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Gendered Pathways of Development in Early Childhood: How Socialisation Shapes Behaviour and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood gender socialization is a multilayered process of development in which children approach to learn culturally defined expectations of masculinity and femininity. The paper examines the mechanisms that shape early gendered behaviour: parental influence, educational environments, peer dynamics, and broader sociocultural systems. Drawing on Social Learning Theory and Gender Schema Theory, the paper illustrates how children internalise gendered meanings through observation, reinforcement, and cognitive classification. Research has documented how these processes, such as caregiver emotional coaching, gender play, teacher expectations, and peer regulation, influence long-term developmental outcomes, including emotional expression, academic preferences, self-concept, and occupational aspirations. Intersectional perspectives remind one that gender does not operate in isolation but in interaction with class, cultural norms, and family structures and, therefore, generates diverse experiences of gender. This paper contends that, as strong as they are, gender norms can be undermined by focused interventions such as gender-inclusive education, reflective parenting practices, and bias-aware teaching. Such an understanding provides deeper insights into early developmental pathways and brings attention to the need for intentional equity driven practices both in homes and classrooms.

Keywords: gender socialisation, early childhood development, emotion socialisation, teacher expectations, peer influence, gender norms, developmental psychology,educational intervention

I. Introduction

Gender socialization begins well before children are articulate about who they are. From the first moments of their lives, caregivers interact with infants in ways usually unconsciously framed by cultural assumptions about gender. These interactions become the building blocks of how children interpret emotional expression, behaviour, and social expectations. Research shows that

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gendered patterns emerge not from innate differences but from highly consistent social cues that children absorb in their environments (Endendijk et al., 2016). Over time, these early cues accumulate to form internal frameworks that guide behaviour and shape self-understanding.

A seminal argument in developmental psychology is that gender socialisation is a learned, not innate, process-one that becomes deeply ingrained in children's identities long before they enter formal schooling. Children learn gendered messages through observation, imitation, and from society through consistent reinforcement of traditional gender expectations. A child may interpret and internalise such behaviours as natural; for instance, women cook while men work outside the home. This is significant because these early schemas shape how children will navigate academic settings, interpret challenges, and form long-term aspirations.

Recognising gendered development is crucial for educators: classroom interactions, instructional strategies, and teacher expectations generally mirror broader cultural norms. Even the most well-intentioned teachers sometimes reinforce stereotypes by interacting differently with boys and girls during lessons. Such early experiences leave a lasting impression: research suggests that children’s perception of their academic competence develops during early primary years and becomes increasingly resistant to change as they grow older.

Another important argument is that gender expectations shape emotional development. Boys are usually encouraged to minimise their vulnerability, while girls are urged to emphasize empathy and emotional connection. These norms impact both interpersonal relationships and the way children approach and process academic difficulties. A child's emotional capacity includes motivational, self-efficacy, and resilience elements that are connected with long-term academic achievement.

Hence, the present study investigates how early socialization configures gendered behaviours, emotional expressiveness, and learning trajectories. Knowledge of these processes may allow educators and caregivers to adopt more intentional practices that support equitable pathways to development.

II. Background

Early childhood experiences need to be firmly contextualised within established psychological theories that explain the roots of gendered behaviour. Social Learning Theory and Gender Schema Theory are two such frameworks that provide a sound basis from which to explain how children internalise gender norms.

According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, children learn by observing role models and then imitating behaviors that receive reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). This means that children

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continually scan their environment for clues on how to behave. If boys witness male figures receiving praise for independence or bravery, then they too will likely imitate such behaviors. On the other hand, if girls view women being appreciated for their nurturing behaviors, they internalize caregiving as a component of their identity. Of course, in all this, reinforcement plays an important role; behaviors that are approved are repeated, while those that provoke criticism will be avoided. It begins to happen at home but continues right across school and peer environments.

One explanation is given Bem's Gender Schema Theory (1981) provides a cognitive explanation. According to Bem, children actively create mental schema frameworks through which they organize information related to gender. These schemas establish themselves quite early on and dictate how children make sense of new experiences. For example, once a child has learned that dolls are an attribute of girls, they may refrain from playing with dolls if they perceive themselves as male. As children grow, these schemas become increasingly elaborated and influence memory, attention, preferences, and selfassessments. Most importantly, gender schemas influence what children come to believe they can or cannot do well, which has important repercussions for learning and educational trajectories.

Family environments are influential in the development of these schemas. One meta-analysis by Chaplin and Aldao (2013) suggested that gender differences in parental emotional communication are consistent: richer emotional language with daughters and encouragement of emotional expression, while sons are more often encouraged to be self-reliant and emotionally contained. The outcome for girls is often a heightened emotional literacy, while boys may struggle to articulate their emotions. Such early emotional conditioning influences social interaction, conflict resolution, help-seeking behaviour, and even performance in collaborative learning environments.

Commercial culture reinforces these trends even further. Toy marketing often promotes construction, action, and spatial reasoning for boys and beauty, caregiving, and cooperation for girls. Because the former attributes are associated with later STEM success, such early experiences have long-term implications (Hyde, 2016). In this way, early gender differences in play may translate into gender gaps in achievement in academic disciplines.

Another important layer that helps in understanding gendered development is intersectionality. According to Bauer (2014), gender is never experienced in isolation; rather, it intersects with class, ethnicity, culture, and family structure. For example, in many collectivist cultures, girls may be socialized toward family responsibility, while boys may be encouraged into activities that enhance independence or leadership. On the contrary, in an urban middle-class family, both genders may be encouraged toward academic achievement, though subtle differences in

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expectations persist. Intersectionality thus shows that gendered development is not a uniform experience but rather one that differs across social contexts.

Thus, children's gendered behaviour emerges through this dynamic interaction between observational learning, schema development, emotional conditioning, cultural practices, and family expectations. These processes set the stage for patterns of behaviour, emotion, and learning evident in early childhood.

III. Discussion

Caregiver Influence on Emotional and Behavioural Development -

Caregivers serve as the primary socializing agents in maintaining gendered experiences. Adults, from the time children are babies, view children's actions through gendered glasses: boys' physical activity is framed as strength or boldness, and girls' similar behaviour may be attributed to misbehaviour or emotionality. Such interpretations beget responses. Boys commonly receive messages to be brave and independent, whereas girls receive comfort and emotional validation (Zeman et al., 2019). Over time, such differential treatment moulds emotional expression patterns.

Caregivers are children's first role models, and their influence on gendered behaviour is both profound and long-lasting. Parents appear to interpret children's behaviour in gender-specific ways. For example, boys' active behaviour may be viewed as intentional or adventurous, while similar behaviour on the part of girls may be seen as misbehaviour or emotionality. This differential perception influences how adults respond to children's emotional needs across time.

Interpretations have an impact on responses. Boys receive messages to be brave and independent, while girls get comfort and emotional validation (Zeman et al., 2019). Over time, such differential treatment moulds the pattern of expressing emotions. Boys learn how to internalise or express emotion through anger, while girls learn to verbalise the feeling and seek support.

It is also the case that gendered expectations condition risk-taking behaviours. Boys are more likely to be granted physical freedom-such as climbing trees or engaging in rough-and-tumble play-that nurtures resilience, spatial awareness, and confidence in physical competence. Girls, on the other hand, may be encouraged to take care, not get hurt, or to keep themselves neat. While these messages may promote safety, they also curtail exploration and deny girls valuable opportunities for learning through trial and error.

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One of the key arguments here is that caregiver behaviour forms emotional templates that can either restrict or expand developmental pathways. When children are repeatedly guided to behave in gender-typical ways, they often internalise these expectations as natural parts of their identity.

Educational Settings and Teacher Expectations -

Schools either continue or challenge existing gender norms. Teachers' expectations often result in the unconscious shaping of students' self-perception and academic motivation. Schools play a pivotal role in continuing or challenging gender norms. Teachers' expectations often unconsciously shape students' self-perception and academic motivation. Wang and Degol (2017) found that teachers tend to involve boys more frequently in analytical or problem-solving tasks, while girls receive more praise for neatness, organisation, and compliance. These patterns can create unintentional hierarchies, subtly positioning boys as natural thinkers and girls as diligent followers.

Assessment practices may also be subject to implicit biases. For example, Lavy and Sand (2018) found that teachers sometimes underestimate girls' mathematics and boys' language arts abilities. These biases can impact the ways in which children interpret feedback. Where girls repeatedly receive messages about their limited STEM abilities, for instance, they are likely to internalise such messages, even if their performance is sound. Likewise, boys may steer clear of language-rich tasks because they view such activities as inconsistent with masculine norms.

One central argument is that educational environments not only reflect cultural assumptions but also reinforce them; thus, the classroom becomes a site where gender norms are continually reproduced unless intentionally contested.

Peer Groups and Social Boundaries-

Peer relationships become increasingly central to reinforcing and policing gender norms in early childhood, often shaping children's identities as powerfully as adults do. While it may be caregivers and teachers who initially model behaviour, it is peers who establish the social context within which these behaviours are rewarded, tolerated, or rejected. Children learn very quickly that acceptance within a peer group is conditional on adherence to the unwritten rules that determine "acceptable" behaviour for boys and girls. These are not transmitted by explicit instruction but through play invitations extended or denied, conflict resolution, and other daily interactions, as well as through praise or criticism for certain behaviours.

One of the clearest ways peers reinforce gender boundaries is through emotional policing. Boys who express fear, sadness, or hesitation may be teased for being "weak"; girls who display

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assertiveness or leadership may be subject to social pushback for being "bossy" or "too outspoken." These responses teach children that their emotional expression is not merely personal but a social performance having to do with fitting one's group expectations. Over time, such pressures mould emotional habits in the following way: boys may restrict themselves mainly to expressions of confidence or anger; and girls, prioritizing harmony, avoid confrontation to sustain friendships.

Peer influence also extends to the kinds of play children enjoy. For example, boys commonly enjoy competitive or physically rough games not because they inherently like these activities but because the activities garner approval from other males. Girls tend to be interested in co-operative or imaginative play because this kind of interaction reinforces social relationships and can be related to social expectations for nurturance and communication. These patterns reinforce cognitive and social competencies. Action oriented play provides training in spatial skills, problem-solving, and assertiveness, whereas co-operative play provides training in communication, negotiation, and empathy. Even though both sets of skills are important, many children narrow their range to only those behaviours that their peers consider appropriate.

Peer groups can also restrict cross-gender interactions. Even when children show interest in mixed-gender play, they avoid it for fear of exclusion or ridicule. This self-segregation leads to a belief that boys and girls are basically different, reduces opportunities to learn from diverse perspectives, and limits the development of flexible social skills.

Importantly, these peer dynamics underscore the point that gender norms are perpetuated in collective behaviour, rather than simply in discrete beliefs. Children become active contributors to cultural norms when they enforce gender expectations among their peers. This also implies that the direction of peer influence can change if norms are brought into question. Teachers can disrupt rigid boundaries and provide children opportunities to practice a wider range of social interactions through inclusive play opportunities, mixing peer groups, or modeling acceptance of diverse behaviors.

In this way, peer groups act both as gatekeepers and as potential catalysts: they either can constrict children's behavior by norms that are too rigid or they can open up possibilities when nurtured by inclusive environments. Understanding the role of peer dynamics thus becomes an important component in constructing the contexts of early learning that foster autonomy, diversity, and a socially equitable development.

Academic Preference, Identity, and Future Aspirations-

Gender norms deeply influence children’s academic choices and confidence levels. Although boys and girls begin early schooling with similar potential in most areas, cultural expectations

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guide them toward different subject domains. Girls often report lower confidence in mathematics and science despite strong performance. This is partly due to stereotype threat, a psychological phenomenon where awareness of stereotypes affects performance and self-perception.Similarly, boys may disengage from reading or expressive writing because these activities require emotional interpretation, which conflicts with masculine expectations of emotional restraint.

These academic preferences significantly impact occupational aspirations. Children often imagine their future careers based on the roles they observe and the encouragement they receive. Girls who internalise messages about caregiving may aspire to careers in teaching or nursing, while boys exposed to models of dominance may gravitate toward engineering or leadership roles.

An important argument is that academic choices are not simply reflections of ability but of identity. Children choose activities that align with the kind of person they believe they are expected to be. Therefore, interventions must target identity development alongside skill-building.

Interventions and Pathways Toward Equity-

Research has shown that gender norms can be modified. For example, gender-neutral pedagogies in Swedish preschools significantly reduce gender-typed behaviours among children and teachers alike Skoog & Björklund (2020). Gender-neutral pedagogical approaches, as seen in Swedish preschools, significantly reduce gender-typed behaviours (Skoog & Björklund, 2020). Teachers in these settings adopt practices such as rotating roles, avoiding gendered labels, and encouraging all children to participate in diverse activities. Children in such environments develop broader interests, cross-gender friendships, and reduced reliance on stereotypes.

Bias-aware teaching is another effective strategy. When educators reflect on their own assumptions and intentionally call on all children equally, they create more equitable learning opportunities. Additionally, replacing gendered praise (“you are such a pretty girl”) with skill-based praise (“you solved that problem well”) helps children build competence-based identities.

At home, parents can support equity by encouraging emotional expression in boys, risk-taking in girls, and shared responsibilities among siblings. Books, toys, and media can also be chosen intentionally to present diverse role models.

Together, these interventions reveal a central argument: gender norms are socially constructed and therefore changeable. When adults across home and school settings adopt intentional strategies, children experience greater freedom to explore diverse interests and develop a fuller sense of self.

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IV. Conclusion

Gender socialisation has emerged as a strong influence from early childhood onward, in the ways children perceive themselves and others. This study showed that children adopt gendered expectations because of ongoing reinforcement from classmates, instructors, caretakers, and cultural norms in day-to-day living rather than because of natural abilities or dispositions. These repeated cues influence children's emotional habits, academic confidence, behaviour, and long-term aspirations, creating pathways that appear natural but are grounded in social learning and cognitive schema development.

Recognising these patterns is important because early gendered expectations often limit children's emotional and intellectual growth. Boys who are discouraged from showing vulnerability may develop fewer strategies for emotional regulation, while girls who are guided toward compliance may hesitate to take risks or assert their opinions. These early differences can influence how children approach learning, respond to challenges, and imagine their future possibilities. From early childhood on, gender socialization has been shown to have a significant impact on how children view themselves and other people. This study found that children adopt gendered expectations because of ongoing reinforcement from classmates, instructors, caretakers, and cultural norms in everyday life rather than because of natural talents or dispositions.

At the same time, studies prove that gender norms can be flexible and can change. Children develop confidence to explore more skills and interests when educators use inclusive teaching practices, challenge stereotypes, and ensure equitable participation. Caregivers who encourage emotional expression, independence, and resilience in all children, whether boys or girls, ultimately find that the outcomes of development become balanced.

Ultimately, supporting children beyond narrow gender expectations helps them develop healthier emotional patterns, stronger identities, and greater academic confidence. Creating such environments is essential for building a more inclusive society where children feel free to grow into their full potential.

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