



Gender & cognitive development

This activity will help you to...

- Identify features of children's thinking about gender
- Understand Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory of gender

Overheard from children

Example 1

A friend of mine's son, Ben, then three years old, was watching her put on lipstick before going out. "What are you doing, mum?" he asked.

"I'm putting on lipstick", she replied.

"Can I put on lipstick?"

"No, silly, lipstick's only for girls!" said my friend, who had a quite traditional outlook on that sort of thing. Ben went quiet for a bit and kept watching.

"Mum," he said eventually, "when I'm a girl, will I be able to put on lipstick then?"

Example 2

When I was younger I worked in a shoe shop that was frequented by the fashionable young women of Wimbledon. Then, as now, I had long hair and wore large silver earrings. I didn't like shaving much and would frequently go unshaven for three or four days. On one such occasion, a woman came into the shop with what was presumably her daughter in tow. The girl looked to be about three or four years old. She gave me a good long look whilst her mum examined some shoes. Presently, the girl tugged on mum's sleeve.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Mummy, why has that lady got a BEARD?"

Example 3

Maria, 8, and Glen, 4, were playing together. Or, rather, Maria was playing and Glen had been roped in to cooperating. Maria had turned her room into a disco and dressed them both up. Glen was resplendent in an orange satin dress and a pair of his mother's heels. On catching sight of himself in a mirror he stopped and stared at his reflection.

"Ooooh – look! I'm a girl!"

He seemed a bit surprised about this and possibly a little upset.

"It's only pretend, Glen", his sister reassured him, "you're still a boy really, and when you grow up you'll be a man like dad."

- **What do the things these children say indicate about their understanding of gender?**
- **How would a cognitive developmentalist like Kohlberg describe each child's thinking?**
- **If you were a psychological researcher, what questions could you ask children in order to establish what stage of cognitive gender development they were at?**