

PERSPECTIVES  
on  
GENDER  
in  
EARLY  
CHILDHOOD

Foreword by  
Bryan G. Nelson

Edited by Tamar Jacobson, PhD

P E R S P E C T I V E S  
on  
G E N D E R  
in  
E A R L Y  
C H I L D H O O D

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## FOREWORD

### Opening Our Minds and Hearts to New Perspectives on Gender

— Bryan G. Nelson —

*“Is it a girl or a boy?”*

This simple question at the announcement of a baby’s birth speaks volumes about the impact of gender in our daily lives. People want to know—they *must* know whether a new human is female or male. This need to know a newborn’s gender occurs even before the child’s birth: parents are asked whether they want a baby boy or girl; they need to choose clothing—pink or blue?

Identity is dramatically shaped by one’s perceived gender. In many cultures and time periods, what one can and cannot do is determined by characteristics called “feminine” and “masculine.” Frederick William, an eighteenth-century Prussian king and father of Frederick the Great, beat his son for wearing gloves in cold weather because it was “an effeminate behavior.” When helmets first showed up on football fields, Pudge Heffelfinger, Yale’s three-time All American from 1889 to 1891, said, “None of that sissy stuff for me.” Helmets are now standard protective gear for football. Further, not until 1875 were women in the United States legally defined as “persons.” Women did not receive the vote in the United States until 1920. In the book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1946), authors Marynia Famham and Ferdinand Lundberg argued that women who worked sacrificed their essential femininity. Before the

1900s, wristwatches were considered effeminate because men carried only pocket watches. When World War I fighter pilots adopted them for tactical reasons, they became acceptably masculine.

In our society, some styles, conditions, and behaviors for men and women haven't changed. The disparity between wages paid to women and those paid to men persists. In 2004, women's wages in the United States were 76.5 percent of men's wages. The care of young children and housecleaning continue to be done primarily by women. We also continue to see increasing numbers of men injured or dying as a result of their work in dangerous occupations and their participation in contact sports, such as boxing and football. Violence against men whose behavior is perceived as effeminate is also on the rise.

Norms for men's and women's appearance are narrowly defined by most cultures. In a recent court case in Texas, a four-year-old boy who wore his hair long was suspended from his school because his parents would not cut his hair—the length of his hair violated the dress code in his suburban Dallas school district. A girl would not be suspended for having short hair. Gender perceptions and expectations take root at an early age.

To appreciate the need for this book, one only has to visit an early education classroom and watch young children's play. You will see boys running around or predominantly playing in the block areas and girls with dolls in the dress-up or dramatic play areas. Is it considered acceptable for boys to dress-up as women? Sometimes, but not really. Do girls play with trucks or blocks? Not as often as the boys. Early education creates powerful environments that can positively or negatively influence a child's perception, understanding of, and attitude toward gender roles. We need this book to help develop a better understanding of young children and gender identity.

At the same time there are signs that gender expectations of men and women are changing in the United States today. For example, currently there are more women than men graduating from medical and law schools. We see more women joining the military and going into combat zones. There are more female professional athletes. For the first time in history, more women than men will soon be working outside the home and there are more single-parent fathers caring for their children than ever before. While this change (hopefully) will bring increased freedom to both men and women, it also may create an increased confusion regarding what one's roles should be.

Fortunately there is hope, knowledge, and information available in this book you've chosen to read. Tamar Jacobson, editor of *Perspectives on Gender in Early Childhood*, leads the way by sharing a powerful personal story about her emerging understanding of being a woman. The vulnerability modeled by Jacobson pushes us to consider our own path toward self-discovery. I think you'll find the journey rewarding in that it will bring you to new understanding of yourself, others around you, and the world that we live in. To authentically work with young children you must be open to all the possibilities that make up who you are. The new information you discover will be both exciting and challenging. Exciting because you may enjoy an activity that you previously thought of as unavailable due to perceived gender constraints. Challenging because you may need to let go of previously held expectations of children.

Finally, *Perspectives on Gender in Early Childhood* is needed to help expand our knowledge and understanding of gender and its impact on children. We all need guidance and support by reading about new theories, research, and practices that challenge our thinking while offering practical ideas for the classroom. This book will provide you more than self-reflection (which is certainly important); it will also provide practical approaches to making meaningful changes to your work.