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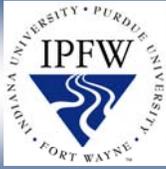
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Children's Gender Development: Sibling Configuration and Maternal Influence

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Abstract

We present a study of 3- to 8-year-old children in various family types. Family type influenced some outcomes, although many measures were unrelated to family type. Additionally, some relationships between maternal attitudes about gender-related behavior differed between boys and girls, and in different family configurations.

Introduction

Children gain gender-related knowledge about such things as toys, occupations, and interests, often referred to as gender schemas. They also acquire basic understanding about the permanence of gender, known as gender constancy. Finally, they often come to prefer gender stereotyped toys and activities (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006).

Theoretical models such as gender schema theory (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002) and social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) both consider experiences in the family as important influences on gender development. Some previous research has found such relationships, as reviewed in Tenenbaum & Leaper (2002).

One important consideration may be sibling configuration. Does it matter if a family consists of only boys, only girls, or whether children of both sexes are present? Some research suggests that it does (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003), although much remains to be learned about these issues, especially with younger children.

In this poster we present information from a subset of families who participated in a study of the relationships between parent attitudes about gender and various measures of children's gender development.

Method

Participants. We include data from 98 children between the ages of 3 and 8 years and their mothers. The children include 25 girls (*M* age 75.16 months) with brothers, 25 girls (*M* age 70.08 months) without brothers (19 of whom had sisters), 23 boys (*M* age 69.17 months) without sisters (17 of whom had brothers), and 25 boys with sisters (*M* age 73.48 months). The child sample included approximately 25% ethnic minorities including biracial children; the maternal sample included approximately 17% ethnic minorities.

Measures.

Parents completed:

- the *Child Gender Socialization Scale* (CGSS; Blakemore & Hill, 2008)
- the AWS (Spence & Helmreich, 1972)

Children completed:

- a measure of toy preference and "gender schematicity" (Levy & Carter, 1989)
- a measure of knowledge about 16 gender norms, judgments about whether norm violation was possible, and attitudes about norm violation (Blakemore, 2003)
- a measure of gender constancy (Ruble et al., 2007; Szkrybalo & Ruble, 1999)

Children were tested individually in their day care centers or in a campus lab. Mothers completed their questionnaires at home prior to the children's testing, either online or on paper.

Results

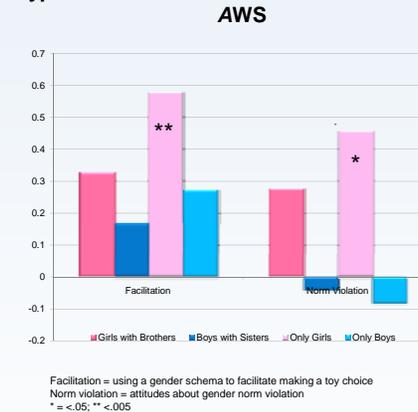
Effects of Family Type on Measures

Mothers who had children of both sexes were more strongly positive about their sons playing with masculine toys than were mothers who had only sons, $F(1,46) = 4.28, p = .045$ (on 7-point scale, mothers of boys with sisters, $M = 5.77$; without sisters $M = 5.23$).

Family Type, continued

For sons, there was an interaction between family type and age group on the measure of boys' toy violations, $F(2, 41) = 3.39, p = .043$. The youngest boys (3- and 4-year-olds) who had sisters rated other boys' play with traditionally feminine toys more positively ($M = 3.88$ on 5-point scale) than did boys who had no sisters ($M = 2.93$). There was no effect of family type on the older boys' judgments about boys' play with feminine toys. None of the other mother or child measures was affected by family type.

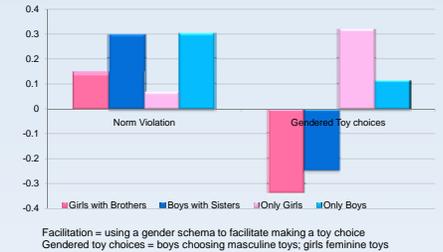
Relationships between Maternal Measures and Child Outcomes in Different Family Types



The results displayed above suggest that mothers' general gender attitudes seem to influence some aspects of daughters' gender-related attitudes, but only significantly in families without boys.

We examined a subset of the data where more than one child in the same family was tested. Only in pairs of sisters in families with only girls ($N = 7$ pairs) were siblings' attitudes about gender norm violation positively and significantly correlated, $r = .79, p = .034$. The same pattern was evident for facilitation ($r = .65$), but the correlation was not significant.

CGSS: Disapproval of Cross Gender Behavior



The relationships depicted above, suggest that when mothers disapprove of cross gender behavior in their own children, boys appear to be more inclined to judge such behaviors as inappropriate in other children, and that family type exerts little influence. Considering all boys, the relationship between maternal disapproval of cross gender behavior and sons' disapproval of gender norm violation was $r = .30, p = .043$.

Toy choices, on the other hand, were positively related to maternal disapproval in families with children of only one sex, but negatively related to maternal disapproval when siblings of the other sex were present in the family, although none reached conventional statistical significance.

Other Relationships using CGSS Subscales

When mothers were more positive about their daughters' play with masculine toys, their daughters were less likely to choose feminine toys as preferred, but only in families where there were only girls, $r = -.58, p = .002$.

When mothers were more positive about sons' play with masculine toys, sons were more likely to say it was acceptable for girls to play with such toys too, but only when they had no sisters, $r = .47, p = .028$.

Conclusions

Family type impacts the relationship between maternal attitudes about gender roles and some gender-related preferences and cognitions in young children.

Poster presented at the Society for Research in Child Development, April 2011. For copies, email blakemor@ipfw.edu