



## Parenting and Children Development: The Cons of Gender-Neutral Parenting on Mental Health

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### ABSTRACT

**Abstract:** This paper delves into the concept of gender-neutral parenting, its historical roots, and its impacts on children's mental health. The authors acknowledge the rise of gender-neutral parenting as a response to challenging traditional gender stereotypes and promoting inclusivity. The study critically reviews existing literature, examining both the negative aspects and concerns associated with this parenting approach. The article argues that a gender-neutral approach has a direct impact on children's mental health. Children who are raised in a gender-neutral environment may experience confusion about their gender identity, potentially leading to anxiety and depression. A major focus of the study is on the correlation between gender-neutral parenting and children's mental health outcomes, specifically exploring the potential links to anxiety, depression, and identity-related challenges. The authors note the limited and inconsistent literature on this topic, with some studies suggesting positive impacts on psychological development and well-being. In contrast, others highlight potential challenges, including social stigma and discrimination. However, the study acknowledges the insufficient scientific data to substantiate these assertions and emphasizes the need

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for a tailored strategy that considers individual needs and circumstances. The article concludes by summarizing key findings and suggests further research on the long-term effects of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health

**Abstrak:** Makalah ini membahas konsep pengasuhan tanpa gender, akar sejarahnya, dan dampaknya terhadap kesehatan mental anak-anak. Para penulis mengakui munculnya pengasuhan tanpa gender sebagai respons terhadap tantangan stereotip gender tradisional dan promosi inklusivitas. Studi ini secara kritis meninjau literatur yang ada, memeriksa baik aspek negatif maupun kekhawatiran yang terkait dengan pendekatan pengasuhan ini. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pendekatan tanpa gender memiliki dampak langsung pada kesehatan mental anak-anak. Anak-anak yang dibesarkan dalam lingkungan tanpa gender mungkin mengalami kebingungan tentang identitas gender mereka, yang berpotensi menyebabkan kecemasan dan depresi. Fokus utama dari studi ini adalah pada korelasi antara pengasuhan tanpa gender dan hasil kesehatan mental anak, khususnya menjelajahi potensi hubungan dengan kecemasan, depresi, dan tantangan terkait identitas. Penulis mencatat adanya literatur yang terbatas dan tidak konsisten tentang topik ini, dengan beberapa studi menunjukkan dampak positif pada perkembangan psikologis dan kesejahteraan. Sebaliknya, yang lain menyoroti tantangan potensial, termasuk stigma sosial dan diskriminasi. Namun, studi ini mengakui kurangnya data ilmiah yang cukup untuk mendukung pernyataan-pernyataan ini dan menekankan perlunya strategi yang disesuaikan yang mempertimbangkan kebutuhan dan keadaan individu. Artikel ini menyimpulkan dengan merangkum temuan kunci dan menyarankan penelitian lebih lanjut tentang efek jangka panjang dari pengasuhan tanpa gender pada kesehatan mental anak.

**Kata kunci:**

Depresi,  
Identitas gender,  
Kecemasan,  
Kesehatan mental anak,  
Pengasuhan yang netral gender,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The origins of gender-neutral parenting can be traced back to the 1970s, a time of significant social change and feminist activism. However, it eventually expanded to include parenting practices as well (Saguy & Williams, 2019). Gender-neutral parenting means not putting gender norms or expectations on children based on their biological sex. The goal of this parenting style is to release children from the constraints and influences of conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity so they can explore their interests, preferences, and identities (Zhang et al., 2023).

Social life is significantly organized by gender (Barker et al., 2019). Whether the baby will be a boy or a girl is one of the first concerns an expectant couple asks themselves daily. This decision is known to influence names, as well as toys, clothes, books, and room décor. Studies showing that 3- to 4-month-old infants can already distinguish between men and women based on internal facial traits demonstrate the importance of gender in face processing (Safar & Moulson, 2020).

To avoid perpetuating gender stereotypes, gender-neutral parenting promotes children's freedom to explore their gender identity and expression. Creating an atmosphere where children can develop their own sense of identity without being constrained by cultural assumptions of what it means to be a boy or a girl is the philosophy behind gender-neutral parenting. Rather than giving children toys, clothes, and activities that are just appropriate for one gender, this strategy gives them a lot of options to pick from (Davis & Hines, 2020).

Children's mental health is often defined as different from adult mental health and more multifaceted because of the unique developmental milestones that children experience. Characteristics of the child (e.g., gender, genetics) are important determinants of that child's well-being. The mental health problems that children experience may be reflected as difficulties in psychological and emotional development, social relationships, and behaviour (Lowthian et al., 2021, Lestari et al., 2025).

Although there are advantages to an impartial parenting style, there are several drawbacks that must be taken into account. There doesn't seem to be much research on the detrimental effects of this increasingly popular parenting style, not only on society's morality but also on children's personalities and development in ways that can affect social interactions and family dynamics. This is especially true in most of the world's cultural and religious communities. Studies assert that gender differences are biologically based and that rejecting or minimizing them could be detrimental to a child's growth and well-being (Marquez et al., 2023). Examining both the positive and negative aspects of the issue in detail is significant to provide the audience with a wide range of knowledge and, ultimately, help them make better decisions for the family's future as well as to better prepare their children for the future.

Based on the literature review, this article seeks to investigate and evaluate the effects of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health, regardless of the advantages that proponents and certain studies have asserted. This study aims to analyse the implications and potential challenges of gender-neutral parenting, specifically its psychological impacts on children's mental well-being, identity formation, anxiety, and depression. It aims to analyse the historical origins and rationales for the practice of gender-neutral parenting strategies and, through literature analysis, specify their psychological effects. The research also aims to establish correlations between gender-neutral parenting and some mental health outcomes among children, for instance, anxiety, depression, or identity issues.

Additionally, the research addresses how gender-neutral parenting influences children's identity development and self-esteem and compares the mental health outcomes of children growing up in gender-neutral contexts with those raised under traditional gendered contexts.

Consequently, this study contends that a gender-neutral approach has a direct impact on children's mental health. Children who are raised in a gender-neutral environment may experience confusion about their gender identity, potentially leading to anxiety and depression. For instance, some studies such as "Mental Health Outcomes in Transgender and Nonbinary Youths Receiving Gender-Affirming Care" (Real et al., 2024) and "Trajectories of Gender Identity and Depressive Symptoms in Youths" (Morawska, 2020) suggest that the pressures and invalidation from society may contribute to elevated rates of anxiety and depression among young people who identify as transgender or nonbinary. However, the effects of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health outcomes are not well studied, and the existing literature is limited and inconsistent. However, some studies have suggested that gender-neutral parenting may have positive impacts on children's psychological development, such as their role attitude, gender-typed behaviours, self-esteem, and well-being (Morawska, 2020). Although these studies also have some limitations, such as small sample sizes, a lack of longitudinal data, and confounding factors. Therefore, more research is needed to examine the long-term effects of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health outcomes, especially in different sociocultural contexts and children's mental health outcomes especially in different sociocultural contexts and across a range of outcomes such as anxiety, identity-related challenges, and resilience.

Theoretically, the discourse surrounding parenting practices has seen a paradigm shift in recent years, with a growing focus on challenging gender stereotypes and creating surroundings that are not limited by traditional gender roles, create a more welcoming atmosphere for children, a lot of emphasis has been placed on gender-neutral parenting (Bornstein, 2017). It's important to think about the potential drawbacks of this parenting approach, even amid the growing zeal for challenging social norms. In particular, the influence of gender-neutral parenting on children's psychological well-being is the main focus of this theoretical framework, which delves into the complicated argument surrounding its disadvantages.

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory was acknowledged for its foundation in reciprocal determinism, observational learning, and self-efficacy. based on social cognitive theory, which contends that social environments have an impact on the cognitive stages through which children acquire gender identity and gender roles (Albert, 2016). From adolescence to maturity, gender identity has a big impact on how children's mental health develops. Gender roles are formed through early modelling, reinforcement, and direct instruction, especially in the family. As children see and emulate the role models in their environment, gender roles emerge. Parents' (and other caregivers') process of reinforcement promotes sex-typed behaviours and reinforces traditional gender roles. Vicarious or direct reinforcement can also operate through symbolic processes like language and communication (Endendijk et al, 2018).

Nevertheless, there was little data to support the impact of these behaviours on children, frequently due to the lack of clear correlation between parent behaviour and child results and the infrequent study of parent-child interactions. Moreover, the social cognitive theory's suggested processes of gender role transmission, namely, modelling, reinforcing, and direct teaching, were typically neither rigorously studied nor connected to the results of children. (Firmansyah et al., 2022).

Social cognitive theory, which stresses the impact of social circumstances on human behaviour and development, is one psychological theory that supports the development of mental health. It offers chances for social support through the development of expectations and self-efficacy, as well as the use of observational learning and other forms of reward to effect behaviour change (Bronstein, 2024). Considering observational Learning: Following the Social Learning Theory, people pick up knowledge by seeing the actions of others and the results of those actions. Children often pick up parenting skills from watching their parents' behaviours and attitudes (Paul & Perry, 2016).

**Modelling Gender-Neutral Behaviour:** Parents have a significant impact on how their children perceive gender roles (Paul & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Children are more likely to embrace a more inclusive gender view if parents actively participate in activities and behaviours that challenge established gender standards. Parents can encourage their children to explore a wide range of interests, share household tasks, and pursue hobbies despite gender preconceptions (Willard et al., 2019). **Encouragement of Gender-Neutral Actions:** Reinforcement plays a key role in learning, according to social learning theory. When their children participate in activities or show interests that defy gender stereotypes, parents can support gender-neutral conduct by giving them encouragement and appreciation (Morawska, 2020).

## **2. METHOD**

The study utilized is a systematic literature review aimed at comprehensively exploring the cons of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health. A systematic approach was employed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant research studies and scholarly articles on the topic, ensuring a rigorous and unbiased assessment of the existing literature (Lame, 2019).

### **2.1. Search Strategy, Inclusion, and Exclusion Criteria.**

To find peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and appropriate literature published between 2015 and 2025, a comprehensive search strategy was put into place. The search was conducted using major databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Key terms and phrases utilized in the search included the aforementioned keywords.

Particular inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to ensure that the research represents recent advancements in the field. Included were English-language studies that were published within 10 years and that particularly addressed the effect of gender-neutral parenting on the mental health of children. Prioritization was given to articles that discussed psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and confusion about gender identity. On the other hand, the review did not include any research that was specifically about gender-neutral parenting, studies that did not concentrate on mental health outcomes, or non-empirical publications.

### **2.2. Data Extraction, Quality Assessment, and Synthesis.**

Key information from each study, such as the authors, the year of publication, the study design, the sample size, the measures of mental health, and the main findings, was extracted using a standardized form. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)

checklists were used to rate the quality of the included research, analysing factors such as study validity, possible biases, and result reliability.

To synthesize the data, the findings were categorized into themes according to the mental health consequences of parenting in a gender-neutral manner. A narrative synthesis was utilized to address the diverse outcomes, emphasizing the possible adverse effects, such as anxiety and depression, as well as the discrepancies found in the literature. This synthesis made it possible to critically assess the data and spot any holes or areas that needed more investigation. However, potential publication bias and the variation in study techniques are among the systematic review's shortcomings, which could have an impact on how broadly applicable the results are.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. The correlations between gender-neutral parenting and specific mental health outcomes in children, such as anxiety, depression, or identity-related challenges.

According to a study published in BMC Public Health, exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and being female are distinct risk factors for having a major depressive episode (MDE) or an anxiety disorder (AD) in adulthood (Whitaker et al., 2021). Gender confusion (dysphoria) is a term used to describe the sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. This sense of unease or dissatisfaction may be so intense that it can lead to depression and anxiety and hurt daily life. It is important to note that gender confusion (dysphoria) is not a mental illness, but rather a medical condition that can be treated with appropriate care and support (Block, 2023). There is a strong link between gender confusion and mental health. Confusion about gender identity can lead to anxiety and depression in children who experience it (Xu et al., 2024).

The effects of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health outcomes are not well understood, as there is a lack of rigorous and longitudinal research on this topic. However, some studies have suggested that gender-neutral parenting may have positive impacts on children's well-being, such as reducing gender-related stress, enhancing self-esteem, and promoting resilience. Studies by Katz-Wise developed parenting guidelines to support transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) children's well-being, based on expert consensus. Content that supportive strategies for parents, such as open communication, listening, and avoiding behaviours that pressure child's gender identity or expression, were essential for promoting the mental health of TGD children while another compared the mental health of TGD children who were supported in their identities by their families with those who were not (Katz-Wise et al., 2022b). They found that TGD children who were affirmed by their parents showed no elevations in depression and slightly elevated anxiety relative to population averages, whereas those who were not supported had higher levels of depression and anxiety.

On the other hand, some studies have also indicated that gender-neutral parenting may have some challenges or limitations, such as facing social stigma, discrimination, or isolation from peers and other adults who do not understand or accept this approach. This may create stress, anxiety, or isolation for the family and affect their mental health and well-being (Mazrekaj & Jin, 2023). Moreover, some research has revealed that gender-neutral parenting may not be sufficient to address the structural and systemic factors that contribute to gender inequality and oppression, and that a more comprehensive and

transformative approach is needed to challenge the gender binary and promote social justice.

Therefore, the correlation between gender-neutral parenting and children's mental health is not clear-cut. It may depend on various factors, such as the child's personality, the family's environment, the community's culture, and the availability of support and resources. The most important thing for parents is to be emotionally open and accepting of their child, regardless of their gender, and to encourage them to express their feelings and their sense of identity.

### **3.2. Impact of gender-neutral parenting on the psychological well-being of children in terms of self-esteem and identity formation**

In exploring the impact of gender-neutral parenting on children's psychological well-being, some studies have investigated its effects on self-esteem and identity formation. Several researchers posit that gender-neutral parenting fosters a more egalitarian environment, challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes. This shift away from rigid gender expectations may positively influence children's self-esteem by promoting a sense of autonomy and freedom from societal expectations (Mannat & Shanwal, K, 2024). On the contrary, some scholars argue that an overly gender-neutral approach may expose children to confusion and uncertainty regarding their identity (King et al., 2021). Found that children raised in strictly gender-neutral environments might face challenges in forming a stable sense of self, as they lack clear gender markers for identification. The absence of traditional gender roles might lead to a sense of ambiguity, potentially impacting the development of a secure identity. However, some studies explore the effects of gender-neutral or gender-expansive environments on children's development and identity. For example, Chapman (Chapman, 2022) examined Australian early childhood educators' views on children's gender identity development and the content on gender in the Australian Government's Early Years Learning Framework. She argued that gender-neutral environments are not enough to support children's diverse expressions of gender, and suggested the need for gender-expansive environments that challenge stereotypes and biases.

However, it's crucial to note that the literature is not unanimous in its findings. Studies suggest that the relationship between gender-neutral parenting and self-esteem is complex and context-dependent (Garcia & Santiago, 2017). They propose that factors such as cultural background, parental attitudes, and societal influences can mediate the impact of gender-neutral parenting on children's psychological well-being. While gender-neutral parenting may offer advantages in terms of promoting positive self-esteem through dismantling gender stereotypes, it also carries potential risks, such as identity confusion, which vary based on individual and contextual factors (Rawee, P. et al, 2024).

This parenting may challenge children's psychological well-being, especially in their social adjustment and peer relationships. As pointed out earlier, children who are raised without gender may face confusion, curiosity, or criticism from others who do not understand or accept their gender expression or identity. They may also experience isolation, bullying, or discrimination from peers who adhere to more traditional gender norms (Rahilly, 2022).

These negative social experiences may affect their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and emotional stability. Therefore, to assist children and deal with the possible challenges and strains of living in a gendered world, gender-neutral parenting may need extra support and direction from parents and other adults. In addition to giving their kids a secure and

supportive atmosphere in which they can explore their identities and express their feelings, parents who adopt a gender-neutral parenting style should also be perceptive, accommodating, and flexible in meeting their needs and preferences (Stannard, 2018).

### **3.3. Comparison of mental health outcomes of children raised in gender-neutral parenting and traditional gendered environments.**

The review synthesizes and analyses studies that investigate the potential impact of gender-neutral parenting practices on children's mental well-being. Gender-neutral parenting emphasizes equality and avoids reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes, whereas traditional gendered environments often adhere to more conventional expectations related to gender roles. Understanding the psychological consequences of these parenting approaches is essential for gaining insights into the complex interplay between gender-related upbringing and mental health outcomes in children.

Both gender-neutral and traditional styles of parenting may have implications for the mental health outcomes of children, such as their self-esteem, identity, and overall well-being. One study analyses the effects of gendered parenting on child development outcomes, such as cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development (Lucas-Stannard, 2016). The review finds that gendered parenting may have both positive and negative effects on children, depending on the type and context of the parenting behaviour. The review also proposes a theoretical framework to explain how gendered parenting influences child development through various mechanisms, such as parental expectations, modelling, and feedback.

However, the results are mixed and depend on the underlying sample, such as the type of data, the measurement of mental health, and the characteristics of the parents and children. The differences between children raised in gender-neutral parenting and those raised in a traditional parenting environment can vary widely, and it's important to note that individual experiences may differ (Endendijk et al., 2016). Additionally, the terms "gender-neutral parenting" and "traditional parenting" can be somewhat broad and may encompass a range of practices. Here are some general differences that may be observed that might bring about the said impact unintentionally.

**Gender Stereotypes:** In gender-neutral parenting, there is an emphasis on avoiding traditional gender stereotypes. Parents may encourage children to explore a wide range of activities and interests regardless of societal expectations associated with their gender. In traditional parenting, there may be a tendency to adhere more closely to traditional gender roles and expectations. Boys might be encouraged toward activities considered stereotypically masculine, while girls might be directed toward more traditionally feminine pursuits (Morawska et al., 2021).

Although this is a complex and controversial topic that does not have a definitive answer, this paper provides some information and perspectives. There are different motivations and methods for both parenting approaches, and the effects on child development may vary depending on the context and the individual child. Also, some possible challenges of gender-neutral parenting include: Facing stigma, discrimination, or harassment from others who do not understand or support the parenting choice, Confusing or upsetting children who may want or need more guidance or clarity on their gender identity, Limiting children's opportunities or choices by avoiding certain activities or items that are associated with a specific gender, Creating a mismatch between children's expectations and reality, especially in contexts where gender norms are still prevalent and influential (Mazrekaj & Jin, 2023).

However, there is not enough evidence to conclusively determine the negative mental health outcomes of children raised in gender-neutral parenting, as most studies on this topic are small, qualitative, or based on self-reports. Despite that fact, some possible risks or challenges may affect children's mental health including Feeling isolated, alienated, or rejected by peers or society, Developing low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression due to internal or external conflicts about their gender identity, experiencing identity confusion, crisis, or dysphoria if they do not identify with their assigned sex at birth or with any gender category, These potential negative outcomes are not inevitable or universal and may depend on various factors such as the child's personality, temperament, resilience, support system, and environment (Liu, 2023).

On the other hand, children who are raised in traditional gendered environments which are often referred to as strict, authoritative, and value obedience and conformity portray mental health outcomes that include; They may have higher self-esteem and self-confidence, as they receive clear feedback and expectations from their parents (Prime et al., 2023). They may have better academic performance and cognitive skills, as they benefit from positive parenting interventions that promote sensitivity, responsiveness, and non-harsh discipline (Zhao et al., 2021). They may have lower levels of anxiety and depression, as they learn to cope with stress and adversity in a structured and supportive environment and, they may have stronger social skills and relationships, as they respect authority and follow social norms and rules (Wolicki et al., 2021). However, studies contend that traditional parenting can also have some negative effects on children's mental health, such as: They may have lower levels of creativity and autonomy, as they are discouraged from expressing their individuality and exploring their interests and higher levels of aggression and delinquency, as they rebel against the rigid and punitive control of their parents (Wang et al., 2024).

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study critically examined the effects of gender-neutral parenting on children's mental health, particularly on identity formation, anxiety, and depression. The systematic literature review revealed that despite gender-neutral parenting attempts to deconstruct traditional gender stereotypes and foster inclusivity, it might be the cause of psychological issues among children, like gender identity confusion and potential mental health problems. The evidence is that the impact of this type of parenting is not uniformly positive nor uniformly negative, but is subject to context-dependent variables such as cultural environment, family, and social support. While certain findings reveal increased self-esteem and reduced gender-specific stress in nurturing environments, other findings caution against dangers such as ambiguity of identity and social isolation. Given the inconclusiveness of available research, the study underscores the need for more rigorous, longitudinal studies to further clarify long-term mental health effects in children reared in gender-neutral settings. Parenting styles must ultimately be flexible, child-centred, and ethnocentric to maximize psychological and emotional development.

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