

# Gender at Play

## Fourth-Grade Girls and Boys on the Playground

D. ELLEN BOYLE  
NANCY L. MARSHALL  
WENDY W. ROBESON

*Wellesley College Center for Research on Women*

*This study explores the complicated social interactions related to gender that take place at school recess. Using grounded theory methodology and a social constructionist perspective, the researchers observed 67 recesses in New England and then examined the data to determine which themes emerged. Results demonstrate that there is great complexity in preadolescent gender relations and that their incidence and significance is in flux during recess time. Among the results noted were ways in which children reinforce their gender identities; the wide intragender variability in choice of activities especially for girls; and clear evidence of borderwork, that is, those interactions where boys and girls play together but there is something about the play that actually reinforces the gender divisions rather than diminishes them. Future research should examine ways adults can support children in developing relationships based on mutual collegiality and liking, thereby building their sense of competence and self-esteem.*

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**Gender is constructed** through everyday social interactions. One place where this process is particularly intriguing is the world of elementary school recess. Outdoor recess playgrounds are an entire world in and of themselves. On a daily basis, children come together, are joined by a few adults, interact with one another for about 30 minutes, then return to the separate world inside the classroom. It is the purpose of this article to examine how gender shapes and is shaped by children during their play at recess.

Gender is not something inborn; rather, gender is something that exists only through our (re)creation of it on a daily basis. We actively “do” gender, it is not something one “is” or “has.” Children (and adults) “do gender” on a daily basis

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by creating meanings as they interact socially with one another (Lorber, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Following the social constructionist perspective (Adler & Adler, 1998), we view the making of gender as a process in which parents, school, society, and the child all contribute. We see children as active agents in the making of their social world at recess (Thorne, 1993).

The peer group culture on the playground is a significant place in which to examine children's social interactions specifically with regard to gender. Researchers have found that gender separation is most complete in peer-dominated, public settings such as the school playground (Thorne, 1993) and is most prevalent in preadolescence (Corsaro, 1997). It is here on the playground that preadolescents (ages 7 to 12) explore a variety of norms concerning friendship, leadership, romantic/sexual relations, appearance, competition, competence, and personal sense of power. Through their social interactions on the playground, children are learning to make sense of and deal with ambiguities and concerns related to gender.

What we have found is that there is great complexity in preadolescent gender relations. There are numerous, sometimes contradictory meanings noted during interactions where gender is salient. Furthermore, the significance of gender in children's social relations at recess is very much in flux; sometimes it is very significant, whereas at other times it is much less so or not at all.

It is important to note that recess most commonly takes place on "the playground" and the stated intention of recess is "for play." Play is generally considered an important part of how children develop (Herron & Sutton-Smith, 1982). However, much of what goes on during recess does not fit with general assumptions about the meaning of the word *play*. In its purest form, play connotes a light-heartedness, an abandonment to joy, to spontaneity. We rarely saw this type of play at the recesses we observed. Instead, much of what we saw on the playground fell more into the definition of play as dramatic performance. Here, play became the framework for acting out various forms of aggression, romantic liaisons, and/or power struggles. The interactions often moved in continuous and various forms of flow, such as from play to romance to aggression and back to play. Moreover, there often were numerous overlays of emotion—joy, anger, frustration, embarrassment, rejection, humiliation, and fear were all observed.

Playtime away from the classroom allowed children greater freedom of choice and the opportunity to work on or further develop various social skills in a less adult-directed world than that inside the school building. Here, children were deeply involved in constructing their social world, although certainly adults played a role.

## METHODS

Our research model was that of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), allowing the themes to emerge from the data. The findings here were drawn from

field notes collected by three observers trained in grounded-theory methodology, who closely observed children's social interactions at lunch and recess at 67 New England schools. Most of the children were White, middle or upper middle class, and they attended suburban, urban, and a few rural schools.

The great majority of the children were in the fourth grade of school, although a few were in third grade. The children were age 9 to 10 years. The majority of observed recesses were of a single grade of children with a handful of multiple-grade recesses. This article focuses on the social interactions of outdoor recess and acknowledges the complexities of looking at gender at recess: the overlays of race, class, ethnicity, and age variations. We were able to observe and speak to some but not all of these complexities, and it is our hope that additional research will continue to probe these further.

The three observers were White female adults. They wrote periodic, self-reflective journal notes in a systematic effort to control for observer bias. Observers were instructed to focus on observation and accurate recording of behavior; they did not actively engage with the children. When children approached the observers, their questions were answered and then the children were redirected to return to their play.

#### CHILDREN AT PLAY

We first describe a general picture of what we saw children doing at recess and then delineate where and in what context children separate into distinct groups based on gender. We then discuss how gender issues are constantly in flux and are woven in and out of the play exchange.

*Fun.* From a distance, recess appears to the observer as a bunch of children having fun: a mass of bustling, running, laughing, throwing, and twirling bodies. Noted on the perimeter of the playground are a few youngsters who walk alone or sit sedately by themselves. One or two adult monitors, usually female, stand together and chat.

The predominant mixed-gender activity at the almost 70 recesses we observed was team sports: soccer, kickball, or softball. For the most part, these games were child-organized in terms of team selection. There were also active games that were composed of children playing together but not on teams. These children were engaged in skill-building activities such as swinging, jump roping, and jungle gym play. In most of these latter activities, children tended to cluster in same-gender groups. For example, there might be girls and boys on a swing set but usually there would be four girls swinging side-by-side and talking and then two boys side-by-side, often with an empty swing separating the gender-based groups. So, although on one level they are simply children playing at recess, they are often separated by gender. In addition, most of the sports teams had a predominance of one gender, more often boys, with a few "cross-over" girls.

Close readings of the multitude of field notes manifested several general themes. First, it is safe to say that children generally greatly enjoy recess. They joyfully welcome the break in their academic day. All the observers commented on the exuberance with which children ran outside to recess with comments such as "The kids break into a run as soon as they're on the play area" and "The kids are now at the slide taking turns, laughing as they slide." Again and again we saw children eagerly run through the school doors leading to the playground area; bursting with energy, they spilled out of school doors: "The equipment was mobbed with both boys and girls with one monitor assigned to them. This was the first day since the fall [that] it had been open to play because of snow, ice or rain."

*Physicality.* The second theme to emerge about kids at play is their physicality. Many children of both genders are actively using large muscles, particularly in the first half of recess. The following scenario illustrates both children having fun and being physically active:

The larger lot in the back was used by about 15 kids playing kickball. Teams were organized quickly. There were four girls playing. One of the girls had a lot of power—she was the pitcher for most of the game. No one questioned this. The best boy played second base and caught all the fly balls within his vicinity. The late arrival was a girl and she joined without question as the fifth girl, three on one team and two on the other. All five girls were serious about the game just as the boys were. This was an amazing game to watch. There were no arguments at all, no going to the principal for complaints of calls of "safe" or "out." Everyone was happy and enjoying the game and playing by the rules.

*In relationship.* Third, the great majority of children at recess were involved in positive relationships—calling each other by name, placing a hand briefly on a back, sharing a laugh, calling "Hi" to a monitor, walking or running to the edge of the playground, or negotiating the text of their play. Overall, most of the children observed were having a good time in relationship with other children.

*Conformity.* Conformity was evidenced in both boys and girls in terms of general adherence to rules (stay within the playground perimeter, walk until you are outside, don't hurt others while you play, and the like). In addition, the majority of both genders conformed to peer-approved clothing styles and this was true in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Boys wore oversized designer jeans, high-top designer athletic shoes, and oversized designer-logo or sports-related T-shirts. Girls wore designer jeans, designer athletic shoes, form-fitting tops, or designer-logo oversized T-shirts.

What also became clear is that by this time in the school year (we observed from mid-February through early June), many children have a good idea before they go outside what, where, and with whom they are going to spend time at recess. Thus, it appeared to us that much of the groundwork negotiation of entry

into games had been established previously, as the following field notes demonstrate: "A group of about 10 of them, all boys, start playing football on the drive." At another school, "the boys charge out . . . and run immediately to the basketball court and begin to play, 3 against 3."

There is likely some fluctuation in the groupings; however, our one-visit protocol did not allow us to explore this in more detail. The games that seem to be about "just children playing" tend to have about an equal number of girls and boys or have more girls. They tend to have less aggressive play as well. "A group comprised of 7 boys and 5 girls is playing soccer. One of the girls playing soccer has clogs on and can't run very fast. At one point when she tries to kick the ball her shoe falls off her foot. Both boys and girls go after the ball. The teams are made up of both genders and everybody seems to be actively playing. This is not a particularly aggressive game, but they all look like they are having fun." Thus, we did see times when gender was not a salient issue in children's play. These were times when we saw healthy, active children fully absorbed in their world of play.

#### GIRLS WITH GIRLS

*Intragender variation.* Some distinctions in choices and behaviors of girls emerged, although similar to Thorne (1993), we found that there is much intragender variation. Girls choose from among a variety of groups and activities: dyads, small-group socializing, all-girl sports teams, mostly-all-boy sports teams, active skill-building groups, hanging with monitors, and standing or sitting alone. Overall, girls at recess are developing one or more of these types of skills: social-relational, physical-muscular (dance, jump rope, sports team), and creative arts (book-making, songs, drawing, making cards).

*Girls walk and talk.* At our observations, we saw many fourth-grade girls who strolled around the play area, talking and staying in small, all-girl groups with anywhere from two to six members. They walk, they talk, they giggle, they occasionally hop and skip a bit, perhaps throw in a twirl or two, and then they return to walking. For the most part, they are not looking for interaction with any other children beyond their little group. They are engrossed in their own world, relating to other girls and fully enjoying the experience. In contrast, when we occasionally observed a recess that included Grades 5 and 6, we noted that more of the fifth/sixth grade all-girl groups were interested in gaining the attention of the boys on sports teams, more in the style of "troupes" as described by Thorne (1993).

*Girl dyads.* The dyads appear to be girls who are "best friends." They have lunch together, walk to the playground together, stick close by one another

throughout recess, and walk back to the school building together at the end of recess as illustrated here:

[The two girls] walk the perimeter, talking, leaning in toward one another, once briefly placing an arm around one another. They then lie down in the snow, roll over a few times, talking all the while. They sit a while, talking. They then . . . walk, kneel, begin digging in the snow. After about 5 minutes they stand and begin what appears to be a dance routine. . . . They laugh and smile as they dance. They are in their own little world.

*Girls create a circle.* Membership in the larger-than-two small girls' groups who walk and talk is slightly more fluid than the dyads. In both types of groups, the girls created a zone of privacy around themselves. We were seldom able to hear specific words, for we found that if we moved closer, they would stiffen slightly, stop talking, and move away. It became clear that adults, especially unknown ones, were not invited into their world. What was clear was that the girls taking part in the groups exhibited intimacy through talk and whispering, through touch, through smiles, and laughter. As they walked, they leaned close; they made frequent eye contact; they touched each other's hair, arms, or shoulders; they laughed; and they whispered. During conversations at lunch, or when they approached us at recess to initiate talk, we learned that they discussed clothes, other kids, teachers, homework, and after-school plans.

Girls in these small groups touched frequently as a way of expressing friendship, noticeably more than boys in groups. It was not unusual to see girls walking arm-in-arm, holding hands, and/or hugging, whereas we never observed any boys holding hands.

Four girls were arm-in-arm walking. Another girl took out a Kodak throw-away camera and started taking pictures of the girls. They posed arm-in-arm, in doubles. They exchanged the camera amongst themselves to be sure all had a chance to be in the pictures.

*Groups based on shared interest.* Sometimes, girls' groups were created due to a shared interest or talent. These were girls' groups who spent recess practicing dance steps and/or cheerleading routines. It was rare to see boys with these groups, and when it did occur, the dance steps tended to be more hip-hop style. Many of the all-girl groups did hand games. Standing in a circle they sang or chanted, laughed, and clapped rhythmically. Girls, far more often than boys, did creativity activities: writing books, drawing pictures, and making cards. For example, we saw several groups of girls making cards for a teacher or a friend. We also saw groups of girls making a book together. Two other fairly popular activities for groups of girls were jumping rope and climbing on the jungle gym. In both of these activities the players were predominately girls; however, there were often one or two boys who participated. The sense was definitely of a

“girls’ game,” but one with enough ease of entry that boys could participate. Close observation of many recesses showed that these were not the boys playing team sports but a distinct group. In addition, in contrast to the girls, the boys tended not to jump rope for the entire recess.

*Membership in girls’ groups.* In groups that were predominately girls with only one or two boys, the boys were usually accepted into the play by the girls. However, rarely did these girls actually seek out boys to join them; there was an acceptance if boys approached but no active invitations for boy companionship in the play; it appeared that the girls would have been just as happy playing by themselves. There were occasionally groups of all-girl sports teams, usually soccer or Red Rover. We observed no girls playing football. It was not uncommon for a group that began as an all-girl group to become eventually a mixed-gender group. It appeared fairly easy for boys to enter a previously all-girl sports game. At times, the boys entered the game without comment and the game continued. At other times, however, gender emerged and came to the fore, as in the following case:

A game of Red Rover began with about 5 girls and expanded to about 10 girls. Then two boys joined them. One girl said that Cody and Michael both liked Amanda . . . Amanda was a cute, outgoing, slim girl. She squealed and said she hated them both. . . . Then, since Cody was present, his boy friend pushed his head forward towards Amanda and said “Smooch, smooch, smooch.” Kids laughed and Amanda walked away.

Girls’ groups that were less likely to become mixed-gender sports groups were (a) those that began as walk-and-talk groups and (b) those with a special shared talent. There is some quality of closeness about these groups that does not invite others to join. The girls might walk and talk and then decide to play soccer but it remained an all-girl group. The following case illustrates this particular dynamic:

At one side of the playground . . . a group of three girls lie in the grass at the start of recess. Several other girls join them. . . . [They] practice some dance steps for a few minutes. One of the girls has a soccer ball and this group of eight girls begins a pick-up soccer game that lasts for the remainder of recess. They play in a narrow corridor of the grassy part of the playground. These girls appear to be totally in their own space and world. . . . All the girls play the game in a laughing and easygoing way. Their easygoing manner gives the impression that this game is more about friendship and having a good time than about winning or losing. There is no yelling or squealing. It’s a beautiful spring day at the end of the school year and they’re enjoying recess apparently without a care in the world.

*Girls assert their power.* We were impressed by the air of self-confidence most of the girls displayed in their recess world regardless of choice of activity. Whether tumbling on the jungle gym, jumping rope, walking and talking, or

playing on a sports team, these girls looked comfortable in their school play world. They were busy finding out about the world in general and about interpersonal dynamics in particular. Some of these girls are clear leaders; a few are followers. However, the majority of girls can best be described as full participants in whatever game/activity they've chosen to do. Active participants were described as follows:

[This] girl is tall and has long blonde hair. She wears a pale blue jacket, unisex jeans and Nikes. She is slim and looks strong and athletic. . . . She and a girlfriend have a big yellow rubber ball and they are kicking it back and forth to each other, [appearing] to be practicing soccer skills. They remain there kicking the ball, laughing, occasionally talking, for the entire recess. . . . They appear to be having a fun time together completely absorbed in what they are doing.

Even when challenged, girls retained their wholeness of self:

One boy said to a girl, "Hey, you kicked it the wrong way." She grabbed the ball in her hands and said with a toss of her long blonde hair, "I don't freaking care." Absolute self-confidence. The game continued.

*Girls negotiate text of their play.* There was a sense of ease as girls negotiated the text of their play in most of the girls' groups:

Five girls came to join [two girls playing Simon Says with the ball]. It was a mimic game where the leader did something with the ball and the others had to imitate it. One girl asked how you get out. The girl in the dress said if you forget what to do. So she then bounced the ball once and passed the ball around. . . . Then it was her turn to do it again. She did some very complicated maneuvers of bouncing, turning, and throwing it. The first girl tried to repeat it, and another said, "You are out." Then they decided that no one could be out. Each girl tried to repeat it but the leader couldn't even remember what she did. They all ended up laughing and giggling as each girl did something sillier than the girl before. They played this throughout recess.

*Girl leaders.* The positive leaders take charge of the activity, help the less confident, and/or facilitate group process:

One girl seems to be an informal leader. She is a sturdy girl with shoulder-length black hair in a stylish cut. . . . She tends to run in the middle of the pack of girls. [She] has a confident air about her whether she's running or standing.

*Girls and negative leadership.* Only very rarely was a girl observed whose power was based on physical dominance/threat, although it was striking when it appeared. Only one girl was seen physically menacing a peer. Also, girls generally did not overtly challenge adults on the playground. Others have posited that girls challenge and seek control in more subtle ways, particularly with regard to exclusionary behavior in the small groups (Goodman & O'Brien, 2000;

Simmons, 2002). It is interesting to note that in our observations of fourth-grade recesses we did not see this “mean girls” phenomenon emerge as a theme from our data. We do know from Gilligan’s (2002) work that, in adolescence, part of the initiation into womanhood seems to involve rituals of inclusion/exclusion. Perhaps fourth grade is a critical point for intervention on how to negotiate peer relationships with strength and safety.

*Girls alone.* There was a small percentage of girls who did not appear active and/or self-confident. They tended to hang about the school building, stand with monitors, or silently watch others play as outliers at the edge of the play. There are more girls than boys in this group.

To summarize, the majority of girls we observed were confident, physically active, and valued relationship. Most of the girls whom we observed were demonstrating positive relationship skills: negotiating with laughter, appropriate and frequent use of touch, eye contact, and verbal sharing of inner thoughts.

#### BOYS WITH BOYS

*Physicality in motion.* The most striking feature of boys’ play was their high level of physical activity. The majority of boys on nearly every outdoor playground were playing on a sports team, a game with either all boys or a majority of boys. By and large, these were games controlled by boys. These all-boy groups were playing soccer, kickball, baseball, or touch football. They were generally competitive, expended a great deal of physical energy, and for the most part appeared to be having a good time. Because the majority of the boys we observed were involved in sports, boys’ play overall tended to look very physical, was loud, and involved much use of gross-motor muscles. Most recesses we observed had two or more groups of boys playing on sports teams; thus, boys tended to control large areas of the playing area whenever this was available. They were usually away from the school building and far from adult monitors. “One large group of boys was playing pass football, but using a bright yellow baseball cap. They [were] fully engaged in this game, running vigorously, laughing.” At a different school: “[A boy] calls over, ‘Keep the ball over here! Keep the ball over here!’ Several boys are pushing each other in a playful way. They are smiling.”

*Boys in relationship.* When boys are together they are physically active. Often there is a fair amount of friendly calling back and forth among the boys in these games. In this way, they may be building or maintaining relationship but it is not about intimacy, it’s about advancing the action of the game. Some boys showed feelings of friendship in a backslapping, brief arm-across-the-shoulders way as they ran to or from the playground. Some arguing appeared to be an acceptable part of boys’ play, as seen in this case: “On a large field a group of

about 15 boys plays a combination kickball/baseball where a rubber ball is pitched to each one and that person runs the bases. The boys yell: 'Foul! Foul!' 'Out! Out!' 'No! No!' and 'Go! Go!' as the game advances." It was common to observe physical behaviors that displayed physical strength but not physical harm: "Three boys were walking with arms around each others' shoulders. After a few steps, the outside two boys picked up the middle one so his feet were no longer on the ground. The monitor told them to put him down."

*Entering boys' groups.* Even boys who are not particularly skilled athletes, and boys who arrive late on the playground, can and do join the sports teams. This is in direct contrast to girls' experience: For a girl to join boys' teams, the unspoken rule seems to be that she must be skilled. There is a small, separate cohort of boys who are not athletic and/or not interested in sports who choose other activities. For example, there are the boys who stay in all-boy groups other than sports teams. These boys build things, such as one group who dug a trench with sticks and made a boat race. Other boys play imaginary games such as Crazy Bones.

There are occasional boy dyads; they usually walk around rather aimlessly. They do not appear to be looking for contact with anyone, girls or boys. There is not much, if any, physical contact between them. They avoid the sports games. Once in a while we saw a lone boy standing near the school building watching activities, not looking to gain entry. There was a tiny group of loner boys standing near the school or near the all-boy games. They tended not to be "active" watchers; they passively observed the play but were not trying to gain entry.

*Boys show their power.* Boys tend to control the use of space. They used more play space than girls and were quick to claim their territory if "outsiders" approached. One example: "Two girls were skipping and dancing close to [a group of boys playing ball] and one boy told them to LEAVE and the girls did, skipping and holding hands." Boys showed domineering behavior but there was complexity here as well. Some boys manifested positive leadership skills and were directive without being domineering: "There is a 'leader' boy in the game. He has cropped blonde hair, looks athletic, wears shorts, T-shirt, leans into the game eagerly, is very actively in the center of the play."

Boys found many ways to challenge authority, and they did so more overtly than did girls. This was most commonly seen in the number of boys who played out of sight of adult monitors, hiding behind cars, dumpsters, or snow banks. Boys circumvented rules in other ways, most often by using their physical presence. They lunged at peers, they shoved, and they shouted with threatening stance. In 2 recesses out of 67 we saw boys' aggressive behavior cause physical harm, such as the boy who hit another boy in the groin with a stick during a kickball game. Thus, our findings do tend to support a "boy code" (Pollack, 1998) in that the great majority of boys were physically active on a sports team

and were more involved in the action of a game than with emotional connection with peers.

#### **“DOING GENDER” ON THE PLAYGROUND**

*Language.* In analyzing the data, we were struck by the multitude of ways that gender is reinforced at recess. First and foremost is language; adults and children almost always refer to children as “girls and boys,” thereby reinforcing genders.

*Apparel.* Clothing and footwear also proclaims gender. At every recess, the majority of girls wear clothing in a variety of rainbow colors; boys by and large wear neutrals. Girls wear spaghetti-strap T-shirts; boys wear oversized T-shirts most often with athletic trademarks. Boys often wear jackets that identify them as a member of a town or school sports team; girls occasionally do. Many girls wear accessories—bows, barrettes, scrunchies—in their hair. An occasional boy has his hair shaped with gel or has a streak of dyed hair. Girls often wear jewelry; only an occasional boy at this age sports an earring or a necklace chain. Girls who intend to play active sports games wear athletic shoes; girls who walk and talk wear either athletic shoes or fashionable sandals/platform shoes. Girls may make a perhaps unconscious decision as they dress for school about what they will be doing at recess, whereas for boys, dress does not factor into choice of recess activity.

*Choice of playmates.* Gender at recess is constantly reinforced by the choices kids make about playmates. As described above, the great majority of kids choose same-sex playmates, even when there is an activity involving children from both genders.

*Role-playing.* Pretend or imaginary play at (own) gendered roles is another form of doing gender, with clear differences between girls’ and boys’ imaginary play. Usually it was girls who played in and around the little houselike structures built as part of elaborate climbers. Girls did pretend-play talking into plastic cell phones. Mostly girls played jump rope. We noted that imaginary adult roles are encoded in many of the jump rope songs:

Fudge, fudge, call the judge, Mary’s having a baby  
 Her boyfriend’s going crazy.  
 How many babies will she have?

Power and authority is encoded in boys’ imaginary play along with themes of competition and control. For example,

a group of seven boys is sitting on a picnic table. [The observer becomes] curious because it is unusual to see a group of boys just sitting around. As [the observer] gets closer, she realizes the boys are playing "Robbers and Guards." These boys have been captured and are in jail.

Sometimes the boy himself would be the imaginary powerful being: "One boy had a black nylon over his head so he looked like a zombie creature. Kids chased and pushed and shoved him. It was very physical."

There also continues to be some gender association with certain toys. More boys played with electronic toys. Jump ropes are predominately carried and played with by girls, although this is changing somewhat as jump rope activities become more athletic and competitive. Most sports balls are carried by boys, although a few girls carried soccer balls.

#### BORDERWORK

Borderwork (Thorne, 1993) is defined as behavior that reinforces the boundary between boys and girls, including contests of boys versus girls, "rituals of pollution," such as "cooties," and invasions of the territory or activities of the opposite gender. Thorne observed that borderwork is often asymmetrical, with boys having more power.

*Boys versus girls contests.* Very often, borderwork involved girl versus boy contests at recess. One popular children's game is "pickle ball." In this game, two opposing teams run back and forth between two "safe" spots as a team member tries to get someone on the opposing team out by tagging her or him by throwing the big rubber ball directly at them. Here, pickle ball begins as "just kids playing" but develops into borderwork. The text of the play alters as the element of girls versus boys is introduced.

At an early point in the game there are about 10 girls and 10 boys playing. [Gradually] they are pretty much divided into the two teams by gender. A girl throws the ball hard. Another girl yells to her, "Get Jake, Liza!" They tussle for the ball. A girl yells to a boy, "Julie had it!" Liza hangs onto the ball, throws it to a boy, who then throws it to a tall girl. . . . A girl-boy power struggle ensues. They pull, push, and drag the ball. The boy gets the ball, throws it quickly. . . . The girls tend to hold onto the ball longer before trying to tag someone out. Girls tend to squeal when tagged or when running to avoid the tag.

At other times, players in the game are selected and placed on opposite teams based strictly on gender. Boys often dominated in these instances, although at times girls asserted their power and held their ground.

Borders are in flux, not permanent. Sometimes the play was simply children playing, but gradually it became apparent that teams had evolved along gender lines.

Within the four-square game a girl-boy argument breaks out regarding whether or not the ball was "over the line" which would mean that the girl would be out [and] the boy [would] advance. The girl argues briefly, but the boy persists and she concedes and leaves the game, rejoins the waiting line.

*Gendered chasing.* We also observed numerous instances of gendered chasing where a child of one gender would provoke, oftentimes with the help of a same-gender peer, a child of the other gender and a game of chase would follow.

There was a group of three girls who chased a couple of boys off and on during recess. . . . One girl put her arm around the boy. He pushed her arm away and moved out of her space. She kept edging closer to him. The other boy then pushed the boy into her and ran away. That started the game of chase.

It is important to note that alliances are repeatedly shifting, reforming, and shifting again. In the same game, there is a time when gender borders are being reinforced but then something shifts and the play becomes something else.

The girls who sat with the boys at recess played tag with a group of five boys and two other girls. The girls who played were fast and perhaps even more athletic and limber than the boys [and] could outrun them. They were serious about the game. They appeared to be competitive and wanted to catch their opponent. One girl yelled "HAHA, I am faster than you" to one of the boys. When the girls were being chased, they ran up and around the climbing equipment and down. The boys tended to run through groups of kids to avoid being caught.

This example demonstrates both gendered chasing as well as a girl challenging the traditional gender stereotype of boys being faster than girls. It also is an example of a pattern we saw repeatedly of girls running up and around the equipment in contrast to boys who did not hesitate to barge right through nearby groups of children in their quest to avoid being captured.

*Invasions.* We observed more frequent and more overt instances of boys invading girls' space/games than the reverse. Boys were creative in their efforts to invade. In the following example, a group of nine girls is jumping rope:

Two boys tried to jump rope with [the girls] and were told no. There was a slight verbal exchange of the boys begging. . . . One boy was insistent he wanted to jump rope. . . . He began fake jumping in a silly way so eventually the girls paid attention to him. When the girls began playing two-person jump rope swinging, one boy ran through the game just to be annoying. Another boy yelled, "Booger!" every time a girl jumped. Eventually the other insistent boy had a turn to jump—quite seriously about it. . . . The group began to play snake. This drew more boys into the game; 3 boys and 12 girls. Then two more boys came and just started running through the game. They eventually left when the girls ignored them.

Here we see the boys' persistent efforts to disrupt the flow of the girls' game, including the boy shouting "booger," which eventually led to some boys joining. However, some boys join to invade, others join to truly participate.

*Exclusions on basis of gender.* It was not uncommon to see children excluding others apparently on the basis of gender. We saw more instances of boys excluding girls than vice versa. Boys also displayed a more overt style of exclusion, such as the following:

Twelve boys got permission to play on the adjacent baseball field on the edge of the [play area]. They had two-man races. Three girls that were hanging around the backstop left. They then returned and a boy pushed them away from their activity. [The girls] insisted they were going to run. The boys let them run to first base with a few on either side as if keeping them within a certain area of the base path. The girls held hands and more or less skipped to first base. The boys were yelling at them to get out! And they wandered off to right field together and turned and smiled at the boys. One boy said "Stupid," another "Annoying," another "Tell Mrs. P." The boys then just returned to their game and forgot about [the girls who] didn't return.

Repeatedly, we saw boys respond to girls' presence by ignoring them as if they simply were not there. "Out of the 40 kids [playing soccer] 5 of them are girls. The girls never get the ball. They basically run back and forth in the direction of the ball. The girls stay pretty close together." This ignoring of girls occurred even when the ball went out of play and into the area where the girls were watching and continued even after the girls actually kicked the ball back into play. No comment from the boys, they simply continued playing their game.

Unlike some of the boys' sports teams, we did not see the girls-only sports teams directly excluding boys from joining. In most cases, what we observed was that boys who approached to enter the all-girl games were accepted. There are other layers of complexity in these gendered interactions. All-girl groups may exclude others by sending out "this is our group" signals. Because we observed each school only once, we cannot comment on how this evolves.

*Troupes.* Thorne (1993) describes another type of borderwork, that of troupes. Troupes are groups of girls who cover a lot of territory in an open-ended search for ritual contact with boys. The only times we observed the troupe-like pattern were during recesses that included older kids in Grades 5 and 6.

Four girls . . . stand near the group of football-playing boys. . . . Their eyes are pinned on the boys playing football. They make a couple of attempts with words and gestures to get the boys' attention but the boys ignore them. After a moment or so the tallest girl yells, "You guys gonna play with us or not?" The boys ignore her, play on. She then moves with the other three girls closer to the boys and yells to a [specific] boy. This boy moves over to the girls, talks with them . . . while all the

other boys continue to ignore the girls. Two boys join the girls and . . . this smaller subset of kids then walks away from the still-all-boys football game which continues without a pause.

In the third- and fourth-grade recesses, we observed that girl groups were far more likely to be in enclaves that looked inward toward their little world rather than outward toward boys. Occasionally, we saw girl groups who approached boys' groups as they walked. They might have a brief interaction with boys but the focus remained on their internal group.

*Gender meanings in flux.* With regard to mixed-gender groupings, there was an ebb and flow between when the activity appeared to be simply children playing together having fun at recess and when some clear shift into same-gender affinity appeared, played itself out, then flowed back to children playing. For example,

a group of 15 boys and 3 girls play kickball. The girls look athletic, strong. They wear sweats or jeans and athletic shoes [as do all of the boys]. The kids form two opposing teams and kick the balls across the hardtop. The goal appears to be who can kick the furthest. . . . After a few moments another girl joins the team that already has 3 girls [leaving no girls on the opposite team]. No one comments, she just joins the game. . . . The girls' involvement in the game is similar to the boys'; [they are] fully involved and . . . having fun.

In this case, there is an active game of children playing with full participation of all members, but there is an element of genderwork in the choice the new girl makes to join one side versus the other (the numbers of participants per side were roughly equal prior to her choice).

#### INTENT OF BORDERWORK

*Light-hearted.* There were clear patterns in the meanings attached to various forms of borderwork. Occasionally, the meaning appeared to be "in fun," such as follows:

Four girls run around the playground holding onto a bright pink jump rope all of them in a line. As they approach the boys playing basketball, a couple of the boys tease them by doing a mock-jump motion. The girls keep going, moving around the boys, all still holding the rope, smiling.

*Aggressive.* At other times, borderwork had an aggressive edge to it:

Each line has about eight boys on one side linked with three or four girls at the end. . . . In one case a small girl runs over to [the opposite] line and is held back. She has attempted the breakthrough in the middle of the boys' cluster on the

line. . . . [Conversely,] next, a very large, heavy boy gears up to run. . . . He makes a “rev-your-engines” windup and then heads directly for the four girls at the end of the opposite lineup. The girls drop their arms as he approaches. . . . The girls smile sheepishly as he passes through; he cheers triumphantly.

*Sexual/romantic.* Borderwork at many recesses fairly often encompassed a sexual or romantic theme:

One girl said that Cody and Michael both liked Amanda at recess. . . . She squealed and said she hated them both . . . his boy friend pushed his head forward towards Amanda and said “smooch, smooch, smooch.” Kids laughed and Amanda walked away.

The sexual theme entered elsewhere as well: “A boy tells a girl that one of the girls wants to take her dress off. The girl who wants to take her dress off says, ‘I can.’ She shows that she has Umbro shorts under. The boy says, ‘SICK.’”

Our observations clearly support the concept of borderwork during preadolescent recess. Furthermore, our data supports others’ contention (Corsaro, 1997; Thorne, 1993) that borderwork leans the balance of power—at least in the sense of “power over” someone—to boys. We observed that boys frequently dominate the text of mixed-gender play, they control more of the playground space, and they are more frequently actively aggressive. Complexities exist, however, in that there are aggressive girls, passive boys, and most important, the broad group of girls and boys whose interactions fall somewhere in the middle.

#### CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

There were numerous occasions where we observed how play and ritual challenged traditional assumptions about gender, such as the view that “masculinity” involves being independent, aggressive, and unemotional and “femininity” means focusing on relationships and caring and being emotional. The times we saw these being challenged included times when girls joined traditionally boys-only sports games or when boys joined traditionally girls-only games. They also included conversations that challenged. We saw girls use agency in the context of relationality and caring but we also saw girls who were aggressive (although rare). We observed that there is some expansion of femininity, namely, that preadolescent girls can and do play sports and still retain, even gain, admiration and status for doing so.

*Girls with mostly boys.* The preadolescent girls who hang out with mostly boys’ groups are doing team sports at recess. They are girls who are athletic and fit. An occasional girl may be in fairly androgynous dress, but the majority of them are clearly gender-identified by their clothing, accessories, and/or

hairstyle as girls. We were able to further separate these girls into three distinct groups: girls who are "in the game," girls who are "weavers" in and out of the game, and girls who are "active watchers" on the sidelines of the game.

The girls who are "in the game" play soccer, kickball, tag, or softball with the boys. These girls are skilled, fast, strong, and athletic and they know it.

There is a girl who is in the game from the beginning and is a central player throughout the game. She is of average height with slight build. She looks strong and athletic. She wears a gold fleece jacket and jeans. When she later removes the jacket, she reveals a pink spaghetti-strap T-shirt on underneath. She's intent on the game, fully involved and appears to be having a great time. There is no flirtation between her and any of the boys; she's one of the kids in the game.

It appears that for girls to be fully accepted in the boys' sports games they need to be physically fit and skilled. There were no exceptions to this unwritten, unspoken rule.

"Weavers" are girls who move in and out of the boys' sports games, interested in playing but never fully integrated into the game.

There's another girl, a tall one in a gray jacket who is occasionally in the soccer game as well. She moves back and forth between a huddle of four girls standing off to the right of the game and participation in the game. She appears athletic and strong and has good soccer skills. She is also accepted by the boys in the game. No one comments when she enters or leaves the game.

Thus, weavers are girls who flow back and forth between groups of girls and groups of boys. They appear to be accepted without question by both gender groups.

Girls who are active watchers stand near the all-boys' games and show with a variety of body movements (eyes fastened on the ball as it moves around the field, leaning in) that they are interested in the game but they are never fully integrated into the game.

The all-boy group playing dodge ball has grown to about 15 kids. There are 2 girls standing on the sidelines, watching, appearing to want to play . . . they now start running back and forth on the sidelines. . . . Whenever the ball gets kicked their way one of the girls returns the ball to the group playing. So far, they don't actively join the game, however. It's as if they are merely returning the ball to the boys, not that they are "inside" the game. . . . Now [they] walk closer to the monitor and talk with [her]. . . . [One girl] continues to look back at the game . . . and when the ball gets kicked out, she is there, throwing it back into the game . . . forcefully and with good aim. Then at other times they stand close together, watching, one with her arm thrown carelessly across the back of her friend.

*Boys with mostly girls.* Jumping rope and jungle gym play were activities that had mostly girls, but it was not uncommon to see a boy or two join in the activity. For the most part, the girls accepted their presence but they did not seek it. The

boys joining them were often in boy dyads; they jumped rope or scrambled on the jungle gym several minutes and then ran off to another activity. They did not appear to be looking for connection with girls. They were not the same boys who were playing on boys' sports teams. There were two patterns to the boys' play in jump rope: (a) the skilled boys who joined in to truly participate and (b) the boys who joined to disrupt the flow of the game.

A tall girl and a tall boy hold each end of the bright pink rope. They swing it in circles, with no song or chant. A girl waits to get in, tries and fails. Another boy is next; he waits, jumps in but only lasts a couple of rounds before he hits the rope. He runs off.

The conversations that challenged traditional gender constructs occurred when girls spoke up. Girls are speaking up, asserting their self-confidence verbally. When directly challenged, girls talk back, like the girl who replied to the boy who claimed she'd kicked a soccer ball the wrong way: "I don't freaking care." We saw evidence that some girls were not afraid to challenge boys' skill:

As a girl shoots hoops with a boy they enter into a verbal argument around the boy stinking at basketball. The girl says, "I can beat you anywhere, any time, any place." He insists she can't. She says, "Tomorrow afternoon." He agrees to this.

We only have one instance in our data where a boy challenged traditional tough-guy stereotypes in conversation. In a very caring way this boy asked a girl who fell and got slightly hurt during a game hurt if she was OK. However, he returned to the game and several girls took the injured one to the nurse.

#### **ADULTS WITH CHILDREN**

Although children create their own social world on the playground, adults do play a role in recess. Most of the monitors are women and do not engage in the children's play. When there is a male monitor, he is likely to join a boys' sports team and play along. Girls at recess more often hang with the monitors. Boys are more often spoken to for discipline reasons: "The monitors tell me how bad all the classes have been today. They are so loud. They think it is spring fever, but they are not putting up with it. That is why the boys stayed in." It is clear that adults play a significant role in shaping gender at recess, by action or inaction.

#### **DISCUSSION**

On the surface level, recess is the fun time of the day when children get a break from the work of academia. But much is going on in terms of their social interactions at this time. Our goal was to examine school-age children's play at recess through a "gender lens." By examining many schools on a one-time basis,

several themes emerged that held true across the schools we observed. On one hand, sometimes the children's play is "just play." What children at recess share is that they enjoy the outdoor time, they are physically active, and most of them choose an activity that places them in relationship with others. We saw many examples of kids of both genders using agency, showing autonomy, and forming and re-forming groups without gender being a salient factor.

But what also emerged clearly from our data is that there are other times when "doing gender" involves moving in a gender-specific world. Most children do choose to play in same-gender groupings. Children reinforce their gender identities through choice of clothing, toys, and gender of playmates. The majority of boys manifest competency by being active players in sports games. The majority of girls walk and talk. Intricacies enter in here because we found that most girls are also physically active at recess. Also, most of the children of both genders conform (acceptable "good" behavior, clothing choices) so that the traditional view that girls conform and are compliant and boys are self-reliant, autonomous, and aggressive leaves out much of the complexities of their recess world.

There is a great deal of intragender variation in terms of the choices children make at recess. Most girls do "walk-and-talk," thereby developing relational skills of intimacy. However, where we see changes in gender norms is that more girls are choosing to join boys' teams and they are doing so with confidence. It seems to be true that girls at this age can choose to walk and talk or they can choose to join a sports team; both appear to be socially acceptable so that the same girl can move in and out of either group. Also, many of the athletic girls of this age are admired leaders.

In terms of the "cult of masculinity" we did find that most boys are physically very active (higher intensity and longer duration than girls) and are more openly competitive and more often aggressive, although aggression at recess was relatively rare. A small group of boys "cross" to do "girls' things," but it was less clear what the level of their peer acceptance was.

We found the strong presence of borderwork manifested as male dominance. But again, there is a fluidity in how this takes shape just as there is shifting movement in the significance of gender in social interactions overall. What is most clear is that children do construct gender in their interactions with one another at recess.

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**D. ELLEN BOYLE** is a psychiatric nurse practitioner with more than 10 years' clinical experience working with mental health issues of children and adolescents. A graduate of Mount Holyoke College, she has a master of science in nursing from the University of Washington and was on the clinical faculty at that university from 1995 to 1999. She participated in research on children and their families at the University of Washington's School of Nursing as well as the School of Social Work. Currently, she is a project associate at the Wellesley Center for Research on Women; she works on the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development.

**NANCYL MARSHALL** is senior research scientist and associate director of the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. She is a member of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, which has published numerous papers on child care, families, and children. She is also the editor, with Rosanna Hertz, of *Working Families: The Transformation of the American Home* and author of numerous other chapters and articles on the lives of children and families.

**WENDY W. ROBESON** is a research scientist at the Center for Research on Women and Wellesley College. She holds an Ed.D. from Harvard Graduate School of Education and is a study director of many projects that focus on early care and education as well as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development.