Children start believing gender stereotypes as young as 6, study shows

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.02.17

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Can women be brilliant? Little girls are not sure.

A study published January 26 in the journal Science suggests that girls as young as 6 can be led to believe men are inherently smarter and more talented than women. This belief can make girls less motivated to pursue ambitious careers or activities. The authors of the study were surprised that these gender stereotypes affect children at such a young age. A gender stereotype is a generalization about either men or women that is false. One of these is the stereotype that men are smarter than women.

"As a society, we associate a high level of intellectual ability with males more than females, and our research suggests that this association is picked up by children as young as 6 and 7," said Andrei Cimpian. Andrei Cimpian is an associate professor in the psychology department at New York University. He co-authored the study, which looked at 400 children ages 5-7.
5-Year-Olds Associate Brilliance With Their Own Gender

In the first part of the study, girls and boys were told a story about a person who is "really, really smart," a child's idea of brilliance. Then, they were asked to identify that person among the photos of two women and two men. The people in the photos were dressed professionally, looked the same age and appeared equally happy. At 5, both boys and girls chose the photo of their own gender. This part of the study showed that at age 5, boys and girls associate brilliance with their own gender.

6-Year-Old Girls Much Less Likely To Pick Women As Brilliant

As they became older and began attending school, children apparently began believing more gender stereotypes. At 6 and 7, girls were much less likely to pick women.

The study also asked the kids to select photos of children who look like they do well in school. Interestingly, girls tended to pick girls, which means that their ideas of brilliance are not based on academic performance. "These stereotypes float free of any objective markers of achievement and intelligence," Cimpian said.

Girls Don't Play Game For "Really, Really Smart" Kids

In the second part of the study, children were introduced to two new board games. One was described as an activity "for children who are really, really smart" and the other one "for children who try really, really hard." Five-year-old girls and boys were equally likely to want to play the game for smart kids. At ages 6 and 7, boys still wanted to play that game, while girls chose the activity for children who try hard.

"There isn't anything about the game itself that becomes less interesting for girls, but rather it's the description of it as being for kids that are really, really smart," Cimpian said.

According to these results, girls do not believe that they are as gifted as boys. They tend to shy away from demanding majors and fields, leading to big differences in goals and career choices between men and women. "These stereotypes discourage women's pursuit of many prestigious careers; that is, women are underrepresented in fields whose members cherish brilliance," the authors of the study wrote.

Stereotypes Must Not Stop Girls' Professional Goals, Cimpian Says

It is still unclear where the stereotypes come from. Parents, teachers, peers and the media are the usual suspects, Cimpian said. Wherever they come from, Cimpian said it is evident that action must be taken so that these stereotypes don't stop girls' professional goals. "Instill the idea that success in any line of work is putting your head down, being passionate about what you are doing," Cimpian said, adding that exposure to successful women who can serve as role models also helps.
Toy companies like Mattel, maker of the Barbie doll, have taken steps to try to reduce gender stereotypes. Mattel’s "You can be anything" Barbie campaign tells girls that they can be paleontologists, veterinarians or professors, among other careers. The campaign also holds out the possibility that a girl can imagine herself to be a fairy princess.

"Geniuses" Of History Studied In School Are Mostly Men

Rebecca S. Bigler, professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, described Cimpian’s study as “exceptionally nice work.” She suggested that the stereotypes develop in early elementary school when students are exposed to famous scientists, composers and writers. These are called the “geniuses” of history and are overwhelmingly men. Bigler said it is important to combine that knowledge with information on gender discrimination.

"We need to explain to children that laws were created specifically to prevent women from becoming great scientists, artists, composers, writers, explorers and leaders," Bigler added. "Children will then be ... more likely to believe in their own intellectual potential and contribute to social justice and equality by pursuing these careers themselves."
Quiz

1. Read the sentence from the article.

   This belief can make girls less motivated to pursue ambitious careers or activities.

Which of the following statements from the article BEST supports the idea in the sentence above?

(A) "There isn’t anything about the game itself that becomes less interesting for girls, but rather it's the description of it as being for kids that are really, really smart," Cimpian said.

(B) "These stereotypes discourage women's pursuit of many prestigious careers; that is, women are underrepresented in fields whose members cherish brilliance," the authors of the study wrote.

(C) "Instill the idea that success in any line of work is putting your head down, being passionate about what you are doing," Cimpian said, adding that exposure to successful women who can serve as role models also helps.

(D) "We need to explain to children that laws were created specifically to prevent women from becoming great scientists, artists, composers, writers, explorers and leaders," Bigler added.

2. Which piece of evidence BEST supports the idea that girls begin to think they have to work harder to do as well as boys?

(A) As they became older and began attending school, children apparently began believing more gender stereotypes. At 6 and 7, girls were much less likely to pick women.

(B) The study also asked the kids to select photos of children who look like they do well in school. Interestingly, girls tended to pick girls, which means that their ideas of brilliance are not based on academic performance.

(C) Five-year-old girls and boys were equally likely to want to play the game for smart kids. At ages 6 and 7, boys still wanted to play that game, while girls chose the activity for children who try hard.

(D) According to these results, girls do not believe that they are as gifted as boys. They tend to shy away from demanding majors and fields, leading to big differences in goals and career choices between men and women.
3 Which statement would be MOST appropriate to include in an accurate and objective summary of the article?

(A) Research suggests that the gender stereotype labeling men as more intelligent than women is picked up by children as young as six years old.

(B) Researchers involved in the study failed to consider objective markers such as achievement in the stereotypes believed by children.

(C) Stereotypes result in women being tragically underrepresented in prestigious fields and those fields considered the work of "geniuses."

(D) Stereotypes have likely been reinforced by many things including Barbie dolls that are made to look like veterinarians and princesses.

4 The CENTRAL idea of the article is developed by:

(A) showing differences in the types of intelligence between boys and girls, and predicting their effects on gender stereotypes

(B) predicting the later effects of gender stereotyping on young girls, and encouraging parents to take an active role in prevention

(C) describing the methods and results of a study of gender stereotypes, and emphasizing the need to find ways to change this

(D) giving background information about laws that reinforced gender stereotypes, and describing how they were changed