

Gender Biases in Children's Appraisals of Injury Risk and Other Children's Risk-Taking Behaviors

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Children ages 6, 8, and 10 years were given tasks designed to assess their beliefs about risk of injury from activities. Children were asked to appraise the risk of injury for boys and girls engaging in various play behaviors and to judge the sex of the character in stories about children engaging in activities that result in injuries. Results revealed gender biases in children's appraisals of injury risk: Both boys and girls rated boys as having a lower likelihood of injury than girls even though the boys and girls were engaging in the exact same activities. Children also showed higher accuracy in identifying the sex of the character in stories of boys' injuries than girls' injuries, and accuracy improved with the participant's age. Overall, the results indicate that by the age of 6 years children already have differential beliefs about injury vulnerability for boys and girls. Although boys routinely experience more injuries than girls, children rate girls as having a greater risk of injury than boys. With increasing age, school-age children develop a greater awareness of the ways in which boys and girls differ in risk-taking activities that lead to injury outcomes. © 2000 Academic Press

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Unintentional injury constitutes one of the most pervasive and threatening health problems for children. In the United States and Canada, as in many other industrialized nations, injury is a leading cause of death and disability for children beyond 2 years of age (Baker, O'Neill, & Karpf, 1992; Canadian Institute of Child Health, 1994). Indeed, more children die from injuries than from all other diseases combined (Rodriguez, 1990). In Canada, for example, injuries account for 57% of all deaths of children (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1996). In the United States, recent evidence indicates that one-fourth of all children experience a medically attended injury each year (Scheidt et al., 1994). In light of the scope of the child injury problem, it is not surprising

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that there have been numerous recent calls for research to illuminate factors that place children at risk of injury (e.g., Finney et al., 1993).

Epidemiological data highlight two factors that influence children's risk of injury, namely socioeconomic status (SES) and gender (e.g., Baker et al., 1992; CICH, 1994). Consistent with the commonly reported health-SES gradient (e.g., Aber, Bennett, Conley, & Li, 1997; Adler et al., 1994), children in lower SES groups are at elevated risk of injury (Baker et al., 1992; CICH, 1994), although there is surprisingly little known about how SES exerts such effects on childhood injury. For children beyond 2 years of age, boys experience more frequent and severe injuries than girls (Baker et al., 1992; CICH, 1994; Rivara, Bergman, LoGerfo, & Weiss, 1982). Naturalistic observations (e.g., Ginsburg & Miller, 1982; Morrongiello & Dawber, 1998; Rosen & Peterson, 1990), as well as laboratory studies (e.g., Coppens & Gentry, 1991; Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999), indicate that boys engage in more risk taking than girls, with this sex difference emerging by 2 to 3 years of age (Matheny, 1991). Obviously, such risk taking places them at elevated risk of injury. But why do boys engage in more risk taking than girls? Several recent studies have provided some answers to this question, and we examine this further in the present research.

Differential socialization of boys' and girls' risk-taking behavior likely contributes to the observed sex differences in children's risk taking. Recent evidence indicates that parents make more statements of encouragement to boys than girls when they engage in injury-risk behaviors on a playground, such as going down a firehouse-type pole. In contrast, girls receive more cautions to be careful and more physical support when they engage in these same behaviors (Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999). These sex differences in parental responses to 2- to 4-year-olds' behaviors occurred despite the fact that there were no differences in physical abilities between boys and girls. Nor did the boys and girls differ in their behaviors during the pole task or in their seeking of physical support from the parent. Similar findings have been found for 8-year-olds engaging in injury-risk behaviors on a playground: Mothers showed more tolerance of risk taking by sons than daughters (i.e., more encouraging statements to boys and slower to respond to boys' risky behaviors), even though the boys and girls engaged in exactly the same play activities, showed similar abilities in performing the risky play behaviors, and the boys actually had a history of more frequent injuries than the girls (Morrongiello & Dawber, 2000).

Research on the psychological determinants of children's risk taking decisions also reveals important differences between boys and girls in the early school years, and these differences have been shown to predict children's risk-taking behavior. Specifically, boys and girls differ with respect to their ratings of vulnerability for injuries and potential severity of injuries, attributions for injuries, and appraisals of injury risk. Boys are more likely than girls to assume that they will not get hurt when engaging in risky play activities, and boys rate the potential injury severity as low in comparison to the judgments of same-age girls

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