

Describe and evaluate the learning explanation for gender development

[Business](#)



The learning approach suggests that gender is a result of Nurture i. e. it is learned from the environment and is not fixed at birth.

One way in which we learn behaviour is through operant conditioning. A young child will behave in various different ways, some behaviour will be noticed by adults and reinforced if they think that is desirable and some behaviours will be punished if they feel that it is undesirable. As the child grows up other role models will influence and reinforce desirable gender behaviour and punish undesirable behaviour. An example of this can be seen through a young child that is dressing up. A young girl who dresses up as a fairy will be praised and told that she looks pretty, whereas if a boy was who was dressed up as a fairy he would be laughed at (punishment).

Over time consistent reinforcement and punishment shapes the behaviour of the child so that the girl continues to dress up as a fairy, but the boy does not. Another way we learn behaviour is social learning. This involves observing a role model, remembering what you observe and imitating it in a similar situation. A role model is similar to us (same sex) but has status (an adult) so for most children their same-sex parents and same-sex brothers and sisters will be role models. Imitation is particularly likely if children observe their role models being rewarded - this is vicarious reinforcement.

An example would be a boy seeing his older brother fight bullies and getting praised by his father for "standing up for himself". This is negative reinforcement (the bullying stopped) and positive reinforcement (praise) and the older brother is a role model. The young boy may imitate this aggressive behaviour and get into fights. A final type of learning is classical

conditioning. Boys and girls might learn to associate certain neutral stimuli (colours like blue or pink, football, horses) with their gender because they are paired together in the media, on birthday cards, etc. These things become conditioned stimuli, attracting the child's interest in future.

Evaluation of the learning approach explanation of gender development
In support of the idea that gender behaviour is learned, there is the study by Bandura, Ross ; Ross. This showed that boys are more likely than girls to imitate physical aggression and that all children are more likely to imitate a same-sex role model. However, this study only looks at learning aggression and the set-up lacks ecological validity, so it may not tell us about how gender develops in real life. A disadvantage is that it does not consider the possible biological differences between males and females. For example males are said to have strong brain lateralisation to the right side.

This may suggest why males have a lower emotional intelligence than females as emotional intelligence is associated with the left side of the brain.

Females have more activity in the corpus callosum than males which means there is more communication between the left and right hemispheres of the brain in females than in males, which explain why females have better language skills than males. Another disadvantage is that the learning theories suggest that gender behaviour is learned through observation and reinforcement which if true would mean the way in which gender is developed would show variation across cultures who all have different customs - but in reality, there are many similarities in the way gender development takes place, such as when children undergo gender

identification. Finally there are gender differences in newborn babies in which cannot be explained by learning theories, so there are still some elements which have to consider other explanations for gender development.