

From the time they are born, children begin to learn about sexual roles. Sexual roles include standards not only for behaviour, but also for appearance, personality traits, interests, and careers. Children learn about the way males and

females are supposed to act from their families, their friends, and from the books they read and the television programs they watch.

What do these scenes tell you about children's understanding of sexual roles?



When three-year-olds play house, they have no trouble figuring out who should be the mother and who should be the father. But these two children, Jenny and Martin, ran into a problem because they have each learned something different about sexual roles. In Jenny's family, her mother always cooks dinner. In Martin's family, sometimes his

father cooks, and sometimes his mother cooks. No one ever told Jenny that only women could cook dinner, but this is what she has picked up from living in her family. Since young children's ideas about sexual roles tend to be quite rigid, if they have never seen a man cooking, they tend to believe that it's impossible.

Girls

Girls are nicer than boys.

Boys fight all the time and girls don't.

It's more fun to play with girls because boys are rough and mean.

Girls are smarter than boys.

Boys

Boys are more fun than girls.

Girls are silly, and they always tell on you.

Boys are stronger than girls.

Boys get into trouble more than girls.

A grade three teacher asked her students this question: What do you think are the differences between boys and girls?

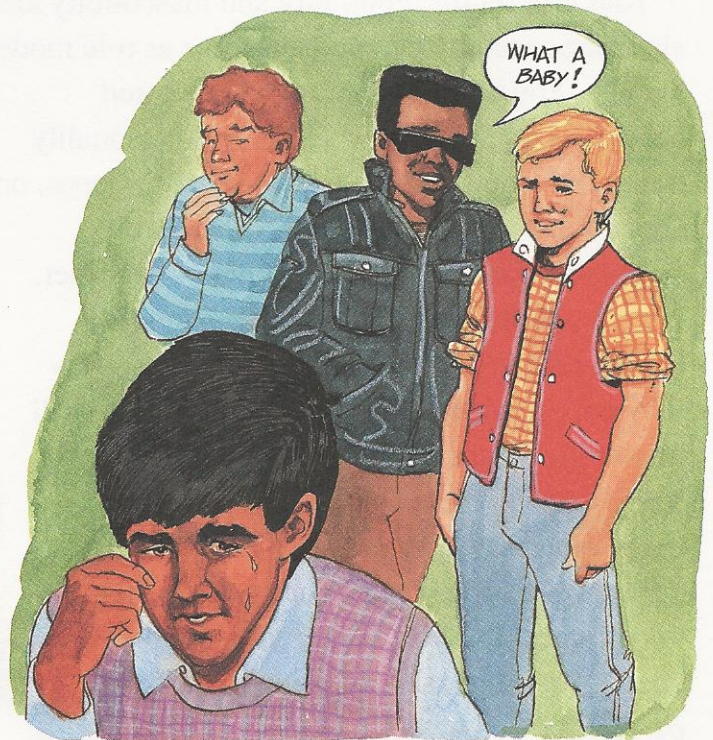
These answers tell you something very important about developing girls and boys. They usually prefer their own sex, and they often have less than positive views about the opposite sex. Some psychologists suspect that this may be a necessary stage as children develop a sense of sexual identity. They aren't mature enough to realize that when they value their own sex, they don't have to devalue the opposite sex. The fact that in any grade three classroom there are boys who don't enjoy fighting, girls who never tattle, boys who aren't particularly strong, and girls who enjoy rough play doesn't seem to be relevant. Instead of noticing all the differences among the boys and girls they know, they tend to think in stereotypes — a positive stereotype for their own sex, and a somewhat negative one for the opposite sex. It is not until children are a few years older that their ideas about the differences between males and females become more flexible.

The changes of puberty focus young people's attention on sexual identity. Instead of taking it for granted as children do, they become more aware of it, and they have new questions about sexual roles. What does it mean to be female and behave in a feminine way, to be male and behave in a masculine way? Do I measure up as a female or as a male?

Femininity and masculinity are the behaviours, interests, and qualities that are associated with being female and male. You did not develop your ideas about masculinity and femininity by yourself. Your family, your teachers, your classmates, your friends, your faith community, and the media have had an important influence on your ideas — about how you should look and behave, what are appropriate interests for your sex, what personality traits are valued in your sex, and what kind of aspirations you should have for your future.

Indirectly or directly, they have provided you with a set of criteria for masculinity and femininity. *Criteria* are standards for judging or criticising something. Your task during adolescence is to become aware of these criteria, and to examine them. You may decide to keep some and to reject others, and as you continue to grow, you will also discover new ones. By the time you are an adult, you will want to be sure that your criteria for masculinity and femininity are truly your own, and are in keeping with Christian values.

What do you think of these criteria for masculinity and femininity?



Males are not supposed to cry.



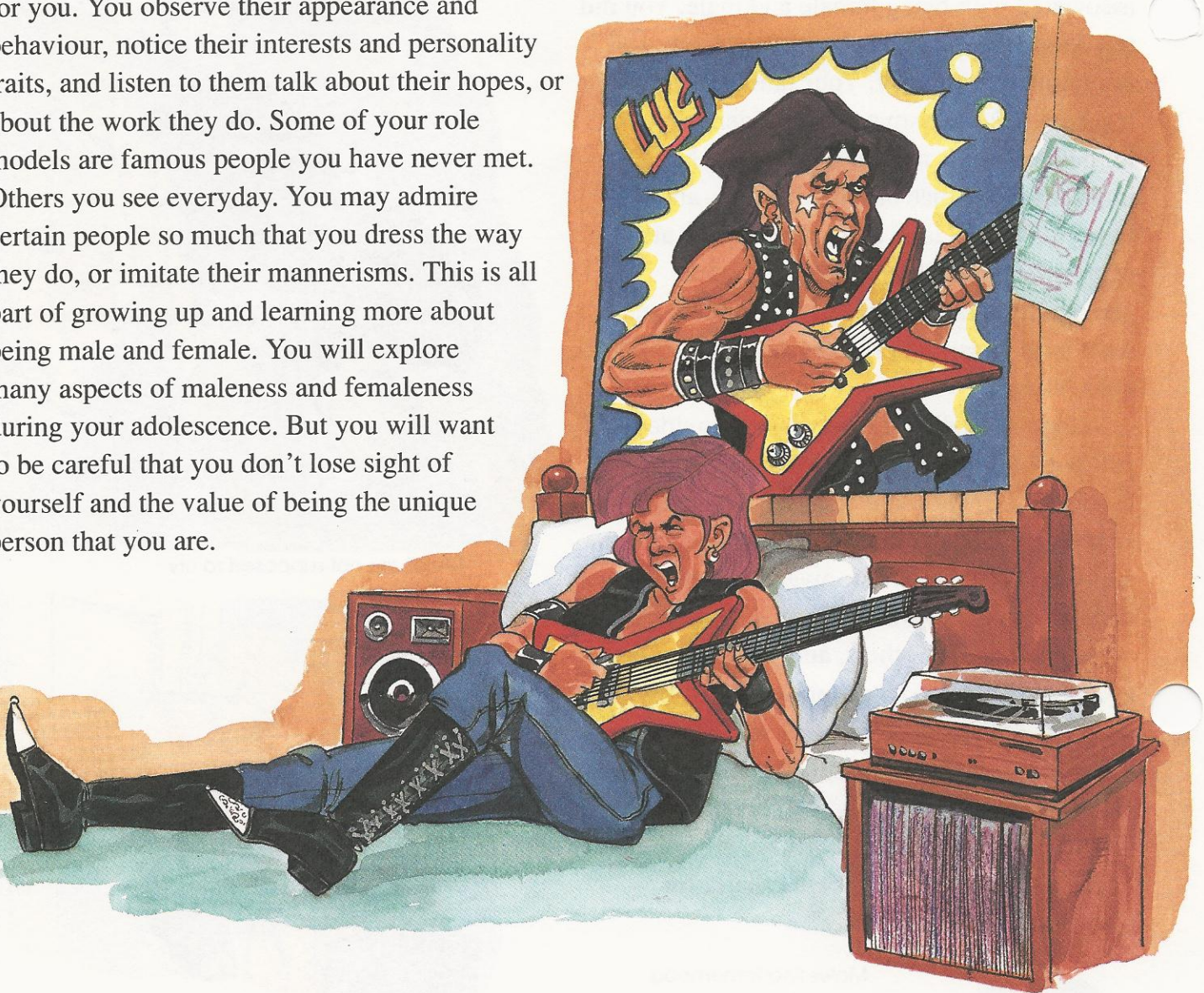
It is important for females to have careers.

Males find fatherhood very enjoyable.



Females with well-developed bodies are sexy.

Your criteria for femininity and masculinity are also influenced by people who serve as role models for you. You observe their appearance and behaviour, notice their interests and personality traits, and listen to them talk about their hopes, or about the work they do. Some of your role models are famous people you have never met. Others you see everyday. You may admire certain people so much that you dress the way they do, or imitate their mannerisms. This is all part of growing up and learning more about being male and female. You will explore many aspects of maleness and femaleness during your adolescence. But you will want to be careful that you don't lose sight of yourself and the value of being the unique person that you are.



Understanding Sexual Roles

As you learn more about your sexual identity and explore different views about sexual roles, it is important to be aware of sexual stereotypes. A stereotype is a belief about a particular group of people that is overly simple, often incorrect, and is applied to every member of the group. Stereotypes about any group of individuals — men, women, the elderly, teen-agers, or people of different races — ignore the uniqueness of people. People are far too complex and mysterious to be summed up by a stereotype.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Sexual Roles and Television

Name of show: _____

Date show was watched: _____

Choose two main characters in the show (one female, one male) and describe each of them. Ask your family members to join you in this activity.

What interests, jobs, and activities did they have?

How did they express their feelings? _____

How did they act toward each other? _____

Do you agree with the way the show portrayed the roles of males and females?

Why? Why not? _____

