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Do Girls Read Better Than Boys? If So, Gender Stereotypes May Be to Blame

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Beware of Stereotypes: Are Classmates' Stereotypes Associated With Students' Reading Outcomes?

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A new longitudinal study of fifth and sixth graders in Germany examined the relation between classmates' gender stereotypes and individual students' reading outcomes to shed light on how these stereotypes contribute to the gender gap in reading. The study concluded that girls experienced positive effects and boys experienced negative effects on their reading-related outcomes, specifically, their competence beliefs, motivation, and achievement in reading. Furthermore, classmates' gender stereotypes also negatively related to boys' competence beliefs, motivation, and achievement in reading.

These findings come from researchers at the University of Hamburg. They appear in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

"It's a cycle of sorts," explains Francesca Muntoni, postdoctoral research associate at the University of Hamburg, who led the study. "Reading is first stereotyped as a female domain. This and other gender stereotypes that emphasize that girls are more competent in reading than boys significantly affect boys by causing them to devalue their actual reading ability while also having less motivation to read, which in turn impairs their reading performance."

In this longitudinal study, researchers collected two waves of information, once in fifth grade and once in sixth grade, on 1,508 students from 60 classes in Germany. Findings were based on data from 1) a student questionnaire assessing gender stereotypes and evaluating reading skills, degree of confidence in their ability to master aspects of good reading, and motivation to read, 2) a reading achievement test, and 3) information about students' socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

The study found that boys who held a strong stereotype favoring girls in reading were less motivated to read and held weaker reading-related beliefs about their own competence, and performed less optimally on the reading test. These effects were also found for boys in classes with students who held a strong stereotype favoring girls in reading. The effect of classmates' stereotypes was seen over and above the effect of

individual stereotypes.

The study found fewer individual positive effects and no effects of classmates' stereotyping on reading-related outcomes for girls.

The study's authors caution that their findings are not causal. However, given the many experimental findings on the subject, they suggest that their study provides evidence of lasting negative effects of stereotypical beliefs in a classroom context. They also note that students' gender stereotypes were measured by self-reports, which may limit their accuracy. Finally, they point out that their study did not address how gender stereotypes are transmitted.

"To reduce socially determined gender disparities in reading, it may help to create classroom contexts that discourage students from acting on their stereotypical beliefs," says Jan Retelsdorf, professor of the psychology of learning and instruction at the University of Hamburg, who coauthored the study. "Teachers and parents might consider socializing boys and girls in ways that reduce stereotypical behaviors, and students could become aware of their gender stereotypes to counteract their effects on other students' outcomes and to create a gender-fair learning environment."

The study was funded by the German Research Foundation.

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Summarized from *Child Development, Beware of Stereotypes: Are Classmates' Stereotypes Associated With Students' Reading Outcomes?* by Muntoni, F, Wagner, J, and Retelsdorf, J (University of Hamburg). Copyright 2020 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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