Men and women interact every day. Every day they face the never ending challenge of trying to understand one another. Author John Gray’s 1992 best-selling book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, brought a new focus to that age-old mystery of why men and women exhibit distinct gender differences when they interact. Richard Fabes and Carol Martin say that those fundamental differences may well be rooted in early childhood playground activities.

Fabes and Martin are child development researchers at Arizona State University. The results of their groundbreaking study were published in the May 2001 issue of *Developmental Psychology*, the journal of the American Psychological Association. The ASU researchers found that children as young as 3 and 4 years are socialized to stereotypical gender roles through a process that is as innocent as playing with same-sex peers.

The homemade paper sign pinned to the makeshift blanket and sofa cushion shelter spelled out the ground rules: “No girls allowed!”

Three 6-year-old boys were pretending to be Army soldiers. They set up camp in the corner of the living room. One of the boys’ 4-year-old sister enters the room. She asks if she can join in on the fun. The boys’ answer is immediate. “You can’t play this game—you’re a girl,” shouts her brother. The other two boys chime in. “Yeah, you’re a girl! Get out of here.”

Sound familiar? In the world of child’s play it is not unusual to encounter what some researchers have called the ‘Gender Police.’ Some kids think it’s their job to monitor and maintain gender norms. “These kids are probably on your child’s preschool playground,” says Martin.

Most kids do a pretty good job monitoring their own gender roles. However, Martin says that researchers are still trying to figure out what influence these enforcement peers play in playground politics. They want to know what processes and outcomes are likely to result from such peer monitoring.

The ASU scientist’s hunch is that these messages from peers are very powerful. “I think they have the potential to affect the [social] attitudes of the whole class,” she says.

Many researchers have examined how children tend to self-segregate into same-sex groups. Fabes says it happens in every cultural group and subculture. However, the ASU study was the first to show empirical evidence that this practice is moderately or highly stable over time and does have significant social consequences.

“By most estimates, more than half of all young children’s interaction is with same-sex peers,” says Fabes. “This is really remarkable when you consider that children, age four or less, spend only about 80 percent of their total play time with peers of the other sex. This level of sex segregation was somewhat surprising to us given that teachers in the study classrooms were encouraging gender equity.”

Children spend so much time playing with same-sex peers that several scientists now argue that boys and girls grow up in different social environments and distinctive peer cultures. Moreover, the experiences that boys and girls receive in their segregated peer groups are likely to contribute to many aspects of their development, above and beyond any individual differences that led boys and girls to initially choose to segregate themselves.

It is not clear why children frequently opt to play with same-sex peers. Fabes and Martin say equally puzzling is why some children chose to play exclusively with same-sex playmates when other children may want to mix things up from time to time.

The ASU scientists monitored a group of preschool children for an entire year. They identified a pattern that they call the ‘social dosage effect,’ which may help offer some explanation.

The idea is simple, Fabes says. The more that children interact with same-sex peers, the stronger the consequences. He and Martin found that children who had more exposure to same-sex peers early in the year showed stronger gender-typed behavior by the end of the year when compared to children who spent less time with same-sex peers.

The consequences are not trivial. As adults, individuals whose same-sex peer exposure is considered high during the preschool and elementary-age years could develop social skills, styles, expectations and preferences sufficiently different from the other sex. In short, they may have difficulty interacting and relating to members of the other sex.

Fabes says the gendered scripts and behavioral repertoires we learn as children may carry over in some form into our adult lives. Ultimately, these affect our romantic relationships, workplace interactions, and parenting skills.

“We believe the different play styles of young boys and girls are socializing each sex to behave in ways the other sex is increasingly likely to find unattractive and uninteresting,” Fabes explains. “As boys become more physical over time, girls’ interest in playing with boys tends to decrease. The older children get, the more ingrained the behavior becomes. This contributes to a heightened probability that sex segregation will be seen in later childhood.”
The researchers admit that it is still too early to know how same-sex play ultimately affects individuals in later childhood, adolescence, or their adult years. However, Martin adds, "It is intriguing to consider whether our early relationships are actually contributing to the gender gap, the social interaction differences between the sexes."

One thing is very clear: Given the choice to play with whomever they want, girls will play with girls and boys will play with boys. Watching children play is as intriguing as it gets for Martin, whose expertise is gender development, and for Fabes, a social development expert. "Thinking about why kids do the things they do is on our minds a lot," Martin adds.

The behavioral scientists share more than research notes. They married in 1991. Together, they've studied social interactions for about five years. The idea to study gender segregation on the playground sprouted innocently during a tennis match in 1998. Martin says the court where the couple plays is located next to an elementary school. "We noticed how the boys played together on one part of the playground and girls played together on another area," she says. "We wondered why sex segregation was so strong in these young children and what influence it had on their development. We couldn't believe that this intriguing question was right there staring us in the face."

Josh is a 3-year-old, brown-eyed preschooler. When alone, he is content to sit at the kitchen table and quietly draw pictures and cut colored construction paper into tiny shapes. ... says his mother, Marilyn, who eagerly displays his precision-cut and glitter-covered artwork on the kitchen refrigerator.

At home, Josh is seemingly meek, but good-natured and eager to help his mother perform chores around the house. But things change when Josh gets together with his next-door neighbor, 4-year-old Tyler. "He turns into a completely different kid," Marilyn says with dismay. "He becomes rougher in his play, more aggressive. Between the two of them, they are literally bouncing off the walls."

Fabes and Martin say that Josh is, more or less, a typical kid. This scenario is no doubt repeated over and over again in preschool settings across the country. The ASU scientists observed similar activities daily on the playground while collecting data for their study.

Fabes explains that when 3-year-old boys entered the study’s daycare class in the fall, they showed little or no differences in their play style from girls of the same age in the class. Just six months later, however, boys exhibited play styles that were consistently rougher and more active than the girls. The rougher the play, the more likely the boys were to play away from adults.

"This heavy-handed style of play demonstrates the greater emphasis that boys place on competition as the basis of forming a hierarchical peer group, says Fabes. "Through their interactions with other boys, little boys learn that rough and aggressive play may be necessary to have influence with their friends."

Girls’ exposure to same-sex play is manifested by an increased tendency to play near adults. Over time, the more girls played with other girls, the calmer their interactions were with peers, and their tendency to play closer to adults became more magnified.

Fabes and Martin work with a large research team to help them understand children’s relationships. In their study, observers who worked on the project amassed more than 20,000 individual observations of children on the playground. They also carefully studied the same children’s daily interactions.

"We have more observation time than almost anyone else," Fabes says. "Daily observations are necessary to get the full picture of the child’s emotional life. Each observation is much like a single snapshot. It provides us with some good information. But when hundreds of these are collected for each child, the result is an incredible mosaic of information about social interactions and experiences."

The work is supported by the National Institute of Mental Health and the Cowden Research Fellowship Fund. For more information, contact Carol Martin, Ph.D., or Richard Fabes, Ph.D., Family and Human Development Department, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 480.965.6978. Send e-mail to cmartin@asu.edu or to rfabes@asu.edu.