

Liberating Young Children from Sex Roles

Experiences in Day Care Centers,
Play Groups, and Free Schools

by Phyllis Taube Greenleaf

30c

CHANGE FOR CHILDREN
2588 Mission St., Rm. 226
San Francisco, Ca 94110

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"...but I believed in the existence of other and more vivid kinds of goodness, and what I believed in I wished to behold.

"Who blames me? Many, no doubt, and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes....

"It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer.....It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

—from *Jane Eyre*, quoted in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, Harcourt Brace & World, 1929, p. 72. ✓

Many friends contributed their ideas and encouragement to me in the course of writing this paper. Without question this paper has been a collective effort. Warm thanks to Ansti Benfield, Vicki Brietbart, Dorry Brown, Peggy Clark, Lynne Miller Cohn, Suzy Q. Groden, Louise Gross, Arthur MacEwan, Barbara McHugh, Claudette Piper, Amy Kovner Plumer, Petey Shane, Louise Taube, and Sheli Wortis. Very special thanks to my house family — Marjorie Bakken, Harold Bakken, Ellen Cantarow, and Louis Kampf.

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Boys have trucks.
Girls have dolls.

Boys are strong.
Girls are graceful.

Boys are doctors.
Girls are nurses.

Boys are policemen.
Girls are metermaids.

Boys are football-players.
Girls are cheerleaders.

Boys are pilots.
Girls are stewardesses.

Boys fix things.
Girls need things fixed.

Boys invent things.
Girls use what boys invent.

Boys build houses.
Girls keep houses.

I'm glad you're a boy.
I'm glad you're a girl.

We need each other.

These statements quoted from the children's book **I'm Glad I'm A Boy, I'm Glad I'm A Girl**, published by Simon and Schuster in 1970, blatantly teach attitudes and beliefs about sex role differences that parents, teachers, and the mass media teach in more subtle ways. Learning to conform to these sex roles has been considered a normal and healthy part of human development.

When we were growing up the physically agile and aggressive girl was labeled "tomboy" and considered to be going through a temporary stage of development. The boy who cried or was too sensitive was labeled sissy and girlish. Tomboy girls soon learned to inhibit their spirit of adventure; sissy boys stopped crying. Female and male children learned their proper sex roles and so were considered well-adjusted and "normal."

The Women's Liberation Movement has forced us to question whether our ideas about normal development are consistent with our goals for healthy development—for both sexes. The Movement has made many women and men realize that our beliefs about normalcy are a basic part of the ideology of sexism, a system of ideas, values and expectations that prescribes and therefore cripples the full development of both sexes. When a young girl learns it is not "feminine" to be strong and when a young boy learns it is not "masculine" to be emotional and when both the girl and boy begin to adjust their behavior to the normal expectations for their sex, the crippling process has begun. As they grow up they will also learn that a normal relationship between a man and a woman is one in which the man is dominant and superior, while the woman is dependent and inferior. They will learn that a woman's role is to care for her children and husband,



Boys fix things.



Girls need things fixed.

while the role of men is to support their families and achieve. From early childhood onward, we learn to accept this ideology of sexism. As adults we play our roles quite unconsciously and naturally.

When *I'm Glad I'm A Boy, I'm Glad I'm A Girl* was discussed recently by a group of preschool teachers, it was felt that the book's clarity and simplicity regarding sex role differences would be helpful to children's development. Most of the teachers believed that boys and girls should be socialized in different ways. Boys should be prepared to assume roles of leadership and action; while girls should be prepared to be more "feminine," which meant dependent and passive. Their attitudes toward the book probably would have been different had it read:

Whites are doctors.
Blacks are nurses.

The rich are strong.
The poor are graceful.

The rich build houses.
The poor keep houses.

Americans invent things.
Asians and Africans use what Americans invent.

At least intellectually, most teachers and parents do not believe in doctrines of class, race and national superiority. Therefore few adults would intentionally

select books for children that openly taught them that "black people are stupid, while white people are smart." Nor do most adults consciously want to teach children national racism—that being North American makes one better than being Asian or African.

One could argue that in some respects all of those statements contrasting whites and blacks, boys and girls, rich and poor, do indeed describe reality: the existing dominant-dependent relationships between those people with power and privilege and those without. Most doctors in this country are white and men. Most architects are rich. And, indeed, most housework—paid and unpaid—is done by women. But while children are learning about such realities, we also want them to learn that reality can be questioned and changed and that not everyone fits the pattern. We want children to have enough confidence in themselves to know that they can make new choices in their own lives.

The purpose of this paper is to first discuss how adults consciously and unconsciously teach sex role stereotypes, and then to describe ways that some teachers have begun to challenge the ideology of sexism as it is expressed in the play of young children.

I. TEACHING SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES

All adults have values which influence the way they work with and care for young children. Often certain values are unintentionally communicated. At other times teachers are fully conscious of their goals and very intentionally try to communicate them to children. In 1965 I intentionally dealt with the issue of race with the children and adults in the preschool where I taught. Having learned through study and experience that before the age of five, children already begin to accept our society's racist attitudes, I realized the importance of openly discussing this issue with the children. My goal was to help develop in children positive selfconcepts that included an acceptance and respect for their own racial identity.

Yet while consciously trying to counter the learning of racial stereotypes and the ideology of racism, I unconsciously was teaching sex role stereotypes and the ideology of sexism.

When I used to say, "I need some big strong boys to help me carry this table," I was communicating to all of the children that I did not expect the girls to be physically strong, and that I assumed that all the boys were stronger than the girls. I expected the girls to set and clear the table for snack times. The lesson was well learned: "Boys are strong, girls are graceful." No girl ever offered her assistance in moving tables or other heavy objects. My expectations were fulfilled.*

I encouraged the boys much more often than the girls to "channel their aggression" into hammering, sawing, or

block building. If a group of boys excluded the girls in their dramatic play—chanting, "No girls here, no girls here..." I would smile, confident that this excluding behavior was normal to four year olds and therefore not harmful. Likewise, if some girls excluded the boys from cooking in the housekeeping corner, I felt no need to intervene in their "free" play. The children and I silently accepted the traditional pattern of male-female division of labor.



*Molly and Polly like to
play store.*

Peter sells groceries.

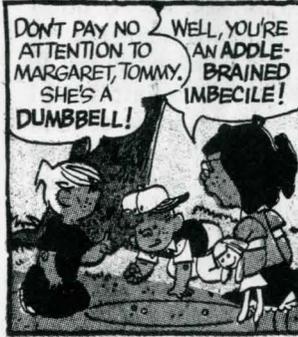
*Molly and Polly come
to buy.*

On the other hand, I would have intervened if a group of white kids excluded blacks by saying, "No blacks can play here," or a group of rich kids excluded poor kids from their play. But since I believed that boy-girl exclusive play was a normal part of developing a "healthy sex-role identity," it never occurred to me that children's exclusion of each other on the basis of sex could be harmful. Nor did I think that a girl's self exclusion from "masculine" activities or a boy's self-exclusion from "female" activities was anything to be concerned about.

*See *Pygmalion in the Classroom; Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development* by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) for an excellent study of how expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Dennis *the* Menace

by Hank Ketcham



Yet believing in "free" choice, I never discouraged a child from "testing out" any role. In fact, a traditional goal of early childhood education has been to let kids test out different roles—occupation and sex—in preparation for later "normal" adjustment. We say they should have the opportunity to explore all areas of interest in order to develop physical and intellectual self-confidence. Yet while believing that it is normal to try out different roles in early childhood, we have failed to recognize that boys and girls might continue to enjoy and be challenged by those activities traditionally assigned to the opposite sex if it were not for the attitudes and expectations that adults express to them.

Seven years ago I did not recognize that helping children adjust to traditional sex roles was contradictory to helping them develop their potential. Yet for children to make such an adjustment, they must severely limit their development—literally shut off parts of their personalities and cut themselves off from many physical and intellectual challenges.

Like most adults, I was unintentionally tracking children according to their sex, programming their development, rather than expanding it. Becoming conscious of this contradiction resulted in my wanting to change the way I was teaching.



For the past two years a group of Boston area teachers in child care centers and nursery schools have been trying to figure out ways to confront the sex role stereotyping that young children express in their play. In the remaining

three sections of this paper, I will describe several incidents that took place in our centers—what the children did and how we responded.* The first situations involve incidents in which children of each sex openly excluded the opposite from her or his "female" or "male" realm. The second group of situations will describe how teachers have helped some children break out of a stereotype they had already begun to accept in themselves. The last part of the paper discusses how adults can act as living examples to counter the learning of sex roles.

II. CONFRONTING CHILDREN'S ACTS OF EXCLUSION

**"Boys don't cook!
You can't play here, Larry."**

Early in the fall, three year olds Linda and Joanna were playing house in the outdoor kitchen. Larry, a somewhat shy boy, hesitantly walked into the playhouse to join them. He was instantly stopped by Joanna, who asserted confidently, "No, Larry, you can't play here. Boys don't cook." Linda nodded in agreement. Larry, looking somewhat rejected, began to retreat.

At this point the teacher said, in a matter of fact way, "Joanna, I know lots of men who like to cook, and I know many women who don't enjoy cooking."

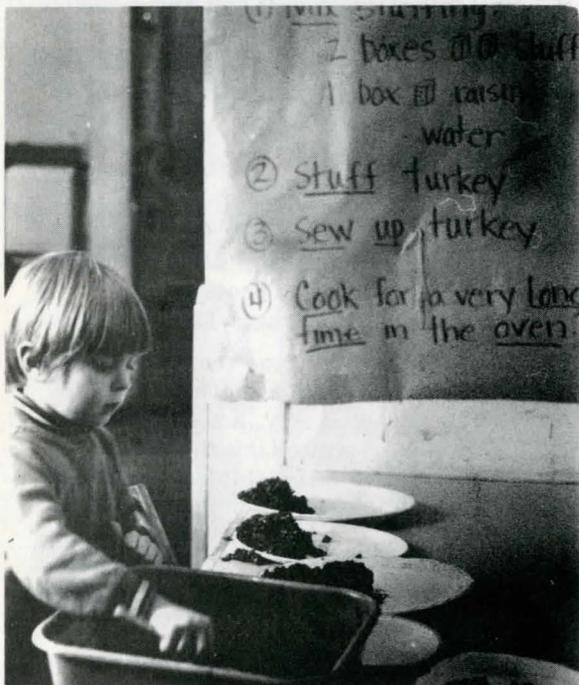
The kids looked up at the teacher with puzzled and interested expressions.

"Yes, my daddy cooks," Linda proudly asserted to the other kids.

*Most of the experiences described in this paper demonstrate that adults' actions with children regarding the issue of sex roles can bring about positive and visible change. However, it must be recognized that, given the social pressures of the media, family, etc., efforts to help children grow up in a new way can meet with frustration, and change is often slow and not as visible as in the experiences discussed here. In fact, working with children between the ages of 2 and 4 years gives one a rare opportunity to promote new attitudes and self-concepts which is not the case when working with older kids.

"You know, I'm a woman and I don't like to cook—at least not all the time. So my husband and I both cook," the teacher added.

Joanna especially looked baffled. Nevertheless, Larry joined the girls in cooking. For the moment Joanna accepted this.



"Only boys on the rocket."

Four boys were playing on a metal climbing structure, their rocket. One girl started to join them.

"Only boys on the rocket. You can't play here, Sarah," commanded Victor.

Sarah came up to her teacher and said complainingly, "They won't let me play with them."

The teacher and Sarah approached the rocket, and the teacher said, "The rocket is for everyone to use, find a way for Sarah to play with you."

"Okay," replied Victor accommodatingly, "She can be our helper. She can cook and take care of the rocket."

"Sarah has good ideas, she can play the way you are playing." Sarah then joined the boys on the rocket. Only Victor seemed annoyed and disconcerted. But after playing with Sarah for a while, Victor appeared to give up his belief that rockets were for males only.

At least temporarily he was relating to Sarah as a person and co-pilot, rather than as a girl who should be excluded.

Temporary Separatism

Two boys in a four year old group were very competent at carpentry and worked with wood every day. The adults noticed how these boys continually made fun of two girls who occasionally joined them at the carpentry table. These two girls, who were less skilled, would leave the carpentry table when the boys made fun of them. They were obviously embarrassed by their incompetence; the boys could use the tools better than they.

Instead of confronting the boys for the way they made fun of the girls, the teacher decided to institute female and male periods at the carpentry table. Her purpose in doing this was to give the girls an opportunity to become more self-confident in woodworking without the pressure of the boys' ridicule and competition. (It should be mentioned that these two boys did not make fun of other boys who were as unskilled as the girls.)

After a few months of these male-female times at carpentry, the two girls who had initially showed so much interest in carpentry became as skilled as the boys who had made fun of them. And girls who had never participated before began to join in. Throughout this period the teachers, whether working with the boys or girls, gave lots of encouragement until each child had mastered the tools. Finally, the teachers never compared the work of different children, but encouraged the children to assist each other. At the end of the year, all of the kids worked with the teachers building one structure—a collective achievement.



"Girls don't play with cars, Linda."

The next situation took place in an experimental elementary school; the children involved were in a "family group" that ranged in age from five to ten.

Seven year olds Eddy and John were engrossed in playing with hot wheels on an elaborate home-made ramp structure. After watching them race a while, Linda, a sturdy five year old, walked up, picked up a car and silently joined the boys in their racing.

"You can't play here, Linda," asserted one boy.

Without responding she continued playing with her car. Both boys repeated their demand for her to leave, getting progressively louder and more annoyed. Over and over they repeated, "Girls don't play with cars!" While she didn't appear to be intimidated, she finally stood up, stared at them, holding on to one car. For a few moments she simply

stood there and looked at them, unsure of what to do next.

At this point the teacher intervened, saying, "Girls can play with cars as well as boys can." The boys looked bothered by the teacher's statement.

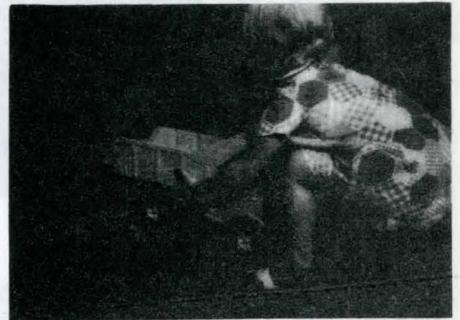
"We'll talk more about this later, but right now I think you will have to let her play." Play resumed; although the boys played separately from Linda, excluding her from the racing and measuring.

At their regular group discussion time that day the teacher brought up the incident and asked the kids why it was that boys and girls did not play together.

"Sometimes we want to play alone," one boy said.

"Why do girls ever need to play with cars? They don't drive cars," another boy commented.

A nine year old girl responded, "Look, that's silly to say because ladies drive cars. Like Marian (the teacher), so we can play with cars too."



Another girl pointed out that one of the bus drivers was a woman. The teacher asked them about their own parents. It came out that mothers drove as often as fathers. The result of that discussion was to show that the boys' line of argument was simply not true: both men and women drive.

The teacher continued the discussion by asking, "Why do you think that boys usually play with cars and trucks and girls with dolls? I want you to go home and think about this for the next few

days. Look at your toys and at your sisters' and brothers' and try to think why boys and girls play in different ways."

At the suggestion of a child the teacher reintroduced the issue a few days later. She began the discussion by asking if the children had noticed if their fathers ever helped out with the babies or with housework. Most of their fathers helped only on Mother's Day or when their mothers were sick. This happened whether both parents worked or not.

"How do fathers get that way? How come that happens?" the teacher asked.

"But that's how it should be," insisted one boy.

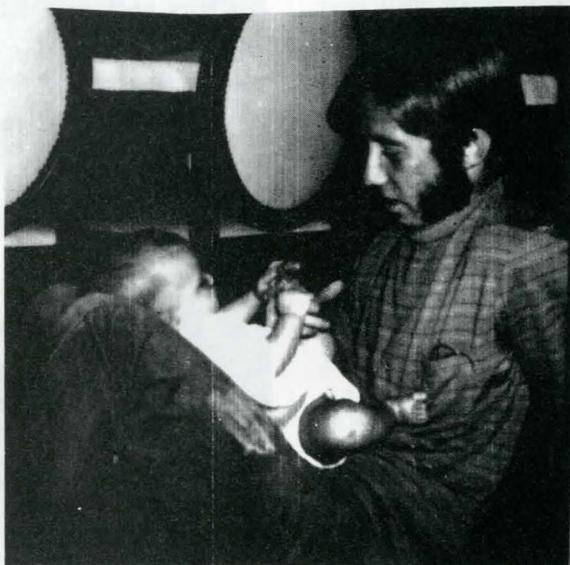
"How did you learn that?"

"Tonka."

"Where do you see Tonka?"

"On TV, only the boys play with the trucks."

Then proceeded a very involved 45-minute discussion about other things that kids see on TV regarding roles: mothers cooking with their girls, using Pillsbury; fathers fishing or hiking with their sons, smoking Kent, etc.



"That's why young boys should take care of babies, 'cause they are going to be fathers and fathers should help too," one older girl replied.

"Yeah, that's why boys should play house with girls; they need to learn how to do that kind of thing," added another girl.

It was quite clear that the kids understood that role playing in childhood taught people their adult roles.

"Look, remember our problem was the business of boys and girls playing with cars together?"

"Do you girls like to play with trucks?"

"I do." "Sure." "Yeah." "Not me." "Sometimes."

And do you boys like to play with dolls?"

"Yeah." "Sure." "Sometimes." "Me too."

"Where do you do it?"

"I play with my sisters' dolls," a few boys commented. The same was true of girls using their brothers' trucks. When the teacher suggested that the boys ask their parents for dolls, and the girls ask

for trucks for their next birthdays, the response was a united "No" from all the kids. The teacher's final comment was to point out how early in their lives they had learned from their parents and TV what they could and could not do.

Throughout the year this topic cropped up in various ways. The kids, even though they didn't dramatically change their own behavior, certainly became aware of how they got that way.

**Let's not let it pass anymore:
teachers' responses to children's acts
of exclusion**

In each of the above situations the adults' goals were to make every activity open to all the children and to help kids participate in all activities. These adults did not believe that children should be "free" to exclude, even if such behavior is normal in adult society.

In three of the situations the adult confronted the kids and, without preaching, opened up the incident for discussion, in effect, forcing integration in a reasonable but direct way. For some, like Joanna and Victor, it was disconcerting to be faced with an idea that did not fit into their pattern of thinking. The main value of the teachers' interventions into the cooking, racing, and rocket events was that it gave the children, who were directly involved or on the sidelines watching, some food for thought.

In the carpentry situation, the teacher felt that only with an initial period of separatism could there be a healthy integration. This teacher is now considering doing the same time division with the cooking-playhouse area, which is usually controlled by girls.

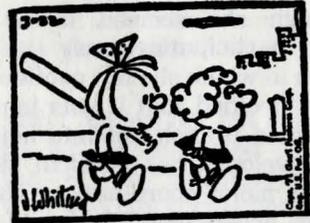
Another teacher who had been noticing the pattern of girls' monopoly over the playhouse, and the boys' dominance over the climbing equipment suggests that people who are setting up play spaces "could. . .put the housekeeping area on the second floor of a climbing structure

to encourage both climbing by girls and housekeeping by boys.*

* * * * *

What all of the above situations shared were adults who chose to intervene into children's play when they excluded each other on the basis of sex. These adults confronted the children's acceptance of sex role stereotypes and opened up the issue as a topic for group discussions. The last incident, especially, showed how it is possible for an adult to have an honest discussion about sexism without preaching or condemning. Although that incident happened with children over five, shorter versions of the same direct approach were used among younger children.

LPL ONES



"It's hard to believe I'll ever give up baseball for knitting."

**III.
HELPING INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN
BREAK OUT**

The focus of this section will be on individual children whose behavior expresses an unspoken acceptance of sex role stereotypes. In these cases the adults deal with problems of self-exclusion and even self-rejection that appear to be related to a child's attitude toward her or his sexual identity.

*Anna Howard, *Politics in The Preschool.*, BAEYC Reports: Boston Association for the Education of Young Children, December 1971. This article includes a discussion of racism, elitism, sexism and sexuality in the classroom.

Girls And Their Bodies*

In the fall three year old Robin came to school dressed in delicate, carefully ironed dresses. She informed the teachers that she must not get dirty. Being neat and clean seemed to be tied up with being the pretty little girl that Robin knew she was. Most of her time was spent housekeeping, cooking and playing with dolls. The rest of the time she engaged in sedentary activities: puzzles, lotto, collage, browsing through books. She stayed clear of all physically vigorous activities. The teachers never saw her climb, hammer, ride a trike, or run fast. she would, however, control other children verbally—directing them to bring her this, do that—like a rich lady with servants to wait on her. But she never exerted power or strength with her body.

Although she seemed to be quite content participating only in those activities in which she felt confident, the teachers decided that it was important for Robin to branch out into activities which developed her physical strength and large motor coordination. They felt that her acceptance of the "female" role—to be clean, neat, and frail—coupled with her actual fears, inhibited her from entering into physically active play. In early winter, one teacher came up to Robin and suggested, "Robin, let's climb together to the top of the jungle gym."

"No, I don't like to climb," Robin answered firmly.

"I'll do it with you and help you, so you won't fall."

"I said **no**, I don't want to!"

About a week later, after this teacher had shown a lot of interest in Robin's housekeeping play, she again suggested that they climb together, this time

adding, "You know, Robin, I know that you have strong arms and legs, and I'm sure you could be a good climber, once you started doing it a lot."

This time Robin nodded okay.

It seemed to take forever that first time she cautiously and awkwardly climbed the jungle gym. As she climbed, she kept repeating, "I'm going to fall." The teacher knew that Robin was afraid, but she also knew that Robin could make it. "You can do it, Robin; hold on firmly, and soon you will reach the top."



When Robin finally arrived at the top, she was extremely pleased with herself. Smiling with a victorious gleam in her eyes, she began calling out to the other kids to witness her accomplishment: "Look at me, look at me!"

By spring Robin was climbing the jungle gym and another higher structure with confidence and speed. She had also become competent in running and triking. At the same time she continued to participate in cooking and art work. Her scope of play had expanded.

After several casual discussions be-

*This subtitle is inspired by **Women and Their Bodies**, the original title of **Our Bodies, Our Selves**, a pamphlet by the Boston Women's Health Collective now available from the New England Free Press and soon to be published in expanded book form by Simon and Schuster.

tween the teachers and Robin's mother, Robin no longer wore dainty dresses to school. Instead she came in overalls and jerseys. It was also noticed that by the end of the year, Robin didn't boss other kids as much.

The teachers used no fancy teaching methods to help Robin and her mother change. But they did express their attitude that it was important to be as agile with one's body as with words. The teachers encouraged and enjoyed her accomplishments with her. It should be added that a few of the boys needed the same kind of encouragement.

Girls And Trucks

Three year old Barbara was the most physically agile child in the group. Fast and well-coordinated, she moved with grace and energy. At school she took part in all activities—spending as much time with dolls as with building, running, digging, climbing. When one teacher visited Barbara's apartment, she noticed that there were no trucks, cars, or action-oriented toys. Instead there were many dolls, doll furniture, puzzles and table games. The teacher once asked her mother if she had ever considered getting Barbara wheel toys. Barbara's mother responded, laughing, "So I'm guilty too, even though I believe in Women's Liberation. Sure, Barbara should have trucks and cars, but I know what my family will say when they find out."

This exchange with Barbara's mother makes one realize that sometimes it is easy to raise people's consciousness and to get them to act on their new awareness. It didn't take any convincing on the teacher's part, because this mother wanted her daughter to play in her own style, even if her relatives would disapprove and label her a tomboy; although the fact that Barbara's mother trusted and liked the teachers probably made it easier for her to accept the suggestion.

"I Don't Want To Be A Girl."

At the age of three a little girl named Jessica appeared insulted when her teacher commented to her when she was wearing a firehat, "Here comes Jessica, the firewoman."

"I'm not a firewoman, I'm a fireman," she said sternly.

At first the teacher did not know how to respond. Then she said, "Jessica, it is true that right now not many people who put out fires are women. Most of them are men. But this is changing. You are a young girl now, but when you are older and become a woman, you could probably be a firewoman, if you wanted to."

"But I'm not a girl! I don't want to be a girl," Jessica answered with anger in her voice.

At this point the teacher felt at a loss. Fortunately for the frustrated teacher, Jessica ran off to continue playing fireman with her boy companions.

The teacher told Jessica's mother what had happened. The incident did not surprise the mother, as Jessica had already made the declaration to her parents that she was a boy and did not want to be a girl or to play with them. Both at school and at home Jessica avoided activities that most girls participated in—doll play, art, cooking, etc. She clearly preferred vigorous activities and the company of active boys.

The mother and teacher were not bothered by her preference for energetic play, but they were concerned about Jessica's rejection of her sexual identity. She seemed to believe that one had to be a boy to take part in "boy" activities. Girls did not belong in those activities, so therefore she decided—or wished herself—not to be a girl.

A later realization that Jessica had never gone to the bathroom* at the center raised the question that her shyness about possibly being seen on the toilet could be related to her not wanting other children to know that she was a girl.

The teachers helped Jessica's parents to become more aware of the importance of assuring their daughter that she could be a person of action and still be a girl. Yet they knew what awaited Jessica in the public schools—sexually segregated sports, with the emphasis and prestige on boys' sports. Yet their daughter was a natural athlete, not a cheerleader or spectator type. They realized that unless they worked with other parents and teachers, who felt the same way, to change the schools, Jessica would have a lonely battle ahead.

The teachers wondered at the end of the year if they had really done their job in helping Jessica to enjoy and participate in the activities she had avoided. The emphasis had been on integrating girls into the "boys" activities, and to a lesser extent on involving boys in "girls" activities. They may have communicated a preference for outdoor play over playing house. In other words, the teachers' own prejudice that "woman's work" is less important might have been expressed to Jessica, giving support to her rejection of girlhood.**

One year later Jessica's mother told her former teacher: "She is beginning to resolve that although she is a girl she can still do the things that interest her. She is really involved in carpentry and works

very independently. This year she is playing with dolls, but when she plays house with her girlfriend, she always is the father. I once came into the room when Jessica, as father, was lying down on the bed directing the other girl, the wife, to 'bring me some food.' And what upsets both my husband and me is how Jessica gets mad when her father does any housework. Once she asked, 'Why does Daddy have to do the dishes?'. . . We were also really disturbed when she came in and told us that she had to be a nurse, when all last summer she was talking about being a doctor."

Jessica's conclusion about her medical aspirations parallels a statement made this year by a four year old girl from another center: "Mommy, I dreamed last night that I was a pilot. But I know that's silly because girls can't be pilots, we can only be stewardesses."

It seems that to both these girls an acceptance of their girlhood has meant giving up their "male" goals. Even having teachers and parents who have tried to counter the stereotypes, it is hard to stand up against the larger social pressures.

Boys and dolls: "Dolls are for girls, sissy."

While girls are usually not encouraged to develop themselves physically, boys are not encouraged to develop themselves emotionally. In fact, the capacity to be compassionate and the ability to take care of others—and babies in particular—have been considered instinctive qualities of women. Yet it is quite clear

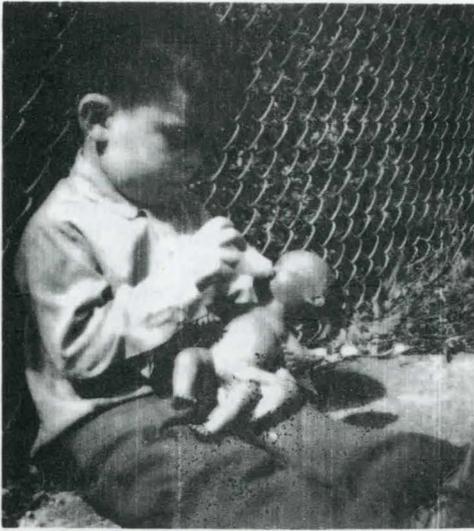
*At this particular center, when children observed each other in the bathroom, the teachers occasionally and informally would comment about the differences between female and male sex organs in order to help children deal with their shame, confusion or curiosity. For instance, one teacher once commented to a group of giggling, gaping children in the bathroom, "Boys pee out of their penises and girls pee from their vaginas." (Actually, this comment is incorrect; the word *vulva* describes the whole outer area of the female genital region. While the *urethra* is the actual vehicle for urination, males have an *urethra* too. It is a real issue to decide what is the best label to use to

describe the difference between the ways boys and girls pee. But the mere fact that adults matter-of-factly comment on sex differences makes children realize that there is nothing "nasty" about their "private" parts.)

**What Jessica's rejection calls to mind is what a four year old black boy replied when asked, "Is this boy (a brown doll) like you?"

"No, 'cause I don't want him to be. But he looks like me."

This child and Jessica made "wishful identifications." The quote is from *Race Awareness in Young Children* by Mary Ellen Goodman.



from watching young children from infancy on that boys can be as gentle and sensitive as girls.

Being deprived of the experience of playing with dolls, little boys have much less opportunity than girls to express and develop nurturant feelings. Furthermore, rarely in our society are older brothers or teenage boys expected to be responsible for the care of younger children—at home or as neighborhood babysitters. By not encouraging boys to play with dolls or take care of babies and young children, adults are, in effect, promoting the development of emotional hardness and inhibition—qualities all too common in adult men, who, as fathers cannot relate easily to their babies. The next incident illustrates the importance of dolls in the life of a three year old boy named Mark.

Mark was a bright, intense, physically aggressive boy. Usually he played alone, and when he made contact with another child, it was usually to take away a toy that he or she was using.

One day Mark seemed at loose ends. While normally able to get involved in one activity, on this day he went from activity to activity—restless, silent and somber. All at once he ran to the cradle in the housekeeping area, picked up a baby doll, found a baby bottle and sat

down in a rocking chair. For the next fifteen minutes he rocked, talked and sang to the baby doll, smiling frequently.

The adults who saw this happen made sure that Mark was not disturbed by the other kids, and they also left him alone. They had never in the six months at the center seen Mark as peaceful and affectionate as he was with that doll. For the remaining part of the day Mark played with the other kids in an unusually relaxed and flexible way.

In the following week one of the teachers described the incident to Mark's mother, and asked her if Mark ever played with dolls at home.



"Oh, yes, he often plays with his sister's dolls."

"Does Mark have any dolls of his own?"

"No, I've never thought of giving him one. And I know my husband would not permit it, or at least he would not approve."

In spite of her husband's attitude, she agreed with the teacher that it was important that her son be encouraged to play with dolls and that meant giving him his own dolls. Both the mother and the teacher felt that playing with dolls would help to free Mark emotionally. They were both aware that through doll play children could express feelings, both affectionate and hostile, that otherwise might not get expressed.

For the rest of the school year Mark continued to play with dolls; not as often as most of the girls, but more often than

the other boys. The teachers noticed that Mark would choose to play with dolls at times when he was in a bad mood and feeling tense. His mother informed the teachers that Mark never played with dolls in front of his father; she felt that Mark did this to avoid his father's ridicule.

By the end of the year Mark, the solitary, intense achiever, was becoming a warmer, more relaxed social being, able to work independently as well as enjoy the company of his peers.

"But its not nice to hit."

While Mark needed to develop the capacity to be sensitive to other people, Judy, in the following situation, needed to become more able to stand up for herself.

Judy and Jerry, two four year olds, were the oldest kids in a parent cooperative playgroup. Judy liked to please others. Her consideration for other children, her cooperative attitude with adults, and her capacity to get absorbed in art activities and doll play all made her an easy child to work with.

Jerry was the rough, tough leader of the group. His physical aggression and speed helped to give him that role. In the fall he continually picked on Judy—knocking her down, grabbing things from her, or shoving her out of the way. Her response to his aggression was a pitiful, defenseless wailing, calling to the adults for comfort. The adults' usual reaction was to get mad at Jerry, try to find out why he hit her, tell him it wasn't nice to hit people—he should use words instead—and then to comfort poor, frail Judy. In other words, Jerry could create a big event when he hit Judy.

Two of the mothers decided that instead of trying to stop Jerry from bullying Judy, it might be better for both kids if Judy would hit him back. They felt that Judy should be encouraged to defend herself. A few days later, one of these mothers saw Jerry shove Judy out of the way. Instead of bawling out Jerry, she quickly came up to Judy, who was on the verge of tears and said, "Say, Judy,

you can hit him back when he does that to you."

"But it's not nice to hit."

"Maybe if Jerry knew you could hit back, he wouldn't bother you so much."

Judy looked at this mother with disbelief and confusion, and then commented with a somewhat put-on coyness, "Well, I don't really want to hit him anyway," and walked away.

A week after that conversation, as he was running through a museum, Jerry rammed into Judy full force, knocking her to the floor. At first she appeared stunned. Then all of a sudden, she got up, ran up to him and with a determined look on her face, she socked him hard on the back.

He turned around and stared at her. For the next few seconds they both stood still staring at each other in silence. It seemed as though neither child could believe what had just happened. Then Jerry ran off.

The mother who had just watched the whole event, the same person who had encouraged Judy to fight back, came up to Judy, saying approvingly, "Judy, you can hit back when you need to! Now Jerry knows that you can defend yourself." Judy nodded and smiled, obviously pleased with herself.

After that event (as well as a few repeat performances), the parents noticed that Jerry and Judy played together more often, and that she participated more frequently in active play. Jerry's play became more constructive, especially when he was with Judy. He rarely hit her, and when he did, her typical response was to yell at him angrily. Angry words and the occasional use of force replaced her defenseless crying.

Their relationship became more give and take. He seemed to realize that a girl could be his equal. Judy only occasionally played the frail female role: she no longer seemed intimidated by his physical power. This probably grew out of a new recognition of her own strength. The other children in the group also benefited

from Judy's example. Though younger than Jerry, they began to get mad at him, at least occasionally, instead of being intimidated when he hit them.

In Defense of Self-Defense and Self-Expression

What these mothers did in openly encouraging Judy to hit back goes against the "we-don't-hit-at-this-school" policy, the traditional line toward physical aggression among professionals in early education. Teachers in nursery schools and day care centers have been trained to get the aggressor to "verbalize" feelings or to "channel" the aggressive energy into other activities. Attention is usually focused on stopping the child who uses physical force, rather than encouraging the kids who are intimidated to fight back.

Yet it is quite common for adults to quietly encourage "weakling" boys to fight back when attacked by other boys. Most parents will encourage their sons to stand up for themselves. But it is uncommon—especially among middle income families—for parents to encourage girls to physically defend themselves against boys. Boys learn early in life that it is not proper to fight girls, frail creatures that they are. When a boy does hit a girl, the adult intervenes to stop him and protect her. His sin is not simply hitting, but hitting a girl.

By protecting girls instead of encouraging them to fight back, we are training them to accept the role of the retreating and impotent female. And while girls are trained to be defenseless, boys are pressured into being the brave defenders; they are not permitted to feel frightened or cry when in pain. "Big boys don't cry," we tell our boys, training them to control the expression of their emotions. As adults these big boys have little capacity to feel deeply and express those feelings freely—physically or verbally. Beginning in early childhood, boys learn to hold back feelings of hurt behind clenched teeth and determined eyes—instead of allowing their emotions to be expressed in words—asking for help, in tears, feeling the pain, or with their

bodies—in warm embraces.

But regardless of our sex we need to develop strength—physical and emotional. But having strength does not mean that people will not experience moments and periods of weakness. What is most healthy is when a person can express



and share her or his strengths and weaknesses with others, able to be independent yet also dependent. In fact, unless women can be as independent and strong as men, men and other women will not be able to depend on them.

HELPING INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN BREAK OUT

The adults in the preceding section shared a fundamental goal: they all wanted to help children become self-expressive and confident, regardless of their sex. For this reason they attempted to help children break out of sex role stereotypes. The teachers and parents wanted children to recognize that their sex types need not narrow their choices or inhibit the expression of their feelings. The adults attempted to free children from a stereotyped pattern or quality that was crippling to their development: Robin, from her physical inhibitions and

concern about outward appearance; Mark, from his emotional sterility; Judy and Jerry, from their traditional dominant-submissive male-female pattern; and Jessica from her negative attitudes toward girlhood.

The teachers' actions with the children had a social as well as an individual impact: While becoming more physically competent, Robin also became less directive and manipulative with other kids; Mark's decreased tenseness and growing capacity to be affectionate contributed to the cooperative spirit of his group; Judy's actions in self-defense against Jerry were no doubt inspiring to the others. Not only did they learn that not all girls are sissies, but more important, they saw that standing up for oneself against a bully could result in a relationship of mutual respect and warmth. Finally, their budding egalitarian relationship changed the nature of leadership in the group.

Helping Jessica cope with and resolve her feelings of ambivalence toward being a girl presented a problem of a different order. Jessica did not need help in breaking out of a sex role or in asserting herself. But like many adult women, Jessica was struggling with a social problem that hurt her personally. She was aware that a woman's "role" is limiting and fairly predetermined, while men have a broader range of choice. She needed help in developing positive feelings about being a girl and becoming a

woman. She needed to understand and resolve her conflicts about her future as a woman. Such ambivalent feelings can only be alleviated for Jessica and girls like her if they have adults in their lives who are living examples of people who have broken free of the prison of sex roles yet still feel positive about their own sexual identity.* The significance of having alternative adult models is discussed in the following section.

IV.

WHAT KIND OF MODELS ARE WE?

In the situations discussed in Parts II and III of this paper adults tried to free children from sex role stereotypes before the stereotype had been internalized. Because most of the children were under six, and because it was possible to become close to parents, they had this opportunity. Obviously, their impact on these children was limited by the short amount of time they spent with the kids, as well as by the parents' attitudes and actions in face of social pressures. However, it is still significant that they did react to the children's behavior, helping them deal with these issues.

Yet, equally important to how we respond to children's behavior is our independent behavior. Our actions can contradict our words. For example, many adults help children become sensitive to each other and treat the adults with

*It is important to differentiate between sex role and sexual identity. A role is social behavior that is prescribed and defined by tradition. The individual "plays" her or his part in the play that has already been written. Identity relates to individuality, "unity and persistence of personality" to quote Webster's dictionary. Having a positive sexual identity would mean feeling good about yourself, enjoying your body, respecting yourself as a person who is female or male, and having the confidence and self-trust to express yourself in sexual relationships. In fact "role playing" will often come in conflict with a person's identity. For while identity relates to a person's self-concept, role relates to the behavior society expects from you on the basis of some category — be it sex type, race, age, income. Roles track us, and therefore cripple the development of personal identity.



whom they work or live with no respect. It is meaningless for a white teacher to teach young children about race in a way that counters racism, while she is treating her black "aide" as a subservient person. Likewise, our efforts to counter sexism can be contradicted in the same manner. If children learn only second hand that both men and women can be competent at woodwork or child care, but never actually see a woman using a hammer, or a man playing with a baby, they have learned only an abstract idea, a concept that does not mean much to their own experience. It has been well-documented in child development research that the behavior of adult models—the real people who have some personal contact with the child—strongly influence children's ways of feeling, thinking and behaving.

But unfortunately, what most children see at home, in school and centers supports the old values. The following four situations are typical examples of what children experience in the hidden curriculum of their early education.

"Next time don't get a man for this job!"

One male teacher working in a parent cooperative told mothers he would not waste his time changing diapers or playing with the children under two. Each day the children saw him direct and criticize their mothers, who accepted his authority with silent resentment. If a mother made a suggestion or questioned some aspect of his program, he was visibly annoyed.

After months of tension, the mothers decided to ask him to leave. His parting words, "Next time don't get a man for this job," confirmed their growing realization that being a male with professional credentials does not automatically give one the qualities of a good teacher of young children.

Male teacher, as flirt and seducer.

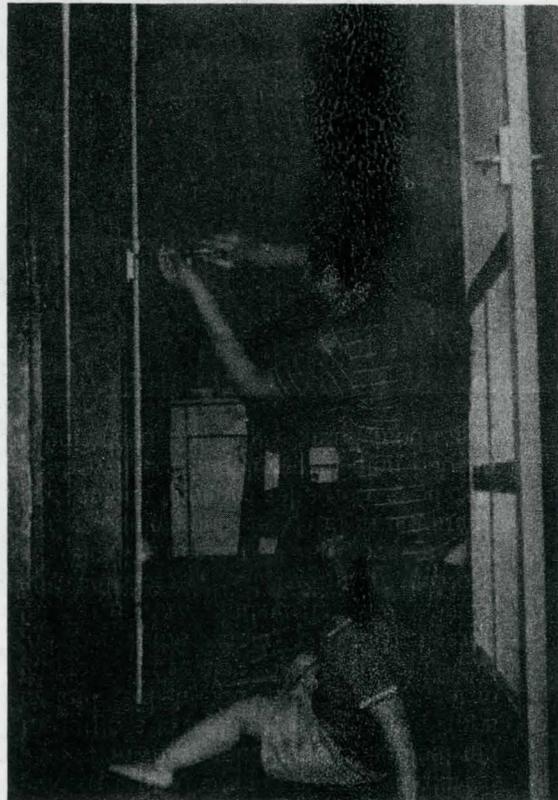
In a free school for older kids a highly inventive male teacher invited only boys to join him on his construction projects and related to girls and female teachers by flirting with them or telling them how

pretty they looked. Though he worked cooperatively with the women teachers, his behavior was also seductive. Being the only male on the staff, he used his maleness to have special power over the other teachers.

Fathers excused from cleaning up.

The women teachers of a middle class parent cooperative informed the fathers that when they worked in the school, they would not be expected to help with clean up. This was done in order to keep the fathers involved. The mothers were expected to share all tasks with the staff. Unlike the fathers they had not complained about doing this. The female teachers were so delighted by the mere paternal presence that they were willing to do extra work on those days.

The message was clear: cleaning up was a demeaning task and men were too valuable to be concerned with such lowly chores. By implication, women were therefore less important than men.



Woman teacher encourages only girls to sew, wash and feed dolls.

The most common adult model for children in centers for young children is the woman teacher. A teacher of three year olds began some sewing projects with the kids. All the children were free to choose to sew but she invited only the girls to join her. She simply assumed that the boys would not be interested. This same teacher would enthusiastically compliment the girls on their clothes and hairdos, rarely noticing a boy when he got a new shirt or a haircut.



THE POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE

Some alternatives do exist. The teachers of two parent cooperatives are examples:

In an all-day playgroup, the man and woman teacher share all the responsibilities for the children. Neither is the head teacher. (They are paid equal salaries.) The kids see them planning and solving problems together, making decisions about field trips, cooking, giving and taking suggestions from each other. She often plays the doctor role in dramatic play; he cooks and cleans with the kids. Most important, these two people really like and respect each other. The woman teacher commented, "We

really have an interesting relationship. Jack is more easy going and affectionate than me. I tend to be more authoritarian. But we enjoy working together."

Another male teacher of a playgroup with kids from one to five is very conscious of his being a new kind of man. In his gentle way, he relates with warmth, patience, and flexibility to both the children and their parents. He cooks, builds, plays ball, tells stories, finger-paints, and changes diapers as a matter of course. Whether he is changing a diaper or leading the kids in singing, he takes his work seriously. He also really loves the kids.

AN ANTI-SEXIST CURRICULUM

Such first hand experiences no doubt teach more powerfully than do words. Observing an egalitarian relationship between a man and a woman, watching your mother or female teacher change a tire and your father or male teacher change a diaper, seeing a woman carpenter build something in your school, meeting a male librarian, or having female and male doctors examine you, are experiences that embody an anti-sexist curriculum. Besides providing such living examples, teachers and parents can counter the learning of sex roles by being very selective about children's books. (See Appendix for list.)

and by making sure that children recognize that TV and magazines (especially advertisements) portray an image of women and men that is both false and destructive.



IT BEGINS WITH OURSELVES

Even those of us who are aware of the problem find it difficult to create a situation in our homes or schools that will give children experiences that can liberate them from sex roles. Yet perhaps the first step that we can take is to examine our own attitudes and behavior. Before we attempt to change children's behavior or our behavior with them, we have to examine how we feel about ourselves as women or men. Can we teach girls to respect themselves and

take themselves seriously if we, as women, do not have the same attitudes toward ourselves? Nor can men help boys to become flexible, sensitive people if they cannot share decision making or express their emotions.

Once we have begun to change ourselves, we will be ready to help children to be more open people. In fact, our responses to children's acts of group exclusion or self-exclusion will come more naturally having dealt with our own attitudes and behavior. Most importantly, by beginning with ourselves we will be able to feel with the kids the difficulty and joy of breaking new ground.

Breaking New Ground with Children and in Our Own Lives and Making the Revolution

[or The Personal is Political]

When parents and teachers encourage children to develop self-trust, compassion, and egalitarian relationships, they are challenging the basic tenets of our capitalist society in which people learn to accept powerlessness, inequality, and competition as normal parts of life. What many of us used to accept as normal, we



now see as unhealthy—in fact destructive. The ideology of normalcy in this society is harmoniously incorporated within the ideology of capitalism. Therefore, when we begin to question our “normal” attitudes toward sex roles, it leads us to think about how sex roles and sexism relate to our entire social and economic life and the basic foundation of that life: capitalism.

Breaking new ground with young children and in our own lives is fundamental to making a revolution in this country because it can help us to understand that we must create a new society in which powerlessness, inequality and competition have no place.

A girl is taught to accept the role of wife, mother, and homemaker. Her role is to be of service to her husband and children, to assist and help them in their development and work. Developing an identity apart from her husband and children is not part of that role, in fact, it contradicts it. Wife-mothers, taken as a whole—a caste, in fact—also serve the important role of pacification for the capitalist system. The security and warmth they provide their husbands make their families “refuges from competitive, dehumanizing, impersonal world of modern capitalist technology.*

A boy is taught to accept the role of breadwinner for his own family. Most men (and women) workers work at jobs in order to survive—to buy food and clothing for their families and pay the rent or mortgage. Though they learned they could “make it” in the system by competing, they later found out that making it really means receiving a paycheck and getting through the day. Most workers, the majority of whom are men, do not even expect their work to be personally or socially meaningful. They view their work only as a means to an end (the paycheck), not as an activity



that in and of itself is of worth. (An activity that has intrinsic worth to the individual or to society cannot be measured in dollars and cents. How can one measure whether teaching young children is “worth” more than designing a functional, beautiful hospital?)

The teachers described in this paper were trying to break down this system of roles, which depends on boys and girls learning to accept segregation from one another. Therefore, to begin with, their goal was to integrate children such as Larry and Sarah into activities previously dominated by the opposite sex, thus allowing them as individuals to develop and play more freely. Integration was considered only a short term goal by the adults. The more fundamental goal was to help children work and play together as a group or collective. The example of carpentry demonstrated that when children had opportunities to achieve and become competent as separate individuals, they were later able to work together as equals—each using the skills and ideas he/she had developed when working alone. Again, letting children know that we value group achievement and collective work over private accomplishment is a clear challenge to capitalist ideology, in which individuals “make it” alone.

Mark was not encouraged to be self-seeking and competitive—basic values of an economic system based on private profit. Robin was not encouraged to depend upon being the pretty, passive female, qualities needed and promoted

* from *Families*, by Linda Gordon, pp. 1-2. New England Free Press. (This pamphlet provides an excellent clear discussion of the function of the nuclear family, sex roles and other forms of division of labor in a modern capitalist society.)

by our consumer culture. By encouraging Judy to physically defend herself against Jerry's bullyish behavior, the mothers were also confronting the power structure of the playgroup, and expressing their non-acceptance of a status quo in which one person acts as though he has the "right" to dominate others. Jerry's unquestioned power to be boss of the playgroup was threatened when the "weaklings" began to rise up with angry words and actions.

Learning how to stand up for oneself, to become a self-determined person, is the opposite of learning to be passive and

to follow without question the orders of the person in charge—whether he is the school bully, teacher, manager, or president.

Kids who can express and respect themselves, who are free from a dependency on sex roles, will have the strength to take control of their own lives and the capacity to make a revolution in our society.



APPENDIX

This is a list of books for young children that express to children, either through their stories or illustrations, a non-traditional concept of what it can mean to be a girl or boy, man or woman.

- Abramovitz. **Winifred** (Steck-Vaughn)
Boyte. **Jenny's Secret Place** (Lollipop Power, P.O. Box 1171, Chapel Hill, N.C.)
Chorao. **The Repair of Uncle Toe** (Farrar-Straus)
Conford. **Impossible Possum** (Little)
Danish. **The Dragon and the Doctor** (Feminist Press, 5504 Greenspring Ave., Baltimore, Maryland 21209)
Eichler. **Martin's Father** (Lollipop Power)
Goldreich. **What Can She Be? A Veterinarian** (Lothrop, Lee, Shepard)
Mao-Chiu. **The Little Doctor** (China Books and Periodicals, 2929 24th St. San Francisco, California)
Merriam. **Mommies at Work** (Knopf) paper and hardback
Miles. **Just Think!** (Knopf)
Preston. **The Temper Tantrum Book** (Viking Press, N.Y.) paper
Reich. **Children and Their Fathers** and **Children and Their Mothers** (Hill and Wang)
Shulevitz. **Rain, Rain Rivers** (Farrar-Straus)
Shulman. **Finders Keepers** (Bradbury)
Udry and Sendak. **MoonJumpers** (Harper and Row) **MoonJumpers** is visual poetry: the sisters and brothers dance, climb and enjoy together.
Zolotow. **William's Doll** (Harper and Row)

See also **Little Miss Muffet Fights Back**, a bibliography compiled by Feminists on Children's Media. (P.O. Box 4315 Grand Central Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10017) This bibliography includes books for older children.

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Cover	<i>Betsy Cole</i>
page 5	<i>Eric Levenson</i>
page 6	<i>Doe Saunders</i>
page 7	<i>Renalda Chambers</i> <i>Phyllis Taube MacEwan</i>
page 8	<i>Phyllis Taube MacEwan</i>
page 10	<i>Betsy Cole</i>
page 13	<i>Phyllis Taube MacEwan</i>
page 15	<i>Vaughn Sills</i>
page 16	<i>Eric Levenson</i>
page 17	<i>Phyllis Taube MacEwan</i>
page 18	<i>Betsy Cole</i>
page 19	<i>Vaughn Sills</i> <i>Central School</i>
page 20	<i>Betsy Cole</i>
page 21	<i>Eric Levenson</i>

