at the Child Development Laboratory at Arizona State University. Doors to the playground open, explosively exhaling about a dozen 5 year olds into the afternoon sun. A dark-haired girl hangs bat-style on the monkey bars, the hem of her striped polo dress hovering around her neck. ASU Professor Carol Martin approaches her and contorts sideways, so she and the girl are nearly face-to-face. Martin shows her two photographs: One of two little girls, one of two little boys. “Which do you think you would like to play with?” Martin asks. The dark-haired girl points to the little girls. Why the girls? “Because I wanna play. It would be more fun to play with her and her.” Across the yard, boys push trucks through a sandbox, emulating the sounds of roaring engines. Joel, a chubby kid in a long-sleeved striped shirt and jeans, asserts that he favors boy playmates over girls. Martin asks why he does not like playing with girls. “Because they make such a fuss,” Joel says, pointing a lunging finger at Martin. “And you’re a girl!”

Social Structure on the Playground by Amanda Kingsbury
When children have a choice, they choose to play with members of their own sex. It’s cute, in a cooties sort of way. But it can translate into powerful differences as we grow older, says Martin, a family resources and human development professor who studies gender segregation among kids.

The evidence suggests likewise: Just check the sales slips from authors such as John Gray (Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus) and Deborah Tannen (You Just Don’t Understand).

Communication and interaction styles grow out of the way we are socialized. And, says Martin, “Boys’ and girls’ groups are very different places.”

Girls play in small groups, usually relegated to the left-over places on the playground. They are cooperative and agreeable. Their play is quiet, structured and verbal. If they are playing with Barbies, there is usually a continuous story being told about what Barbie’s doing, where she’s going, and what she’s thinking. If a girl starts a conversation, others try to continue it by showing interest and staying on subject. They favor equality and harmony.

Boys play in large, unstructured groups. They boast, challenge each other, and hurl insults. Rather than encourage communication, they disrupt it by changing the subject or interrupting. Their goal is to one-up each other, to hoist themselves up the hierarchy. They like body contact.

Martin describes their behavior as “rough and tumble”—not menacingly aggressive, but playful.

Children start segregating by sex at age 2 1/2, with disruptive boys and sensitive girls being the first to split off, Martin says. By age 4, kids play with same-sex peers about three times more often. Among 6 year olds, segregation occurs 11 times more often.

Girls pull away before boys. But by ages 5 or 6, boys more adamantly prefer same-sex playmates, discarding girls as wimpy and uninteresting, says Eleanor Maccoby, a retired Stanford University professor and author of The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart and Coming Together, published earlier this year.

Maccoby pioneered research into gender segregation among kids, believing that boys and girls were growing up in separate cultures. Those cultural differences later play out in romantic relationships, the workplace and parenting.

During her own research, ASU’s Martin observed 40 children at the university’s Child Development Lab. Every day for a couple months, she and her research assistants watched individual children, noting their activity and playmates. Most of the girls and boys spent less than 20 percent of their time with the opposite sex, she says.

Only one boy and one girl spent more than half their time across the gender boundary.

And these were mostly professor’s children, whom Martin believed would have more liberal attitudes.

“We get the pattern even in places we didn’t think we would,” she says.

What motivates kids to separate by sex? Play styles are one likely influence. Maccoby says. Boys like rough play; girls withdraw from it. One biologically based theory links extra doses of a prenatal hormone called androgen to excitability and play styles—in the womb, male fetuses get an extra dose.

Studies of female monkeys corroborate the theory—those with higher androgen levels are more prone to participate in rough and tumble play. Maccoby says. There are indications that the same goes for human females.

Segregation is possibly set in motion when children can identify their own sex and that of others. Martin says.

Kids might reason that children of the same sex are “like me” and therefore more fun to play with.

Martin’s research shows that around age 4, kids start presuming similarities within the sexes. They may think, “Because I like this and I’m a boy, other boys must like it, too.” They decide whether to like an unknown child based solely on the child’s sex.Interest compatibility is not even a consideration.

Martin once interviewed children to get their opinions on fictitious children with different interests. As one example, she told them that “Jeremy” likes to play with kitchen sets and that his best friend is a girl. Then she asked the children, “How much do you want to play with Jeremy?”

The standard response of the typical 4 year old boy: “A lot, because he’s a boy.”

How much would Jeremy like to play with a car? “He would like cars a lot because he’s a boy.”

How much would Jeremy like to play with a doll? “He wouldn’t like dolls much because he’s a boy.”

Kids harbor very strong beliefs about what is and is not gender appropriate—and they are not shy about pressuring others to conform.

If other kids saw Jeremy playing with a girl or a doll, “they’d either ignore or disapprove of it,” Martin says. It is what makes peer pressure such a forceful factor in gender segregation.

At the ASU Child Development Lab, the playground ringleader was Stuart, a bright, expressive kid with a buzz cut and a croaky voice like that of Froggy from The Little Rascals.

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According to a playground aide, Stuart’s best friend in preschool was a girl. Now, a year later, he would not even acknowledge or talk to her. When asked why, he said it is because he’s afraid other kids might make fun of him.

Martin showed Stuart the pictures of the two little boys and two little girls, and asked him which he would rather play with.

“Couple’a boys,” Stuart said. “Because I like a couple’a boys.”

His opinion of girls? “They’re OK.” Then, he gets more specific: “They don’t even know what I’m saying. They make such a mess of everything. They want to destroy my plans. They want to be the king.”

Early gender segregation is inconsistent with the greater scheme of things. Say you are an active adolescent girl. One day, your mother is yelling at you to quit playing tomboyish games with boys because it is not ladylike. Years later, she pressures you to find a nice young man to live with for eternity.

Or, you are a little boy who gets called a sissy for playing with girls. Then, as a man, people encourage you to open up to your wife or girlfriend and reveal your most sensitive and vulnerable side.

Ideally, men and women should be able to relate comfortably to both sexes, says Martin, who will study tomboys as part of her next project. A study of active, athletic... with mixed groups when they were younger. As adults, the women reported having better body images and self-esteem.

Mixed-gender interaction also benefits kids by teaching them skills they would not ordinarily learn in their same-sex divisions. Boys play with blocks, so they develop better spatial skills, Martin says. Girls talk more, so they develop better verbal skills. Boys who play with girls learn more about cooperation and controlling their impulses. Girls can get a lesson in assertiveness from boy playmates.

But the answer is not to force kids to play with members of the opposite sex. That is unrealistic—and besides, “I’m not sure (gender segregation) is all that bad, anyway,” Maccoby says.

More practical advice? Parents should show their kids that Mom and Dad interact on an equal level—they listen to each other, consult each other, and do not arbitrarily override each other’s decisions.

“It will make a difference when kids get into the situation of encountering the other sex and pairing off and forming romantic relationships,” Maccoby says.

In the classroom, teachers should make sure that girls and boys participate equally in structured interactions. Maccoby suggests rotating leadership roles in group situations. Teachers also should let students know that each member of the group has knowledge to contribute. Often, boys assume girls know nothing; girls see boys as silly and inattentive.

“At all age levels, it’s important for kids to have the opportunity to cooperate in enterprises at equal-status levels,” Maccoby says. “Parents and teachers have to be vigilant to not let boys take over and dominate the interactions. Girls these days are pretty spunky, so they’re probably not as likely to fold up and be quiet as they would have been 50 years ago. But even so, there’s a tendency for boys to talk louder and override the girls.”

Research on gender segregation is supported by the National Science Foundation. For more information, contact Carol L. Martin, Ph.D., Department of Family Resources and Human Development, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.5861. Send E-mail to: atcjm@asuvm.inre.asu.edu