Adult Responses to Gender Typical and Atypical Behavior in Preschoolers: Implications for Girls with Disruptive Behavior Disorders

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Perceptions of appropriate gender behaviors play an important role in parenting and subsequently in children’s development. This work examines the influence that parental gender perception might have on caring for preschool aged girls with Disruptive Behavior Disorders (DBDs). The disorders included in the investigation were Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder. These three disorders are characterized by disruptive behavior, such as aggression, impulsivity and disobedience, above and beyond normative levels. There is a dearth of literature on young girls with DBDs because the disorders are more common in boys.

In general, it has been shown that parents are less accepting of perceived atypical gender behavior in young children of both genders. One key area where this appears is the disruptive behavior domain. Preschool girls are expected to display less disruptive behavior than preschool boys. Consequently, when young girls demonstrate these behaviors, adults view it as more concerning and atypical. Conversely, when these behaviors are demonstrated by boys, parents may tend to normalize it. It has been found that some adults respond more negatively toward disruptive girls and react to their behavior with anger and frustration. Additionally, studies have shown that negative reactions by parents and non-parental adults can lead to reciprocal effects that further increase the initial disruptive behavior. Based on the literature, parents and non-parental adults who care for girls with DBDs may benefit from an enhanced awareness of their own gender biases in order to provide adequate support and avoid increasing disruptive behavior. Additionally, DBDs in preschool girls is an area in need of more attention and investigation from researchers and clinicians to determine clinical thresholds.