stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests.

A new report reveals a disturbing perception among six year-olds; that being 'really, really smart' is a male trait.

Meanwhile, being 'really, really nice' is a female trait.

A study conducted by academics from Princeton, New York University and the University of Illinois has found that while 5 year-olds view their own gender more positively - by age six, girls believe that boys are more likely to be 'brilliant'.

Stereotypes have long associated high intelligence (brilliance, genius etc.) with males more than females. These stereotypes contribute to girls shying away from Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths careers.

The study shows that even by age six, girls are avoiding activities said to be for children who are 'really, really smart'.

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The aspirations of boys and girls are shaped by society's perceptions of gender. Obviously, the earlier children get the notion that brilliance is a male quality, the stronger that impact will be. However, until now, little research has been done on how children acquire this idea.

The new research is comprised of four studies.

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Study One

The first study examined children aged 5, 6 & 7 - half were boys, half girls. The children came mostly from middle-class backgrounds and 75% were white.

The studies found that socioeconomic and racial background made no significant difference to the 'brilliance = male' stereotype.

“However, by age 6 and 7 girls were significantly less likely than boys to associate brilliance with their own gender.”

Task 1: Children were told a story about a person who was 'really, really smart' (child-speak for brilliant). No mention was made of the gender of this person. Children were then given four adult options - two men, two women - and asked to guess which was the 'really, really smart' person from the story.

Task 2: Children were shown several pairs of adults (mixed or single gender) and were asked which adult was 'really, really smart'.

Task 3: Children were given three puzzles and had to guess which objects (e.g. a hammer) or attributes (e.g. smart) best matched photos of men and women.

All studies used photos of males and females of equal attractiveness and professional dress (possible clues to intelligence).

The results show that children's ideas about brilliance change dramatically from ages 5 to 7.

At age 5, both boys and girls associated brilliance with their own gender to a similar extent.

However, by age 6 and 7 girls were significantly less likely than boys to associate brilliance with their own gender.

The study revealed a similar pattern for associating women with being nice.

Study Two

In the second study, researchers replicated the initial experiments, but with a larger group of children. However, this time, they included photos of children to be assessed - not just adults as in the first study.

Again, at age 5 boys and girls both judged their own gender positively when it came to brilliance.

But, again a significant difference emerged starting at age 6.

This pattern did not differ significantly by whether children rated photos of adults versus children.

The immediate question becomes: why do girls devalue their own intelligence once they start school?

In Study Two, the researchers tested whether this disturbing trend was linked to school achievement. This was done by asking children four more questions - e.g. children had to guess which of four children (two boys, two girls) 'gets the best grades in school'.

Surprisingly, there was no difference between younger and older girls in their thoughts on girls having better grades.

In fact, older girls were more likely to choose girls as having top grades than older boys were to select boys.

“...other aspects of children's experiences in school, such as teachers' attitudes and biases, may still be implicated in the development of this stereotype.”

What is clear, is that there is no relationship between girls' perception of how well they do in school and their perception of brilliance.

“Thus, girls' ideas about who is brilliant are not rooted in their perceptions of who performs well in school. However, other aspects of children's experiences in school, such as teachers' attitudes and biases, may still be implicated in the development of this stereotype.”

Study Three

Study three investigated whether children's beliefs about gender and brilliance shape their interests.

Children aged 6 and 7 (half boys, half girls) were given two games. They were told one is for really smart children and one is for children who try really hard.

“6 year-old girls had lower interest in the games for ‘really, really smart children’.”

Girls were less interested than boys in the game for ‘really, really smart children’, but not in the game for hard-working children.

“To test whether the gender differences in interests are related to children’s beliefs about brilliance, we measured these beliefs with two items adapted from one study. Indeed, as with the 6 and 7 year-olds from the first two studies, girls’ own-gender brilliance perceptions were lower than boys.”

At just 6 years of age, a child's idea about who is likely to be brilliant is already a factor in determining which activities they pursue.

Study Four

In the final study, the researchers replicated the game scenario, but this time measuring the difference in attitudes between 5 and 6 year-olds.

Again researchers measured girls and boys interest in games said to be for ‘really, really smart children’.

They found no significant gender difference in interest in games for the 5 year old group.

However, 6 year-old girls had lower interest in the games for ‘really, really smart children’ - in line with the results of Study Three.

The researchers checked whether perhaps some boys had been delayed in their entry to school - which may give them inflated confidence - but this was not the case.

Age aside, own-gender brilliance scores did not differ for boys who had started first grade and those who had not. However, scores were lower for girls who had started school.

Researchers also considered women's stronger ‘modesty norms’. Perhaps 6 & 7 year-old girls showed less interest in the harder games due to an increase in concerns about modesty?

However, this is not the case - in fact, “children in the age-range we tested are notoriously boastful”. Plus, these studies did not ask girls about their own ‘smarts’, but the smarts of other children and adults.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude further testing is needed to see if these results extend beyond middle-class, majority white US context. There is also the need to ascertain the sources of the ‘brilliance = males’ stereotype.

“Nevertheless, the present results suggest a sobering conclusion: Many children assimilate the idea that brilliance is a male quality at a young age. This stereotype begins to shape children’s interests as soon as it is acquired and is thus likely to narrow the range of careers they will one day contemplate.”

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The question is also, whether such gender-perceptions are developing in Australian 6 year-olds... ■

Source: Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests. Lin Bian, Sarah Jane Leslie, Andrei Cimpia.