



# GULP!

## Talking With Your Kids About Sexuality



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### Focus on Gender

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## Ages 0 to 5: Setting the Stage

by Katherine McLaughlin

**D**o you feel more comfortable talking with a baby when you know whether the child is a boy or a girl? Do you find yourself giving children gifts that are gender-specific, like trucks for boys and dolls for girls? Do you assume that when a person mentions a doctor that the physician is male? Do you compliment girls on how pretty they are? Do you compliment boys on how strong they are?

Many of us could answer “yes” to these questions because we have been raised in a culture that expects and encourages certain behavior from males and females. In general, we expect girls to be pretty and sweet, and boys to be rough and tough. As soon as a baby is born, we need to know what its gender is so we can start teaching the child what is expected of his or her gender. We put pink hats on girls and blue hats on boys. We start labeling their features as “strong and solid” for boys, and “petite and delicate” for girls.

Even in the first few years, we are teaching children what gender they are and giving messages about what qualities they need to have to be female or male.

Although this is done to varying degrees, many of us tend to dress girls in pink, ruffled clothes that

make climbing trees difficult. If a girl has the potential and interest to climb trees, we may be stifling her. Many of us dress boys in blue comfortable clothes that support playing rough. If a boy has the potential to be creative in art or music, we may be pushing him into being more physical and expecting him to want to climb trees.

We also give messages in the gifts we give children. In general, girls get kitchens and dolls, while boys get trucks and tools. This message reinforces stereotypes, and may put limits on what a child thinks she or he can and should do in the future.

In addition to clothing and toys, some of the messages we give about gender are subtle. Many of us play differently with young children based on their gender. We are rough and loud with boys, tending to hold them away from us and bounce them on our knee. We may also comment on how smart they are. In contrast, we are gentle and quiet when we play with girls. We are more likely to hold them close rather than bouncing them on our knee, and we may comment on how pretty they are.

Even if you are aware of and try not to give stereotypical messages, your young child is receiving mess-

*“Childhood’s learning is made up of moments. It isn’t steady. It’s a pulse.”*

—Eudora Welty

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## Ages 5 to 9: Getting Started

by Judy Cyprian

“Girls rule, boys drool!” or the opposite, “Boys rule, girls drool!” could be mottos for this age group when it comes to gender issues. From the ages of 5 to 9, girls and boys are often in separate groups. This same sex grouping occurs in part because they share similar interests.

However, children this age are concerned with what it means to be a male or female and how they are supposed to behave as a girl or a boy. Playing with other children who are the same gender gives them the opportunity to practice being male or female with each other. As they are figuring this out, they often behave in very stereotypical ways. Boys may talk about growing up to be car mechanics or football players; they often engage in rough and tumble play. They play games that require strength and bravery, qualities that our culture has traditionally applied to males. On the other hand, girls may practice being mommies, teachers or movie stars as they act out some of the qualities that our culture has attributed to females: being nurturing and/or being thin and beautiful. Developmentally, children this age are also concerned with mastery and competency; they want to learn the necessary skills to master the world around them. It is not surprising, therefore,



that in their attempts to master and understand what it means to be male or female, they often seem to go to the extreme and be as stereotypically male or female as they can be.

Children get their ideas of being male or female from observing the world around them. The behaviors and attitudes of their parents, teachers, and friends' families as well as TV and movies all help to shape a child's attitudes and behaviors. Parents don't usually sit their 7-year-old down and say: “This is how I expect you to behave as a girl,” yet children get many messages from their parents about being a girl or boy at a very early age.

Toys that parents give their children also send messages. It's no wonder that a girl would think that the world of women is restricted to taking care of children and the house if she only got dolls and kitchen sets to play with. Likewise, it would be no surprise if boys thought that the world was made for shooting and driving and if all they got were toy guns and cars. It is important for children to be

given a variety of things to play with. Offering every child a variety of “male” and “female” toys lets all children know that they can be both nurturing and powerful, and opens options for them and lets their natural interests emerge. Gender-neutral toys are also a must--building

blocks, puzzles, music, books, or art supplies are some examples. The message they get is “I can be who I am” rather than “I am a boy so I must behave in a certain way.” Even if your daughter always chooses the Barbie doll over the truck, she still has gotten the message that it is her choice to be who she wants and that all doors are open to her.

The chores you give your children also give them messages about being male or female. Does your son always get the chores that require more physical activity or being outside like emptying the trash or raking the yard? Does your daughter only help with the more traditionally

### Good Reads for Parents

- ☞ *Boys Will Be Men.* Paul Kivel. New Society Publishers, British Columbia, Canada, 1998.
- ☞ *Growing a Girl: Seven Strategies for Raising a Strong, Spirited Daughter.* Barbara Mackoff. Dell Publishing, New York, NY, 1996.
- ☞ *The Difference: Growing Up Female in America.* Judy Mann. Warner Books, New York, NY, 1994.
- ☞ “Why Doesn't Anybody Like Me?” *A Guide to Raising Socially Confident Kids.* Hara Estroff Marano. William Morrow and Company, New York, NY, 1998.
- ☞ *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood.* William Pollack. Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1998.
- ☞ *Lunch Box Letters: Writing Notes of Love and Encouragement to Your Children.* Bill Zimmerman and Carol Sperandio. Firefly Books, 2000.

female jobs of setting the table or making the beds? Exposing your child to all the jobs required to help a family run smoothly lets them know that no matter what their gender, they can contribute to all the work that is involved.

It is never too early to teach your child to be a media critic. There are plenty of opportunities on TV or in the movies to point out gender roles that you like or dislike. It only takes a sentence or two to get your point across. When you see an ad for a household product that portrays the dad as a bumbling idiot, you might want to say to your child: "I don't think that is quite right. I know lots of men who know how to do the laundry!" Telling your child how you feel about what you see lets him or her know what you think about how males and females should behave.

Although children this age may prefer to spend time with the same sex, they also like to interact with the other gender, usually in groups. Anyone who has ever been to a school playground can probably describe how the girls chase the boys around and vice versa. This is actually how they let someone know that they like them. Children at the older end of this age range may

have boyfriends/ girlfriends and be going out. This usually involves talking on the phone, or telling their friends they are interested in a certain someone until that certain someone hears about it. This is how they start to learn about romantic relationships. Just as they are figuring out how to be male or female within a group of same sex peers, some of them are beginning to figure out how to behave in a relationship with the other gender. Once again, children learn best by observing those around them, especially their parents.

### Myth:

*Boys are always ready for sex; girls aren't interested in sex.*

How their parents treat and are treated by their intimate partners will influence their children's attitudes and behaviors. Although it is often tempting to dismiss a 9-year-old's crushes as cute or unimportant, it is serious business for them. Talking about breaking up with their boyfriends or girlfriends (which usually happens within days or weeks after they get together) validates and supports them as they learn how to negotiate a romantic relationship.

Gender roles are beginning to be less rigid than in the past. This helps reduce the subtle pressure to behave in gender-specific ways and opens up the world for children. With fewer gender expectations for behavior, children have the

opportunity to express all sides of themselves and to live up to their true potential. A boy who dreams of being a dancer and has been brought up with a broad definition of being male would not have to stifle his creative or artistic side and maybe his natural talent. Likewise, a girl who loves cars and wants to become a mechanic would be supported in her quest as much as any boy.



Many children this age feel good about themselves as males or females. It is important for parents to support those feelings in their children, for in the next few years, that self-confidence may lessen as children go through the many changes that puberty brings. Help your child feel proud, reinforce their sense of self-worth, and tell them, "I am so glad to have a girl (or boy) like you!" ☑

### Good Reads—Ages 5 to 9:

*Prince Cinders. Princess Smartypants.* Babette Cole. Putnam Publishing Group, 1997.

*Horris and Morris But Mostly Delores.* James Howe. Simon and Shuster, New York, NY, 1999.

*Tatterhood.* Ethel Johnston Phelps, Ed. Feminist Press, Old Westbury, NY, 1978.

*Willie Was Different.* Norman Rockwell, Berkshire House Publishers, Stockbridge, MA, 1994.



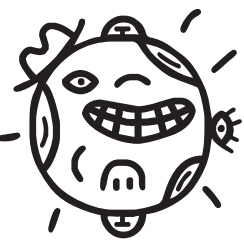
## Ages 9 to 13: Really Talking

by Anne Johnson

As our kids grow up, they crave acceptance more and more. When they reach adolescence, this need really peaks. They seek acceptance from everyone around them--their friends, teachers, parents, and even from themselves. Perfectly normal teens find it too easy to believe that they don't fit in. This belief can make them think that they must be "weird," "abnormal," or a "nerd."

As adolescents begin their journey through puberty they are constantly questioning (if only to themselves) the physical and emotional changes they are going through. It is at this time, also, that they continue to evaluate what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how to act as a boy or a girl.

Gender role is a factor that influences how adolescents feel they are "fitting in." It affects attitudes, behaviors, and decisions. They begin to question, for example, whether it's okay for boys to show their emotions and if girls can be engineers when they grow up. From birth, males and females are treated differently and these gender-based expectations continue throughout their lives. They receive messages from family, friends, teachers,



society, and the media about how males and females should be.

Our kids are being raised by parents or grandparents who were taught to act, dress, talk, and choose a career,

### Myth:

*Boys are better than girls in math and science.*

based on whether they were male or female. It is important that parents understand that it is okay to

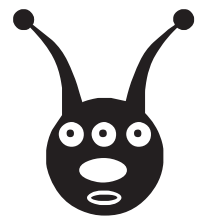
have both male and female traits. Talking openly with their children beginning at a very young age, parents can help guide them to understand the other gender and that they can share each other's traits without being judged or harassed. If we don't allow ourselves to think openly we reinforce gender role stereotyping.

Gender roles can be limiting when they become a stereotype and, when a stereotype is carried to an extreme, they can hurt people and those around them. Think back to your adolescent years...did you receive particular messages from those around you about how you should act as a male or a female? Males have traditionally been expected to be aggressive, strong, competent, competitive, and successful. Females, on the other hand, have been expected to be passive, dependent, nurturing, and sensitive. Consider how you may have been treated if you acted outside your specific gender. Did boys get called faggot

or sissy if they showed some emotion; did girls get called tomboy if they liked sports? Gender role stereotyping only creates more confusion and distress at a time when adolescents are already struggling with self-acceptance and the whole process of fitting in.

Although our culture has begun to recognize that there are shared gender roles, there is still plenty of room for improvement. The school hallways become a war zone at this age with humiliating comments being aimed at those who sway from their gender role. Name-calling causes social and emotional consequences. Adolescents especially feel their sexuality being challenged at a time when they are trying to figure it all out. How can we make this social environment safe for them? First, we need to acknowledge that this name-calling is happening.

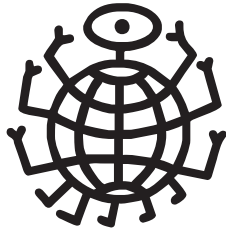
One of the problems boys and girls have relating to each other is that they don't listen to or understand each other. Name-calling is the result of one person not respecting or listening to what the other has to say. Second, when we hear name-calling, we need to discuss it with the individual(s) in a positive/supportive way to help them understand what they are really saying and how it affects the other person. Third, for true understanding to occur, there needs to be



education for parents, students and teachers around gender issues.

Gender roles can also be limiting when people of one gender have a narrow understanding of what it's like to be the other gender. It is important for adolescents to take the time to explore their own feelings about what they like and what they dislike about being male or female and to identify stereotypes they don't like to hear about themselves. By listening to each other, they can begin to understand what it's like to be the other gender. Giving them the opportunity to tell each other what they want them to know deepens this understanding.

Males may want to let females know that they are emotional and can show their feelings. Females may want males to know that they can be independent and successful. The way young people behave and the choices they make can be influenced and limited by gender stereotypes. Sharing what their real feelings are creates an increased understanding and recognition of what boys and girls actually have in common. When students can identify healthy, non-stereotypical behaviors for males and females, they can learn to respect and treat each other in more positive ways. It can help them to change their behavior and make better choices which will help them in the relationships they share with everyone around them.



You, as parents, can help guide this process by evaluating your own feelings about your gender. Reevaluate what you consider traditional male and traditional female roles.

You will discover that some roles are specific to a particular gender, and will remain so, due to the physical make up of each. You will also begin to realize how much people can have in common regardless of their gender. A perfect example is to take a look at the chores kids do around the house. "According to a recent study, ninth graders remain

quite unenlightened, with girls spending considerably more time per week than boys doing chores around the house." (Journal of Marriage and the Family, November, 1999). Why can't girls take out the trash and boys wash dishes? If we can get our children thinking beyond the gender stereotypes of 'who should do what' we'd be able to break down the gender barrier and also get more stuff done around the house.

How can parents help? Modeling behaviors is essential. Let your kids see Dad emptying the dishwasher and Mom taking out the trash. And it shouldn't stop there. Modeling

should begin early in your child's life and continue throughout. Remember the phrase—"monkey see, monkey do?" It relates here as well. Let them see the expanded roles males and females can play. Encourage and celebrate it when they go beyond the traditional gender roles.

Are there certain stereotypes that drive you crazy? Speak openly with your child about them. Let them know exactly how you feel. Your adolescent will be getting messages from many different sources outside the family about gender roles and stereotypes. They will need help sorting this information out and you can help by examining the messages yourself and giving them guidance. Talking to your children about your values and feelings will encourage them to evaluate their own values before outside influences take root. [E](#)

*Myth:*

*Boys don't cry.*

### Good Reads—Ages 9 to 13:

*Caddie Woodlawn.* Carol Ryne Brink. Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 1973.

*Girls Speak Out: Finding Your True Self.* Andrea Johnston. Scholastic Trade, NY, 1997.

*Wringer.* Jerry Spinelli. Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1997.

*New Moon: Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams.* New Moon Publishing.



## Ages 13 to 18: Beyond Gender Issues

by Hilary Kaufman

Today's teens are coming of age in a world with different ideas about gender than you probably grew up with. But many of the same gender messages that you received as a teen are still around. Teens today walk a confusing line between the limitations of gender stereotypes in the past and the 21st century opportunities to stretch beyond those limitations.

When it comes to issues of gender, teens may resent or feel embarrassed by the way adults express masculinity or femininity, accusing them of being old-fashioned or of stepping too far out from those stereotypes, being too "weird." But because they care so much about fitting in, teens will often act within these gender role stereotypes. These are the models they have been given for what it means to be a man or a woman, and stepping outside of those stereotypes can be risky. It may cost them the approval of their friends. Keep in mind that sometimes teens aren't thinking about long-term effects of their

behavior. A girl may be more concerned with being thin now than with the effects of skipping meals on her long-term health. A boy may be more concerned with proving his "coolness" now than worrying about the long-term effects of drug use.

Teenagers are also fascinated by the opposite gender—the very people that, as younger children, they avoided as much as possible. Their lives become filled with trying to develop relationships with both males and females.

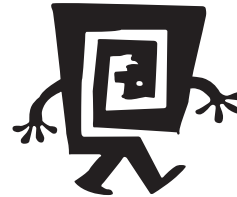
A teenage girl wants to know what boys like in a girl. A teenage boy wants to figure out what kind of expectations girls have on a date. They are learning how to balance the demands of their friends with those of a romantic relationship. And gender roles and stereotypes still shape these relationships.

The list of masculine traits that boys use to measure their transition into

manhood hasn't really changed too much over the years. But what has changed? For one, many teen boys today feel conflicted by expectations to be one way with "the guys" and an entirely different way with the females closest to them. There are clear messages that boys and men should not share their feelings with one another, yet they are expected to be sensitive and have the ability to talk about their feelings in their relationships with girls and women.

How can we help teen boys move past gender role stereotyping? Talk with them about the joys and challenges of being male. Talk about men that you respect and value and tell your son why. Perhaps you admire your father for the tenderness he shared with you. Maybe he was a fantastic cook. Let your son know there are a million different ways to be a man. Talk to him about the rites of passage that a boy may go through on his journey into adulthood.

Encourage boys to treat the girls and women in their lives with respect. Model respectful behavior. Challenge boys when you see them behaving disrespectfully. Encourage them to have friendships with girls. These friendships will help them understand girls as equals and not the "other."



### Myth:

*Only girls have eating disorders.*

### Talking About Gender With Your Kids: Conversation Starters

- ☞ What would you do if you woke up tomorrow as the other gender?
- ☞ What do you wish you could do but don't because boys don't do that, or girls don't do that?
- ☞ Name a favorite person in the other gender. Why do you admire that person?
- ☞ If you were the president, what would you do to help girls? To help boys?
- ☞ What do you like best about yourself, and does that have anything to do with being a girl or boy?

Give boys permission to express their feminine qualities too. It's easy to congratulate your son for being courageous on the athletic field or for being a convincing orator on the debate team. But what about when they display strength in ways that are not usually seen as masculine? Most teen boys are thinking about who they want to be in the future. Point out skills and strengths they have that might be considered feminine, like empathy, nurturing, or coalition building, and suggest that these skills might come in handy in their career. Perhaps someday your son will make a fantastic day care worker, nurse, or baker. Keep their options wide open so they can explore who they want to be.

What about teenage girls? Society's definition of what it means to be female has broadened tremendously in the last 35 years. Today, many girls are perfectly comfortable being involved in team sports, studying to become engineers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, and demonstrating independence in a way that was not possible before. But there are still barriers--women still earn less for equal work.

How can we help teen girls move past gender role stereotyping? Talk about the joys and challenges of being female. Talk about women that you respect and admire, and tell your daughter why. Perhaps you admire your best friend for her competence at running her small business or your mother for the

courage she demonstrated while confronting a health problem. Let your daughter know there are a million different ways to be a woman.

Encourage girls to hold on to their intelligence, independence, and assertiveness. In an effort to stay connected within relationships, girls learn to suppress their own voices. They are more concerned with being nice and retaining friendships than with speaking their minds. Call them on this behavior. Tell them that you want to hear what they have to say. Teach them that being direct and having an opinion can strengthen relationships.

Encourage girls to stick with math and science courses. In this high-tech world, taking math and science is an effective way for closing the gap in wages for girls. High school is the time when it becomes an option to drop these courses. Let girls know that sticking with these courses will provide them with more options down the road.

Before you start talking about gender with your teen, examine your own stereotypes and value judgments about gender. What makes you uncomfortable about being male or female? How do you feel about the gender roles you grew up with? How do you feel about the changes in gender roles that have occurred in the last thirty years? The more you model equality between the genders in your own relationships and the more you allow yourself to be truly yourself, the easier it will be for your teen to feel confident with her/his gender and sense of self. [E](#)

### Good Movies That Give Positive Gender Messages

#### Ages 0-5

- ☞ Madeline
- ☞ Amazing Grace and Other Stories

#### Ages 5-9

- ☞ Mulan
- ☞ Squeakerfoot/Goodbye, Hello (Ramona)

#### Ages 9-12

- ☞ Mrs. Doubtfire
- ☞ The Boy Who Could Fly
- ☞ Stand By Me

#### Ages 12-16

- ☞ Erin Brockovich
- ☞ Shakespeare in Love
- ☞ A League of Their Own

### Good Reads—Ages 13 to 16:

*No Easy Answers: Short Stories About Teenagers Making Tough Choices.* Donald R. Gallo, Ed. Delacorte Press, 1997.

*Life Happens: A Teenager's Guide...* Kathy McCoy. Perigree Press, New York, NY, 1996.

*Cool Women: The Thinking Girl's Guide to the Hippest Women in History.* Girl Press, Chicago, IL, 1998.

[Teen Voices Magazine.](#) Women Express, Inc.



—continued from page 1

ages from other sources about how they should behave. Family members may give gender-specific gifts when a baby arrives. Other children may tease a young boy for wearing a barrette to school. Then there's the media—many cartoons and other children's programs introduce and reinforce gender stereotypes.

Messages that males and females are supposed to act a certain way not only limit children, but can also set them up to harm others. If a person does not act in a stereotypical way, he or she often gets labeled, teased, and sometimes physically harmed. Also, these stereotypes can set young children up to be victims or perpetrators of a crime. If we teach a girl to be sweet and think of other people's feelings first, aren't we setting her up to be victims? If someone is bothering her, instead of getting angry or standing up for what she wants, she might smile because she doesn't want to hurt the other person's feelings. If we teach a boy to be strong, rough, and not to cry, aren't we setting him up to possibly hurt another person? Are we teaching him to stuff his feelings and not become their true self?

What would our culture be like if we taught both boys and girls to be strong, sensitive, caring, and respectful, and if we encouraged them both to learn to cook dinner or take out

the garbage? People would likely reach their fullest potential.

Here are some suggestions that can help you create an open environment at home, broadening the possibilities for your children:

- For boys: talk to them about their feelings and encourage them to express those feelings. For girls: teach them that it's okay to think of their own feelings first.
- Use words that describe professionals as gender neutral, i.e., firefighter versus fireman.
- Consider taking your kids to a nonstereotypical provider, such as a female doctor or a male nurse.
- Ask questions about their behavior during play: How come there are no fathers that cook dinner?
- Be a role model that shows children that we draw on people's strengths, not their gender, to get the job done.
- Give gifts that offer young people choices rather than encouraging stereotypical play, i.e., a tool set for a girl or a shopping cart for a boy.
- When you are teaching about responsibility and helping out around the house, make sure both genders do all the jobs in the house.
- Be aware of your own biases. Do

you assume someone is a particular gender based on his or her job?

- When you hear others making stereotypical comments, say something that would give a more balanced approach to gender. If you see only girls having a tea party, you could say, "I think it's okay for boys to have tea parties, too."
- Remember that the goal is to not limit our children, so don't discourage young people from exploring areas that are stereotypical to their gender. If a girl wants a kitchen, let her play in the kitchen.

By the age of three, many children know their gender and the traits and behaviors considered appropriate. Since these messages are being received at such a young age, it's extremely important for us to help young people see that they don't have to act a certain way based on their gender. These years help form the foundation for their future ideas about gender. Remember the key here is balance. Offer choices and let them decide. ☑

### Good Reads—Ages 0 to 5:

*The Man Who Kept House.* Kathleen and Michael Hague. Harcourt Brace, New York, NY, 1981.

*I'm Terrific.* Marjorie Weinman Sharmat. Scholastic, Inc., New York, NY, 1977.

*Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World.* Mildred Pitts Walter. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, New York, NY, 1986.

*William's Doll.* Charlotte Zolotow. Harper & Row, 1972.



**G U L P !** is a newsletter designed to help parents talk with their children about sexuality. It is published twice a year by Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE). PPNNE provides reproductive health and education services to women, men, and teens throughout Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Call **1.800.488.9638**.