The Dangerous Gender: 
Cultivating Violence and Repressing Nurturing 
in Young Boys

by

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Our society is saturated with violence. That is not to say that the rate of violent crime is at an all-time high or that more individuals are experiencing violence now than in the past. However, cases of murder, beatings, shootings, domestic abuse, and other brutal actions are prevalent in our media and culture. Studies and reports on these acts often discuss factors such as race, class, and more specific details in an attempt to shed light on why they occur. However, one fact is rarely brought up when discussing violence: males are responsible for most of it. It is popular belief that men have inherently more aggressive personalities than women do and that for men, committing violent actions is natural. This notion is interrelated with the concept of nurturing as an innate quality of femininity. However, despite a handful of studies which suggest that the male hormone testosterone may make males slightly more aggressive than females (Miedzian, 39), the view that men are violent by nature is an unfounded and naïve assumption, which parallels a number of sexist ideologies. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that males are much more likely to be violent, as well as less likely to be nurturing, than females.

Considering the fact that violence can not be accounted for in biological terms, it becomes significant to discover and understand the other ways in which gender and violence are linked in our culture. Many societal factors contribute to the construction of a male role that is conducive to violence. Negative physical acts against others are the result of a number of variables, and although some studies claim to “know many of the reasons, or underlying causes, for these acts” (Kinnear, 1), gender role construction is an important, but often overlooked, factor. Although adults commit most severe cases of
violence, I argue that the gendering process, which begins at birth, encourages boys to learn violent tendencies at a very early age. Therefore, considering the ways in which children are gendered is a critical step towards understanding how violence is cultivated in males.

Numerous studies have successfully illustrated the different ways in which children acquire stereotypic gender roles. Instead of assuming that males and females are naturally opposed, these works examine the ways in which society encourages certain sex-specific behaviors. The aforementioned fact of gender linkage in violence necessitates a focus on how violent behavior is encouraged, and nurturing behavior is discouraged, in young boys. The aggressive actions of young children rarely receive media attention, unless, as in recent school shooting incidents, the actions are extremely disturbing and brutal. In fact, while looking for literature on the topic of violence and young children, I was confronted with numerous studies of teenage shootings but never a direct look at how violence is more subtly cultivated in young boys. It is my hypothesis that many less obvious behaviors in young boys may be the possible points of origin for violent actions later in life. Although these aspects of young boys’ lives may be viewed as harmless and innocent, they must be considered to be potentially dangerous repercussions of stereotypical gender-role formation. Therefore, I pose the pertinent question; to what extent are socially constructed, gender-specific behaviors and attitudes in young boys at school perpetuating their potential for aggression and violence and reducing their likelihood of being nurturing? It is not my goal to see whether boys who behave a certain way in school become violent later in life, but rather to look at certain interactions between young children which may subtly or explicitly indicate how
violence is encouraged and legitimized and nurturing is discouraged specifically in boys. I suggest that a multi-layered process involving peers, adults, institutions such as schools, as well as boys’ own desires, increases the likelihood of boys being violent in contemporary society. This process, which consists of constructing the notion of boys and girls as opposites, rewarding male aggression, punishing male empathy, and positioning males in dominant roles to females, begins early and is evident in the school interactions of young children.

At the heart of this process is society’s perpetuating of stereotypical sex roles. Research on gender role development in children has been conducted from a number of different theoretical standpoints and generates an array of potential practical applications. In “Gender Schema Theory and Its Implications for Child Development: Raising Gender-aschematic Children in a Gender-schematic Society,” Sandra Lipsitz Bem identifies three dominant theories of gender role development: social learning theory, cognitive-developmental theory, and gender schema theory. Social learning theory, which repeatedly presents itself, whether explicitly or implicitly, in other readings, is described as the learning of sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate behavior through rewards, punishments, observation, and modeling. This theory presents children as passive recipients of environmental factors. (Bem 598-599) Alternatively, cognitive-developmental theory portrays children as active agents in their sex-role socialization. They first self-identify themselves as male or female and are then motivated to seek out gender-appropriate values and behaviors. However, one of Bem’s primary motivating questions asks why children identify so readily with the category of sex instead of other organizing factors such as race and religion. (Bem 601-602)
In response to this query, as well as in attempt to combine some of the more concrete tenets of both social learning theory and cognitive-developmental theory, Bem advances her own gender schema theory. This theory is based on the idea that children concurrently learn society’s cultural definitions of maleness and femaleness as well as use “this heterogeneous network of sex-related associations in order to evaluate and assimilate new information” (Bem 603). Gender schema theory answers Bem’s question of why sex has cognitive primacy over other social categories by illuminating the extent to which culture links gender to nearly everything around us, including non-sex related behaviors, objects, and concepts. (Bem 608) Critical to Bem’s argument is that children become sex-typed, or develop a gender schema with which to interpret their surroundings, by learning two crucial things from society: first, the mass of sex-related associations that can become a sort of cognitive filter of information, and second, the intensive and extensive relevance the dichotomy between male and female has “to virtually every domain of human experience” (Bem 608).

Gender schema theory has a number of important implications for the understanding of how violent behavior is acquired by young boys. If males seek to recognize certain behaviors which are labeled male by society, then prevailing attitudes of violence and aggression are perpetuated not only by the actions of other boys, but also by other gendered associations, such as the notion of females as the naturally nurturing gender. A closer look at the specific violence-related and gendered associations children make suggest that the lives of boys are saturated with pressures to become aggressive and non-empathetic.
As mentioned earlier, there is a limited amount of research that focuses on the
gendering of children and, more specifically, its implications for violence in young boys.
To receive a better understanding of how this process functions, I turned to the works of a
number of feminist scholars. Boys Will Be Boys, by Myriam Medzian examines the
societal relationship between masculinity and violence. This work thoroughly analyzes
many contributing factors to what she calls the “masculine mystique.” Included in her
discussion is the popular feminist notion of maleness being the societal norm, the
possibility that biological factors make men more aggressive, as well as the effects of
neglect and mass media on boys. Miedzian points out a number of the societal pressures
that play a part in constructing the aggressive and dominant male. She suggests that areas
such as school classes, sports programs, music, media, and the toy industry, which treats
children as a commercial market instead of a precious natural resource (Miedzian 165),
are all sources of violent attitudes and in need of reform. She also explains that they are
saturated with the type of gender dichotomy that Bem says children use to decide which
behaviors to exhibit. Miedzian explains many ways in which these violent attitudes are
grounded in boys instead of girls, while caring and nurturing are
discouraged. When considering the work of Miedzian and the theory of Bem, it becomes
apparent that both a child’s environment, which “determines which behaviors will
become dominant in their lives” (Miedzian 298), as well as their cognitive schema, “a
network of associations that organizes and guides an individual’s perception” (Bem 603),
are responsible for perpetuating stereotypical gender-role formation. Therefore, it was
critical to my research to seek an understanding of young boys’ environmental factors as
well as the gender-based associations they make.
Miedzian, like many scholars on the issue of children and violence, concentrates on the effects of the media and pop culture on young children. Although the importance of such research should not be obscured, a fundamental aspect of socialization involves human interaction. Specifically, children are active sources of perpetuating certain behaviors in their peers. A strong encouragement of stereotypical gender roles, which includes the cultivating of violence in boys, must be present in the daily contact boys and girls have with each other. Although the gendering process occurs in a number of sites, including at home and around the neighborhood, I chose to focus on school, where a large number of children interact on multiple different levels. Therefore, it became necessary to consider works which examine the behaviors of children in school settings.

In “Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity Among Elementary School Boys and Girls,” Adler, Kless, and Adler assert that peer cultures give kids a chance “to escape the well-intentioned efforts of their schools and parents to shape or individualize them” (Adler et al 170). They describe a number of important factors which determine popularity for boys and girls in grade school. Among these traits are athletic ability, coolness, and toughness for boys, and family background, physical appearance, and social development for girls. The researchers claim that these characteristics “embody the models of children’s idealized gender roles” (Adler et al 183). These aspects of popularity are excellent examples of potential sources of violent behavior in later years of boys’ lives. For example, asserting their physical dominance in sports and being resistant to the authority of teachers are two ways boys could obtain popularity. However, these two traits are also be suggestive of males’ desire to show their power physically and
resist authority later in life (which unfortunately may have more extreme consequences beyond organized sports and the principle’s office as the children grow up).

Perhaps most importantly, Adler et al help to reject the notion of males and females as natural opposites. The process by which children enforce different popularity traits suggests that these male/female distinctions are constructed and require regular maintenance. For example, the stigmatization of boys who were poor at athletics and girls who were not considered to be beautiful sends a message to children that practicing typical gender behavior is not only worthy of praise but also necessary to avoid such hurtful labels as “fag” and “ugly.” (Adler et al, 174) Contrary to biological explanations of sex differences, Adler et al assert that “in discerning, adapting to, and creatively forging these features of popularity, children actively socialize themselves to the gender roles embodied in their peer culture” (Adler et al, 182-183).

Although this article appears to be less motivated by the prospect of changing society, it does discuss slight shifts in traditional methods of gaining popularity in recent history. For example, girls are experiencing some gender-role expansion into more traditionally male areas such as sports and achievement. Yet Adler and her colleagues attribute this to changes in family life, such as the increase of dual-career homes, which might also be expected to impact boys’ behavior. Thus, it is striking that boys have made less significant expansion into traditionally feminine areas than the opposite scenario. For some reason, boys are discouraged or not motivated to attempt behaviors that are outside of their dominant traditions. Perhaps boys are not only discouraged by institutions and their peers from seeking non-traditional roles, but also encouraged to
seek out more conventional male behavior by being rewarded with certain freedoms less available to females.

Evidence of this type of social rewarding can be seen in “Becoming a Gendered Body: Practices of Preschools” by Karin A. Martin, which suggests that the socialization of more active behaviors in boys occurs as early as preschool. Martin observes the actions of boys and girls in preschool to highlight how children are encouraged to use their bodies in gender-specific ways. Once again, we see that these sex-role characteristics are constructed to seem natural. Martin notes that past studies have shown that bodies are often a “source of power for men” but are often “sources of anxiety and tentativeness” (Martin, 495) for women. These concepts, which are significant when considering violence and gender, are illustrated in many of the observations Martin makes in preschool classes. For example, under a “hidden school curriculum,” boys were permitted to be louder, more active, and rougher than the girls.

However, boys were not at a complete advantage in the classroom. Boys were physically disciplined in a negative way more often than girls. In the following passage, Martin contends that this observation has an important link to violence:

Because boys more frequently than girls experienced interactions in which their bodies were physically restrained or disciplined by an adult who had more power and was angry, they may be more likely than girls to associate physical interaction with struggle and anger, and thus may be more likely to be aggressive or disruptive. (Martin, 507)

Martin continues by discussing how the children readily imitated same-sex peers.

Groups of children were, for the most part, separated by gender. These boundaries, which were disrupted in many ways, were most frequently broken by “hostile, angry, controlling, [and] hurtful” (Martin, 509) actions of boys. These observations in very
young boys and girls further suggest that physical aggression manifests itself in the male
gender early in life. However, Martin’s study emphasizes that this manifestation is due
not to biological differences, but to the socialization of children’s bodies, which “makes
gender differences feel and appear natural, which allows for such bodily differences to
emerge throughout the life course” (Martin, 495).

This theory of institutional and peer socialization and its implications for gender
roles is also a major focus of “Girls and Boys Together... But Mostly Apart: Gender
Arrangements in Elementary Schools” by Barrie Thorne. The article concentrates on the
interactions between gender groups and individuals in various school settings. Unlike
many scholars on the subject, Thorne argues that sex segregation is far from total, and
that where the sexes meet provides much insight as to how each operates. Her
observations in different cross-sex activities, such as chasing, competition, and invasion
of single-sex play, highlight ways in which differences between genders are encouraged
and perpetuated by both groups. For example, like Adler et al, Thorne notes that girls are
more accepted into traditionally male activities than boys who attempt to join
traditionally female ones. She asserts that “the fact that girls seek and have more access
to boys’ worlds than vise versa, and the fact that girls who travel with the other sex are
less stigmatized for it, are obvious asymmetries” (Thorne, 122). When considering that
nurturing and caring are traditionally female characteristics, this statement has broad
implications for the explanation of how boys are discouraged from being compassionate
and encouraged to be tough. Another important aspect of this study is its concentration
on activities in cafeterias and on the playground. These areas are rich with gendered
interactions and peer activities, ideal for observing how violence, aggression, and nurturing are constructed and acted out.

The research discussed above encouraged me to examine further what types of activities, attitudes, and behaviors exist in young children which may contribute to the gendered construction of violence. The reinforcement of these beliefs through peer interaction became central to my argument that social forces are responsible for the gendering of violence. I observed the activities of third-grade boys and girls during lunch periods and recess. Because I work with a mildly autistic eight-year-old and have served as an aid in his classroom during such activities, I was able to observe gender specific conversations and activities in this setting. By observing and talking to children, I discovered some of the ways in which gender and violence manifest themselves in the behaviors of young boys and girls, and how they are socially maintained on a day to day basis. Some of the behaviors I looked for include violent and non-violent play, the encouragement and discouragement children give and receive towards being rough or not, the inclusion and exclusion of boys and girls in gender-specific activities, and other general differences in male and female behavior. Aggression, a popular topic of discussion among many scholars interested in gender and children, is another type of behavior I paid close attention to. I was interested in which students were the most vocal about how they feel, as well as which students take action and how they do so. In addition, I examined the ways in which boys and girls in the class are positioned in relation to each other. Issues of power, control, and influence between genders repeatedly presented themselves in the classroom. Although I was able to get a feel for the children's varying views on masculinity by observing the same children on multiple
occasions, the number of test cases I observed was limited. Consequently, my ability to apply my conclusions to all children is also limited.

In this essay, I argue that the actions and words of young children in school highlight the gendered encouragement of potentially violent behavior in boys, while at the same time repressing any possibilities of nurturing conduct. Elements in both the organization of the school as well as single and cross-gender interactions presented themselves as clues helpful for understanding how aggression and dominance is constructed as natural for boys while caring is emphasized as deviant. Both male and female peers played a significant role in promoting the idea of the dominant male even at such a young age. Although certain institutional systems within the school presented themselves as catalysts to gendering, peer interactions constituted the most significant findings in respect to gender-specific violence.

Methods

My research took place in a Catholic elementary school that teaches kindergarten through eighth grade. The three-story building, which is located in a small Connecticut city, has one classroom designated to each of the nine grades. My specific observations focussed on the twenty-five children who comprised the third grade class. I attended five lunch periods and five recesses for a total of about five hours at the school. During this time I acted as a visible, but for the most part silent, assistant to the teachers.

While the students ate their lunch, a process that took place in the third grade classroom each day at eleven-o-clock a.m., I moved from one part of the room to another and took notes on what I saw. Meanwhile, whichever teacher was on lunch duty would
occasionally poke her head in to make sure things were under control. The children rarely took much notice of me in their interactions and quickly learned that I was not there to ensure that discipline was maintained. In fact, on many occasions, the teacher on duty scolded the class or certain individuals for being too loud or inappropriate despite my presence in the room. Many children acted out during designated quiet times, but became silent as a teacher approached. Although I felt somewhat guilty for not keeping the students in order during lunch, I felt as though it was necessary for the children to feel comfortable enough to do and say as they pleased. My interaction with certain children during lunch took place for non-disciplinary reasons, such as permitting a student to go to the bathroom or the nurse. Other interactions were initiated by the students, but appeared interesting enough in light of my study to warrant my further questioning. For example, one discussion of Halloween costumes and another concerning football presented some potentially useful gender related issues. Otherwise, I remained silent and took numerous notes about the organization of the room, what was said and done, certain gestures, characteristics displayed by different students, and other patterns of the lunch process. One specific lunchtime took place in the parish hall next to the school. Although students from kindergarten through the fourth grade were all present at this time, I continued to focus on the third grade, taking notes as described above.

My involvement in recess was very similar to lunch. I remained a silent observer, responding only to children’s questions and the occasional minor injury. Recess took place in the limited space of the concrete parking lot behind the school. One major difference between recess and lunch was that recess combined kindergarten through grade three. Although I focussed my attention on members of the third grade, many
mixed grade groups emerged throughout the playground. There were also certain occasions when the actions of younger children on the playground presented themselves as critical to my topic. For example, I recorded one incident where a group of younger girls brought me to their crying friend who had allegedly been pushed down by a boy. Once again, I rarely took disciplinary action and am quite certain that the students participated in the types of activities they desired, unhampered by my presence. Due to the overcrowding of cars in the lot, one particular recess session took place inside the classroom. Although the activities during this recess were significantly different from other days, my observational technique remained more or less the same. The notes I took during recess time focussed on gender and non-gender organization of play, the types of activities different groups engaged in, characteristics of certain play (i.e. aggressive behavior, turn-taking), verbal usage, teacher interactions, and, perhaps most importantly, specific interactions between boys and girls.

It must be noted that I did not examine the role Catholicism plays in the daily life of the students. Although there are probably many ways in which private Catholic schools differ from other schools, having not looked directly at public schools, I am unable to draw observation-based comparisons between the two. Rather than incorporating assumptions about Catholic schools such as the possibility of their encouragement of more nurturing behavior or, on the other hand, of being more deeply routed in hierarchical traditions, I have attempted to narrow my focus to the actions of the children and teachers I observed.
Results

My five days of research with the twenty-five third graders provided an array of interesting observations pertaining to sex-role formation and its significance to the encouragement of violent behavior and the repression of empathy in boys. The swarming confusion of the students during lunch and recess was overwhelming at first glance, but soon proved to be rich with interactions directly or indirectly related to the issues of gender and violence. The ways in which the school and the children themselves separated boys and girls were consistent with those suggested by a number of previous studies. Data focussing on the concepts of violence, aggression, and dominance illustrate a complex system of ideologies and behaviors. This system is expressed in blatant physical and verbal patterns as well as in more subtle actions between males and females. It became obvious that both students and teachers were encouraging gender-specific behavior and that children in particular were reinforcing violence-related patterns in boys.

The Gender Division

Gender division in the school was obvious in a number of forms. First, there were several ways in which the school itself encouraged separation of the sexes and highlighted the constructed differences between boys and girls. One example of this type of institutional gender division was the enforcement of single-sex lines. Although the third-grade room was divided into eight co-ed desk groupings, when the children were asked to line up for recess they were expected to form two separate lines, one for boys and one for girls. In the school hallway, children from grades one through four would be incorporated into these two long lines before heading to the playground. Massing all of
the boys and girls from the four grades into these two separate groups suggested that when it comes to social interaction, the school saw differences between boys and girls as far more significant than the differences of age or school level.

Another way in which the school stressed the significance of gender was through clothing. Like many private schools, the one under observation enforced the use of uniforms. Boys had the option of wearing navy pants or shorts with either a shirt and tie, sweater, or a blue polo shirt. Girls, on the other hand, could wear either a blue dress, skirt, pants, or shorts with a shirt or sweater. I observed very few girls who would wear pants or shorts over the dress or skirt option. Whether this decision was of the girls' own volition or encouraged at home is unclear. However, the slightly more restrictive dresses and skirts served as an important symbol. Although the children had to wear uniforms to prevent inappropriate attire and stress their unity, the different clothing served as a constant reminder of the gender divide.

Finally, one of the most obvious and most normalized example of institutional gender emphasizing was the use of the terms "boys and girls." This phrase preceded many of the instructions given by teachers at the school. Although they could have chosen less polarized terms such as "students," "children," or "kids," or even rejected the notion of labeling altogether by saying "listen up" or "excuse me" to address the class, teachers opted for the more gender specific expression. By considering these three examples, it is evident that Bem is correct in suggesting that societies teach children that "the dichotomy between male and female has intensive and extensive relevance to virtually every domain of human experience" (Bem 608). Therefore, the school is
actively encouraging children to internalize the distinction between boys and girls and to
seek further division from the opposite sex.

Although institutional divisions of gender were present at the school, children
separated themselves into single-sex groups on numerous occasions. The most obvious
organization of this nature took place on the playground. Many girls would join together
to play jump rope close to the school. On one occasion, two of the children’s mothers
who were watching recess led a large faction of girls in a jump rope game, in which
rhymes with gender themes, such as “I like the boys and the boys like me,” were sung.
Small groups of boys would often have an organized ball or tag game further from the
building.

Surprisingly, there were also a large number of mixed-gender activities on the
playground, primarily taking the form of tag and chasing games. One possible reason for
the high level of these co-ed groups is the limited amount of equipment and space on the
playground. Past observations in schools have highlighted the separation of the sexes in
large, well-equipped areas, where “boys controlled the large fixed spaces designated for
team sports (baseball diamonds, grassy fields used for football or soccer)” while “girls
more often played closer to the building, doing tricks on the monkey bars” (Thorne, 117).

As the site I observed consisted of one parking lot with no grass, swings, or other
equipment, it is possible that the students were encouraged to mix by default. Although
the games that involved both boys and girls did rely heavily on the participation of both
groups, there was still always a clear gender distinction embedded in the play. More
often than not, these tag or chase sessions would pit single-sex teams against one another.
The gender division became the defining feature of the game. According to Thorne,
“cross-gender chasing dramatically affirms boundaries between boys and girls” (Thorne, 68). These games, which include taunting, physical aggression, and conflict teach children to direct negative energy towards the opposite sex. It is likely that this type of peer encouragement influences some children who would be less inclined to act upon the gender barrier to do so. Students who are used to playing alongside brothers and sisters at home may be induced to internalize a more significant and socially accepted separation between genders.

Lunchtime in the classroom had the children eating in their co-ed desk arrangements. Although students would shout across the room to their same-sex peers, they were required to stay seated most of the time. The one opportunity the students got to organize themselves during lunch in the parish hall resulted in almost completely sex-segregated tables. During this session, the third grade was comprised of one all-girl table and two boy tables, each including one girl. It can be assumed that if the children had it their way, the classroom would be divided into their gender specific peer groups as well.

The fact that a girl was seated at both of the boys’ tables, but no boy joined the girls’ table is an example of an important detail concerning gender separation. I made a number of observations of girls crossing over into male territory. However, a similar leap by a male was rare, and often justified ridicule. One third-grade boy who had a tendency to play with girls was shunned by other boys and even some girls in the class. After observing a similar situation, Thorne writes, “the fact that girls seek and have more access to boys’ worlds than vice versa, and the fact that girls who travel with the other sex are less stigmatized for it, are obvious asymmetries” (Thorne, 122). The following
data on violent related behavior will stress the potential negative affects of such asymmetries.

**Violence-Related Behavior**

Although I observed many examples of obvious physical violence at the school, I also noticed a number of less explicit behaviors that may have a connection to the manifestation of violence as a gendered trait in young children. On the whole, there was a much greater level of physical activity displayed by boys. They were louder, more antagonistic, and simply more violent than the girls. In the classroom, boys shouted across the room, ran between desks, talked during quiet times, and resisted the authority of teachers. On the playground, they engaged in punching, pushing, and were generally quite rough. Although girls displayed these types of actions from time to time, boys were consistent in their actions. However, it does not suffice to say that boys were more violent than girls without taking a more detailed look at what attitudes, concepts, and modes of peer interaction exist that perpetuate such an imbalance. The remaining section of my results focuses on five major themes that presented themselves as critical pieces of the gendered violence problem.

*The Violence Connection*

One interesting distinction between the sexes was the boys’ readiness to take commonplace activities and transform them into more exciting, and consequently more violent, games. In many cases, boys appeared to be making a boring situation more fun. However, the fact that they equated this fun with violence suggests that boys have a deeply rooted connection between pleasure and violent behavior. I noticed one example of this type of connection by watching two boys use a chess set during indoor recess.
They took the time to set all of the pieces in the correct starting positions, but when it came time to begin the game they smiled at each other, yelled “Attack!,” and proceeded to shove all of the pieces together while making battle noises. Another example of males adding violence to a mundane activity occurred during the quiet time before recess. One boy sat in his chair, squinted his eyes, and trembled in his seat until he became red. I asked another boy, who was quite entertained by his peer’s actions, what the shaking boy was doing. “He’s trying to explode!” was the reply. Another incident involved a group of boys who decided that the bee that had flown in through the window had to be killed. Two girls watched as four boys grabbed heavy objects and ran around the room on a bee hunt. I had to convince a boy who was allergic to bees to abandon chasing the stinging insect with a book in favor of a more defensive strategy.

These episodes illustrate the internalized violence connection boys make to everyday activities. However, by watching the children closely, it became evident that some of the enjoyment boys received from such violent play was due to the encouragement and approval they were given by their peers. Instead of presenting themselves as natural activities that the boys would take part in at home alone in their rooms, these displays were highly dramatized. They took the form of entertainment for the approving classmates. This example of violence for show suggests that boys might not be attracted to such behavior without the encouragement of peers.

*Image: The Tough Rebel*

Image construction was a very important aspect of the children’s behavior in school. Girls as well as boys placed a great emphasis on which male words and actions were appropriate. It quickly became evident that a critical aspect of boys’ identities was
being tough and, at times, rebellious. I will use the term “tough” as equivalent to strong
and rough during play, as well as assertive of one’s resilience and power. The socially
positive image of boys being physically dominant is supported by Adler et al who write,
“fighting, whether formal fights or informal pushing, shoving, or roughhousing, was a
means of establishing a social order” (Adler et al, 172). Although I did not observe any
formal fist fights or wrestling matches, there was plenty of roughhousing on the
playground which generated a great deal of excitement among some of the third grade
boys.

Adler et al stress the importance of athletic ability, which usually implies being
tough, in determining who is popular among boys. My observations on the playground
support this notion of being strong and athletic to obtain prestige. Even in the class, one
boy struck up a conversation with me about how he was destined to be great at football.
He explained that he had been playing with his older brother, a friend, and another older
boy who was “kinda’ fat, so he’s, you know, big and good.” The boy described how he
broke past these players to score multiple touchdowns. Apparently, this boy expected me
to give him similar approval for his toughness to the encouragement that he was no doubt
getting from his peers and possibly at home. On another occasion, the same boy threw
his dessert to me so I could open it for him. When I failed to catch it he said, “you won’t
be good at football or baseball . . . the best sports,” implying that it was a goal of all males
to achieve at these activities.

Other examples of boys who failed to achieve the popular tough image
highlighted the importance of traditional male roles in order to obtain acceptance. During
one lunch period, one of the less active and more alienated boys asked if he could join a
particular group of boys for recess. One boy replied, “No, he’s not rough enough.” A girl confirmed the rejection by saying, “He can play soft games.” The connection between being tough and being allowed to participate in a prestigious game stresses how peers reward the importance of a strong male image. Adler et al, who claim that this type of toughness is a key factor in earning popularity as a boy, also suggest that those boys who do not display such masculine tendencies are often punished. As an example from their research, “Mikey, an unpopular boy with asthma who was fairly uncoordinated and weak, was often the victim of rough playground tackles in football and checks in soccer” (Adler et al, 172).

In addition, the girl’s statement about the boy being “soft” alludes to the fact that females have also learned and support the specific patterns males are expected to follow. During a discussion of Halloween costumes, a group of girls found it wildly humorous and ridiculous that I had chosen to be a pink flower. The notion of a male representing something delicate and deviant from the traditional gendered color scheme justified their laughter and confusion. In her book, School Talk, Donna Eder illustrates how “boys within peer groups become increasingly important sources of ‘policing masculinity’” (Eder, 64) through rewarding stertotypic male behavior and ridiculing those who do not ascribe to such standards. However, the previous examples suggest that girls may be nearly or as important in regulating toughness in males. Eder supports this phenomenon by describing cases of girls as well as boys using homosexual labels to insult boys who identified with females more than the others. She emphasizes that since these insults are so hurtful to young children, “their extensive use suggests that strong pressure is needed to reinforce traditional masculine behavior” (Eder, 64).
Another pattern that seemed to be linked to the male image was the tendency for boys to be more rebellious than girls. The main way this resistance to authority was displayed was in refusal to be quiet during designated times and the vocal expression of discontent. Students were asked to put their heads on their desks and be quiet every day before they were allowed to go out to recess. Although most of the children obeyed this rule, there were always a few boys who were highly disruptive while the teacher was out of the room. One boy in particular refused to stay in his seat or be quiet. As other children encouraged him to do so by whispering “Come on!” and “Shhhh,” he mocked them. As the teacher approached, the children warned “Teacher! Teacher!” The boy replied, “So? What’s the problem with the teacher?” His macho display earned him ten minutes without recess.

At other times, the entire class was made to wait to go out. In these situations, most of the class remained quiet in hopes of getting let out. However, a few boys groaned and stumped in anger around the room, repeating such complaints as “Come on! Why can’t we go out?” This solely male display suggested that the boys thought their protests would improve their likelihood of going out sooner or that somehow it was more rewarding to act out in front of the others. It is noteworthy that the boys felt like they had been treated unfairly and were not going to remain silent victims. This masculine display may also be an attempt to assert their maleness in front of the rest of the class. Eder notes that less rebellious boys often “admired the toughness and defiance” (Eder, 79) of these other children. This suggests that boys are socialized to revere fighting back. In contrast to the girls, these boys established themselves as empowered individuals who expected to get their way. Teachers seemed to acknowledge this resistance by singling boys out for
punishment much more often than girls. On one occasion, the entire class was being disruptive during lunch. The teacher on duty entered the room and picked three boys to exit the room as a disciplinary measure.

It is a likely assumption that this type of gendered distinction on the part of the teachers only serves to perpetuate the role of the male rebel. Adler et al observed that “the popular boys . . . were defiant of adult authority, challenged existing rules, and received more disciplinary actions than did boys in the other groups” (Adler et al, 173). However, my observations suggest a slightly different dynamic. The boys who were loud during quiet time were met with discontent from their classmates who wished to go outside. The rebelliousness of these boys did not appear to be a direct attempt to achieve praise or popularity. To the contrary, their actions displayed their positioning in the class as dominant members. They viewed themselves as above the rules and on a high enough level to justify disobeying their, perhaps of some significance, female teachers. This power dynamic is critical to the understanding of gendered violence-related behavior.

*Threats: The Fist Versus the Kiss*

Another way in which boys expressed their assumed power was through the use of threats. These physical and verbal manifestations of male dominant ideology were present in many interactions between boys and girls. On the first day of my observations, I entered the classroom just behind a girl who was bringing in a piece of her birthday cake to put on the teacher’s desk. The first words I heard in the room were from a boy who jumped out of his seat, pointed at the girl, and shouted, “Give me one before I kill you!” Other threats of this nature included boys threatening to hurt or kill someone if they did not obey his demands. Physical threats mainly took the form of boys holding up
a fist while also giving a conniving smile. One boy asked me to tie his shoes outside at recess. After doing so, I joked that they might never come off again. His reply was to show me his fists and the popular evil grin before running off to join his peers. Once again, it is apparent that some boys believe that their physical strength and ability to inflict harm will help them get what they want from others. This power over others, although often displayed in a joking manner, suggests a problematic and potentially dangerous philosophy to be employed throughout a boy's life. In addition, the use of such threats sends the message to less physically powerful boys that they must adhere to these standards if they expect to get their way in life.

Girls rarely used similar verbal or physical death or pain threats. To obtain any power over the more egotistical and physical boys, they were required to utilize different tactics; namely, the kiss. Other studies describe games such as "kiss or kill" (Thorne, 68), which implies a similar distinction. During one recess, a group of third grade boys was pitted against a group of third grade girls in a chasing game. One boy ran up to me and ordered, "Help us get our commander back!" Apparently one member of the boys' team had become a "traitor" and joined the girls' side. As they dragged this boy away from the girls, he pleaded, "But if I'm on [the boys'] team, [girl's name] will try to get me and kiss me!" A related incident took place during lunch on a different day. A girl was swinging a bag at a boy, who asked me to make her stop. Another girl taunted, "What, he's afraid of a girl?" "But she kissed me!" was his excuse. It became obvious that the girls were using their threat of physical affection as a way of regaining some of the physical power the boys had over them. Whereas the boys used their fists in attempt to get what they wanted, girls used the much less violent kiss to gain control over boys'
actions. Adler et al observed that showing affection toward boys was an important status symbol. (Adler et al, 180) I argue that, at least in third graders, it is also a gendered, yet peaceful, form of empowerment.

The kiss was viewed as unwanted for a number of possible reasons. Thorne describes the concept of touch from the opposite sex as polluting. She lists different cases of boys positioning girls as contaminators and hosts of “cooties” (Thorne, 74), which are dangerous to the pure and healthy male. Although none of the children I observed used the word “cooties,” it became obvious that the third grade boys were either actually threatened by female intimacy or, more likely, discouraged from expressing their interest or enjoyment by their peers. Boys seemed to consider the concept of love or even close friendship as traditionally feminine. Close contact with a girl warranted criticism from other more appropriate males.

*Victims*

Up to this point, it may be assumed that the gendering of violence-related behavior positions males as the offenders and females as the common victims. However, although it is true that most violent crime is committed by men, it is also true that “men are still the most frequent victims of violence” (Miedzian, xxiv). Although violence towards women is probably fueled by the imbalance of power previously discussed in this study, social practices must stress the importance of protecting women, more than men, from negative physical acts. In light of this theory, I observed one rough game between girls and boys which involved chasing. I watched as one boy got pushed onto the ground by a female opponent. After shaking it off, the boy came to me to help him tie his shoe, which had become one of my primary functions on the playground. As I
double-knotted his laces, I asked the boy what the game was about. He replied, "The girls chase us around and try to hurt us, and then we chase them but don't try to hurt."

When I questioned why the girls were allowed to inflict pain but not the boys, he answered, "Well, isn't that a law that they have?" Apparently, it was assumed that boys, in their position of greater power, were not permitted to use this dominant role to harm the weaker females. This concept has two major problematic ramifications. First, it continues to position girls as the more fragile of the sexes. Furthermore, although it may potentially help protect females from violence, this idea assumes that males do not require similar care and may, in effect, increase male to male violence.

Another important observation concerning victims was how vocal they were when attacked or hurt. On two separate occasions, younger girls came crying to me with their friends complaining that a boy had pushed her or pinched her. These girls were sent to the nurse with the support of their peers. Although I witnessed many boys being harmed by boys, the victim never brought it to my attention. It was commonplace for those males who were hurt to get up, deal with the pain, and continue the activity. This fact may support the idea that it is more of a shock when females are the victims of violence.

Concurrently, boys are expected to accept that being the target of violence is a routine occurrence. Eder explains that this refusal to admit to being hurt is strongly regulated by other children. Boys who are not able to give or take pain are often the subjects of ritual insults that describe the children as fragile, feminine, or homosexual. (Eder, 63) This type of insulting is another confirmation boys are not naturally violent and aggressive, but are instead socially encouraged to be so.
Violent Girls

Although I observed much more violence-related behavior in boys, it would be misleading to suggest that no similar actions were observed in girls. In fact, there were quite a few instances of pushing, pinching, grabbing, and pulling from females. However, the subtle differences between these actions and those of boys, as well as the even more important distinction between how children reacted to each, highlight some important details concerning the acceptance of gender roles.

Nearly all of the violence displayed by females was directed towards boys, further establishing males as the most popular target. One girl in particular asserted herself as a very physical and formidable opponent in chasing and pushing games. She would break into large groups of boys to “kidnap” one of them, push boys onto the ground, and thoroughly enjoy the process. This girl was also one of the few girls I saw who ever wore shorts. Perhaps of most interest was the fact that girls and boys alike held her in great esteem. Although she displayed uncharacteristic female behavior, she was completely accepted by her peers. It is possible that her nontraditional position of power won her acceptance with the boys as well as admiration from the girls. It is important to note that, as we saw with the boy who was not “rough” and could “play soft games,” the nontraditional male does not share such acceptance. To the contrary, both boys and girls shun him. This idea supports the work of Adler et al, who assert, “To a greater extent than did the boys, then, [girls] attained some gender-role expansion” (Adler et al).

Apparently, boys seem destined to remain trapped by institutions, peers, and society at large in the stereotypic male role, which, as illustrated by these data, contains strong connections to potentially violent behavior.
Thorne’s work describes a girl who crossed gender boundaries in a similar way. This girl, Jessie, experienced similar success with the acceptance of her peers. Instead of earning herself criticism, “her skills in athletics and in verbal and physical confrontation (it was widely acknowledged that she could beat up ant boy in the school) gained Jessie a kind of wary respect” (Thorne, 131). Thorne also describes a boy, Brian, who crossed over into more traditionally feminine play. Unlike Jessie, both girls and boys stigmatized him. Thorne explains that this inequality is linked to the male dominated hierarchy:

When Jessie or Nancy beat up a boy, a ripple of excitement moved among the girls, including me; I think it gave us a sense that one of our kind could resist and even herself exert physical dominance over boys. Through such processes of identification, the accomplishments of girls who cross the gender divide may challenge familiar stereotypes and even the boundaries themselves. However, I saw no evidence that Brian’s crossing grabbed the imagination of other boys: the barriers to movement in the other direction are heavy indeed. (Thorne, 133)

This passage suggests that male activity is positioned as superior to female behavior. Girls’ movements into traditionally male areas were viewed as succeeding and moving up, whereas similar deviations by boys were viewed as lowering standards and deserved harsh peer regulation.

**Conclusion**

The research I have done with third grade children has helped to focus my concern on the gendering of violence at a young age into a few specific areas. The ways in which traditional gender roles are enforced at school by institutional and social methods were in many ways consistent across studies done by Thorne, Eder, Martin, Adler et al, and others. After observing students for just five days, it is evident to me that sex stereotypes are being strongly reinforced on a number of levels, and that the
community of scholars on the issue are well aware of many of these patterns. Eder acknowledges this social reinforcement and suggests that it is strongly linked to violence-related behavior:

Until recently it was assumed by many that seeking power over others is a natural desire and thus not in need of explanation. However, there is now increasing awareness of belief systems and social institutions that cause people to take on the roles and behaviors of the oppressor as well as those of the oppressed. (Eder, 154)

This passage implies that institutions such as schools in addition to peer culture are of the utmost importance to gendering children as well as cultivating violence in boys. My concentration on violence-related behavior reorganizes previous speculations on the matter as well as highlighting new concepts.

Many researchers acknowledge the importance of peers in gender role formation. However, when addressing the issue of violence, there is rarely as much focus on child interactions as there is on other societal influences such as the television. My study suggests that although some children may be learning violent behavior outside of school, the continual perpetuation and gendering of these tendencies occurs when mass numbers of children congregate. Although many children may be discouraged from being violent and may even be protected from some harmful effects of the media at home, there is an overwhelming amount of pressure for boys to ascribe to the traditional tough, rebellious image and to adopt more aggressive actions. I was quite surprised by the pivotal role females played in enforcing the type of behavior described above. Girls have apparently learned to disseminate the notion that it is unacceptable for boys to be "soft," caring, or vulnerable to any amount of female empowerment.
The perpetuating of oppressive and aggressive attitudes in boys by peers also confirms the concept that males are not more violent than females due to biological differences. In other words, "if boys naturally desired to be tough, competitive, and aggressive, they would not need such strong peer pressure to do so" (Eder, 64). More so than girls, boys are trapped in this strict gender framework, either destined to seek approval within the guidelines, or left to risk stigmatization by attempting to deviate from traditional identities. The fact that my study showed boys to be much more violent than girls indicates a highly negative aspect of this gendering process. The strength of peers to encourage these tendencies in boys while discouraging more nurturing alternatives has grave implications for the children's further school years and the future of society as a whole.

Although I and other researchers such as Miedzian may be able to speculate about the harmful consequences of the trap that continually links males and violence-related behavior, some boys who grow up within such traditional boundaries may experience positive effects from such a process. One aspect of life as a third grade boy emphasized by my research is their continuous development of a sense of dominance in the world. Although they may have met with little success, many of the boys felt that there was a link between their power as males and their right to get what they want. Boys were much more likely than girls to use threats in an attempt to obtain a reward or motivate someone to perform a certain duty. Males were also much more vocal when they did not receive what they wanted from other students or the teacher. In addition, I observed numerous ways in which girls were positioned as fragile or subservient to the assumed strength and supremacy of the boys. It was assumed that girls needed protection from the violence of
boys but never vice versa. Any boy who appeared to be affected by the actions of a girl was immediately ostracized. On the whole, boys were learning from their peers that a combination of their assumed physical superiority and the use of aggression in the form of threats and dangerous actions put them in a position of power over all females as well as the males who did not adhere to this stereotype.

Of course, the type of dominance described above can also be viewed as limiting to male experience. Although some of the boys I observed were learning from the school and their fellow students that they had an advantage over girls and weaker boys in some arenas, they were also sacrificing other facets of life that are considered traditionally feminine. For example, these boys were discouraged from showing pain, intimacy, or developing a sense of care for those around them. In addition, these boys were “required to compete and prove themselves continually because their sense of worth and masculinity relies on external validation rather than an inner sense of self” (Eder, 155). Thus, the same boys who were developing a sense of domination and power were constantly forced to justify this position and to surrender more nurturing and personal thoughts and feelings.

One final finding that emerged over the course of the study concerned the children’s perceptions of the future. Although few of the students discussed their ideas about what life as an adult would be like, many alluded to how they envisioned certain aspects of the “real world.” Many of these conjectures reflected their experience with the gendering of violent behavior. The boy who explained to me how well he had performed against teenagers in football stressed the importance his strength and agility would play later in life. The boy who said I would not be good at baseball or football after I dropped
a dessert that had been thrown to me was possibly assuming that at some point in my adult career these aggressive activities might be important to my acceptance as a male. This boy’s peers had instilled in him the notion that achievement as a boy depends on such attributes. Girls laughed as I told them that I had been a pink flower for Halloween. The concept of a male dressing up as something fragile and pretty was shocking to them. It was obvious to these girls that adults were also not allowed to deviate from the strict gender guidelines established by and for children. Finally, one boy’s concept of girls being protected from male violence as a “law” suggests that young males may learn to view the world around them in terms of their unbalanced power positioning. At least this one child believed that society had restrictions on male power being used on females, but no similar guidelines for the use of violence on males. This notion is supported by many of the interactions I observed between the students. Although these distorted thoughts may develop and change radically as the children grow, their presence in children’s minds at such a young age indicates that society is cultivating a culture of gendered violence throughout their lifetime.

Unfortunately, my findings reveal a critical situation that affects us all. Although much of the violence-related behavior I observed in children may not translate into abusive, aggressive, and violent adult tendencies, the study does imply that there is a strong connection between the cultivation of specific dispositions in boys and the fact that most violent crimes are committed by men. Once the concepts of the violent male and nurturing female “are revealed as cultural creations and not biological or concrete realities, it is possible to begin to challenge them openly to see if they reflect our sense of
wholeness and justice” (Eder, 149). However, reducing the negative effects of this type of socialization may be as complex a process as the gendering of violence is itself.

First, I agree with many other researchers on the topic that the stressing of differences between boys and girls that are not related to anatomy is potentially harmful. Children “invoke this heterogeneous network of sex-related associations in order to evaluate and assimilate new information” (Bem, 603), and have, in effect, continued to reinforce the traditional notion of the powerful, dominant male. In accordance with Bem, Eder et al, Thorne, as well as others, limiting these sex-related associations is an important step towards preventing this process. For example, the institutional forms of gendering such as separate lines and clothes for boys and girls must be eradicated in order to reduce the notion that contrived differences between the sexes are natural. As Thorne notes, “since gender is a relatively unambiguous and visible category of individual identity that divides the population roughly in half, it is a convenient basis for sorting out two teams” (Thorne, 66). However, this arbitrary emphasis of gender may encourage children to internalize the faulty notion that boys and girls are natural opposites. If the class needs to be separated into two, why not have two randomly mixed lines? It would be surprising to most people if the children were split into lines according to dichotomies such as taller or shorter, heavier or lighter, or Caucasian or non-Caucasian. Gender however, is drilled into the children’s minds as the most obvious center of difference.

Addressing the class as “boys and girls” is also unnecessary. The young members of the school are united as children, students, kids, people, and a class. Any of these terms would successfully get the class’ attention without imposing the slant of gender
difference. Even the fact that no men were employed at the school confirms common conceptions about females’ roles as teachers and caretakers of children. Although it is possible that no men were interested in working at the school, this point suggests yet another negative effect of the perpetuating of stereotypic sex roles.

Decreasing violence-related behavior in particular may be more problematic than the suggestions given above. As shown by this study, peer interaction during less structured times at school such as lunch and recess is a very powerful component in the gendering of violence. Limiting the child interactions that fuel this process is difficult for adults who remain outside the younger community. Perhaps encouraging large group activities during recess that involve both boys and girls working together would help to regulate the clash between sexes on the playground. Instead of traditionally gendered activities such as jump rope and football, the recess monitors could lead mixed activities such as Duck, Duck, Goose, Frisbee tossing, and parachute games. Thorne, who also supports the idea of organized, co-ed recess play, explains that “relaxed mixed-gender interaction is more likely when an adult sets up the activities, when access is routinely structured, when there are few potential witnesses, and when individuals have the skills an activity requires” (Thorne, 162). Although requiring the children to be active physical participants, the pastimes listed above are not rooted in fierce competition, which is often an excuse to pit boys against girls.

As noted earlier, one major tenet of this analysis is that seemingly harmless interactions between young children can lead to the formation of extremely dangerous ideologies and gender positioning. Thorne notes that while first observing children at recess she “interpreted these engagements as more antagonistic than . . . the kids seemed
to experience or intend” (Thorne, 15). To the contrary, I believe these types of interactions, although not very dangerous if taken at face value, lay down the foundation for future violent behavior. Therefore, I propose that schools should increase their efforts in discouraging all violence-related behavior. This includes disciplining boys and girls equally for pushing, pinching, kicking, punching, and other forms of physical aggression. Students who injure others should be made to accompany that individual to the nurse. The notion of girls supporting their hurt friends while the perpetrator continues playing is unacceptable. Learning that both girls and boys need to be nurturing is fundamental to combating violence. Threatening to hurt or kill other students should be recognized as a problematic use of assumed power relations, and should also be discouraged. In addition, adults must stress that threats and force are not acceptable ways of reaching certain goals. The importance of communities, leadership, compromise, and communication should be important lessons stressed in class. Engaging in class discussions and writing papers on such topics are possible ways of encouraging empathy and conflict resolution in young children.

This study, as well as many others that have contributed supporting data to it, strengthens the argument that many attitudes about gender as well as violence are the product of socialization. The traditional essentialist notion that males are more violent than females due to biological factors is a harmful and confounding belief that must be challenged in the classroom. Although sexual education is a controversial issue, its potential for correcting our culture’s skewed understanding of gender differences warrants an increased presence in school curriculum. Bem concludes that increasing children’s knowledge about the two major biological differences between males and
females, anatomy and reproduction, is a key to limiting the other gender-linked
associations imposed by schools, peers, and society in general. She asserts that “by
teaching their children that the genitalia constitute the definitive attributes of females and
males, parents help them to apprehend the merely probabilistic nature of sex’s cultural
correlates and thereby restrict sex’s associative sprawl” (Bem, 612). Although it is
important for this education to begin in the home, it may have an even more positive
effect in the school where stereotypical gender roles are reinforced every day. Despite
some children’s, as well as teachers,’ discomfort with the topic, sexual education
correctly directed throughout each grade would slowly improve the way children define
gender differences. In addition, the humor and ridicule surrounding the subject would be
replaced with comfort and understanding over time.

Unfortunately, many of the suggestions made above place new demands on
teachers, who are often overworked to begin with. However, it is my vision that these
increased guidelines at school will also slowly open up new freedoms for teachers as well
as students. Adults should be relieved of the duty of dividing children on the basis of
gender. It should not be their responsibility to entertain specific traditionally gendered
needs of children. The reduction of sex-typing clothes, games, equipment, and rules
would open up new possibilities for child-adult interactions. In this more natural and
hopefully less violent environment, children would experience more leeway from
institutions and their peers on the types of behaviors they are expected to display. The
need for constant discipline and the difficulty of dealing with rebellious boys would also
decrease in the teacher’s job description. Ultimately, a learning atmosphere where boys
are not encouraged to follow a strict, violence-linked path would emerge, and the
resulting shift of early male foundations would lead to a less violent and more nurturing society.
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