

Male and Female Responses to Conflict

Source: "In the Company of Women -- Patricia Heim & Susan Murphy

Male and female responses to conflict are often quite different and can often be traced back to the way children play.

Play: An informal, cooperative interaction that has no particular goals, no rules, no score keeping, no end point, no strategy for winning, and no winners or losers, e.g., creating a structure out of Tinker Toys or playing with dolls.

Game: A competitive interaction with definite rules, a clear goal, and a predetermined end point (nine innings, a particular score). There are always winners in games and, consequently, losers.

Boys	Girls
Outdoors -- requires larger spaces for basketball, baseball, cops and robbers, war -- venture further, encouraging independence	Indoors -- dolls, board games, school, house
Larger groups, often age heterogeneous -- "public" -- open to surveillance	Prefer pairs, often with best friends -- "private" affairs
Not likely to play in girl's games	More likely to play in boys' games
65% activities - formal games	35% activities -- formal games
Games organized by hierarchies (coach, team captain, star players, average player, water boy)	Power shared equally - even games like hopscotch involves taking turns
Interaction through conflict -- strive with team to come out on top	Prefer intimacy, reciprocity, sharing secrets -- avoid conflict -- gravitate toward win-win situations
Having high position in hierarchy is what counts	Popularity and intimacy more important than success or achievement
72% activities span an hour or more	43% activities span an hour or more
Involve rules and frequent settling of disputes	If squabble breaks out, the game stops. If the game stops, there are generally tears and/or threats: "I won't be your friend anymore."
Depersonalize attacks -- when game is over, it's over	Game is never over -- if girls have a conflict, it is not readily forgiven and forgotten

An all male peer group is the setting where boys first discover the requirements of maintaining one's status in the male hierarchy. Peers are the most effective teachers of values. Boys who are slightly older than kindergarteners learn from one another, in playground games and in more or less organized sports, to condemn cheaters and showoffs, the clumsy and the incompetent, the cowardly, the egocentric. They learn in confrontations with other small boys to resist aggression, to conquer fear or at least mask it, to stand up for themselves. In the world of small boys, they learn hardihood. They learn not to cry when their feelings are hurt. They learn not to offer alibis for poor performance, not to ask for help. They learn not to talk about their uncertainties and fears except, perhaps, as a means of uncovering them.

A boy and his best friend often find themselves on opposing teams. They must learn ways to resolve disputes so that the quarrels do not become so heated that they rupture friendships. Boys must learn to "depersonalize the attack." Not only do they learn to compete against friends, they also learn to cooperate with teammates whom they may or may not like personally. Such interpersonal skills have obvious value in the organizational milieu.

In adulthood, two women condemning each other's ideas in a meeting rarely go to lunch afterward arm in arm; the enmity is retained. But among men accustomed to living in a competitive world, such clashes are soon dismissed as "part of the game." It's just business, they tell themselves.

The Ten Golden Rules of Girlhood

- Relationships are critically important, so work to preserve them.
- "Be nice." "Get along." "Look out for each other." "Remember we're all in this together."
- Avoid conflict at all costs because it hurts relationships.
- Girls need verbal contact to feel close to one another. Secrets are important. Share them with your best friend.
- Never hit or physically hurt anyone.
- Put the needs of others before you own.
- Competition causes conflict, so avoid direct competition.
- Don't take more than your "share" of any resource: candy, attention, A's, cute clothes, beauty, and boys.
- Don't be a show-off. Never brag about your accomplishments or positive attributes. Don't act as if you're better than everyone.
- Don't push other girls around. Don't act as if you're in charge.

Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers -- a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connections. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers -- a form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status.