

When Do Children Understand Gender?

by Katie Hurley Monday, June 6th, 2016



When I was pregnant with my son, I was determined to avoid themes and stereotypes. I decorated his nursery in rich earth tones to promote relaxation, but I didn't include a single reference to sports, dinosaurs, trains, cars, or anything else considered "boy-ish" in nature. No son of mine would fall into that trap! Be you! Go your own way! Follow your passion!

By 18 months, he was passionate about cars and trucks. He spent the majority of his toddler and preschool years digging in the sand and mud with a fleet of trucks and we never left home without at least four cars in my purse. At 2 ½, he could sing every word to "Twenty Trucks", preferred all things blue, and enjoyed car rides around Los Angeles in search of trucks at work.

These days he's all about sports. He is passionate when he plays, when he watches from the sidelines, and when he cheers for his favorite pro teams on the screen. He is also, however, a lover of all things math, science, wild animals, and history. By the way, he keeps his hair long.

I get a lot of questions about gender identity development in children. Does a boy with long hair and a preference for pink actually identify as a girl? Does a girl who prefers to "dress like a boy" (what does that mean, exactly?) and plays with boys over girls identify as a boy?

It's very common for kids to show an interest in clothes

and toys associated with the opposite gender.

In fact, children under the age of five may have little awareness that such gender associations even exist. Who says mermaids are only for girls?

Even as kids grow, many children identify with the opposite gender at times or engage in gender variant behavior. I was the quintessential "tomboy" of the eighties. I loved when people referred to me as such and spent a fair amount of times trying to beat the boys at just about everything. At some point, however, I shifted into girl power mode and the rest was history.

Parents ask me far more questions about boys playing with Barbie than girls playing with cars. I find that it helps to have an understanding of typical gender development. While most kids have an understanding of gender by age 7, there are several stages they go through as they grow. It's also important to remember that all kids are different and work through different stages at their own pace.

Here's what to expect:

2 years:

By age two, toddlers begin to use gender stereotypes in their play. They might show a preference for gender specific toys, but some of this can be attributed to parent input. They also mimic the adults in the room.

2-3 years:

This is when young children begin to understand gender identity. They become aware of the physical differences between boys and girls. They label themselves, their family members, and their friends.

3-4 years:

Young children begin to engage in gender typing. They might separate toys and clothes as “girl” or “boy”. They also ask a lot of questions about gender typing. *Is this for a boy?*

4-6 years:

Instead of simply gender typing objects, kids in this age range are likely to put events and activities into groups by gender. For example, many young children think that firefighters are always men and teachers are women.

6-7 years:

By this age, most kids understand that gender is constant. They know that a man wearing a tutu is still a man, for example. By this time, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity.

The bottom line is that all kids need the opportunity to explore different gender roles and engage in different styles of play. Children learn about themselves and others through the context of play. Try not to overthink their play choices. Let your children explore their thoughts and feelings through play without assigning roles and leading them in a direction works for you.

Incidentally, my nine-year-old daughter is loving her new “football style jersey” in gray and white, and her little brother is bummed that it’s in the “girl” section – Old Navy for the win.

What do you think?

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