The Two Sexes

GROWING UP APART,
COMING TOGETHER

Eleanor E. Maccoby

The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
The Two Cultures of Childhood

As we have seen, the third year of life is the time when children who have access to other children near their own age begin to focus their social lives within same-sex groups or dyads. Between the ages of 3 and 6, same-sex groups more and more constitute the context within which children's social experience occurs. How similar, and how different, are the contexts that male groups and female groups provide for their members?

Gender Divergence in Playstyles

Play is a major enterprise of childhood. It is an activity which strongly distinguishes children from adults. It marks the early phases of development in other mammalian species as well as in humans. Playful behavior is not something directly taught by the older generation to the younger. Nor is it something young creatures learn by watching the behavior of their parents. We have only to imagine the playful antics of a kitten or puppy to realize how different this activity is from the more sober behavior that adult animals display most of the time. Play is an emergent kind of activity, something that waxes and then wanes during childhood.

Some play is solitary, but in most mammalian species, when two or more young animals are together, special social patterns emerge, such as chasing and mock biting. In humans, the playful behaviors of the young are enormously varied, and they change greatly with age, so that by the ages of 4 and 5, human children are sometimes seen engaging in rather complicated reciprocal role play where they act out mutually understood scripts—scripts that are often invented as they go along. Much of their social play, however, is simpler, and is made up of fairly short bouts of interaction. As Corsaro and Eder (1990) note, generating shared meanings and coordinating play with social partners is a difficult task for young children; the "culture" of childhood groups is something that must be co-constructed by the participants. Perhaps the most important thing about play is its emotional tone: it is clearly fun. Although children do sometimes get hurt or angry while playing, and may cry, most of the time they are either calm or pleasantly aroused, smiling or laughing frequently.

Boys' groups and girls' groups are similar in an important respect: in the preschool years play is the major social enterprise for both sexes. In groups of any gender composition, children derive great pleasure from play. But the two sexes occupy somewhat different play spaces: from the ages of 4 or 5, boys congregate in larger groups, and more often play outdoors, while girls more often play in twos and threes in indoor settings. When the two sexes are both present on a playground, the boys take up more space for their games. And the nature of the interaction that goes on among boys is qualitatively different in some respects from what goes on in all-girl dyads or groups.

Roughness

Boys are more "physical" in their play than girls. Charlesworth and Dzur (1987) provide an example in their research: they brought quartets of preschool-aged boys into a situation where they had to compete for access to a movie-viewer that had only one eyepiece. One boy usually emerged as dominant and got a greater share of access than the others; he usually did so simply by shouldering the other boys out of the way. When quartets of girls competed in this situation, a dominant girl would also usually emerge, just as in the boys' groups, but she usually got greater access by verbal bargaining and persuasion rather than by pushing.

On playgrounds in northern Ireland, Dunn and Morgan (1987) observed differences in the way boys and girls 5 to 7 years old used the same toys. They noted, for example, that when riding wheeled vehicles, boys played "ramming" games, deliberately running into each other, while girls (on the rare occasions when they could get access to the wheeled toys) rode around carefully, avoiding hitting other children's vehicles.

Boys engage in a good deal of roughhousing such as play wrestling and mock fighting. In my work with Jacklin and DiPietro, this difference
became very apparent when we brought trios of preschool boys or trios of girls to a playroom.' The room was thickly carpeted, and equipped with a child-sized trampoline, an inflated Bobo doll, and a beachball. The boys engaged in rough-and-tumble play with these items over four times as often as did the girls.4 These higher male levels did not seem to reflect a generally higher activity level, as evidenced by the fact that the girls (in three cohorts of children) did considerably more jumping on the trampoline than did the boys. But in this very active form of play, girls almost always jumped one at a time and took turns. Only in the male triads was one child seen to throw himself onto another child who was jumping on the trampoline. When this happened, the boys would fall to the floor in a mock wrestling match. Observations in other cultures confirm that this kind of rough play occurs much more frequently among boys than among girls in a wide variety of cultural settings.4

Most rough-and-tumble play occurs in high good humor. Pitcher and Schulz (1983), drawing on their observations of a large sample of preschoolers, describe the male playstyle as follows:

Among 4-year-olds, boys have a boisterous heyday in their numerous same-sex contacts in rough-and-tumble play, positive teasing, and foolish word play. They wrestle, bump into and fall on one another. One child pushes another back and forth in playful tussles, shouting "You're my brother." They make machine-gun sounds, and chase one another around with space guns and spray bottles. They are convulsed with laughter as they pretend to make toy horses sneeze and fall down. Boys put clay in one another's hair, play puppet fighting, tickle and pretend to shoot one another, fall dead and roll on the floor. They slide from piles of blocks, fall over chairs, pretend to drink and eat fire. (Pitcher and Schultz, 1983, p. 59)

Enjoyable play of these kinds occurs far more frequently than aggression among boys. They seem to be trying out each other's strength and toughness, without letting the situation escalate into serious confrontation. Occasionally, however, this kind of play does become angry and turns into fighting. A field observation made by the Romneys in a village in Mexico (juxtlaahuaca) illustrates how this happens:

Juvenal and several boys are running around the school playground engaging each other in wrestling. There is much laughter in the wrestling match with the first boy. In spite of the fact that they are both showing strength, it is easy to see that they are not trying to harm each other . . . In one of the movements, they fall to the ground intertwined. They go rolling around the ground until Juvenal remains on top and stops. While he looks at his opponent, laughing and breathing heavily, he pulls up his pants, which have fallen down, and adjusts his belt with both hands, which seems to signal that he hopes that the other boy will stop wrestling also. The other boy stands up and begins to run, looking at Juvenal (a chase and capture sequence follows) . . . Another boy comes running from the courtyard and grabs Juvenal from behind as if he wants to fight. Juvenal loosens himself, and with a push almost throws him to the ground. He laughs. The two again lock in a struggle, trying to intertwine their legs so that they will both fall to the ground . . . The other takes Juvenal's leg and throws him to the ground. Juvenal gets up. The other boy remains laughing in an expectant attitude. They grab each other again. This time Juvenal throws the other to the ground. The boy hits quite hard upon falling. He gets up, no longer laughing. He grabs Juvenal by the arms and twists them. Juvenal laughs but immediately begins to try to free himself, becoming rather serious. He seems to realize that the other boy is no longer "playing" but is now angry. (Whiting and Edwards, 1988, pp. 254-255)

This episode illustrates the fact that boys' play more frequently puts them on the edge of aggression, in a state of greater likelihood that provocations to fighting will occur, than is the case for girls (see also Smith and Boulton, 1990). And, indeed, direct aggression—both verbal and physical—is more common among boys than among girls. The sex difference in the frequency of aggression may be seen as early as the third year of life. In their observations of the social behavior of children toward each other in the large Montreal daycare center mentioned in Chapter 1, Legault and Strayer (1990) were interested in what they called agonistic behavior: aggression or competitive struggles over toys or control of space. Among children under 2, no sex differences were seen in the frequency of such behavior. In the third and fourth years, however, girls dropped off notably in the frequency with which they displayed agonistic behavior, while in boys the frequency was not only maintained but somewhat increased (see Figure 5), so that in the third and fourth years the frequencies were twice as high for boys as for girls.

The greater frequency of conflictual behavior among boys in the third
year has been noted in a number of other studies. Howes (1988), in reporting her observations of interaction among toddlers, noted that male toddlers had more difficulty with their peers: they were more likely to become upset if a peer interfered with their play or bossed or attempted to dominate them; they were more often involved in episodes of hitting or pushing, and had more difficulty sharing toys. Girls, by contrast, were more sociable, and showed more concern over others’ distress.

From this early age into adulthood, a robust sex difference in rates of direct (overt) aggression is reliably seen. We are accustomed to thinking of boys’ aggressiveness as a personality trait (as when we say “boys are more aggressive than girls”), but we must keep two facts in mind: first, most boys are not aggressive, in the sense of possessing a consistent personality disposition that involves frequent fighting and getting into trouble with adults and peers through fighting; and second, boys almost always choose other boys as their targets for aggression. And as Fagot and colleagues (1985) have shown, boys are more responsive to aggressive (assertive) actions directed toward them by other boys than they are when the instigator of such actions is a girl. Thus fighting is a characteristic of male-male play—better seen as a property of male dyads or groups than of individuals. Part of the male aggressive pattern is a greater readiness to be aroused to anger by displays of anger in others (Cummins, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh, 1989), and boys are more likely than girls to attribute hostile intent to a playmate’s assertive behavior (Feldman and Dodge, 1987). I must reiterate, however, that among most groups of boys, fighting does not occur frequently, and most of their rough play occurs more in the spirit of fun than of anger.

Indeed, it is worth emphasizing how much fun boys have together. Several studies have documented that during their play boys show more positive affect, more high spirits, than girls do during their play. This difference is foreshadowed early in life: in the longitudinal study Carol Jacklin and I conducted, we asked mothers to fill out 24-hour “mood” diaries (in which they recorded a child’s predominant mood for every 15-minute waking interval) on several occasions during the first 18 months of their children’s lives. They reported that their infant sons were more often in a happy or excited mood, while their daughters were more often quiet and calm.

We do not have a very reliable mapping of the frequency with which rough play and fighting occur at the successive age periods of childhood, but what evidence we do have suggests that it declines through middle childhood. Indeed, for most boys, the peak frequency may be reached at about the age of 4 (see Pitcher and Schultz, 1983). There is a subgroup of boys, however, for whom aggression (including bullying) and rough, confrontational behavior are sustained and become a dominant mode of behavior. Such behavior is consolidated in their male peer groups: deviant boys seek and find other deviant boys with whom they congregate, providing for each other conditions that maintain deviant behavior.

**Dominance and Toughness**

One of the things boys appear to be doing in their rough-and-tumble encounters is establishing a dominance hierarchy. The concept of such a hierarchy first came from the work of ethologists studying the behavior of a number of different animal species, including nonhuman primates. It
became clear that when two animals compete with each other on a number of occasions for a scarce and desirable resource—a bit of food, access to a mate—one of the two is more likely to emerge a winner from the encounter than the other. Usually, such encounters do not involve combat; instead, threat gestures displayed by the dominant animal are enough to make the other animal back away. Although among young animals one member of a pair may win on some occasions and the other on other occasions, a hierarchy soon emerges in which Animal A usually dominates Animal B. Animal B usually dominates Animal C, and so on, in a transitive series through a social group.

Ethological methods of observation and scoring have been applied to groups of human children. Strayer and colleagues (Strayer, 1980a, 1980b), for example, identified a clear dominance hierarchy in several nursery schools. They reported that there were more boys than girls in the top echelons of the dominance hierarchy when one considered all the children in a class. As we have seen, however, children in preschools spend a majority of their social time with same-sex others, so we need to ask about the nature of dominance hierarchies among girls and among boys separately. Omark and colleagues (Omark, Omark, and Edelman, 1973) reported that male hierarchies are more well defined than those of girls, in the sense that all the boys agree about the ranking, and that the rankings are more stable over time than girls' hierarchies.

How quickly do boys form stable hierarchies? Petit, Bakshi, Dodge, and Cole (1990) investigated this question by forming groups of unacquainted boys—six boys in each group of first- or third-graders—who met and played together several times. The observers noted any asymmetries between pairs of boys in the giving and receiving of aggression, and in attempts to influence a partner. It was apparent that dominance hierarchies had begun to form even during the first play session, and after several sessions the hierarchies had become quite stable and transitive, with certain boys clearly being more influential and less often aggressed against, while others were consistently on the receiving end of both influence attempts and aggression. The hierarchies emerged more quickly, and became more stable, among third-graders than among first-graders.

The question of who is tougher than whom seems to be much more salient to boys than to girls, and more efforts to establish or maintain dominance may be seen among boys than among girls.” In preschool and kindergarten, then, we see the beginning of boys' concern not to appear weak in the eyes of their male peers.

As we saw in the work of Charlesworth and Dzur (1987), one dominant girl often emerged in a quartet of girls—one who got more than her share of a scarce resource. Among groups of girls who congregate together spontaneously, there are girls who are especially likely to take a leadership position. But their rank appears to depend less on toughness or unwillingness to back down when confronted—the basis for dominance among young boys—than it does on other leadership qualities.

**Competition**

The physical and verbal jousting among boys that occurs in establishing dominance relations often takes a more generalized form, namely competition. Even when with a good friend, boys take pleasure in competing to see who can do a task best or quickest, who can lift the heaviest weight, who can run faster or farther. Boys' games are more competitive than girls' games.

In middle childhood, male competitiveness undergoes a structural change: boys in their larger groups tend to organize their competitive play in the form of structured games.

Observing the free play activities of fourth- and sixth-graders, Crombie and Desjardins (1993) found that boys spent the majority of their play time in games, while girls spent much less time playing games. Girls' games involved turn-taking 21 percent of the time, while less than 1 percent of the boys' games had this element. When in their large same-sex playgroups, boys were engaged in direct competition with other boys 50 percent of the time, while for girls in their smaller same-sex groups, direct competition occurred only 1 percent of the time. Much of the competition among boys took the form of competitive activity between groups. This competition among groups of boys can be informal and temporary, but it can also evolve into competition between formally recognized sports teams or gangs. Once again, it is worth emphasizing that most of the male intergroup competition is not aggressive. Indeed, it has been shown that among groups of inner-city first- and third-grade boys, group members act to discourage any individual's aggressive behavior when they are engaged in a competitive game. Thus the very need to win a competition between groups carries with it the requirement to cooperate within the in-group: for example, to subordinate individual egos for the sake of a group effort.
So, among boys, cooperation and competition are by no means antithetical, but are woven into the same web of social relationships. Despite girls' generally more cooperative playstyles, identification with a team or gang is probably stronger among boys. So far, I have depicted males as the aggressive sex, and females as though their interactions were free from conflict or meanness. This is far from the reality. Although conflict does arise more frequently among boys, the interaction among girls is by no means free of conflict, and recent studies have pointed to a distinctively female element in conflictual behavior - relational aggression - that greatly modifies any idea we might have about girls being made of "sugar and spice and everything nice." Cairns and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study, enrolling 220 children in the fourth grade and interviewing them each year through the ninth grade. At each interview, they asked the children to describe recent conflicts they had had with same-sex and other-sex peers. Girls, far more often than boys, reported using what the Cairns group called "social alienation": when conflicts occurred, girls sometimes retaliated against other girls by attempting to manipulate another girl's friendship or affiliation status, by saying "I won't be your friend anymore;" by excluding another girl from their social group, or by spreading negative gossip about another girl so as to alienate the girl's friends. The frequency of alienating tactics among girls increased sharply with age, from about one tenth of conflict themes in the fourth grade to over a third in the seventh grade. These tactics were almost never mentioned by boys in their interviews.

Similar findings are reported by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), who studied children in grades 3-6, and assessed relational aggression by having children identify which classmates exemplified certain characteristics. Included were such traits as: "When mad, gets even by keeping the person from being in their group of friends:" Girls, more often than boys, were described by their classmates as using relational forms of aggression, while boys were the ones most often said to use direct, overt forms of aggression (starts fights, yells, calls others mean names). In a review article, Bjorkquist (1994) found considerable consistency across several cultures in females' greater use of relational aggression in conflict situations.

It is worth noting that the sex difference in direct aggression is greater than that for relational aggression in studies where the comparison can be made. In the Cairns study, boys reported that physical aggression was involved in nearly 50 percent of their conflicts with other boys (compared to about 15 percent among girls), regardless of age; relational aggression among girls did not reach this high a level even among the older children, and occurred much less often than did the boys' direct aggression among the younger children.

**Different Themes for Pretend Play**

Pretend play does not occupy a major portion of children's time in nursery school, but when it does occur, interesting sex differences are apparent.

**Boys' Themes**

Boys' pretend play often involves assuming the role of a heroic character (Ninja Turtle, Superman, or Batman are recent favorites), and carrying out fantasy actions involves themes of danger and righteous combat. Historically, favorite roles for boys' fantasy play have included soldier, cowboy, policeman, and Robin Hood. Boys' fantasy play is sometimes stimulated by the presence of appropriate costumes or props - for example, a bow and-arrow set but when such props are not available, children improvise, using other objects as surrogates. Many nursery school teachers report how ingenious boys are in devising make-believe guns or swords in situations where more realistic toy armament are not allowed. Flannery and Watson (1993) noted that at age 4, boys' pretend aggression occurred at twice the girls' rate, and at ages 5 and 6-8 the discrepancy was much greater: over six to one. Boys' pretend play often involves high levels of physical activity, and tends to occur outdoors. Often, such play occurs in conjunction with other boys who are playing similar or complementary roles, but a boy playing alone will also enact heroic or warlike themes by himself.

**Girls' Themes**

Girls' pretend play is less often solitary, more likely to involve cooperative role-taking. It frequently invokes domestic or school themes such as "I'll be the teacher, you be the child." McLoyd (1983) suggests a reason why girls' pretend play is more often a cooperative matter with two or more girls taking reciprocal roles: that the scenarios girls prefer to enact-family interactions, teacher-child interactions have several roles that are familiar to all children. Boys' favorite roles, by contrast, are often learned from TV
characters who are portrayed as lone superheroes, and it is difficult for another boy to know what a reciprocal role might call for. Obviously, reciprocal role-taking is facilitated if two or more children already know similar scripts having more than one clearly delineated role. And this is more likely to be the case for the scripts that girls prefer than for those that boys prefer.

Girls' fantasy play frequently involves enacting family roles. Girls seem comfortable in assuming the role of father as well as mother, though the mother role is more central. (It is worth noting that boys seldom take on the pretend roles of either mother or father when playing with each other.) When girls enact family-based pretend scenarios, the preparation and serving of food looms large, as do other aspects of domestic life: managing households, entertaining guests, caring for children. When one girl takes the role of mother and another girl takes the role of child or baby, the "mother" enacts a number of nurturant activities: feeding the "baby," putting on a Band-Aid, engaging in soothing talk when the "child" is hurt, and rocking a "child" to sleep.

Girls, of course, often use dolls as props for their domestic play, and doll play has often been seen as the prototype of female nurturance. We should, however, be aware that in modern American society, nurturant play with baby dolls quickly gives way to doll play with entirely different themes. Girls become interested in Barbie dolls and paper dolls at least by age 5, and the play themes enacted with these dolls have much more to do with adornment than nurturance. Play with Barbie dolls can be seen as expressing fantasies of becoming attractive, glamorous young women. The emphasis is on clothes, hairdos, jewelry, cosmetics. (One can see a commercial side to all this: the elaborate kits provided with Barbie dolls prepare girls for their future as consumers of a myriad products designed to enhance female attractiveness.)

In acting out their pretend scripts of glamour and romance, girls often make use of dress-up props. In preschool dress-up corners, bridal dresses and veils are popular with girls, as are ballet costumes and ball gowns. When dressing up, girls may be seen arranging one another's hair, adorning one another with beads, trying on hats for each other's approval. Their choices of dress-up props stand in sharp contrast to boys' choices of Batman capes or space or police helmets, though we should note that many girls try out male dress-up items as well as female ones.

The Two Cultures of Childhood

The Growth of Same-Sex Coherence in Fantasy Themes

Not only is it true that boys and girls differ in their fantasy themes for pretend play. It is also true that children become more similar to their same-sex peers over a year's preschool experience, and more different from other-sex peers. Nicolopoulou (1997) collected 495 stories, told by 18 members of a preschool class during an academic year. The procedure was as follows:

Every day, any child in the class can choose to dictate a story to a designated teacher, who records the story as the child tells it. At the end of each day, at "circle time," the same teacher reads aloud to the entire class all the stories dictated during that day; while each story is being read, the child/author, and other children whom he or she chooses, act out the story. Note that under this arrangement, children tell their stories not only to adults, but primarily to each other. (Nicolopoulou, 1997, pp. 162-163)

The stories told by children of the two sexes diverged sharply. Girls' stories were focused on social relationships, and frequently dealt with the maintenance and restoration of order in these relationships. "Home" was an anchoring locale, and characters were shown moving away from home and returning home. The boys, by contrast, did not portray their characters as members of stable social groups, but rather as individual characters linked to each other through their actions. Their stories focused on struggle, conflict, and destruction, with the resolution depending on physical size and power. The gender differentiation in story themes was very large indeed: during the fall, 76 percent of the girls' stories dealt with family relationships, while only 18 percent of the boys' stories did so. Aggressive/violent themes emerged in 87 percent of the boys' stories, and in only 17 percent of the stories told by girls. The heroic-agonistic themes of boys' stories, and the social-relationship (domestic, familial) themes of girls' stories, are clearly isomorphic with the themes, described above, that are enacted by boys and girls in their spontaneous pretend play. Child storytellers also overwhelmingly chose to enact same-sex roles. The composition of the play-acting castes is worth noting, too: children who acted in another child's story much more often participated in a story told by a child of their own sex. Boys almost never enacted a female role. Girls somewhat
more often enacted male roles, especially when called upon by a male storyteller to do so (usually, a boy called upon a younger girl to be the "bad guy").

There was evidence that over the school year, children of the two sexes were becoming increasingly polarized. Among boys, the excess of aggressive-violent story themes over family themes became greater as the year went on. And girls were less often called upon—or less often volunteered to enact a part in a story told by a boy. The children seemed to become aware that certain kinds of stories were "for boys," others "for girls;" and their preference for own-gender roles relative to gender-neutral roles increased during the year. The authors suggest that the children were using their narratives to mark themselves off from the other gender symbolically, as part of the formation of a group identity based on gender. They note, too, that the boys seemed consistently more preoccupied with distinguishing themselves sharply from girls than girls were with distinguishing themselves from boys.

Although these findings are based on a very small number of children, they are consistent with a study done previously by the same author and colleagues in a different preschool (Nicolopoulou, Scales, and Weintraub, 1994), and with the work on pretend play themes summarized present purposes, the important point is that the gender divergence in story themes occurred in a setting where the school staff were making deliberate efforts to achieve a nonsexist atmosphere. Furthermore, the children came mainly from families professing egalitarian values. And the boys and girls were being exposed to similar themes in the stories read to them by adults. The strongest interpretation is that boys and girls were being exposed to the same array of possible themes, but were selecting and utilizing quite different elements from the array. I will return to this issue when I discuss self-socialization in Chapter 7.

Different Activities and Interests

In view of the above-noted differences in playstyles and in the themes of stories and dramatic play, it is not surprising that the nature of the preferred play activities in boys' groups and girls' groups should differ. Indeed, Huston has claimed that it is their divergent interests and activities, rather than their dispositions or "traits," that most distinguish boys and girls. In middle childhood, boys' heroic fantasies are continued in the form of preference for adventure stories on TV and in books. And boys' interest in the heroics of fantasy combat are metamorphosed into more organized, less fantasized, activities. Preeminent among these is organized sports, in which boys consistently take a much greater interest than girls. Their interests are expressed not only through participation in sports, but in a preference for watching sports programs on TV, trading baseball or football cards, talking about sports among themselves, and wearing caps or T-shirts that declare partisanship for certain teams. And, of course, there are certain games, such as marbles, which are not organized as team sports but are understood to be "boys' games;"

Boys' social contacts with each other tend to occur as by-products of their joint activities. Indeed, boys tend to choose friends on the basis of similarity in activity interests (such as a love of baseball), while girls choose more on the basis of personality compatibilities (Erwin, 1985). Girls more often seem to arrange social occasions simply for the sake of getting together. When they are old enough and can arrange transportation, they like to go shopping together. They watch TV or movies together, and their interest in romantic themes expresses itself in their choice of programs: soap operas and romances are popular, although some girls are also interested in sports and adventure programs. In recent years, schools have offered much more in the way of active sports programs for girls, and although sports have not become as pervasive and absorbing an activity for girls as for boys, they now do provide a major focus of interest for a substantial subgroup of girls. (It is notable, however, that after the first few years of grade school, participant sports activities are almost entirely sex-segregated.)

Girls' tastes and interests are broader, more eclectic, than boys: It has long been evident that from an early age, girls are more interested in boys' toys and games than boys are in toys and games stereotyped as feminine. It is common doctrine among producers of children's television fare that girls will watch not only girl-type romantic or family-oriented programs but also action-adventure programs with a boy as the lead character. Boys, by contrast, seldom watch girl-type programs with a girl as the leading character. (These beliefs among media program managers are presumably based on private rating data not available for citation.) Clearly, the way to maximize viewership among children is to offer male-type programs. At
the time of this writing, children's programs being produced and broadcast on
American networks that have a girl as the leading character are rare indeed.

**Discourse in Boys' Groups and Girls' Groups**

**In Preschool**

The amount of talking that children do during their play increases greatly during
the age range from 3 to 6. Researchers have recorded children's talk as it occurs
either in structured situations where two or three children are working or playing
together in a laboratory room, or in more unstructured free-play situations. At
preschool age, children of the two sexes talk to their same-sex playmates in
quite similar ways, on the whole. Nevertheless, their styles of talking to each
other do begin to diverge at this age, in ways that foreshadow the greater
differences that appear when they reach middle childhood. A predominant
theme is that girls' speech to each other is more cooperative, more reciprocal.
Leaper (1991) uses the apt term collaborative. Although "conversations" are
somewhat brief and fragmented at preschool age, girls more often than boys
sustain longer sequences of exchanges with each other in which they take turns
speaking and maintain a joint theme. Girls achieve this in a number of ways.
They use more "extending statements" or "relevant turns" - their responses build
on something the partner has just said. More often than boys, they express
agreement with a partner's suggestions. When they make suggestions of their
own, they are likely to put them in the form of a question, or add a tag question
in a way that softens the suggestion and keeps it from seeming coercive or
dominating: "I'll be the doctor, OK?" They refer to themselves jointly: "We'll
do..." Or "Let's" Or "Why don't we."

Boys, by contrast, are more likely to use direct imperatives ("give me"; "put it
there") or prohibitions ("don't touch that"; "stop it") when talking to each other.
They are more likely to reject a suggestion made by a partner, and more likely
to "grandstand" by talking about their own activities without reference to what a
partner is doing. And there are more "domineering" exchanges between boys, in
which one boy issues orders or prohibitions and the other either simply remains
silent or tries to withdraw (Leaper, 1991).

These speech styles are particularly apparent when conflicts arise. Here
are two examples of conflict episodes among boys. The first comes from a
study by Jaqueline Sacks (1987, p. 185):

Two boys are playing doctor. S.U. (the one who was playing the patient role)
has walked off with the toy stethoscope.

CH: No. You're not the doctor. Now take that off.

SU: No. Stop that. You pinched me on the eye.

CH: I didn't mean to.

SU: Then be my friend.

CH: Then don't talk like that.

SU: And you too.

CH: And you too, cause I didn't mean to do that.

SU: Not me either.

CH: Can you take that off? Just one person can be doctor.

Sacks (1987) notes that C.H. finally uses a mitigating utterance, softening his
demand by transforming it into a polite question. She uses this example to
illustrate what she believes is the case: that boys have such strategies in their
repertoire, and know how to use them, but simply employ them less
frequently than girls. Another example of conflict between two four-year-old
boys comes from the work of Amy Sheldon (1992b). The boys are in a
playroom; Tony is sitting on a small foam chair/couch, pushing the buttons on
the base of a touch-tone phone on his lap:

Tony: I pushed two squares (giggles), two squares like this.

Charlie (comes closer, puts his fist up to his ear and talks into an imaginary
phone): Hello!

Tony (puts his fist to his ear and talks back): Hello.

Charlie (picks up the receiver that is on Tony's couch) No, that's my phone!

Tony (grabs the telephone cord and tries to pull the receiver away from
Charlie) No, tha-ah, it's on my couch. It's on my couch. Charlie, it's on
my couch.

Charlie (ignoring Tony, holding onto the receiver and talking into it:) Hi.

Tony: (gets off couch, sets phone base on floor). I'll rock the couch like
this. (turns the chair over on top of the base and leans on it as Charlie tries to reach for it under the chair) Don't! That's my phone!

Charlie: (pushes the chair off the phone and pulls it closer to himself). I need a use it.

Tony: (sits back on his heels and watches Charlie playing with the phone).

Sheldon gives this as an example of what she calls single-voiced discourse, found more commonly in interaction among boys than among girls, in which the children do not negotiate or try to persuade, and do not try to adapt themselves to their partners' wishes. Each simply persists, pursuing his own objective, and their conflict escalates. Girls, Sheldon finds, more often use double-voiced discourse. An example of this kind of discourse is seen in a conflict between two four-year-old girls playing with a doctor's kit:

Arlene: Can I have that-that thing? (referring to the blood-pressure gauge in Eileen's lap). I'm going to take my baby's temperature.

Elaine: (who is talking on the toy telephone) You can use it, you can use my temperature. Just make sure you can't use anything else unless you can ask. (turns back to telephone)

Arlene: (picks up thermometer from table and takes her baby's temperature) Eighty three! She isn't sick. Yahoo! May I? (She asks Elaine, who is still on the phone, if she can use the hypodermic syringe.)

Elaine: No, I'm gonna need the shot in a couple of minutes.

Arlene: But I-I need this though.

Elaine: (firmly) Okay, just use it once.

Although it appears that Elaine is dominating a compliant partner, later in this considerably extended discourse Arlene demands and gets some reciprocal compliance:

Arlene has given her doll a shot, and picks up the earscope to check her ears.

Arlene: (picks up the syringe) Now I'll give her-I'll have to give her-a shot.

Elaine: There can only be one thing that you-that-no, she only needs one shot.

Elaine: Well, let's pretend that it's another day, that we have to look in her ears together.

Sheldon argues that girls' discourse has been misunderstood. Girls have been described as compliant, polite, considerate of their partners' wishes as though they seldom had conflicts and willingly subordinated their own interests for the sake of social harmony. Sheldon points out that girls do have disputes and do confront each other. She describes their conflict talk as double-voiced discourse because, while each pursues her own objective vigorously, each also negotiates with the partner and takes the other's wishes into account.

Several researchers have noted girls' use of "conflict mitigating" strategies (which include trying to find out what their partners' objectives are, and showing opposition indirectly rather than directly). It appears that girls tend to talk to each other in ways that keep interaction going. The things that boys more commonly do, however, such as issuing commands and prohibitions, can stop interaction in its tracks and alienate partners.

In Middle Childhood

The themes apparent in preschool discourse are continued and elaborated in the school-aged years. Since the early influential review by Maltz and Borker (1982), the distinctive patterns of discourse in boys' and girls' groups has been described and reviewed by a number of scholars, and the results are well known, so I will simply summarize the main themes here.

Conflict occurs less often among girls than among boys; when it does occur, the two sexes have somewhat different strategies for resolving it. Among girls, the double-voiced discourse is evident, in that while expressing their own point of view they also use conflict-mitigating strategies. These strategies include: displaying anger indirectly, proposing a compromise, and attempting to clarify the feelings or intent of the partner (Miller, Danaher, and Forbes, 1986), as well as simply softening one's claims by using more polite forms of speech and avoiding the power-assertive strategy of yelling or shouting (Crick and Ladd, 1990). Girls, too, more often avoid conflict by simply yielding to what a partner wants done, even when it is not in accord with their own preferences. Challenges to a partner are more often issued by boys, and this is often done in direct, power-assertive ways. In discussing a disagreement, boys are also less likely than girls to give a rationale for their position, simply asserting (or reasserting) their position (Hartup et al., 1993).
it is more likely to include bragging, threatening, overriding a partner's attempt to speak, or ignoring a partner's suggestion or demand. Boys' speech to each other more often includes direct commands and the giving of information. Girls, by contrast, more often acknowledge or agree with what a partner has said, and willingly give up the floor to a partner, so that there is an easier flow of turn-taking in the talk among girls.

Boys' talk fairly often includes the giving and receiving of "dares:" Boys taunt each other with jibes of "scaredy-cat" and "stupid" and "sissy" or "faggot;" challenging each other to do risky, limit-testing things, to prove their toughness. "Dirty" talk is much more common among boys than girls, and boys sometimes generate considerable excitement by trying to outdo each other in seeing who can say the most outrageously dirty thing (Thorne and Luria, 1986). Homophobic remarks increase during middle childhood, as do references to female bodies and explicit talk about sexuality.

In view of the different styles of discourse summarized above, it is not surprising that boys and girls employ somewhat different tactics when attempting to join the play of pairs (or larger groups) of other children already engaged in play. Some children watch to see what activity is going on in the existing playgroup, and try to fit into the framework already established, by making comments or offering suggestions related to the ongoing activity. This is usually a successful tactic. Other children, however, will do what is called redirecting, trying to change the focus of the existing group and direct attention toward themselves—a tactic which is usually unsuccessful. Boys use "redirect" more commonly than do girls, and when girls do use it, they are less successful in getting group entry by this means than are boys using the same tactics. There is also a sex difference in the receptiveness of the "host" children, who are already engaged in play when an outsider attempts to join. Borja-Alvarez and colleagues (1991), observing second- and third-grade children, report that a pair of "host" girls are more socially attentive to a would-be playmate, on the average, than a pair of "host" boys; the girls less often ignore the efforts of another child to join in? And girl "guests" are more responsive to the readiness signals from potential "hosts; with the result that girls entering girl groups have the highest rate of entry success.

When one compares the frequency of the various kinds of discourse in boys' groups and girls' groups, the differences are quite apparent and consistent across studies. Still, it is easy to overemphasize the differences.

By no means all of what children say to each other in their segregated playgroups conforms to the gendered patterns described above. In fact, most utterances fall into neutral territory. For example, Miller, Danaher, and Forbes (1986), analyzing conflict-resolution strategies, identified a form of influence attempt called moderate persuasion. This consisted of a range of processes including appeals to a social norm, appeals to a situational constraint, expressions of pleasure or displeasure, and entreaties. While girls were using twice as many conflict mitigations as boys (22 percent of influence attempts by girls were of this sort, as compared to 10 percent for boys), the two sexes did not differ in their use of moderate persuasion techniques; more important, these moderate techniques constituted the majority of strategies used by both sexes. In sum, the conversations occurring in boys' and girls' groups are much alike in many respects.

What is the essence of the divergence, then? I suggest that what is distinctive about the discourse within all-male and all-female pairs or groups of children is directly linked to the playstyle differences noted earlier. When boys issue dares, shout at each other, boast, and refuse to listen or yield the floor, they are doing the same thing they are doing in their rough play and physical confrontations: they are defending their turf, and vying for dominance—for recognition of status from other boys. This is the element in the male agenda that most distinguishes their interactions from those of girls. But boys are not engaged in dominance encounters all the time. When they are not, their style of talk can be quite similar to that of girls.

The Greater Strength of Boys' Groups

A number of studies have shown that when boys and girls are asked to name their friends, or say which children in the class they would most prefer to sit next to or participate in a project with, the same-sex preference is equally strong in boys and girls. And behavioral measures usually show similar rates of staying close to, or playing with, a same-sex peer (for example, Turner and Gerai, 1995), although there are a few girls who consistently join boys' games while boys very seldom join girls' games.

Monitoring Gender Boundaries

Despite the fact that children of both sexes are powerfully oriented toward others of their own sex, however, the forces drawing boys together, and
involving the exclusion of girls, appear to be stronger than the own-gender forces binding groups of girls. This asymmetry shows itself first of all in the degree of rejection of the other sex. Girls are more open to association with boys, more willing to listen to and interact with them, than boys are in relation to girls. Girls tend to be interested in masculine-as well as feminine-activities.

Boys, however, seem to play mainly to a male audience. In their toy and activity choices, preschool boys are concerned with not appearing to be girl-like. They tease or reject other boys who do girl-like things (Feiring and Lewis, 1987) or play with girls, and reinforce their male playmates for male-typical behavior; girls, by contrast, are usually unconcerned about tomboy behavior in another girl. In order to prove his toughness to other boys, a boy must avoid any activities that might earn the label "sissy." Clearly, an essential element in becoming masculine is becoming not feminine, while girls can be feminine without having to prove that they are not masculine.

**Separation from Adults**

A second major asymmetry is that boys' groups are more separated from, less oriented toward, the world of adults. This greater separation from adults has its beginning within the family. Clarke-Stewart and Hevey (1981) reported that between the ages of 24 and 36 months, boys showed a drop-off in the rate at which they initiated contact with their mothers, while for girls, contact initiations were sustained. A further indication of lesser male attentiveness to mothers in early childhood comes from an early study by Minton, Kagan, and Levine (1971). They observed 27-month-old children at home with their mothers, and reported that boys who were initiating mischievous activities tended to ignore their mothers' initial, low-key remonstrances, so that the mother had to turn to more forceful methods of stopping a boy's behavior than were needed for girls. When young children move out of the home into group-care settings, similar differences in orientation are apparent. As early as toddlerhood, boys in group-care settings have been seen to be less responsive than girls to the reactions of teachers to their behavior; they are sensitive, however, to the reactions of other boys (Fagot, 1985). Fagot found that the young girls in the group-care settings she observed were oriented to, and influenced by, the responses of both teachers and other children. Girls also spent much more time interacting with adults than did boys (Fagot, 1994).

By the time they enter the first grade, boys show strong orientation toward other boys. Grant (1985), in her observations of first-grade classrooms, was concerned with the level of attentiveness each child showed toward teachers as compared to peers. She documented high levels of attentiveness to peers, much of which represented a distraction from teacher-pupil interactions. What emerged was a picture of considerably higher attention to peers, and interaction with them, among boys than among girls. Indeed, the boys' attentional orientation to each other was higher than to the teacher. Here is an illustration from Grant's field notes:

Children are assembled on a rug, while (teacher) reads a story. She tells them: "Pay attention. I'll be asking you some questions about what I'm reading." Andre attempts to attract Ralph's attention and engage him in a pencil-poking fight. Ralph says Shhss. Janet tells them Shhss. Ralph finally fights with pencils with Andre. Mickey giggles. Teacher frowns at them, says nothing, keeps reading. Ralph whispers to Andre, "It's snowing out there (looks out the window). Let's you and me throw snowballs at recess." Andre grins, nods head to indicate yes. Mickey says, "Mr. (Principal) won't let you throw snowballs." Andre tells Mickey, "Well, man, he ain't going to see us." (Grant, 1985, p. 71)

The girls in these classrooms, by contrast, directed their attention more to the teachers than to each other.

**Closing Ranks to Protect Risk-Taking**

Part of boys' separation from adult society involves their risky, limit-testing enterprises. Some of the things grade school boys do-for example, passing around a can of beer, or a cigarette, or a pornographic picture-are clearly understood by boys as something adults would not condone. Such activities are surrounded by mutually understood peer-group rules about not tattling to adults. The boys become a closed group protecting each other from the prying eyes of adults. In their discussion of rule transgression, Thorne and Luria give us some important observations:

Rule transgression in public is exciting to boys in their groups. Boys' groups are attentive to potential consequences of transgression, but, compared with girls, groups of boys appear to be greater risk-takers...
of girls’ groups) could get away with the rule-breaking that characterizes the larger male group. A boy may not have power, but a boys’ group does. Teachers avoid disciplining whole groups of boys. Boys rarely identify those who proposed direct transgressions and, when confronted, they claim (singly) “I didn’t start it; why should I be punished?” Boys are visibly excited when they break rules together. They are flushed as they play, wipe their hands on their jeans, some of them look guilty. Boys experience a shared, arousing context for transgression, with sustained gender group support for rule-breaking. Girls’ groups may engage in rule-breaking, but the gender group’s support for repeated public transgression is far less certain. The smaller size of girls’ gender groupings in comparison with those of boys, and the girls’ greater susceptibility to rules and social control by teachers, make girls’ groups easier to control. Boys’ larger groups give each transgressor a degree of anonymity. (Thorne and Luria, 1986, p. 181)

Thorne and Luria suggest that in their rule-breaking activities, boys are playing to each other as an audience, and that the contagious excitement which is involved in the limit testing (including the shared excitement of taunting marginal or isolated boys) contributes to bonding among boys. Probably, also, the implicit rules against tattling to adults help to develop mutual trust among a group of boys.

Boys’ and Girls’ Friendships

For girls, participation in same-sex social groupings is almost synonymous with the formation of friendships: they tend to congregate in pairs or trios who identify each other as friends. And there is reason to believe that even during the preschool years, girls take more pleasure in interacting one on one than boys do. In an artificially contrived situation in which a child interacted either with a single puppet or with a group of puppets, preschool girls showed more interest and positive affect in the dyadic situation than boys, while boys expressed more positive affect when interacting in larger groups than in a dyadic interchange (Benenson, 1993). Thus we see precursors to the kind of social lives children lead in the middle childhood years, with girls concentrating mainly on reciprocated friendships, while boys invest in two kinds of social relationships: their larger male groups and their same-sex friendships. Some evidence for this comes from the work of Benenson and colleagues (Benenson, Apostoleris, and Parnass, 1997). They have shown that by the age of 6, boys engage in dyadic interaction quite frequently, just as girls do. What is different is that boys are also greatly involved in coordinated group activity with larger groups of peers, something that is much less true of girls.

Pairs of girl friends express intimacy in a variety of ways: they use endearing terms to each other, stroke or arrange each other's hair, sit close together with shoulders touching or arms intertwined, and face each other with direct eye contact. In middle childhood, girls' friendship alliances are shifting ones, and girls’ conversations reveal considerable concern over who is a friend and who is not. “You can't be my friend anymore” is a potent threat. Girls often cement their close friendships by mutually disclosing secrets and confessing weaknesses or fears-something that makes them vulnerable to gossip by former friends. The breakup of friendships seems to be a more intensely emotional process among girls than among boys.

Some of the games girls play on school playgrounds-hopscotch, jump-rope-involve more than two or three girls. Also, as we have seen, girls sit together in larger groups in school lunchrooms. But these larger groups generally do not seem to cement themselves into genuine groups of girls who meet together frequently, identify each other as group members, or participate in joint activities outside the immediate context of the game or lunchroom. As we have seen, too, larger groups of girls are less likely to form stable dominance hierarchies or play structured games, so these groupings are more like loose associations than structured, coherent groups. Most of the social time girls spend during out-of-school hours is with one or two friends, and it is doubtful whether they often have a strong sense of group membership in a larger category of girls. (This may be changing, though, as more girls become involved in girls' athletic teams.)

Among boys, a meaningful distinction can be made between friendships and membership in larger groups. As we have seen, boys do form larger, structurally coherent male playgroups. A boy who is a member of such a group will often have, in addition, a reciprocal friendship with one or two other boys. Boys’ friendships tend to be less intimate than those of girls, in the sense that there is less mutual self-disclosure, less physical closeness and eye contact. As boys progress through the middle-childhood years, they more and more avoid affectionate touching of their male friends; body contact takes the form of exchanging high flues or friendly punches. Male
friendships appear to be based primarily on interest in, and participation in, the same activities.

Summary and Comment

The answer to the question whether distinctive cultures emerge in all-girl as compared to all-boy groups is: Yes, they do. It is clear that boys' groups and girls' groups have somewhat different agendas, a major difference being that boys seem to be much more intensively involved than girls in issues of dominance and the maintenance of status. This difference can be seen in styles of discourse and the fantasy themes of pretend play, as well as in the behavioral modes of enacting and resolving conflict.

In Chapter 1, we saw that the tendency for children to congregate with same-sex playmates was robust indeed. The distributions of boys' and girls' choices of playmates of a given sex diverged so strongly that their joint distribution was essentially binary (see Figures 6, 7, and 8 in Chapter 4).

How divergent are the cultures of the male and female childhood playgroups, once segregation has occurred? In some respects, they appear to be nearly as divergent as segregation itself. The incidence of rough-and-tumble play, and of fighting (though this is infrequent even for boys) is much greater in male groups than in female groups. With respect to the themes enacted in fantasy play, the two sexes are also quite divergent, though perhaps not so strongly as in rough-and-tumble play. When it comes to styles of discourse and styles of conflict resolution, gender divergence is probably narrower. I have suggested that scores on discourse styles are in a sense diluted: when boys play together, dominance issues are sometimes salient, sometimes not. My hypothesis is that boys' discourse styles diverge from the female pattern especially strongly when dominance issues are at play; otherwise the styles of the two sexes may be more similar.

So far, I have been talking about same-sex peer groups, particularly male ones, as though they were monolithic. And indeed, on playgrounds for preschoolers or first- and second- graders, there may appear to be one primary boys' group within which dominance relations are mutually understood. Boys do differ, however, with respect to how involved they are in the activities of the primary boys' group, and some individuals remain on the periphery. During the late grade school years, and certainly by the time children have reached middle school, one sees the formation of subgroups along lines of mutual interests. As noted above, boys who display exceptionally high levels of aggression or risk-taking are not especially popular with mainstream boys, but they do find each other, and as time goes on they congregate more and more with each other. Similarly, boys with mutual interests in computers, or athletics, form subgroups, and these groupings are recognized by other children and given names—the "jocks;" the "nerds;" the "brains;" Among girls such groupings are not so clear. The main basis for distinction among girls appears to be popularity. The "top girls" are the ones who are style-setters: they know how to dress and take pains about their grooming. They are competent managers of social activities while being "nice" to others. They wield social power in the sense that they can influence which girls are "in" and which "out" of the popular category. And as puberty approaches, they are the girls who are viewed by other girls as popular with boys.

Distinctive patterns of interaction emerge in male and female peer groups. So far, however, we know very little about whether these descriptions apply equally to the different kinds of subgroups that emerge toward the end of the middle-childhood period. It is likely that the most distinctive male patterns-vying for status, competitiveness, ego displays, risktaking-are more salient in some male peer groups than others.

We should be aware, too, that some children of each sex do not become very deeply involved in any same-sex peer group, but remain loners through much of their childhood. Thus some children are much more intensely exposed than others to the socializing environment of a same-sex peer group. And among the majority of children who do spend significant time playing in a same-sex peer group, individuals differ greatly in the behaviors they enact and the relationships they establish within these groups. Among boys, not every member of a given peer group is equally engaged in showing off or wrestling, issuing dares or shouting other boys down. And of course, in a stable dominance hierarchy, the experiences of boys at the top of the totem pole are necessarily different from the experiences of those at the bottom. Within girls' groups, not all are equally engaged in trying to maintain positive relationships among group members, and some girls are clearly more given to relational aggression than others. These individual differences are of great importance for individual personality development, and they undoubtedly have their roots both in genetic predispositions and in earlier socialization experiences, both of
which vary among the children of a given sex. Thus there is usually considerable personality variation among the different members of a peer group.

Barrie Thorne argues that these within-sex differences are so great as to render group differences irrelevant, and urges that "the contrastive framework has outlived its usefulness" (Thorne, 1994, p. 108). It is my position that if one thinks about group differences as a comparison of the average scores of males with those of females on some measure of individual personality dispositions, the contrastive framework has indeed been outgrown. But if one thinks of groups as entities which have their own dynamics, their own cultures—properties that pertain to groups as groups and are not describable in terms of the characteristics of the members then the contrastive framework remains both useful and necessary. It may be the case—probably is the case—that a small number of central or leading children are much more active than others in establishing a group's culture. Yet this does not change the fact that all members of the group must find ways to adapt to whatever the group culture is. We all have both individual and group identities. At some periods of life, and in some settings, certain group identities are more important than at other times and in other settings. In this chapter, I have presented evidence to support the view that boys and girls are indeed exposed to two somewhat different cultures of childhood, and in Chapter 6 I will discuss the implications of involvement in a same-sex peer group for the formation of a group identity based on membership in a same-sex collective. The question of how much difference it makes to have been part of a same-sex culture in childhood is an open one. In the last part of the book I will explore how much carry-over there is to the gendered relationships that are formed later in life.

We should not assume that the two sexes are entirely disconnected from each other in childhood, however. Boys and girls are intensely aware of each other, and there are changes with age in the nature of the cross-sex interactions that occur and in the way cross-sex contacts are perceived and managed by children. I take up these matters in the next chapter.