

Jobs for the boys: How children give voice to gender stereotyped job roles

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Children, and especially boys, show stronger stereotyping about masculine and feminine jobs than previously suspected, an innovative study by the University of Sussex reveals.

New research reveals the extent to which girls exaggerated their gendered voices to imitate workers in different professions dropped off at around seven but continues to increase beyond that age with boys.

Boys also used an overtly masculine voice even when imitating workers in gender-neutral roles, the study found.

Research in the field of [gender stereotypes](#) usually involves asking study participants what they think about men and women doing different jobs, but there are concerns this can mask people's true beliefs because their answers may be biased by their desire to conform.

So instead, University of Sussex psychologists tapped into children's unconscious stereotypes by asking them to speak in the voices of people with different occupations.

The research found that for stereotypically male jobs, both sexes spontaneously masculinised their voices, by lowering pitch and resonance, and they also feminised their voices for stereotypically female occupations, by raising their pitch and resonance.

The academics are advising authors and children's TV writers to be extra vigilant about associating job roles too strongly with a specific gender, to avoid children associating certain jobs exclusively with a given gender. They also call attention to the voice as an untapped resource to monitor and potentially challenge implicit stereotypes in children.

Dr. Valentina Cartei, research fellow at the University of Sussex's School of Psychology, said:

"Our study found that boys were especially likely to accentuate the vocal masculinity or femininity of people doing different jobs. This pattern suggests that children have differential evaluations of males and females engaging in stereotypical and counter-stereotypical occupations."

In the study, children between the ages of five and ten took part in a voice production task where they were provided with descriptions of traditionally male, female and gender neutral professions and asked to give voices to people in each of those jobs.

In order to measure children's beliefs about gender stereotypes using the more conventional approach, the researchers also asked them to complete a questionnaire which asked them directly about men and women carrying out particular job roles.

The researchers created a simple Index of Stereotypicality which they believe could be used to quantify implicit occupational stereotyping in children.

Used alongside software that can extract pitch from the recording of children's voices, the academics believe the index could be a useful tool for teachers and practitioners interested in challenging stereotypes.

Professor Jane Oakhill said: "The strength of stereotypicality based on vocal pitch revealed stereotypes that were not found in children's direct responses to the conventional questions about men and women doing different jobs. This suggests that [children](#) continue to entertain gender stereotypes even if they are not prepared to say so explicitly.

"If we are to successfully challenge these occupational stereotypes, then as well as having depictions of both male and female nurses, we need occupational role models who vary in vocal masculinity and femininity, such as male nurses

with both low and high vocal pitch, Unconscious bias training should also include [voice](#) cues to help teachers and parents become aware of and challenge biases about [gender](#) stereotypes in relation to particular [jobs](#)."

More information: Valentina Cartei et al, "This Is What a Mechanic Sounds Like": Children's Vocal Control Reveals Implicit Occupational Stereotypes, *Psychological Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797620929297](#)

Provided by University of Sussex

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