

Female Occupational Stereotypes and Role Models

Adolescence is a time when young women begin to define themselves through the expectations of others. It is during this time that they are particularly vulnerable to traditional, societal, sex role, and occupational stereotypes (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Societal stereotypes and attitudes convey the beliefs that math is a male dominated field, females are incompetent in math (Osen, 1974), and females do not need to study math (Fennema & Sherman, 1977). As rigid adherence to gender roles becomes the norm in adolescence, young women often avoid higher math achievement. They fear disapproval or view math as unnecessary to the life role they expect to fulfill (Benbow & Stanley, 1980; Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Sherman, 1983). Traditional male traits such as independence, assertiveness, internal locus of control, and high self-esteem are more positively associated with intellectual abilities and interests among females (Doherty & Culver, 1976; Kagan & Moss, 1962). Further, data indicates that females whom reject traditional gender roles have higher math achievement than females adhering to more traditional sex role characteristics (AAUW, 1992).

Children's occupational preferences tend to be consistent with the occupational stereotypes they hold (Bertz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Children appear to learn at an early age that some occupations are appropriate for men, while other occupations are appropriate for women. For example, Gettys and Cann (1981) reported that children as young as two and a half were able to distinguish masculine and feminine occupations. While among both boys and girls, occupational preferences are consistent with sex stereotypes, the more limited range of traditional female occupations results in the perception among girls that career options are also limited from very early ages (Bird, 1968). It appears that occupational stereotyping only increases with age (Tremaine & Schau, 1979; Gettys & Cann, 1981). Kriedberg, Butcher, and White (1978) reported that while some girls in the 2nd grade expressed interest in pursuing more traditionally male-dominated occupations, by the 6th grade almost all girls chose stereotypical female occupations.

At this critical developmental period of adolescence, when young women are defining themselves through others expectations, they receive less support for achievement-related behaviors than males (Goodale & Hall, 1976) and are exposed to few female role models with educational and occupational achievement (Douvan, 1976; Oakes, 1990). The literature suggests the importance of the positive effect of role models in women's career development and the importance of support and achievement (Pipher, 1994). Andberg et al. (1979) found that support from teachers and professors were important in the selection of non-traditional career choices.