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Sex Differences in Response to School Failure

Paula J. Caplan, Ph.D. and Marcel Kinsbourne, M.D., Ph.D.

Boys have difficulties in learning far more often than girls. While girls' relatively more advanced cognitive development may account for some of this difference, the present questionnaire study of 222 grade school children shows that sex differences in emotional response to failure could amplify the effect. Failing girls have the alternative of pleasing the teacher by good behavior, a so-called feminine attribute, whereas most failing boys have to resort to excellence in sports or leadership, qualities which are less valued and not readily accessible in the classroom. Failing girls' acceptable social behavior receives the teacher's approval, whereas failing boys behave antisocially, which further discredits them with the teacher, setting up a vicious cycle.

Psychologists and educators have long known that boys are referred to learning clinics and special education classes far more often than girls (Berlin 1969, Kinsbourne 1969). This preponderance of boys is accounted for at least in part by the verbal superiority of girls, which, if it is not innate (McCarthy 1954), at least appears to be socialized very early. If innate attributes or very early socialization were totally responsible for sex differences in the severity of problems in the primary grades, prospects for reducing the learning difficulties

of boys would be bleak. But if productive changes could be made in a child's school environment at the time that his learning problem is identified, it might be possible to minimize problems which arise *secondarily* to the learning difficulty.

It is known that strong sex differences exist in response to failure and in expression of aggression, but, so far, this knowledge has not been operationally applied to children with learning disabilities. We do not question the part that sex differences in verbal abilities play in causing the boy-girl ratio of reported learning difficulty to be "boy-heavy." We suggest, however, that these differences are exaggerated by differences in the sexes in response to failure. The present study shows how a boy and a girl may, in response to similar academic failure, receive different reactions from teachers and hence different treatment.

It has been shown elsewhere that boys and girls behave differently in response to failure (Zunich 1964, Solkoff 1964). It might be possible to change a child's behavior by working solely on behavioral end-products – e.g., by giving a child candy if he is quiet and punishing him if he is disruptive. But typically, behavior is based on attitude. Hence, it would be preferable to make judgments and decisions about working with children if one understands not

just the behavior but also the reasons for it. This is especially true if the same cause, such as failure, can elicit different behavior depending upon the sex of the failing child, or if two similar behaviors in a boy and a girl can have different causes. Take as an example a failing boy and a failing girl, both of whom are well-behaved in class. In the failing girl, it seems likely that this good behavior is an alternate way to win social approval, since she cannot win it through academic success. In the failing boy, on the other hand, we believe that his good behavior is more likely to represent an effort to avoid further disapproval or punishment. A child whose nondisruptive behavior can win rewards will have a better chance of being happy and fulfilled than one whose nondisruptive behavior can only avoid punishment.

FIRST QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to determine whether children's attitudes about various kinds of classroom behavior are different after failure and are different for boys than for girls, we administered a questionnaire to 190 boys and girls, age 6-11 years; 95 were from a nongraded, progressive, private school, and 95 were from a graded, public school. The children in the former school were middle class and mostly white, while the children in the latter school were lower class, 47 black and 48 white. The questionnaire was intended to determine which classroom behaviors children consider acceptable and desirable, which behaviors are most appropriate for which sex, and which sex is usually found behaving in each way. Sometimes the children were directly asked questions, such as, "Who is usually smarter, boys or girls? Other times, through the use of three male and three female dolls, the questions were asked indirectly. For example, the dolls were lined up and the child was asked to "point to the smartest one." The questions are listed in Table 1.

Regardless of the race, age, sex, socioeconomic status, or type of school, a highly significant number of the children ranked desirable types of classroom behavior as: (1) to be nice, (2) to be smart, (3) to be good at sports, and (4) to be a leader. Items 3 and 4 were

Table 1. Sex stereotype questionnaire.

USING DOLLS

- 1) Which is much smarter than all the others?
- 2) Which one is nice and quiet in class?
- 3) Which one is nice to people?
- 4) Which one fights with people?
- 5) Which one is noisy in class?
- 6) Which one wants to do well in school?
- 7) Which one does not want to do well in school?
- 8) Which one is best at sports?
- 9) Which one is the leader?

DIRECT QUESTIONS

- 10) Are boys supposed to be smart in school?
- 11) Are girls supposed to be smart in school?
- 12) Is it good to be smart?
- 13) Is it good to be nice?
- 14) Is it good to do well at sports?
- 15) Is it good to be a leader?
- 16) Is it OK to be noisy in class?
- 17) Is it OK for girls not to be smart?
- 18) Is it OK for boys not to be smart?
- 19) Is it OK for girls to fight or be noisy?
- 20) Is it OK for boys to fight or be noisy?
- 21) Who is smarter, boys or girls?
- 22) Who are better leaders, girls or boys?
- 23) Who are better at sports, girls or boys?
- 24) Who fights with people, boys or girls?
- 25) Who is nicer to people, boys or girls?
- 26) Who is quiet in class, boys or girls?
- 27) Which is better, to be smart or to be nice?
- 28) Which is better, to be smart or to be a leader?
- 29) Which is better, to be nice or to be a leader?
- 30) Which is better, to be good at sports or to be nice?
- 31) Which is better, to be good at sports or to be smart?

ranked much lower than 1 and 2. A statistically significant majority of all children also said that girls were usually both the nicest and the smartest of the sexes, while boys filled the last two positions (i.e., items 3 and 4).

These findings have important implications in explaining sex differences in the behavior of failing children, since they reveal that a failing girl has an easier time coping than a failing boy. The five reasons for boys' relative disadvantage are: (1) Children regard girls as smart more often than boys. (2) Girls' alternative to being smart – i.e., being nice – is higher on the acceptability hierarchy than boys' socially acceptable alternatives. (3) All girls can be nice, and can be nice in any situation, but not all boys can be the best athletes or leaders, nor are these

types of behavior generally applicable in school. (4) Further, boys who are class leaders are often also the good athletes (Waller 1967), since leaders are usually the intelligent, achieving rather than the failing children (Harrison et al., 1971). (5) Boys' alternatives are not as likely to elicit the teacher's or other students' approval as is niceness.

We concluded from this study that failing boys would probably have a more difficult time than failing girls because their socially acceptable alternatives were more rigorous than the girls' alternative.

SECOND QUESTIONNAIRE

It then remained, however, to illustrate the way that the two sexes' attitudes would change after failure and to test the prediction that boys, out of frustration over the difficulty in finding acceptable male roles, would react more antisocially than girls. Therefore, we gave the same questionnaire to 32 children who were participating in the Boston University Summer Institute for children with learning difficulties and compared their responses with those of the children tested earlier who had not experienced learning failure. Eighteen of the failing children were boys and 14 were girls, with age ranges from 6-9 to 11-0 (boys' mean age=9-1, girls' mean age=8-9).

The results supported our prediction that learning failure (LF) boys would adopt more hostile, antisocial attitudes than LF girls. The LF boys tended significantly more often than the normal boys to believe that boys are smarter ($\chi^2=5.0, p<.05$) and better at sports ($\chi^2=3.9, p<.05$) than girls. They also said significantly more often that girls are noisier in class than boys ($\chi^2=4.4, p<.05$), and that girls are the sex which does not want to do well in school ($\chi^2=4.6, p<.05$). The importance of this pattern is that the boys who failed not only became aggressively critical about the opposite sex but also did it in an unrealistic way. The fact is that girls are smarter in school, are quieter in class, and are more concerned about doing well in school than are boys - behaviors no doubt manifested in order to receive the teacher's approval (Crandall et al., 1964). Therefore, the boys who fail seem to adopt a

form of defense which leads them to be dealt with harshly in school. The assault on their mode of defense leads to further frustration for the boys, producing a circle which is particularly vicious since males tend to respond to frustration antisocially.

The LF girls, on the other hand, did not denigrate the opposite sex more than did the normal girls. The relevant difference in this area, however, was that the LF girls more than the normal girls said it was "not OK for boys to fight and make noise" ($\chi^2=6.5, p<.05$). This reflects the girls' tendency to resort to socially acceptable forms of aggression (Maccoby 1966). A failing girl tends not to behave antisocially but instead tends vocally to support the standards which the teacher sets, such as "boys should be quiet and not fight." This is likely to earn the girl approval from the teacher, and it is a gratification which the boys would not be apt to obtain.

Examining the LF children's responses to the questions of what kinds of behavior are most desirable, we found that members of both sexes switched the positions of items 1 and 2. Whereas the normal children had said it was most important to be nice (item 1) and listed "to be smart" second (item 2) ($\chi^2=9.9, p<.01$), the LF boys and girls ($\chi^2=8.8, p<.01$) said it was most important to be smart and listed "to be nice" second. This shift, however, was more uniform for the LF boys than for the girls, suggesting that a boy who fails is more likely to consider "smartness" desirable than a girl who fails. This is understandable if one remembers that boys' acceptable alternatives to being smart are more limited than girls'.

CONCLUSION

Thus, boys rather than girls who have not failed seem more likely to act out and receive the teacher's disapproval. The pattern is exaggerated for failing children, since the acceptable ways a failing boy can behave in school are more rigorous and less desirable, in the children's opinions, than those of girls. Failing boys deal with this situation by denigrating the opposite sex, but failing girls side with the teacher in setting limits on how boys ought to

behave. Furthermore, although both sexes may express aggressiveness due to frustration following failure, the boys' defense is less adaptive than that of the girls. The girls' behavior will be reinforced positively by the teacher. But the boys' defense will be assaulted constantly by the intrusion of reality when the girls' behavior contradicts the boys' denigration. The positive note for boys is that their learning problems are more likely to be recognized, due to their attention-getting antisocial behavior, than those of quietly-behaved, well-liked, but relatively unnoticed, girls.

IMPLICATIONS

The teacher who understands the implications of each sex's response to failure is in a position to take practical steps which would offer failing boys acceptable alternatives to academic success without forcing them into an antisocial role. For example, working with one's hands at mechanical tasks becomes an invaluable tool for offering the academically failing boy who lacks adequate verbal skills a way to acquire self-esteem. It precludes him from acting-up yet still allows him to feel masculine. An understanding of sex differences in response to failure could also help teachers working with academically failing girls. The temptation to become quiet and perfectly behaved seems powerful for a girl who fails academically since she believes she can be rewarded for the acceptable and very feminine role of "well-behaved child." This is all right insofar as it keeps her out of trouble; but the teacher should realize that the frustration the child has suffered by failing does not totally disappear just because she can find an alternate role. The teacher, therefore, needs to

offer the girl a way to express her aggression and frustration; to bottle it all up under prosocial behavior may finally lead to outbursts of violence or refusals to attend school. *Duke University Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development, Durham, N.C. 27710.*

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