



Socialization of Boys: Why it Needs to Change

Michelle Hart

April 9th, 2013

What is the problem?

Boys play with trucks; girls care for dolls. That's the way that our children have been taught to play with toys for decades. Yet, has there ever been a doll or a stroller marketed towards boys, teaching them to be dads when they grow up? Not often. Yet, when you walk down a girl's aisle, there are legos for the girls to play with, something that was previously considered only a male domain. So, why are we allowing our girls to have the social freedom to expand their horizons and stray from traditionalized gender roles when we still force our boys to live in strict social control?

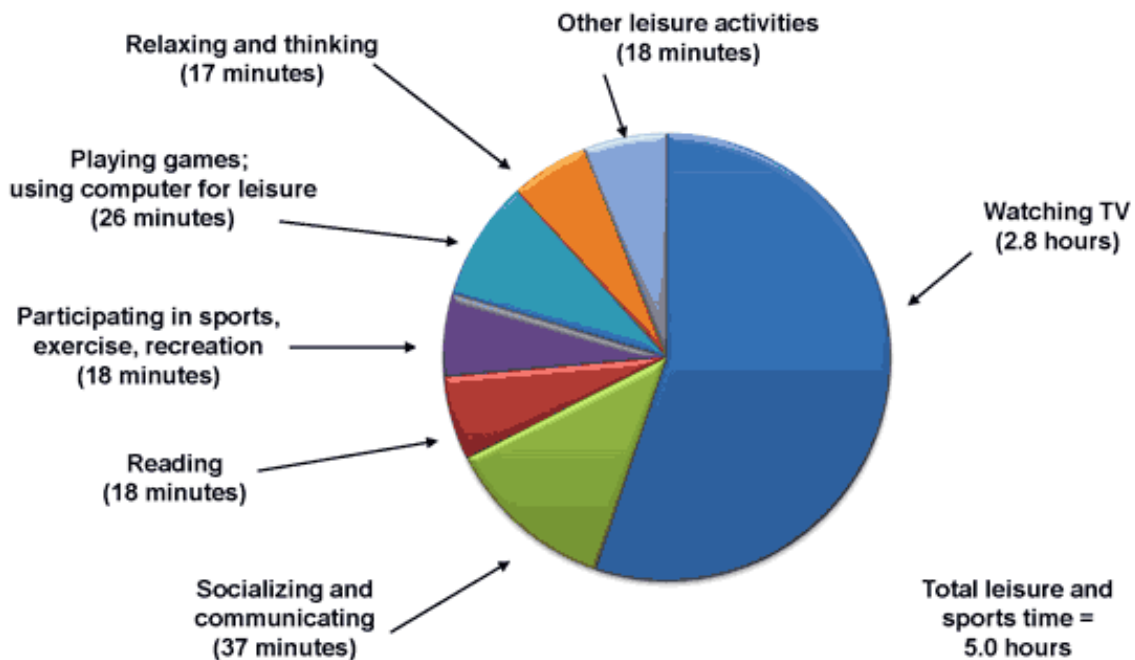
This social construction of male masculinity is something that needs to be refined. Through social movements and the Feminist movement, our culture has migrated away from the ideas of traditional gender roles. Yet, as much as this is true, it has mostly been the women who have changed. Men are still, more or less, in the same stereotype as they always have been. Of course, there are examples of exceptions, such as stay at home dads, but as a society, males have not progressed in the ways that women have.

We need to have an awareness movement for men. We have always had the common-held belief that white males do not need to be advocated for because they are not denied any rights or in any way considered a minority. Yet, this idea needs to be reconstructed. Due to our socialization, we are harming our boys by not preparing them for relationships, making them more aggressive, and causing them to act out in order to express emotions. We need to think about our boys and how we are not preparing them for the future, and parents and educators need to be the ones to initiate this movement.

Socialization From The Media

As a culture, we socialize our boys more strictly into gender traditionalized roles than we do our girls. Yet, this is because our society is completely aware and has highlighted the drawbacks of encouraging our women to be consumed with appearances.¹ Our parents and educators understand the drawbacks of this socialization, and do not want our girls to be victims of the media. Yet, they do not realize that a similar phenomenon is happening to our boys too: we are telling them that being macho is the only acceptable way to behave. This trend is incredibly damaging to boys, because they are not allowed to express their vulnerable side, in a similar way to girls once not being able to show complete strength and intelligence.

Leisure time on an average day



NOTE: Data include all persons age 15 and over. Data include all days of the week and are annual averages for 2011.

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey

Figure 1

In the media, “masculinity is often associated with machismo, independence, competition, emotional detachment, aggression and violence”.² Beyond this, when a male is seen in the media as emotionally savvy, it is almost always followed by ridicule from another source. This is most common in television shows, which usually follow strict, traditional gender roles in characterization. Since this is the majority of the media our children are consuming, as shown in the figure 1, our children are gathering this as the normal way to act. One example of this can be seen in “Friends”, where Rachel and Ross are interviewing a man for a job as a nanny. As he expresses his emotional side, Ross appears physically uncomfortable and mockingly blurts, “are you gay?” The fact that this is the automatic conclusion of a male expressing emotion is absurd and needs to be addressed. As our young boys consume this media, they are being taught to believe that this vulnerability and discussion of emotions needs to be repressed within them.

As the television consumption rates increase, our children are simply a subjects of marketing and socialization. As Graydon and Verrall say, “research tells us that the more television children watch, the more likely they are to hold sexist notions about traditional male and female roles and the more likely the boys are to demonstrate aggressive behaviour.”³ The “Friends” episode is a prime example of these traditional roles.

Lack of Preparation for Relationships

But since we are constructing this traditionalist world for our boys to live in, we are also failing to prepare them for their future, especially in relationships. Marriage is the epitome of a clash of gender socialization. Rubin discusses how men actually desire more intimacy out of their relationships than women do.⁴ Yet, because they are unable to acknowledge and discuss this with their spouse, they constantly live in jeopardy. They believe that they are doing an adequate displaying their feelings, yet the women always want more. When men say “I don’t know what I’m feeling” they are telling the truth; they are being honest with their spouses.⁵ They have never been asked to analyze their feelings before, and more than likely they have been taught to repress them for so long that they cannot understand or express them anymore.

Rubin asked “What are you feeling right now” to both men and women and interestingly found that the women interviewed could all answer the question, yet the men interviewed simply sat there and stared at her, often uttering, “what do you mean?”⁶ We have created a culture where men do not feel comfortable telling their true feelings, yet we expect them to be completely honest. They can never measure up to what women expect in relationships, because when they are being honest, women expect so much more. Women are nurtured to express their feelings, not to repress them. This creates a class of socialization and a double standard for men. Rubin argues that the fault is that socialization has created huge gaps in our genders that cannot be remedied by the time couples are ready for marriage, because it is so engrained in their beliefs.⁷

The Result is Divorce

This socialization is part of what is leading to our increase in divorce rates in our culture. Gottman and Silver study divorce and have developed a way of predicting divorce rates with 96% accuracy, simply based on a 15 minute observation of a newlywed couple arguing.⁸ Although arguing is common in marriages and relationships, when one spouse begins to attack another (typically the wife) the other partner stonewalls, or completely disregards the stimulus. 85% of males are the stonewaller in their marriage, and this is because men do not know how to please their wives; they have not been taught to calmly discuss their feelings, but actually to repress them and only act in anger.⁹ They have learned these traits directly from our society, and especially our media. Thus, if we wish to lower the divorce rate and assist our male population in all relationships, we need to be aware of how we are influencing them.

Who Can Make A Change?

So, what needs to change to eliminate or decrease this gap between the genders? We are already attempting to repair our socialization of women and bring them back towards a homogenous endpoint. But our male contingent has not had the fortune of a movement to assist them in this trek. See figure 2 for clarification. So, it is the responsibility of parent and educators to be aware of what they are doing to our future generations.

Parents – Especially Fathers

First, parents have the most influence over the thinking of their children. Family is the first socialization that a child encounters, and he/she develops opinions and values before ever being able to create his/her own view on the topic. Many parents simply go to

the store and walk down the pink aisle of clothes for girls and the blue aisle for boys. Today, it has become more acceptable for a girl to wear a truck shirt, but it is still not acceptable for boys to wear pink. This is a prime example of how parents are socializing their children before children even understand the concept. According to Witt, “[most] parents [provide] gender-differentiated toys and [reward] play behavior that is gender stereotyped” furthering this gender difference in all aspects of the child’s life.¹⁰

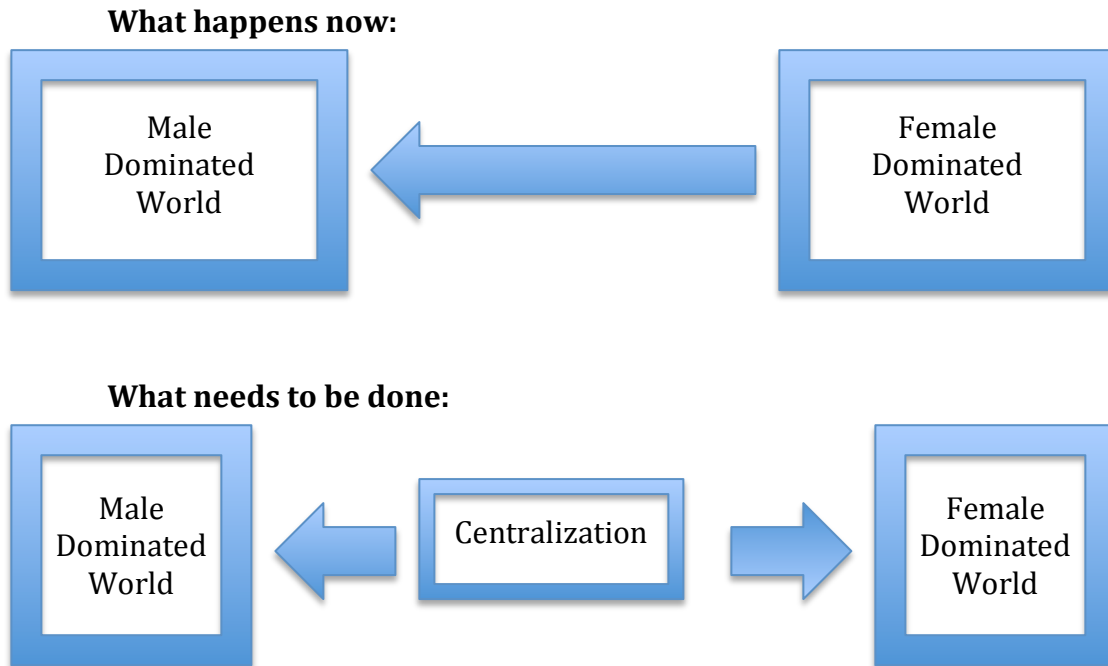


Figure 2

Furthermore, she states that a father is more likely to enforce rigid stereotypes than a mother.¹¹ This is incredibly interesting because boys mimic how their fathers act, so if they receive the socialization from their fathers, then they will undoubtedly wish to please them and continue in the culturally constructed mold for boys to suppress their feelings to display masculinity.

Most fathers actually subconsciously reward sons for traditional, stereotyped male behavior.¹² If parents were to reward sons for taking care of a doll for a day, or creating a beautiful drawing, then these boys would be more prepared later in life. Parents need to be able to discuss emotions with both genders, and convey that all boys need not be stoic. Fathers need to display vulnerability with their male children, showing them that they understand and can be relatable. Too often, the father is the “bad cop” and the children begin to see all males as strong and holding power. Thus, since parent-child relationships construct children’s viewpoints well into pre-adulthood, most children never realize that they have a preconceived notion of men holding more power and displaying strength.¹³ Parents need to be aware that they are the ones creating the difference in genders, and allow their boys to have a chance to relax and display vulnerability.

Educators

Likewise, educators need to comprehend their impact on children in their classrooms. Thorne discusses simple, recreational play that occurs during recess. When observing the cross-sex play (i.e. a boy playing jump-rope with girls), she noticed that it is incredibly more common and acceptable for girls to enter into the “male-dominated world” and play kickball, than for a boy to engage in a laidback “female-dominated game.”¹⁴ If a girl is young and plays with boys, she is seen as a tomboy, simply enjoying sports, and even praised for willing to “get down and dirty.” Yet, when a boy does the exact same thing, our world worries about him being gay. There is a stigma attached to a male participating in a female-dominated world that simply does not exist when looking at the reverse. Females are praised; males are ridiculed. Thus, Thorne has found much more sexual liberty for girls that simply does not exist for boys.¹⁵

Also, Thorne found that teachers often separate the genders into teams to compete against each other, which is perfectly acceptable, since it creates friendly competition with a desired goal.¹⁶ Yet, the teacher usually names the teams inappropriately, socially constructing the thoughts of their students. In this example, the team names were “beastly boys and gossipy girls”.¹⁷ The teacher does not even realizing that she is casually displaying gender socialization. So, how can educators remedy this situation? They need to constantly understand the intermixing the genders. Separating the genders by different colored folders may appear to be helping the student feel more welcome in the classroom, but it is actually another subtle segregation and socialization of the genders.

Therefore, our teachers need to be aware of their surroundings and how they are influencing their students. Once in school, teachers and peers have the most influence on a child, because he/she spends a majority of time with these groups. So, a teacher does not only need to be aware of his/her own actions, but the socialization from other students in the classroom. A teacher needs to create an open, accepting atmosphere if we ever hope to see success in changing our traditional gender roles.

Why Do We Need A Change?

The only way to remedy this issue of gender socialization and the issue of strict social control of males is to improve awareness. First, our parents and educators need to understand their monumental effect on the children in their lives. They must comprehend that they are subconsciously displaying traditional gender roles through simple actions such as praising a boy for constructing a plane and never allowing him to play with dolls. Children wish to please the people they care about most, so those role-models must be the ones to make the change.

We need to have a male movement, much like the Feminist movement that occurred. It is not that boys are being denied rights, but they are being denied emotions and freedom that they do not even know they are missing.¹⁸ This movement will undoubtedly be a challenge to commence, and some may see it as unnecessary, but we have to convince them of the importance. If we are able to allow our male world to openly express emotions and display vulnerability, we will be creating better future relationships and preparing them better for a world where men and women can actually be equal. Until now, we have primarily been concerned with assimilating the female world and with the male world. But, what we actually need to do is homogenize the two worlds. See the figure 2 for comprehension. Women have been successful in de-socializing themselves in the media

and creating a new, less traditionalist image of their gender that is stronger and more prominent than ever before. Now, the male gender needs to have a similar movement to create the sexual freedom they deserve.

Endnotes:

1. Graydon, Shari, and Elizabeth Verrall. "Gender Issues In The Media." Gender Issues In The Media. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2013.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Rubin, Lillian. "Approach-Avoidance Dance: Men, Wome, and Intimacy." Feminist Frontiers IV. New York: McGraw Hill, 1997. 309-13. Print.
5. Ibid, 311
6. Ibid, 310-311
7. Ibid
8. Silver, Nan. and John M. Gottman "How I Predict Divorce." The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. New York: Three Rivers, 1999. 25-46. Print.
9. Ibid
10. Witt, Susan D. "Parental Influence on Children's Socialization to Gender Roles." Adolescence (Summer, 1997): n. pag. Susan Witt's Homepage at The University of Akron. Web. 09 Apr. 2013.
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Thorne, Barrie. "Girls and Boys Together...But Mostly Apart: Gender Arrangements in Elementary Schools." Feminist Frontiers IV. New York: McGraw Hill, 1997. 176-86. Print.
15. Ibid
16. Ibid, 180
17. Ibid
18. Rubin, 312