The next section introduces dominant theoretical perspectives on how children come to form a gender identity, how they develop a sense of gender roles (and the stereotypes that make them up), and how they may come to be gender typed themselves. As you read about these you should bear in mind that different perspectives often focus on distinct issues, so even approaches that seem very different are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, by the end of the chapter you should have a sense of how the different accounts of gender development may be synthesized.

**Summary of Section 3**

- Researchers have moved from viewing masculinity and femininity as the opposite ends of a continuum, and have instead recognized that individuals can score high on both masculine and feminine characteristics.
- The extent to which children are gender typed is usually measured by eliciting preferences for toys or activities, either from the children themselves or from their parents or carers.
- Children’s knowledge of gender role stereotypes is assessed by asking them to attribute behaviours, occupations, and other characteristics to boys only, girls only, or to both sexes.

**4 Approaches to gender development**

In this section, five different theoretical approaches to gender development will be explored. Following a brief overview of psychoanalytic perspectives, which first highlighted for psychologists the importance of childhood processes in gender development, the spotlight turns to a dominant debate in this field: Is the acquisition of gender roles driven from the outset by the behaviour of parents, peers, and the media – what are labelled social processes – or do aspects of children’s thinking – their cognitive processes – encourage them to seek out and adopt these roles? The social learning approach focuses on the role of the social environment in children’s gender development: it argues that children come to identify and endorse stereotypes because they are rewarded for gender-typed behaviour and/or because they observe such behaviour in the world around them. Social cognitive theory, a more recent adaptation of social learning theory, includes an examination of cognitive factors involved in observational learning but still largely focuses on environmental influence. By contrast, cognitive-developmental theory assigns a far more important role to cognitive processes: rather than assuming that parents, peers and the media simply impose gender stereotypes on children, children are regarded as actively seeking out information
about gender roles for themselves, once they have a notion of gender as permanent and unchanging. Finally, *gender schema theory* places a similar emphasis on cognitive processes as driving gender development, but suggests that this happens earlier on in childhood, as soon as children can identify their own sex.

### 4.1 Psychoanalytic perspectives

The first psychological theory of gender development derived from the experience of the psychoanalysts. Sigmund Freud's classic account (1905) of psychosexual development centred on the Oedipus complex. He claimed that in early childhood boys develop a sexual attraction towards their mother and, in the process, fear punishment by their father. In an effort to resolve this conflict they come to identify with their father. Distinct but related processes were thought to account for female sexual identity. Aside from Freud's own contribution, there have been a number of more recent psychoanalytic interpretations. Chodorow's (1978) feminist standpoint – which has influenced the views of many other contemporary theorists – has emphasized the process of identification with the mother as a basis for gender development. Early in life, both male and female infants are said to identify with their mothers as the provider of comfort, nurturance, and care. However, in developing a sense of self, daughters can draw on their identification with their mothers (since they are of the same sex), while sons must separate from their mothers in order to develop a masculine identity. The retained identification with the mother gives developing girls a strong sense of interpersonal relatedness, while for boys their separation from the mother leads to a rejection of femininity and a sense of independence.

These kinds of arguments have had a wider impact on other aspects of psychological investigation as well. For example, Gilligan (1982) has suggested that the different processes of identification in males and females lead to different moral orientations: the focus on interpersonal relationships in girls was said to lead to distinctive ways of reasoning about moral dilemmas, centred on concerns about the needs and desires of others. It is important to note that, across all of these writings, there seems to be a shared assumption that gender roles arise naturally out of children's early family experiences.

Although the psychoanalytic perspectives are provocative they will not be afforded further space in this chapter. The Freudian approach to gender development has been attacked by many because the basic ideas about early sexual conflicts within the family are based on little empirical evidence – indeed, there are few testable hypotheses to generate such evidence. Similarly, while the interpretations of contemporary psychoanalytic theorists do have some intuitive appeal as explanations of gender roles in modern culture, there is inadequate specific evidence regarding the roles played by the different processes of identification. This lack of direct empirical research has contributed to a fall from favour of the psychoanalytic approach in mainstream psychological investigations of gender development. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the substantial contribution of this approach in highlighting the significance of early
childhood in the development of a sense of gender identity. The theoretical perspectives that follow all address processes in childhood, even though the particular processes they emphasize are very different.

4.2 Social learning processes

Are gender stereotypes simply transmitted to children by other people and institutions, such as schools and the media? This is an intuitively appealing idea and one that has been explored in some detail. In 1966 the American psychologist Walter Mischel presented the social learning perspective on gender development. According to this perspective, gender-typed behaviours are those that typically lead to different consequences for one sex than for the other. How children acquire and demonstrate gender-typed behaviours is thus dependent upon the same principles of learning that apply to other aspects of their behaviour (Mischel, 1966). This is consistent with the behaviourist approach which had been dominant in Western psychology since the early twentieth century: learning takes place through conditioning, rewards and punishment, and observation of the behaviour of others. A major step forward in behaviourist thinking here is the addition of that last point – observation of others – as a critical element in the learning process. It is not necessary for you to be rewarded or punished in order to learn to do or not to do something: you can learn simply by watching other people in real life, on television and films, or in books, and this may well be the first step in the development of gender-typed behaviour.

There is undoubtedly an enormous amount of information available about what is masculine and what is feminine. Just after being born, boys and girls are often described differently – boys as ‘strong’ and girls as ‘delicate’, for example (Rubin et al., 1974). Fathers engage in distinctive playful interactions, especially with their sons (for example, Lamb, 1987). Boys’ and girls’ environments and experiences may be shaped by their parents and carers in distinct ways, ranging from the colours of the clothes they are dressed in to the toys and activities provided for them. Intuitively it makes sense to assume that the growing child, exposed to all of this information, will be influenced by their social experience. But does the research evidence support this idea as an explanation of children’s gender development?

Do children become masculine or feminine simply because they are rewarded for behaviour that is consistent with their gender role and punished for role-inconsistent behaviour? Most summaries of research suggest that the evidence for such processes is limited. Maccoby and Jacklin’s analysis of the available research found that boys and girls had very similar experiences: they were treated with equal affection, they were allowed and encouraged to be independent in equal measure, and both sexes were discouraged from dependent behaviour. There was even no evidence that parental reactions to aggressive behaviour differed between boys and girls (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). A more recent study which scrutinized a large body of research into gender differences concluded that the only significant effect from among a long list of possible ones examined was the
encouragement of gender-typed activities, and this was evident more in fathers' behaviour than in mothers' (Lytton and Romney, 1991).

Despite the evidence that the differential reinforcement of gender roles for boys and girls is not widespread, the one effect that is often found—the encouragement of gender-typed activities—may be more important than is often recognized. Gender-typed activities themselves would seem to encourage different psychological orientations: the games that are played with dolls typically involve nurturance and caring, in contrast to the mastery and competitiveness that a rough-and-tumble masculine game might generate. Furthermore, where differential reinforcement does occur, it might be of substantial importance to the child. Research summary 1 provides details of a study that showed that while mothers often responded tolerantly or even positively to boys playing with girls' toys, fathers and peers tended to respond negatively, often with clear ridicule. Such ridicule cannot be dismissed easily, either by the children concerned or indeed by psychologists. Experimental studies have also demonstrated that the encouragement that adults give to gender-typed activities is not simply a reflection of boys' and girls' inherent tendencies. Adults respond differently to infants, in stereotype-consistent ways, when the information they are given about the infants' sex is false. For example, they may start playing with dolls when interacting with boys who they have been told are girls (Seavey et al., 1975; Smith and Lloyd, 1978).

**RESEARCH SUMMARY 1**

**Fathers at play**

The idea that parents reward gender-appropriate behaviour and punish gender-inappropriate behaviour is intuitively appealing, but there is surprisingly little consistent evidence of differential reinforcement of boys' and girls' behaviour. Much of the research that Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) reviewed had been based on mothers' behaviour and there had been little investigation into fathers' responses to children's behaviour. In this context, Langlois and Downs (1980) looked at how mothers, fathers and peers responded to young children's gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate play behaviour. One of their studies focused on fathers' responses.

Forty-eight children aged 3 and 5 years were observed for two 15-minute sessions playing with their fathers in an unoccupied but familiar room in their nursery schools. Sets of 'masculine' toys were available for one of the sessions and 'feminine' toys for the other. The response of the fathers to the children's play with masculine and feminine toys was classified into several categories of reward (for example, attending to the child, smiling, showing affection, giving praise) and punishment (for example, ridiculing, interfering with the child's behaviour, ignoring). The researchers calculated the proportion of 10-second observation intervals in which each response occurred (out of the total number of 10-second observation intervals when the child was playing).

The data in Table 3 illustrate how fathers responded differently to their children's gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate behaviour, rewarding the former and punishing the latter. Moreover, the tendency to reward gender-appropriate behaviour
more than gender-inappropriate behaviour was much more in evidence with boys than with girls.

Table 3  Mean percentage of observation intervals when each response type occurred

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Same-gender toy</th>
<th>Cross-gender toy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural help</td>
<td>8.90</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smile</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive talk</td>
<td>55.79</td>
<td>41.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural interference</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural ridicule</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>5.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal ridicule</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative talk</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Langlois and Downs, 1980.

Langlois and Downs summarized the results of their research programme as follows: ‘When boys exhibited masculine-typed play they encountered only modest approval from mothers, they were generally ignored by other boys, but they received clear approval from fathers. When playing with feminine-typed toys, however, they received reward from mothers and active punishment from peers and fathers’ (p. 1246).

This kind of evidence illustrates how the social influences on children’s gender development are likely to be complex; generalizations about whether children are or are not rewarded for gender-typed behaviour do not paint a complete picture.

As noted earlier, direct reinforcement or punishment is not the only mechanism of social influence within social learning theory. Emphasis is also placed on the role of observational learning. Albert Bandura had shown in a series of experiments in the 1960s that aggressive behaviour could be elicited in pre-school children by first showing them video recordings of models acting in aggressive ways (Bandura, 1965). Furthermore, imitation was more likely if they had seen the model being rewarded following the aggressive activity than if they had seen the model being punished. Perry and Bussey (1979) went on to show that observation of multiple same-sex models, most or all of whom were displaying the same behaviour, is particularly likely to lead to imitation. There is certainly no shortage of models in the child’s day-to-day environment who illustrate stereotyped gender roles. Parents, teachers, peers, books, television and films, all may provide ample opportunity for what is referred to as vicarious learning about gender.
The social influences on children's gender development are likely to be complex. However, estimating precisely how important any one model or set of models is for gender typing is extremely difficult. Experimental set-ups like Bandura's, where children's behaviour is measured following exposure to specific models, are often far removed from children's experiences in everyday life. On the other hand, simple correlations of children's gender typing with variables such as television viewing or parental activities and occupations (for example, Durkin, 1985; Turner and Gervai, 1995) do not allow the conclusion that the exposure to stereotypical models causes the gender typing.

**Activity 2: Observational learning of gender roles**

This activity encourages you to identify information about gender roles that is available to children. When you next have the opportunity, carry out some informal research to explore how much information about gender roles is readily available in children's social environments. The following suggestions may help you with this task.

- Talk to some parents about their daily activities (such as work patterns, household chores, leisure activities), and try to identify the extent to which mothers and fathers engage in gender-typed behaviour.
- Look at a selection of books for children and compare the number of male and female characters and their activities/characteristics.
- Watch some television programmes for children, and record the behaviours and psychological profiles of male and female characters.
- Look at advertisements on television and in magazines which relate to children's toys and games. What are the roles of adults and children in these and how do they relate to the nature and features of the activity?

What conclusions can you draw about the presence of gender-role information in the child's social environment?
Comment

People are often surprised to discover just how prevalent gender-typed information is. Despite all the social changes in the last fifty years or so, women still contribute far more to housework and childcare than men. Even among egalitarian couples, the birth of the first child often leads to a more traditional division of labour. Similarly, books and television programmes often show males and females in traditional roles. However, be careful not to make assumptions about the influence of such social information on children's gender development. If gender-typed children are found to watch more gender-typed television, that does not necessarily mean that the programmes caused them to be more gender-typed; the children may have chosen to watch such programmes precisely because they were already gender-typed.

There seems no doubt that the social environment contains a great deal of information about what it means to be a boy or a girl. However, social learning approaches to gender development have been criticized because they have not sufficiently addressed the mechanisms involved in development. In particular, these approaches do not explain satisfactorily why children's gender-related beliefs and behaviours often change as they get older – why many young children's beliefs about masculinity and femininity are often much more rigid than those of their parents. Most contemporary theorists argue that cognitive processes need to be taken into account in order to explain how the social environment makes its mark on the child's gender development and how the child plays an important role in directing his or her own gender development.

4.3 Cognitive processes

The theories covered in this section all relate to aspects of children's thinking that are central to their gender development. They focus on the ways in which children attend to and then process and organize information in their environment, and have in common a justifiable emphasis on the active role of children in shaping their own development; children are not simply passive respondents to stereotyped information that is imposed upon them. This notion of the child as active helps psychologists understand why consistent effects of the social environment are so difficult to find – the effects themselves are, in one way or another, dependent on the child.

Social cognitive theory

Early social learning theories, where the main focus was on the simple, one-way effect of environment on behaviour, were criticized because they provided too simplistic a picture of human development. Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) builds on the earlier social learning approaches by addressing the fact that human development involves a complex interplay of many factors. SCT is usually presented (Bandura, 1986) in terms of a 'model of causation' that links three sets of variables, all of which influence each other: behaviour (such as activity patterns), person (such as expectations, intentions and goals), and environment
(such as modelling and reinforcement). The emphasis is still very much on how children's social experiences influence their behaviour, but SCT highlights the active role of children in their observational learning. They can attend selectively to particular events or people in the environment, then mentally organize, combine, and rehearse the observed behaviours, decide when to enact the behaviour, and finally monitor the outcomes of that behaviour.

What are the implications of SCT for an understanding of gender development? Just as in early social learning approaches, Bussey and Bandura (1999) point to evidence of negative parental and peer responses to children's behaviour that runs counter to gender stereotypes as confirmation of the idea that gender development is heavily based on external sanctions early in the child's experience. Children's socialization history, it is argued, provides distinctive information about masculinity and femininity from birth – for example, clothes, nursery decor and the toys and activities provided. Moreover, there is undoubtedly widespread modelling of gender stereotypes in the family as well as in wider culture. When a child's behaviour is inconsistent with their gender role and is met with open ridicule by adults and peers, there is a clear motivation for the child to behave in a gender-stereotyped manner. However, there is also evidence of choice and flexibility in children's behaviour, and this is where cognitive processes come into play. Once children have begun to internalize the standards of behaviour appropriate for males and females, based on the social experiences described above, their own behaviour is no longer dependent on external rewards or punishments. Rather, they become capable of directing their own behaviour in such a way as to satisfy their internalized standards. Furthermore, they monitor their behaviour against those standards, so that they can feel pride on performing gender role-consistent behaviour, even if there is no explicit external praise.

In a study which supported this view of gender development (Bussey and Bandura, 1992), nursery children aged between 3 and 4 years were asked to evaluate gender-typed behaviour by peers (as presented on videotape) and to rate how they would feel about themselves if they were playing with masculine and feminine toys. Even the younger children disapproved of gender role-inconsistent behaviour by peers (such as boys playing with dolls), but when they rated their own feelings they were the same for both masculine and feminine toys. In contrast, the 4 year olds not only disapproved of others' role-inconsistent behaviours, but were also self-critical when judging how they would feel if they were playing with role-inconsistent toys. Furthermore, these self-evaluations predicted how the children actually went on to play with masculine and feminine toys. This was taken as evidence that while social sanctions for gender-typed behaviour are clearly present in the younger children, self-regulation becomes more important with age.
Cognitive-developmental theory

Despite the focus on cognition and internal self-regulation in Bandura's more recent work, many theorists argue that there are more fundamental cognitive processes that need to be taken into account when analysing children's gender development. In particular, researchers have suggested that children's concepts of themselves as male or female play a critical role in encouraging children to identify and endorse gender roles. This notion was first set out at the same time as the early social learning approaches to gender development. The book that contained Mischel's (1966) account of the social learning approach to gender development also included Lawrence Kohlberg's (1966) equally significant report on his cognitive-developmental theory. While recognizing the importance of observational learning, Kohlberg presents a very different account of how children come to understand and enact gender roles: in his own words, his theory 'assumes that basic sexual attitudes are not patterned directly by either biological instincts or arbitrary cultural norms, but by the child's cognitive organization of his social world along sex-role dimensions' (p. 82). In Kohlberg's view, boys think 'I am a boy, therefore I want to do boy things, therefore the opportunity to do boy things (and to gain approval for doing them) is rewarding' (p. 89). His emphasis, then, is on gender role development as being 'self-socialized'; certainly, there is plenty of information about gender roles in the social environment, but it is the child who actively seeks out, organizes, and then behaves in accordance with that information. This contrasts markedly with the view of the child as behaving in a gender-typed way simply because he or she is rewarded – or sees someone else being rewarded – for it.

A major implication of this perspective is that children's appreciation of – and adherence to – gender roles is dependent on their gender identity, their sense of being male or female. Kohlberg and other proponents of this approach argue that children develop a sense of gender identity in a sequence of distinct stages, an idea that owes a great deal to Jean Piaget's influential work on cognitive development. Piaget had argued that children's logical thought could be seen to develop through a sequence of discrete stages, each qualitatively different from the others. Kohlberg connected this development with growth in children's sense of gender identity. The Kohlbergian sequence of gender identity development involves three stages, as shown in Box 3.
**Kohlberg’s stages of gender development**

**Stage 1: Gender labelling**
Children can identify themselves and other people as girls or boys (mummies or daddies). However, gender is not seen as stable over time or across changes in superficial physical characteristics (such as length of hair, clothes).

**Stage 2: Gender stability**
Children recognize that gender is stable over time: boys will grow up to be daddies, and girls will grow up to be mummies. However, the unchanging nature of gender — that it remains the same regardless of changes in superficial appearance or activity choice — is not yet appreciated.

**Stage 3: Gender consistency**
Children have a full appreciation of the permanence of gender over time and across situations.
By the age of around 3 years, in the gender labelling stage, children become able to label themselves and others accurately as boys or girls. It is not for another couple of years, however, that children are thought to enter the gender stability stage and appreciate that this classification will remain stable over time (a boy will grow up to be a daddy, and a girl will grow up to be a mummy). But only in the final gender consistency stage, at around the age of 6 or 7 years, are children judged to have an insight into the constancy of sex regardless of the passage of time, changes in context, or transformations of physical features. This understanding is thought to develop in parallel with classic Piagetian changes in children’s appreciation of conservation (for example, understanding that the volume of water in a beaker will remain the same after the water is poured into a beaker of different dimensions). Most importantly, Kohlberg argues that the child’s gender identity can provide a stable organizer of the child’s psychosexual attitudes only when he is categorically certain of its unchangeability (1966, p. 95). Thus, the mature understanding of gender constancy is considered critically important for the gender-typing process.

The research literature provides some support for the notion that more advanced gender concepts are associated with selective attention to same-sex models. The classic study of Slaby and Frey (1975) assessed children’s understanding of gender as a fixed, unchanging attribute using a structured gender concept interview. Children’s responses to the questions seemed to support Kohlberg’s sequence of gender identity development. Furthermore, when shown a videotape that depicted both male and female models, the children who demonstrated an appreciation of gender stability were more likely than children with a less mature gender concept to pay greater attention to the model of their own gender (see Research summary 2). On the whole, however, the research evidence for a link between the appreciation of gender constancy and gender typing is not strong (see reviews by Huston (1983) and Ruble and Martin (1998)). In fact, most of the evidence suggests that it is the most immature form of the gender concept—the accurate labelling of oneself as a boy or girl—that is often associated with gender-typed conduct and stereotyped beliefs. Bussey and Bandura (1999) note that long before children have attained gender constancy, they prefer to play with toys traditionally associated with their gender, [...] to model their behavior after same-sex models, [...] and to reward peers for gender-appropriate behavior (p. 678).

**RESEARCH SUMMARY 2**

Which model to watch?

Social learning approaches indicated that children’s gender development was largely based on observation of same-sex models. However, Kohlberg’s (1966) cognitive-developmental theory suggested that children’s understanding of gender as a permanent, unchanging attribute was of critical importance. Slaby and Frey (1975) set out to determine whether children’s attention to same-sex models was influenced by their level of gender constancy.
The level of gender constancy in 55 children aged between 2 and 5 years was assessed by using a series of fourteen questions and counter-questions. Several questions tapped gender labelling. For instance:

'Is this a girl or a boy?' (showing boy/girl doll)
'Are you a girl or a boy?'

Further questions tapped gender stability. For instance:

'When you were a little baby were you a little girl or a little boy?'
'When you grow up, will you be a mummy or a daddy?'
'Could you ever be a [opposite of previous response]?'

A final set of questions tapped gender consistency. For instance:

'If you wore [opposite of child's sex] clothes, would you be a girl or a boy?'
'Could you be a [opposite of child's sex] if you wanted to be?'

Children were classified as low on gender constancy if they answered incorrectly on the gender labelling or gender stability items, and otherwise were identified as high on gender constancy. Several weeks after this interview the children watched a short film showing a man and a woman engaging in simple parallel activities on different sides of the screen. The amount of time that children's eyes were fixed on each side of the screen was measured.

Slayby and Frey found support for their hypothesis that children with higher levels of gender constancy would show more selective attention to models of their own sex. The data in Table 4 show that high-constancy boys watched the male model rather than the female model more than did low-constancy boys, while the reverse was true for the girls. Interestingly, the selective attention to the same-sex model was much stronger among the high-constancy boys than among the high-constancy girls. In fact, both boys and girls spent more total time watching the male model than the female model. Overall, the results indicate the influence of both cognitive and social factors in gender development.

Table 4  Mean percentage of time spent watching the male rather than the female model (standard deviations in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of participant</th>
<th>Low gender constancy</th>
<th>High gender constancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>47.9 (8.5)</td>
<td>61.4 (9.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>57.8 (9.9)</td>
<td>50.8 (11.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Slayby and Frey, 1975.

Gender schema theory

Despite the limited research evidence for the role of gender constancy in the development of gender-typed behaviour, many contemporary researchers have built on Kohlberg's basic point that cognitive processes play a key role in driving gender development. In fact, the question now is not whether cognition is important - everyone agrees that it is - but which particular cognitions should be
emphasized. Where Kohlberg highlighted the relatively late-developing full understanding of gender constancy, the gender schema theorists argue that it is the *early* cognitive processes underlying children's ability to label themselves as boys or girls that play the key role in gender development (Martin *et al*., 2002).

In 1981, Martin and Halverson presented a new account of gender typing that drew on the ideas of earlier cognitive developmental accounts but included considerably more detail about the exact cognitive processes involved in gender development. They proposed that the emergence of stereotypes in childhood was not purely a function of environmental input, but rather was the perfectly normal consequence of children's information processing. Stereotypes, in this view, are simply an efficient way of handling and predicting large amounts of information. If people do not categorize information and make generalizations (for example, about what boys like and what girls like) on that basis, they simply would not be able to manage their lives effectively. For children exposed to an endless stream of new information and novel input, such processes of simplification are necessary in order to make sense of the complex world around them.

**Activity 3  What's in your gender schema?**

*This activity will help you to explore your own use of gender schemas.*

Do you make any automatic assumptions about people based on whether they are male or female to help you manage your everyday interactions?

Imagine you are at a party and you meet a person for the first time. You really want to have fun and make a good impression. Would the person's gender influence how you approach the situation: how you behave, what you talk about, what you ask questions about, what you joke about, and so on?

Now imagine that you had to look after an 8-year-old child for the first time. You really want the child to have fun. Would the child's gender influence how you approach the situation: what activities you prepare, what you talk about, what you ask questions about, and so on?

Think about other everyday situations, such as going for a job interview, talking to the checkout clerk at a supermarket, or meeting a new work colleague. Try to list some of the inferences you make about people simply from knowing their gender.

**Comment**

The theoretical framework presented by Martin and Halverson is a reminder that stereotypes are not necessarily an abnormal or irrational way of thinking; rather, they often play a key role in simplifying a very complex world. People often use gender stereotypes as rules of thumb to guide them in their social interactions. Care is needed, however, to avoid an over-reliance on gender stereotypes – there may be a need to revise beliefs, expectations, and behaviour when presented with counter-stereotypical information (such as a girl with 'masculine' toy preferences). Research suggests that children become increasingly flexible in their reasoning about gender as they grow older.
At the core of the theory is the notion of ‘schema’, a mental structure that guides the processing of information and experiences. According to the initial model proposed by Martin and Halverson (1981), two key schemas are involved. The first, the ‘in-group–out-group’ schema, includes a broad categorization of attributes, activities and objects as being either for boys or for girls. In other words, boys and girls are said to have a mental representation of what is suitable for their in-group (boys for a boy, girls for a girl) and what is appropriate for their out-group (girls for a boy, boys for a girl). A second schema, the ‘own sex’ schema, involves more detailed information about those behaviours, traits, and objects that are considered to be characteristic of the child’s in-group. As soon as children are able to label themselves as boys or girls, they will start to form these schemas in order to make sense of the world around them.

In many ways, the basic proposition of Kohlberg (1966) still applies: ‘I am a boy, therefore I want to do boy things’. The difference is that the notion ‘I am a boy’ need only reflect basic gender labelling, as opposed to a full appreciation of gender constancy. Once this understanding is present and the environment provides information about certain toys or activities as masculine or feminine (which is organized in the in-group–out-group schema), children will be driven to find out more about the in-group set of toys or activities. In this way, the in-group–out-group schema determines what information goes into the more detailed and elaborate own-sex schema: if a boy views an object or activity as masculine he will approach it, interact with it, and find out more about it. Thus, unlike the SCT view that internal standards for behaviour are formed through the internalization of social rules taught through rewards and punishment (or learned through observing the outcomes of others’ behaviour), children are seen here as having internal, self-regulating standards as soon as they label themselves as boys or girls.

A major advantage of the gender schema approach is that stability and change in children’s gender-linked cognition and behaviour can be understood by tracking the development of children’s schemas. For example, this approach offers a good insight into why children seem to cling so tightly to gender stereotypes, sometimes despite the best efforts of parents who are attempting to reduce or eliminate stereotyping. Schemas govern what people pay attention to, what they try to find out more about, what they interact with, and what (and how) they remember. For example, Bradbard et al. (1986) gave some unfamiliar objects to 56 children aged between 4 and 9 years, for them to explore for 6 minutes. The children explored new objects more when they were labelled as being for their own sex than for the other sex. One week later they remembered more detail about the toys for their own sex than about those for the other sex. In a similar vein, Liben and Signorella (1993) showed 106 primary school children 60 drawings of male and female characters engaged in masculine, feminine, and neutral activities and occupations (for example, firefighter, washing dishes), and then asked them to recall as many of the pictures as possible. Children recalled more pictures of men performing masculine behaviours than of men performing feminine behaviours. The influence of gender schemas can be so strong that counter-stereotypical information may be distorted to make it fit in with the
schemas. Martin and Halverson (1983) showed pictures of males or females engaged in activities that were consistent or inconsistent with gender roles to 48 children aged between 5 and 6 years of age. A week later the children showed distorted memories of role-inconsistent pictures: for example, a picture of a girl sawing wood was remembered as a picture of a boy sawing wood.

The gender schema approach also helps explain why younger children often seem to adhere to stereotypes more rigidly than older children. When children were asked to predict how much the characters in a story would like masculine and feminine toys, the younger children relied only on the gender of the character to make their judgements (Martin, 1989). They predicted that a boy character would like to play with trucks regardless of the information given about that character’s interests. By contrast, the older children took into account both the gender of the character and the ‘individuating’ information about that particular character. So they would predict that a girl who was described as having counter-stereotypical attributes (for example, ‘likes playing with airplanes’) would be less likely to want to play with a doll than a stereotypical girl. This kind of flexibility is likely to be the result of changes in children’s cognition, such as an increased understanding of masculinity as distinct from maleness and femininity as distinct from femaleness, and an increased ability to draw on several sources of information (such as both a person’s gender and his or her idiosyncratic interests) simultaneously. Younger children, with a more simplistic gender schema that links certain activities with boys and certain other activities with girls, seemed to rely only on the character’s gender when inferring his or her toy preferences.

**Summary of Section 4**

- The psychoanalytic perspective highlights the importance of early childhood experience in gender development, but the emphasis on psychosexual dynamics within the family has not received empirical support.
- A dominant debate in current research on gender development concerns the relative importance of social and cognitive factors.
- Mischel’s social learning approach suggests that children’s gender development is a product of their social experiences. This theoretical approach focuses on reinforcement of gender-typed behaviour by parents and peers, and on children’s observation of gender stereotypes in the world around them.
- Bandura’s social cognitive theory is a more recent version of social learning approaches that highlights the active role of children in their observational learning.
- Kohlberg’s cognitive-developmental theory proposes a developmental sequence of stages in children’s conception of gender. Children’s appreciation of the unchanging permanence or ‘constancy’ of gender is thought to underlie their tendency to seek out and adhere to gender role information.
The gender schema approach proposed by Martin and Halverson suggests that children form cognitive schemas about gender as soon as they discover their own sex. These schemas drive gender development, guiding children’s attention and memory in such a way that they focus on and remember gender-typed information much more than counter-stereotypical information.

# Gender development: an integration

Leaving aside the temptation to try to select one of the above perspectives on gender development as the ‘right’ or ‘best’ approach, careful examination of the theories and research findings suggests that each of the viewpoints has made important contributions to the understanding of gender development. This section considers ways of integrating these contributions.

The biggest source of tension among gender development researchers concerns the question of whether the primary focus of attention should be on the plentiful supply of gender-related information in the environment or on the child’s cognitions about gender. Proponents of social learning theory, and of its more recent incarnation as social cognitive theory, favour the former, while cognitive-developmental theory and gender schema theory favour the latter. This tension, however, should not be insurmountable. All contemporary approaches to gender development recognize that important roles are played by both social and cognitive factors. There is no doubt that family, peers, school, media and various other social agents provide a great deal of information about gender roles. Equally, there is agreement that any model of gender development must take into account children’s cognition. In fact, the existence of different theoretical perspectives in this area has been of great advantage because each one has highlighted – and thereby enabled a better understanding of – different social and cognitive aspects of gender development.

The social learning theory described above has revealed important new information concerning the processes by which the social environment can have an impact on the child. Most importantly, research within this framework has contributed to an understanding of how modelling and observational learning, as well as direct reinforcement, play a critical role in children’s acquisition of knowledge from their social experiences. Cognitive theories build on these ideas by demonstrating that children’s behaviour is a product not just of social experiences, but also of internal cognitive and motivational factors. Bandura’s social cognitive theory highlights the fact that children come to regulate their own behaviour according to internal standards. Kohlberg’s cognitive-developmental theory focuses on developmental processes in how children come to understand gender as a permanent attribute of a person, unchanging over time and across situations. Finally, the gender schema theory described by Martin and Halverson