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# Negative Stereotypes About Boys Hinder Their Academic Achievement

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A Stereotype Threat Account of Boys' Academic Underachievement

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Negative stereotypes about boys may hinder their achievement, while assuring them that girls and boys are equally academic may help them achieve. From a very young age, children think boys are academically inferior to girls, and they believe adults think so, too. Even at these very young ages, boys' performance on an academic task is affected by messages that suggest that girls will do better than they will.

Those are the conclusions of new research published in the journal *Child Development* and conducted at the University of Kent. The research sought to determine the causes of boys' underachievement at school.

"People's performance suffers when they think others may see them through the lens of negative expectations for specific racial, class, and other social stereotypes—such as those related to gender—and so expect them to do poorly," explains Bonny L. Hartley, a PhD student at the University of Kent, who led the study. "This effect, known as stereotype threat, grants stereotypes a self-fulfilling power."

In three studies of primarily White schoolchildren in Britain, Hartley and her colleague investigated the role of gender stereotypes. They found that from a very young age, children think boys are academically inferior to girls, and they believe that adults think so, too.

The first study looked at children's stereotypes about boys' and girls' conduct, ability, and motivation. Researchers gave 238 children ages 4 to 10 a series of scenarios that showed a child with either good behavior or performance (such as "This child really wants to learn and do well at school") or poor behavior or performance (such as "This child doesn't do very well at school"), then asked the children to indicate to whom the story referred by pointing to a picture, in silhouette, of a boy or a girl. From an early age—girls from 4 and boys from 7—children matched girls to positive stories and boys to negative ones. This suggests that the children thought girls behaved better, performed better, and understood their work more than boys, despite the fact that boys are members of a nonstigmatized, high-status gender group that is substantially advantaged in society. Follow-up questions showed that children thought adults shared these stereotypes.

Researchers then did two experiments to determine whether stereotype threat hindered boys' academic performance. In one, involving 162 children ages 7 and 8, telling children that boys did worse than girls at school caused boys' performance in a test of reading, writing, and math to decline (compared to a control group that got no such information). In the other experiment, involving 184 children ages 6 to 9, telling children that boys and girls were expected to do equally well caused boys' performance on a scholastic aptitude test to improve (compared to a control group). Girls' performance wasn't affected.

"In many countries, boys lag behind girls at school," according to Hartley. "These studies suggest that negative academic stereotypes about boys are acquired in children's earliest years of primary education and have self-fulfilling consequences. They also suggest that it is possible to improve boys' performance, and so close the gender gap, by conveying egalitarian messages and refraining from such practices as dividing classes by gender."

The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 84, Issue 5. A Stereotype Threat Account of Boys' Academic Underachievement by Hartley, BL, and Sutton, RM (University of Kent). Copyright 2013 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.