

WHO SAID IT?

Can you tell just by looking? Write in your best guesses—then see if they change by the end of this story. *By JESSICA PRESS*



Write on the dotted line

- 1 ***"I hate sports"***
- 2 ***"Sometimes I cry during sad movies"***
- 3 ***"I'm aggressive"***
- 4 ***"I SKATEBOARD AND PLAY DRUMS"***
- 5 ***"I do ballet"***
- 6 ***"I'm proud of my muscles"***
- 7 ***"I LIKE BOXING"***
- 8 ***"I like having deep conversations with my friends"***
- 9 ***"I'm into math and science"***
- 10 ***"I DON'T PLAY VIDEO GAMES"***

IT STARTED THE DAY YOU ARRIVED ON THE PLANET:

Without doing or saying a thing, you've been treated in certain ways, simply because of your sex. Maybe it was the way you were dressed, or the activities you were enrolled in by well-meaning adults. Before any of us are old enough to even know what sex we *are*, people around us make decisions about what our sex *means*. (Unconvinced? Flip through photos from when you were a baby and take note of your toys and clothes!)

But get this: "There's a lot of talk about there being differences between boys and girls, but in reality, those differences are *very* small," says Christia Spears Brown,

a developmental psychologist at the University of Kentucky.

How, then, can you explain what may feel like a *giant* (and completely awkward) divide between you and the opposite sex right now? To fully grasp a boy's "baffling" behavior or a girl's "weird" reaction to it (FYI: Those words are pulled straight from our poll of teens nationwide!), it's crucial to ask big questions about sex differences, gender roles, and the way both are being **amplified** as you grow and change.

Read on for answers, but be warned: They may challenge your perceptions of what it means to be male or female!

YOUR SEX AND YOUR GENDER:

What's the Difference?

Even before you're born, doctors can tell if you're a boy or a girl based on your body—that's your sex. But your *gender* falls along a spectrum. "We hold onto these categories of being masculine or feminine, but there are degrees inbetween," says Ritch C. Savin-Williams, professor of human development at Cornell University. The craziest part: Gender roles are constructed by *society*. At some point, people decided that certain feelings or behaviors were more appropriate for one sex than for the other!

BIG QUESTION #1 Are Boys Better at Some Things— and Vice Versa?

The answer? It's a big fat no. A study of 1.5 *million* kids found that sex predicts very little when it comes to nearly any trait imaginable—from personality and academic ability to athletic skill. "What's much more important than being male or female is getting encouragement that you can do whatever you like, and then practicing it," says Barbara Greenberg, a clinical psychologist who specializes in teen and family therapy.

So why do so many people still believe old myths about, say, boys being better at sports and girls being more emotional? Because, as Brown explains, stereotypes—

those snap-judgment images and ideas a society forms about people, places, and things—are powerful. And our brains hold on to them! We're hardwired to pay attention to cues that confirm what we already know and forget the ones that don't. (You can thank evolution for this—turns out it was advantageous to our **primal** ancestors a *lonnnng* time ago to be able to make quick assessments in the wild!)

BIG QUESTION #2 But What If a Stereotype Appears to Be True?

First things first: There's nothing wrong with being a guy who's into sports and action movies, or a girl who loves fashion and the color pink. But one of the most dangerous **implications** of a world with widespread stereotypes is that we tend to automatically follow them, instead of figuring out our true passions or exploring all of our emotions.

In other words, stereotypes and images often drive our behavior. "It's not the other way around," says Brown.

Case in point: You know how some people think boys are better at math? Research shows that girls and guys have equal abilities! The only difference is girls' *confidence* about their performance in math, which can affect their participation in class or their test scores.



Who Said What?

To shape this story, *Choices* polled our 300-member board of teen advisers, then invited 10 high school students to a mini-summit one afternoon. The questions we asked:

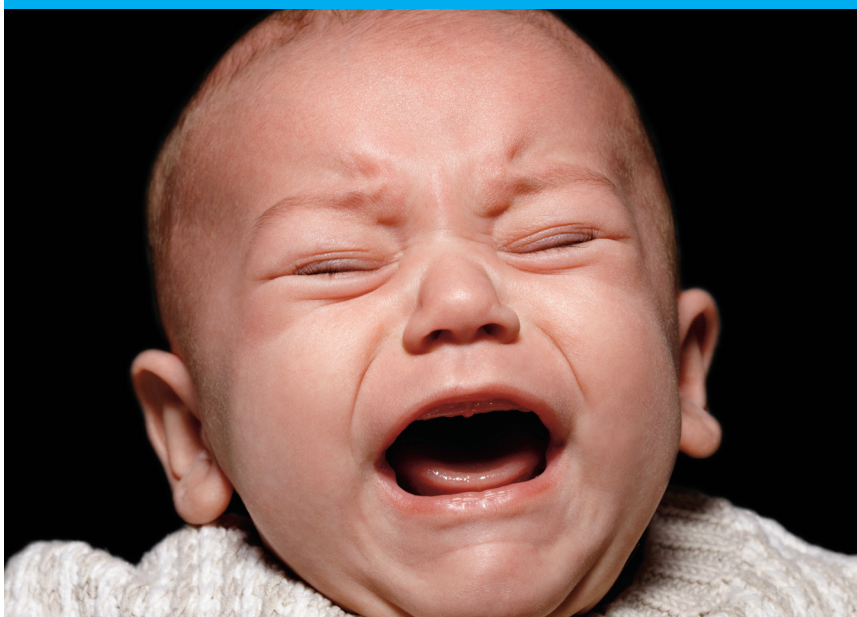
1. What about you challenges typical gender roles?
2. What sex-based stereotypes drive you crazy?

- 1 Alex, 16, hates sports: "I'm not athletic and I don't like competition either."
- 2 Mike, 16, considers himself your "typical guy" . . . who sometimes cries during sad movies: "I'm pretty sure my friends would laugh at me if they knew."
- 3 Stella, 16, hates that girls are expected to be dainty: "I love being aggressive and working up a sweat."
- 4 Sophie, 17, is a drummer, skateboarder, and snowboarder: "Every instructor I've ever had has been a guy."
- 5 Jonas, 14, likes fashion and dancing: "They aren't typical masculine things, but they mean a lot to me."
- 6 Arabella, 14, is a rock climber who is proud of her muscular body: "I think it's really fun and empowering."
- 7 Selah, 14, likes watching boxing. She wants everyone to know: "All girls aren't emotional wrecks!"
- 8 Jubair, 16, wishes he could "get deep" with his friends: "Our talks rarely ever go beyond materialistic matters."
- 9 Rachel, 17, loves math and science: "When I was younger, I felt like I had to work extra hard to be taken seriously in these subjects."
- 10 Zeeshan, 15, is into the arts, not sports or video games: "Everyone has the right to be whoever they want to be."

The good news is there are people who fight stereotypes (like this one about girls and math!) everywhere—if you look for them, pay attention to them, and celebrate them, these oversimplified ideas of what it means to be a boy or girl can and *will* shift!

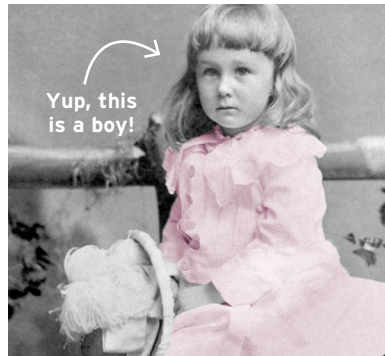
BIG QUESTION #3 Guys' and Girls' Brains Work Differently, Right?

Some days, you may feel completely **mystified** by the way the opposite sex behaves (*Why are his texts SO vague?* or *Is she*



THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER

Not only are sex and gender stereotypes incredibly damaging—they're also totally arbitrary, different in each society, and ever-changing! Don't believe us? Get this:



UNTIL THE EARLY 1900s

● The Color Pink:

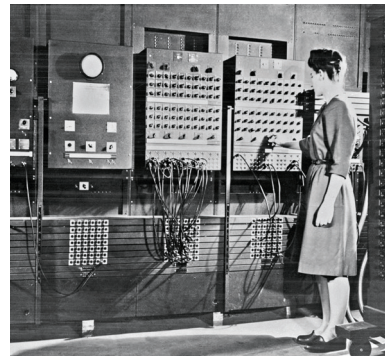
Believe it or not, pink was actually marketed to boys and blue to girls through the early 1900s.



UNTIL THE 1920s

● The Typical Cheerleader:

Women were shut out of cheerleading in the very beginning. It was an elite activity for men!



UNTIL THE 1960s

● The Original Tech Whizzes:

They were women! In fact, in the 1960s, more women than men were involved with computer programming.

really crying over a cartoon?), which could lead you to believe there are two totally different systems of decision making and emotion processing happening for girls and boys. But despite slight variations in your brains and the hormone changes that could affect your emotions right now, you're all working with the same raw materials.

A body of research has also proven that your behavior (from the way you communicate with others to your willingness to express your emotions) is driven by outside factors—like the messages you get from your family, friends, teachers, and the media—more than it is by anything innate. (To learn how

these standards and expectations are formed, see “The Making of a Stereotype,” p. 19.)

BIG QUESTION #4 What's Up With His/Her Body Right Now?

We live in pretty futuristic times: Snapchat! Self-parking cars! Customizable everything! But when it comes to our bodies, no amount of technology can hold back the forces of nature: Once you hit puberty, girls and guys change—and, in the process, they become even more *physically* different.

The unfortunate side effect can be a whole lot of awkwardness as

these transformations happen at different times for different people, says Dr. Chanelle A. Coble, an adolescent medicine specialist at New York University's Langone Medical Center.

SEXISM HALL OF SHAME

Was your grandma allowed to play school sports? Maybe not. It wasn't until 1972—when Title IX (a law banning sex-based discrimination in public education) passed—that girls were granted equal opportunities at school. Will your grandkids be shocked by these facts someday?

Here's the deal: Girls typically begin to experience these physical changes between ages 8 and 13, while boys start between ages 9 and 14. With girls' early signs of puberty being fairly obvious, those who bloom early may receive unwanted attention or expectations.

Guys who develop later, on the other hand, may feel left behind when it comes to sports or dating—or *other* arenas where physical traits (like muscles or height) seem to count a lot. And they struggle with body image too. “I feel as if the stereotype that boys are in love with their bodies is false,” explains Ben, a high school sophomore in New York. “I often feel insecure.”

How can you help each other out? Trust that you'll all arrive at the same place eventually—and vow to treat each other with respect until you get there.

Because remember: Your body (or the sex you're born into) is just one piece of what makes you interesting and unique. You're so much more complex than that!

The Making of a Stereotype

These (admittedly oversimplified) equations can help you understand how society constructs unfair gender expectations.



Male ancestors being expected to focus entirely on work and productivity



Modern media (like movies, music, and advertising) perpetuating “macho” myths



Boys being told from a young age to “man up” when they cry or show their feelings

= “Guys don't show their emotions”



Female ancestors being kept out of the workplace or judged more on their looks than their intellect



Modern American culture obsessing over the weight and attractiveness of female celebrities



Companies preying on insecurity to get girls to buy makeup, clothing, and beauty products

= “Girls are obsessed with their looks”



Boys have to register for the draft at 18, but girls don't—even though women can now serve in combat.



There's still a massive pay gap! Women earn only about 79 cents for every \$1 that men do.



Many men's bathrooms don't have diaper-changing tables. (Hey, dads are hands-on with child care too!)



There has never been a female U.S. president. (Could 2016 be the year?)