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An Examination of the Relationship between Age and Children's Gender-Related Interests and Attitudes

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Abstract

In this study, relationships between age, gender-related preferences, and gender-related attitudes in children were examined. These data were taken from a larger study looking at the impact of parental gender-related attitudes on their children's gender development. Analyses showed that there were some gender-related and age-related differences between boys and girls in regards to preferences as well as attitudes.

Introduction

For many years, researchers have been examining children's gender development and its many components, such as gender role knowledge, stereotype knowledge, gender-related attitudes, and gender-related preferences. While research has shown that gender-related preferences for activities and occupations are consistent throughout childhood (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009; Ruble, Martin & Berenbaum, 2006), gender-related attitudes about activities seem to become more flexible as the child ages (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetz, Gutt, & Morton, 2010; Serbin, Powlishta, & Gulko, 1993).

In this study, we examined the effects of age on children's gender-related preferences and their flexibility of gender-related attitudes, as well as the relationship between attitudes and preferences.

Research Questions:

1. Do boys prefer masculine activities and occupations, and girls prefer feminine ones?
2. Are there age differences between the ages of three and eleven years in interests in participating in gender-related activities and occupations?
3. Are those differences comparable for boys and girls?
4. Are there age differences in children's flexible attitudes about gender norms?
5. Are those age effects comparable for boys and girls?

6. Are attitudes about gender norms and interests in participating in gender-related activities and occupations related in this age range?
7. Are relationships comparable for boys and girls?

Method

Participants

We include data from 76 children, aged 3- to 11-years old (M age in years = 6.33; SD = 2.79). Children were tested individually in a day-care facility or in the campus lab.

Measures

POAT: Children ages 3- to 7-years-old completed the Occupations and Activities scales of the Pre-School Occupation, Activity and Traits Scales (POAT; Liben & Bigler, unpublished). The Traits scale was not used. Children were shown pictures and asked to indicate either how much they enjoyed certain activities or occupations, or whether they thought males, females, or both genders should do certain activities or occupations.



COAT: Children ages 8- to 11-years old completed the occupations and activities scales of the Child Occupation, Activity and Traits Scales (COAT) (Liben & Bigler, 2002). The Traits scale was not used. Children were asked to indicate how much they enjoyed certain activities and how often they did certain tasks. Then they were asked which gender they thought should do certain activities or occupations, or if they believed both genders were able to do the activities or occupations.

Sample COAT items:

Preferences:

How much do you want to be a ship captain when you grow up?
How often do you go fishing?

Attitudes:

Who do you think should be a secretary?
Who do you think should play hide and seek?

Results

Research Question 1: Gender Differences in Interests

Masc. Activities: $F(1,71) = 15.10, p < .001$
 Boys' $M = 2.48; SD = .57$
 Girls' $M = 1.94; SD = .66$
 Fem. Activities: $F(1,71) = 64.21, p < .001$
 Boys' $M = 1.59; SD = .52$
 Girls' $M = 2.47; SD = .50$
 Fem. Occupations: $F(1,71) = 35.35, p < .001$
 Boys' $M = 1.66; SD = .48$
 Girls' $M = 2.34; SD = .51$

Research Question 2: Changing Interests with Age

Fem. Activities: $r = -.27, p < .02$
 -no other significant correlations
 -age was measured in months for these correlations

Research Question 3: Interests and Age by Gender

Girls- Fem. Activities: $r = -.62, p < .001$
 -no other significant correlations

Research Question 4: Attitude Flexibility & Age

Masc. Activities: $r = -.23, p < .05$
 -no other significant correlations

Research Question 5: Attitudes and Age by Gender

Boys- Masc. Occupations: $r = -.30, p < .09^*$
 Girls- Masc. Activities: $r = -.29, p < .06^*$
 Girls- Fem. Activities: $r = -.34, p < .03$
 *denotes borderline significance

Research Question 6: Attitudes & Interests

-no significant correlations

Research Question 7: Attitude, Preferences, & Gender

Girls- Masc. Activities: $r = -.41, p < .007$
 Girls- Fem. Activities: $r = .33, p = .03$
 -no other significant correlations

Conclusions

Results showed that boys show more interest in masculine activities than girls, but not in masculine occupations, and girls showed more interest in feminine activities and occupations than boys. Only interest in feminine activities decreased with age, but this was not the case for feminine occupations or masculine interests of either type. When we examined how these changes were affected by gender, results showed that the decrease in feminine interests with age occurred in girls, but not in boys.

When we examined the effect of child age on gender-related attitudes, results showed that children were less likely to stereotype masculine activities as children got older, but age did not effect stereotyping of feminine activities, or either masculine or feminine occupations. While most correlations between age and gender-related attitudes were of borderline significance, results showing that as girls got older, they were significantly less likely to stereotype feminine activities.

There were few relationships between gender-related attitudes, gender-related interests, and gender. However, results showed girls who stereotyped masculine activities more (thought they were for boys but not girls) preferred masculine activities less themselves. Also, girls who stereotyped feminine activities more (thought they were for girls but not boys) preferred feminine activities more themselves. Therefore, results showed there to be a notable relationship between girls' gender-related attitudes and gender-related preferences, which was not evident in boys.