

A gender gap in negotiation emerges between boys and girls as early as age eight

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A gender gap in negotiation emerges as early as age eight, a finding that sheds new light on the wage gap women face in the workforce, according to new research from Boston College's Cooperation Lab, led by Associate Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience Katherine McAuliffe.

The study of 240 boys and girls between ages four and nine, published recently in the journal *Psychological Science*, found the gap appears when girls who participated in the study were asked to negotiate with a male evaluator, a finding that mirrors the dynamics of the negotiation gap that persists between men and women in the workforce.

The researchers say this study is the first to identify a gender gap in negotiation among

children.

"We found that—consistent with adult work—girls asked for less than boys when negotiating with a man," said McAuliffe. "We did not see this gender gap when children were negotiating with a woman. There is still much more work to be done, but one thing this tells us is that we should be teaching [young girls](#) to advocate for themselves in the context of negotiation from as early elementary school."

The results point to a disparity that takes root in childhood which may help explain the well-documented [gender gap](#) in pay that separates women and men, said McAuliffe, who co-authored the study with New York University graduate student Sophie Arnold, who spent two summers working in McAuliffe's Cooperation Lab, which studies how attributes like fairness develop in children.

McAuliffe and Arnold say the findings reveal a need to determine if cultural signals sent to girls are to blame and whether there should be interventions in childhood to ensure that both girls and boys feel comfortable advocating for themselves, regardless of the gender of the person they are talking with.

"Boys and girls performed equally between the ages of four and seven," said Arnold, whose work on the project became her undergraduate honors thesis at the University of Chicago. "But by age eight, we see girls are requesting less than boys when they are negotiating with a man. It's not that girls are negotiating less overall—it's only when children are negotiating with a man that we see these gender differences emerge."

Prior studies of adults have found gender differences in negotiation, but could not explain their origins, said the authors. The researchers tested 240 children between the ages of 4 and 9 to determine whether girls in the age range would

negotiate differently than boys and whether girls, like women, would ask for less from a man than a woman.

"Although adult research supports the existence of gender differences in negotiation, it cannot reveal their origins. Learning when these gender differences emerge is imperative for understanding what individual and societal factors lead to these gender differences in adulthood," write Arnold and McAuliffe.

The experiments were modeled on real-world scenarios, the authors said. In phase one, children completed a task and then were allowed to ask for as many stickers as they liked as a reward. Unbeknownst to them, the evaluator would always accept requests for two stickers or less, and always reject requests above that threshold. If a request was rejected, negotiations would progress to the next phase.

In the second phase, the evaluator explained the rules of negotiation to the children and spelled out how their next sticker requests could be handled in a way that highlighted the risk and reward inherent to negotiations.

The results revealed a significant interaction between age, participant gender, and evaluator gender. For girls, the number of stickers initially requested decreased with age when the evaluator was a male. When the evaluator was female, girls requested more stickers with age.

Boys, on the other hand, made requests that did not change with age or the gender of the evaluator.

In measuring persistence, a proxy for negotiation length, the study found that girls' persistence decreased with age when the evaluator was male, but remained the same with age when the evaluator was female. For boys, persistence did not change with age or depending on the gender of the evaluator.

"Our study is the first to show that gender differences in negotiation emerge in childhood," the co-authors write. "Older girls in our paradigm differed from boys in how much they were willing to

ask for from a male evaluator, showing a striking resemblance to findings in adults. Girls are not asking for less from both evaluators but instead are negotiating less only with the male evaluator."

"Our findings add negotiation to the list of early-developing gendered behaviors that may lead to and magnify the wage gap in adulthood," the researchers report.

McAuliffe said the next steps in this area of study include trying to determine why these differences emerge.

She and Arnold highlighted two potential avenues for future research: status and gender stereotypes. It could be the case that the gender differences observed in this study are not unique to gender but reflect a more general dynamic due to perceived status of social groups. Namely, that individuals perceived to be a part of a lower status group (in the US, with respect to gender, this would be girls or women) request less from individuals who are perceived to be part of a higher status group (men).

With respect to [gender](#) stereotypes, it could be the case that [girls](#) are adopting [gender stereotypes](#) about communality or modesty that in turn shape their behavior with men. More research is needed to understand how these avenues contribute to the development of [gender differences](#) in [negotiation](#).

The challenge of the next steps in this research are clarifying exactly what explains the development of this behavior and trying to develop interventions that could help remedy the imbalance, said McAuliffe.

More information: Sophie H. Arnold et al, Children Show a Gender Gap in Negotiation, *Psychological Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797620965544](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620965544)

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