

RUNNING HEAD: GENDER DIFFERENCES

Gender Differences In Self Esteem

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the differences in forming self-esteem as well as the differences in how self-esteem affects the overall person between the genders. Focus will be given to formation of the adolescent self-image and as a result, self-esteem.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELF ESTEEM

Self esteem is one of the most basic psychological needs (Lai; et.al, 2009). There are a lot of attributes that can have an effect on self-esteem; gender is no exception in that category. The variation of self-esteem between the genders changes between adolescence and adulthood. The self-esteem is also formed differently between the genders. The degree to which the differences occur is based on how masculine or how feminine the personality of the individual.

Parents are an important part of the development of a healthy self-esteem in a child. Children are likely to identify with the same-gender parent and therefore look to that parent for encouragement and recognition. Sigmund Freud proposed that this is only true after a specific point in adolescence, once the child has had an opportunity to establish his or her sexual identity. Until that point the child is expected to experience some jealousy over that parent for the affection of the opposite sex parent. It is expected by Freud that this effect is stronger in boys than in girls (Freud, p.72), which would leave boys at a disadvantage to their self-esteem if they feel they must fight their fathers for the attention and affection of their mothers.

Boys stereotypically are thought to have quicker rebounding egos, self-images and self-esteem than girls, but there have been no documented studies to confirm the assumption. Boys who are masculine and adhere to socially acceptable behavior for their gender often have strong self-esteem and are accepted by their peers. However, it is possible for an imitation to occur between boys that results in hypermasculinity of a boy that perceives himself to be less-masculine than others, but feels that he must prove his masculinity to his peers. This hypermasculinity can result in violent behavior as well as age-inappropriate interests in sex (Jonason; et.al, 2009).

Boys that have difficulty with self-esteem sometimes develop aggressive behaviors and become disruptive. One study also found that substance abuse occurred more commonly with boys having low self esteem (Houbre, et.al., 2006). Historically boys have not been particularly concerned with their physical appearance as actively as girls, but in recent years the trend has begun to change as boys have begun to form their self-concept by comparing their body image with the images that are presented in muscle magazines and other popular culture publications(Jonason, 2009). The trends and the social acceptance of the trends make it less desirable for a boy to deviate from the extremes of masculinity for fear of being

labeled feminine. While the teasing and peer labeling can have a devastating impact on the child's self-esteem, it is also possible that a child can be harmed by preventing himself from participating in activities that he may find enjoyable, even if not entirely gender-accepted, a boy wishing to learn to cook, for example (Yu, 2009).

Girls tend to be more social than boys and place more importance on social relationships than personal achievement when it comes to evaluating self-worth. This allows girls the ability to develop fewer relationships, but find the relationships they have to be more rewarding (Fornier, 2009). On the other hand, girls are more highly affected by self-image and concern for their appearance than boys. There is continuous pressure for girls to adhere to a "model image" of what they should aspire to look like (Dawson, 2008).

Females in early childhood tend to develop a personality that will fall into one of two categories, either the "little lady" or "tom-boy" category. Girls in the "little lady" category tend to have an easier time adjusting to adolescence and have a strong connection between gender identity and actual gender, resulting in accepting themselves during the transition between childhood and adulthood. The "tom-boy" group on the other hand is more likely to have difficulty transitioning. This condition,

known as "tomboyism", has been treated both positively and negatively in the past by psychological professionals. From a health aspect tomboyish girls are more likely to engage in athletic activity that would allow them to develop a more positive self-image. Unfortunately that added activity, especially the rougher play, places the girls at more risk of injury. From a social perspective the tomboyish girls are more likely to be loners and also suffer from peer rejection. From a social perspective, girls have more freedom in their personality and activity selection, since in most cultures there is little negative connotation given to masculine females (Volkam, 2009). Adolescent females that have low self esteem are more likely to engage in sexual activity than their higher self-esteem counterpart. Those low self-esteem individuals are thought to engage in sexual acts for the purpose of seeking intimacy and as a result an improvement to their self-esteem, but because they are not emotionally capable of handling such a relationship, both due to lack of maturity and their self-esteem, such relationships are not likely. A girl may attempt such an act several times, unsuccessfully, and remain unaware of the cause of their lowered self-esteem (Dawson, et.al., 2008).

An element that has a heavy impact on both genders is school or other academic performance. Generally children with

low academic performance report a lower self esteem than those with exemplary academic records (Zhang, 2009). Also particularly important in adolescence is body image. It is generally accepted that body image affects girls more than boys in that age; however, boys are not completely unaffected. Males that develop strong bodies that are closer to resembling the social ideal body type are more likely to be social and develop a healthy self-image and as a result, a better self-esteem (Lai; et.al, 2009).

Low self-esteem in both girls and boys can have an effect on their health. It can lead to risky behaviors such as early sexual exploration, drug abuse and violence. Adolescents choose these behaviors to find acceptance within a peer group, or to seek attention from other influential individuals in their lives whom they may depend upon for emotional reassurance (Lai; et.al., 2009).

The key to improved self-esteem in adolescents is increased family involvement in the activities that a child enjoys, and a supportive school environment. It is also important to a child's self-esteem to be encouraged in the process of establishing his or her own identity that is distinct from that of a parent (Volkom, 2009). Beginning a team sport or other athletic activity where there is room for growth and improvement on a

modest level is also a method that can be used to nurture the self-esteem and also encourage social connections that can sustain the self-esteem (Lai; et.al., 2009).

Self-esteem is important to the emotional well being of adolescents and can be a determining factor in how they view themselves in relation to their world.

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