

# A Research on Sex Education Environment in Preschool Children Families

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## Abstract

The gender equality education environment in the preschool children's family reflects the parents' concept, attitude and behavior towards the children's gender equality education. This study adopted a combination of convenience sampling and stratified sampling to select research objects from 18 kindergartens in Suzhou city. Based on gender role attitudes scale (GARS), gender role parenting attitude questionnaire and father parenting engagement questionnaire were designed to investigate and analyze the gender equality educational environment in preschool children's families. Statistical analysis methods were employed to analyze the collected data based on SPSS software, such as hierarchical regression and one-way analysis of variance. The result indicated that the gender equality consciousness and gender rearing attitude of preschool children's parents were above the middle level. The gender equality consciousness of parents was discrepant in terms of their gender, age and family socioeconomic status. The gender attitude of parents was influenced by the gender of parents, the socioeconomic status of families, the awareness of gender equality of parents, the involvement of fathers and the gender of children. The suggestions are given as follows: paying more attention to the shortcomings of parents' awareness of gender equality and deepening the promotion of social gender equality. Exploring feasible improvement paths for families with different backgrounds. Giving action support and enhancing father's participation in children's upbringing.

## Keywords

Preschool Children, Gender Equality Consciousness, Gender Parenting Attitude, Paternal Parenting Input

## 1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations listed "To achieve gender equality and to empower

all women and girls” as one of the sustainable development goals in *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. As is known to all, gender education for preschool children is not only a category of education research, but also a concern in the current social field. The existing studies have shown that gender differentiation has appeared in early childhood (Chaplin and Aldao, 2013; Maguire et al., 2016). The formation of children’s gender role and gender consciousness is a socialization process (Dai, 2016). The development of children’s gender role is mainly influenced by various factors, such as physiological basis (Pasterski et al., 2015), family education (Halpern and Perry-Jenkins, 2016), kindergarten education (Lynch, 2015) and mass media (Ey, 2016). In particular, the early family education plays a vital role in the development of children’s gender role (Sun et al., 2019).

Researchers’ understanding and use of the concept of gender equality awareness tends to be more and more broad and diversified. Some researchers believe that the consciousness of gender equality refers to people’s perception and attitude towards the equality of rights and obligations between the gender in various fields (Tang et al., 2011). The other researchers have proposed that the concept of gender role is the general view about gender role and the social function of gender role, which can be divided into equality and inequality (He and Wu, 2014). The requirements of gender equality are different in different social historical periods. Gender equality is more often equated with ignoring the differences between men and women in the last century. Now, scholars generally realize that gender equality does not mean that men and women should be exactly the same, but to promote harmony and mutual assistance between men and women (Zhou, 2006). The improvement of gender equality awareness is of great significance for promoting social equity.

Gender role rearing attitude refers to the gender role attitude held by parents in rearing and interacting with children (Wang et al., 2013). Parents would like to consciously or unconsciously convey their own ideas to children in the interaction with children. Meanwhile, children also construct their understanding of gender in the interaction with parents. The more traditional the gender upbringing of the parents, the more the child’s gender role behavior will be reinforced, and the child is more likely to have a more traditional gender role (Halpern and Perry-Jenkins, 2016).

As the first and most important social organization of children’s life, family should also be the most important learning place for gender equality education. The promotion of gender awareness of preschool children’s parents is an important basis to protect the legitimate rights and interests of preschool children and their healthy growth. This paper investigated the gender equality awareness and gender education attitude of preschool children’s parents to explore and understand the current status, characteristics and influencing factors of the gender equality awareness and gender education attitude of preschool children’s parents in China, on this basis, the and then put forward corresponding suggestions was proposed for improvement.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Subjects

This study used combined convenience sampling and stratified sampling to implement the investigation in 18 kindergartens. Electronic documents were sent to parents via online questionnaire. A total of 3928 questionnaires were collected, of which 3712 were valid, with an effective recovery rate of 94.5%. The demographic characteristics of attendees are presented in **Table 1**.

### 2.2. Research Tools

#### 2.2.1. Gender Role Equality Awareness Scale

Gender equality awareness refers to people's perception and attitude towards the equality of rights and obligations of both sexes in various fields (Tang et al., 2011). This study measured parents' gender equality according to the Gender Role Attitudes Scale (GARS) (García-Cueto et al., 2015). The scale can reflect the equal or discriminatory gender role attitudes held by people under the background of family, social interaction, and employment. It contains 20 questions, and the five-point Likert scale ranges from "total agree" to "total disagree". The higher the final score, the stronger the awareness of gender equality. The Cronbach's coefficient of collected questionnaire data is 0.76, indicating good internal consistency. The correlation between the three and total dimensions by Pearson correlation shows a significant positive correlation between the three dimensions of family, social interaction and employment and the total scale. The correlation coefficients are 0.65, 0.70 and 0.82, respectively, indicating that the scale has good structural validity.

#### 2.2.2. Gender Parenting Attitude Scale

This study used the gender role parenting attitude questionnaire revised by He Fangfang. The questionnaire includes four dimensions: 1) the characteristic expectation of children; 2) parenting attitude and standards, refers to the attitude

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of attendees.

Variables	Type	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	804	21.6
	Female	2908	78.0
Age	21 - 30	746	20.0
	31 - 40	2804	75.2
	41 - 50	168	4.5
	51 -	10	0.3
	College and below	2192	58.7
Education	University	1450	38.9
	Master and above	86	2.3

and standards established when raising children; 3) the type of toy activities, refers to the attitude towards children playing with different toys and participating in different activities; 4) talent course and subject ability, refers to the attitude towards talent course and subject ability suitable for children. There were 32 questions in the questionnaire, using the five-point Likert scale. Each item is described in reverse. The “very disagree”, “more disagree”, “neutral”, “more agree” and “very agree” are scored 5 to 1 point, respectively. The higher the score, the more equal the gender education is. Reliability analysis of the questionnaire showed that the Cronbach’s coefficients of each dimension and total scale are 0.83, 0.67, 0.76, 0.91, and 0.94, indicating that the questionnaire had high reliability of the questionnaire. The correlation of the four dimensions and the total scale was analyzed to test the structural validity of the questionnaire. The results show a significant positive correlation between each dimension and the total scale, with the correlation coefficients of 0.85, 0.83, 0.82, and 0.88 respectively, indicating that the scale had good structural validity.

### 2.2.3. Paternal Parenting Input Scale

In family education, father and mother play different and indispensable roles in the growth and development of children. This study used the father parenting input questionnaire compiled by Wu et al. (2015) to investigate the parenting input of fathers. The questionnaire includes 56 items, including three major dimensions: interactivity, accessibility and responsibility. The questionnaire structure is well fitted ( $\chi^2/df = 4.72$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $NNFI = 0.97$ ,  $CFI = 0.97$ ). It shows that the questionnaire has good structural validity, interactivity, accessibility, responsibility. The Krenbach coefficient of the whole questionnaire are 0.90, 0.82, 0.92, 0 and 0.96, respectively, with good reliability.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

The questionnaire data was analyzed using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics, frequency, percentages, and the mean and standard deviations of numerical variables were calculated. Numerical variables were studied at the 0.05 dominance level based on independent sample t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Parental Gender Equality Awareness

Descriptive statistics indicate that the mean score of the total scale of gender equality for parents of preschool children was 3.70. According to the classification criteria of the total symptom index in the symptom Self-evaluation Scale SCL90, the level 5 scale is divided into: 1 to 1.5 is “very bad”, 1.5 to 2.5 is “poor”, 2.5 to 3.5 is “medium”, 3.5 to 4.5 is “good”, and 4.5 to 5 is “very good”, as shown in Table 2. The overall awareness of gender equality of children’s parents is above the middle level, with only 2.8% of children’s parents reaching a good level.

**Table 2.** Parent awareness of gender equality of preschool children.

	Level 1 Very bad 1 - 1.5	Level 2 Range 1.5 - 2.5	Level 3 secondary 2.5 - 3.5	Level 4 preferably 3.5 - 4.5	Level 5 Fine 4.5 - 5
Family field	0	0.2	7.4	64.1	28.3
Social relations	0	0.2	16.5	75.4	7.9
Area of employment	0.5	13.7	60.1	22.9	2.8
Gender equality awareness	0	0.1	29.7	67.4	2.8

Note: Data in the table is the percentage at each level.

### 3.2. Parental Gender Parenting Attitudes in Preschool Children

The descriptive statistics of the gender attitude of preschool parents indicate that the score of gender attitude was 3.35 and the standard deviation was 0.59. The gender attitude of preschool parents was above the middle level, and only 4.3% of preschool parents reached a good level.

The ANOVA analysis of the differences between the different dimensions of gender parenting attitudes,  $F(3, 3725) = 1530.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparison signifies that gender-equal parenting attitudes ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) were significantly lower than trait expectations ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), toy activity and type ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ), and gender parenting attitudes in talent and subject ability ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). Parents' expectations of gender parenting equality of their children were also significantly lower than those in toy activities and types, talent and academic skills. In brief, there are significant differences in the scores of the four dimensions of gender parenting attitude. In gender education practice, the highest gender equality is the "toy activity type" dimension, and the lowest is the "parenting attitude and standard" dimension.

### 3.3. Influencing Factors of Parental Attitudes towards Gender Rearing of Preschool Children

Hierarchical regression was used to analyze the factors affecting gender equality education in family, including parental identity (father/mother), age, education level, income level, child gender (boy/girl), gender equality awareness, and father participation as the dependent variable. The first layer is the background factors that may influence the parents "gender educational practices, including father/mother, age, education level, income level, and gender (boys/girls)". The second layer includes the gender equality awareness of the parents and fathers' participation are added. The statistical analysis results are shown in **Table 3**.

In **Table 3**, model 1 shows that family background factors can explain 6% of the variation in the dependent variable of their gender education practice. Furthermore, fathers have significant negative correlation with gender parenting attitudes compared to mothers. Age also has a significant negative correlation with the gender education practice of young childhood parents. The older the age, the

**Table 3.** Multi-level regression analysis of the influencing factors.

	model 1		model 2	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Parents (Father)	-0.14	-8.98***	-0.06	-4.11***
Age	-0.05	-3.08**	-0.01	-0.87
Educational status	0.13	7.90***	0.08	5.69***
Level of income	0.06	3.66***	0.04	2.64**
Gender (boy)	-0.11	-6.90***	-0.11	-8.40***
Gender equality awareness			0.55	40.77***
Father to participate in			0.03	2.31*
R <sup>2</sup>	0.06		0.36	
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	0.06		0.30	
F	48.95***		297.66***	

The \* means the probability is less than or equal to 0.05, the \*\* means the probability is less than or equal to 0.01, and the \*\*\* means the probability is less than or equal to 0.001.

more rigid the gender parenting attitude is. Both the education level and the income level have a significant positive prediction effect on the gender parenting attitude of young children's parents. The higher the education level and the higher the income level, the more equal the gender parenting attitude is. Boys can significantly negatively predict parenting attitudes, and girls' parental attitudes towards gender rearing are more equal than boys.

When gender equality awareness of infant parents and father participation were included in the model, the explanatory variation in model 2 increased to 36% and R<sup>2</sup> change was 30%, with statistical test  $F = 297.66$  and  $p < 0.001$ . The prediction effect of age on gender parenting attitude is no longer significant, and the sense of gender equality can significantly and positively affect the gender education attitude of young parents. The higher the awareness of gender equality is, the more equal the gender education attitude is. Paternal participation can also significantly positively affect the gender equal parenting attitude of young parents. The higher the degree of father participation, the more equal the gender parenting attitude. The six predictor variables listed in this survey had significant explanatory power for gender parenting attitudes in preschool children, explaining a total of 36% of the variation in gender parenting attitudes in young children.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Parents' Awareness of Gender Equality and Attitudes towards Gender Education Are above the Average Level

The parents' awareness of gender equality has an important influence in pre-

school children (Doucet, 2015). In this study, the gender equality awareness of preschool children's parents is at an upper middle level, which reflects the effectiveness of China's national policy on gender equality. China's basic state policy on gender equality has effectively raised people's awareness of gender equality. But in the field of employment, for example, "computer algorithms" that link men to high-paying positions not only filter out female applicants, but also solidify gender roles and exacerbate gender inequality in employment. Comparatively speaking, parents have low awareness of gender equality in the field of employment.

The differentiation of gender roles has appeared in early childhood, and parents' attitudes towards gender roles have a crucial impact on the development of children's gender roles (Wang and Yang, 2020). The average score of gender parenting attitude is only slightly higher than the theoretical mean of 3, indicating that the gender parenting attitude is more traditional and has a certain tendency of stereotyping. Parents scored highest in the dimension of toy activity type and lower in the dimension of parenting attitudes and standards and trait expectations for their children. This may be explained by the fact that parents are influenced by the concept of gender equality in the social environment when raising their children, and tend to have the same external requirements as men and women. They have higher and more strict requirements for boys, while they are more tolerant and lower standards for girls. Parents often expect their sons to be independent, self-reliant, highly educated, ambitious, hard-working, career-minded, intelligent and strong-willed and their daughters to be kind, selfless, charming, loving and well-mannered (Block, 1983). In addition, parents' expectations of their children's gender characteristics also appear more rigid. This suggests that parents should be wary of the hidden gender inequality in the upbringing of their children.

#### **4.2. The Gender Equality Awareness of Parents Is Different in Their Gender, Age and Family Socioeconomic Status**

The gender equality awareness of parents is influenced by a number of factors, and there are differences between fathers and mothers. It is discovered that mothers' gender equality awareness was significantly higher than their fathers (Wang and Yang, 2020). This can be explained by the fact that fathers are often the beneficiaries of the gender inequality relationship, under which men have more opportunities and right of speech, whereas mothers are generally in a subordinate position. Gender equality gives women more rights, so women are more sensitive to changes in gender inequality. Therefore, mothers are more motivated to establish gender equality than fathers, and higher awareness of gender equality.

Parents also differ in their awareness of gender equality, characterized by the younger the age, the higher their awareness of gender equality. With the improvement of social civilization, young people are already in a more equal social gender environment, and their gender cognition is more modern. In addition, as

young people receive more and more education and have their own independent ideas, they are also more difficult to be influenced by traditional gender concepts. This may explain why the lower the age, the higher the sense of gender equality.

Parental awareness of gender equality also varied significantly in education level and family economic level. Educational attainment and income level of the parents reflect family socioeconomic status (SES). The higher the family SES, the higher the parental awareness of gender equality. This mainly comes from the role of education, education not only can make individuals have more opportunities to accept the value of gender equality, learn gender equality knowledge and methods, and improve individual learning ability, dialectical thinking ability and reflection ability. These help people correctly view the gender differences, promote individual more enlightened understanding of gender role, improve individual requirements for gender equality and perception of gender inequality in reality. They will be more open and inclusive, understand and absorb more promote gender equality, eliminate gender prejudice. Higher education also offers more possibilities to obtain higher income positions. Therefore, parents with high family SES are more convinced that inequality stems from individual talent and effort rather than innate gender, and thus have a lower gender bias (Xu et al., 2010).

#### **4.3. The Gender Attitude of Parents Is Influenced by Gender, Father Involvement and Other Factors**

There are many uncertainties which may ultimately impact the gender attitude of parents. Identifying key factors is conducive to improve gender attitude of parents. It was found that family socioeconomic status, parental gender equality awareness, and paternal involvement positively affects parental attitudes towards gender rearing. Fathers' awareness of gender equality is significantly lower than that of mothers. Mothers will also have a flexible and equal attitude in bringing up their children. The higher family socioeconomic status, the higher parents' awareness of gender equality. Father's participation can positively affect parents' gender equality and parenting attitude, which is related to their own sense of gender equality. Father can break the constraints of traditional gender division of labor and put themselves into children's upbringing, which indicates that they have a sense of gender equality in the family. Related studies have shown that there is an interaction between the gender awareness of parents, that is, the gender awareness of one parent will affect the other (Kulik, 2004). Therefore, it can be speculated that in families with high father participation, both father and mother have higher awareness of gender equality, which can positively predict their attitudes toward gender equality in parenting.

This study also found that the gender of children affects parents' attitudes towards gender rearing, and the gender rearing of boys is more rigid. People are more likely to accept more masculine girls than they are to accept more feminine



boys (Baker et al., 2016). Therefore, parents may adopt traditional gender parenting attitudes in order to better integrate boys into society.

## **5. Suggestions**

### **5.1. Focus on the Shortcomings of Gender Equality Awareness and Deepen Gender Equality**

Parents' awareness of gender inequality in the field of employment not only affects their own views on men and women's occupation, but also subtly affects children's judgment of their own ability and the formation of early interest. When the awareness of gender equality is well developed, we should pay special attention to the popularization of the awareness of gender equality in the field of employment. From early childhood, we should cultivate girls' interest and ability to learn STEM, change the social prejudice such as "women are not suitable for science and technology", improve women's work competitiveness, and open the door of opportunities for women in high-paid employment fields.

### **5.2. Actively Explore Feasible Improvement Paths for Families with Different Backgrounds**

The study found that family gender-equal parenting attitudes were influenced by family background. To effectively improve family gender education in young children, we should actively explore feasible improvement paths for families with different backgrounds. For example, for families with low socioeconomic status, teachers can focus on observing the child's performance in kindergarten and write an observation record. Then, teachers can make full use of spare time to share it with parents. For the families with higher socioeconomic status, on the one hand, we should pay attention to publicize the importance of gender development in early childhood for arousing parents' attention to gender education and stimulating their willingness to develop gender equality education. On the other hand, we can provide many more learning resources, encourage them to turn their ideas into gender equality education practice.

### **5.3. Face up to the Value of Fathers "Upbringing, Give Action Support, and Enhance Fathers" Participation in Children's Upbringing**

As an important gender role model in children's life, fathers play an irreplaceable role in the construction of gender equality environment in the family and the healthy development of children's gender role. The participation of fathers in parenting is conducive to creating a gender equal sexual family education environment. Therefore, in order to enhance the participation of fathers, we should pay attention to the nurturing value of fathers in thought and give full support to fathers in action.

Kindergarten should actively publicize the role of parents in children's growth. First of all, parent-child activities suitable for fathers should be carried

out to stimulate fathers' interest in participation. Secondly, we should pay attention to the important role of mothers in the process of father's participation. In the process of the father's upbringing, mothers often have "gatekeeping" behavior, which will negate or devalue father's parenting behavior, and mother's gatekeeping behavior will undoubtedly reduce father's participation. Therefore, while encouraging the fathers to participate in the education, the mother should recognize the significance of the father participating in the education and give full trust and support in action. The positive feedback obtained is conducive to the father's affirmation of self-worth in the process of child rearing, and externalized into positive parenting behavior, so as to improve the level of participation in parenting.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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