



## Nine-Year-Old Boys and Girls: On Different Paths?

*Prof. Sheila Greene*





# Nine-year old boys and girls: On different paths?

**Report on main quantitative survey published in December 2009: *The lives of nine-year-olds***

**Large number of statistically different outcomes for boys and girls**

## **Issues:**

- **Large n studies and statistical significance**
- **A great deal of overlap**

**But are there meaningful differences here?**



# What to expect

After the gender conformity of early childhood and before the gender intensification associated with the teenage years, children aged 7-11 are typically found to be more flexible about gender roles and more tolerant of deviations.



# Background theories about the extent and nature of difference

- **Biological vs cultural determinants of sex differences - still a contentious issue. A mix of both.**
- **Culture builds on and can exaggerate sex differences**
- **Can also create differences where none might arise through biology**
- **Social institutions and structures create and perpetuate gender differences**
- **Stereotypes about gender roles perpetuate differences**
- **Children come to construct their own ideas about being a girl or a boy**



# Health and physical development

Boys and girls are equally likely to be rated as very healthy (73%)	Boys taller and heavier
	Boys are more active (84% involved in sport vs. 67% of girls)
	Girls more overweight (32% vs 22%)
	Girls less chronic illness and disability (10% vs. 13%)
	More mental and behavioural problems in boys (24% vs. 12%)



# Relationships

41% of boys and 39% of girls said they were bullied in the past year

Of those bullied, boys experience more physical (69% vs. 46%) and verbal (78% vs. 69%) bullying but less exclusion (59% vs. 67%)

Number of friendships no different – modal number of close friends is 2 or 3 (40% boys vs. 42% girls)

15% of boys compared to 11% of girls admit to engaging in bullying

Both boys (89%) and girls (91%) would talk to Mum about a problem

More boys (65%) than girls (57%) would talk to Dad about a problem.

More mothers reported a highly positive relationship with daughters (41%) than with sons (30%)



# Activities

Both boys (57%) and girls (58%) often or occasionally help with younger siblings

Boys play sport almost every day (56%) more than girls (33%) but 30% boys vs. 12% of girls spend more than 1 hour a weekday at video games

65% of girls participate in cultural activities versus 31% of boys

Both boys (70%) and girls (69%) often or occasionally help with gardening

Boys (64% vs. 53%) more likely to put out bins. Girls more likely to help with cooking (80% vs. 66%) and washing dishes (83% vs. 69%)

For girls, family most important thing that make them happy (27% girls vs. 20% boys). For boys sport came first (27% boys vs. 12% girls)



# Education

65% of girls and 62% of boys feel they are getting on well with their schoolwork

Girls more likely to always like school, (34% vs 20%) look forward to school (32% vs 19%), like teachers (62% vs 44%)

86% taught by female teacher

Boys less likely to complete homework. 30% sometimes don't compared with 24% of girls.

Drumcondra Test of Vocabulary:  
Similar results – 67% correct for girls  
68% for boys

Drumcondra Test of Maths:  
Slightly favours boys – 55% vs 52%

Boys (50%) always like maths more than girls (44%) do.

38% of girls vs 25% of boys read for pleasure for more than an hour a day.  
12% boys and 5% girls never read for pleasure.



# Aspirations

Parents' aspirations high for both sexes	42% boys want to be a sports person when they grow up (7% of girls) - 23% of girls want to be teachers (2% of boys)
	14% of girls want to be hairdressers/beauticians/barbers (0% of boys) - 6% of boys want to be a garda (2% of girls)
	The person girls most admire is Mum or Dad (50%) followed by a pop star (18%), but for boys it is a footballer or sports star (40%) closely followed by Mum or Dad (39%)



# Bodies

**122 children participating in embedded qualitative study reported on:**

**Body image (Children's Body image Scale)**

**Select ideal body size from range of pictures of boys and girls**

- Majority of both boys and girls picked slightly smaller (thinner) than average body size as ideal for both boys and girls**
- There was very little difference in how boys and girls rated ideal body size for own and opposite sex**



# Qualitative findings

**120 families in the qualitative study, 58 boys and 64 girls**

**Questions on a wide range of topics, including a few direct questions for the children on gender.**

**Words differentiate:**

**'My mam always says I'm handsome...after like I spike my hair'**

**C. 'Me ma and me da (say I'm beautiful). And sometimes my sister.'**

**I. 'Do you think you're beautiful?'**

**C. 'Yeah'**



# Being a boy or a girl

**'The girls dress different and play different and they think different' (Boy)**

- C. 'From a girl's point of view they like to do their make-up and their nails and puppies and everything cute. And they like pink things.'
- I. 'And what about boys?'
- C. 'Boys like the outdoors more. They like to stand in a field.' (Boy)

**'And they are much more immature than girls I think... They just, when you are trying to be serious with them ..they just like go and mess with their friends or something (Girl)**

They (boys) are really different. They play different sports, wear different clothes, do different stuff. They spend way too much time watching TV and on the computer and they don't read books unless they are nerds.' (Girl)



# Conclusions

- Some of the differences found correspond closely to traditional stereotypes about male and female gender roles
- Some reflect emerging sex role patterns such as the stronger academic engagement of girls. ‘School is for girls’

HOWEVER a child’s sex is not a good predictor of **outcomes** at an individual level, given the huge overlap at age nine, more similarities exist than differences.

Yet , the children report a clear perception of different roles and direct experience of difference in appearance, clothing, demeanour, interests and activities.  
Gender is central to ideas about identity and will strongly influence life choices.



# Growing Up in Ireland Research Conference 2010