
Agents of Socialization

Specific sites or groups carry out socialization. We call these **agents of socialization**. Similar to the concept of a business agent or insurance agent, they represent and act on the behalf of the larger society and. Socialization can occur outside of these agents but society relies on these agents doing most of the socialization. There's nothing "official" about these agents, at least not in our society. Totalitarian societies attempt to establish official agents of socialization but in a democratic society no government agency licenses or certifies them.

Our society relies on four major agents of socialization (listed in order children tend to experience them):

- **Family**
- **Media**
- **Peers**
- **School**

Family

The family is the earliest and without question the most influential agent of socialization. It grabs the child at birth, when the child is most helpless and dependent, and doesn't let go for a whole lifetime. Socialization via the family goes from cradle to grave.

What makes socialization in the family so important and influential?

- Foundation for all civilized behavior:
 - Language abilities (learning to talk)
 - Body control (e.g., toilet training)
 - Emotional control (e.g., "don't hit your sister")
 - Rules of public conduct (e.g., "don't throw food")
 - Moral values (e.g., "lying is a sin")
- Access to the emotional bond between parent and child, an extremely strong and effective socializing mechanism
- Lifetime impacts affecting the person's self-esteem, emotional health, identity, and personality
- Origin point of gender roles (masculine and feminine behavior; fundamental division of the social world into men and women)
- Origin point of ethnocentrism and racism (racial and ethnic prejudice)
- Source of original social capital that determines life chances
 - Social capital = resources useful for gaining advantages in life; includes such things as family and friendship networks, community schools, family's social class background, technology available in home or school, etc.
 - Life chances = probability of achieving the "good things" in life, such as, health, wealth, happiness, security, power, etc.

The amazing power of the family as an agent of socialization comes from a combination of two factors:

1. The family has almost exclusive control of the person during the first years of life and preeminent control during the childhood and adolescent years

- Preeminent control = Cultural norms and the law recognize the parent's right to determine what is best for their children as trumping the rights of almost any institution
2. Parent-child emotional bond motivates the child to be socialized and the parents to do the difficult, messy job of socialization

Being socialized is difficult and painful. What's better than the uninhibited, self-centered, and dependent life of the child? Think about toilet training (although not for too long). Urinating and bowel movements whenever and wherever is certainly easier than learning to hold it until reaching a bathroom. Think about anger and aggression. Isn't it better to lash out and hit someone immediately if make you angry rather than learning to hold your anger, talk, be nice, compromise, etc.?

Why would children put up with being socialized? As if they had a choice! The child's dependent situation and emotional attachment to parents motivates the child to be socialized.

- Without adults, human children are very vulnerable, largely helpless. They couldn't survive without adults so the loss of parental support is very scary, perhaps life threatening. Such anxiety is very motivating.
- Built into the human animal is a basic love bond between parent and child. Children want to please their parents. They want their parents love, support, and affection. Anything that seems to threaten that emotional bond is very scary. Such anxiety is very motivating.

Socialization uses that dependency and emotional bond to motivate children to put up with the difficult demands of socialization and open themselves up to the lessons being taught by their parents.

For parents socialization is no picnic. You couldn't pay people enough to do the job. It's messy, difficult, demanding, and often frustrating. It's a 24 hour / 7 days a week / 365 weeks a year job, with no vacations, lousy pay, hours, and work conditions, and no benefits. Why would anybody do it? Because they love their children. Socialization uses that love bond to motivate adults to take on and persist in the difficult job of socializing children.

The power of the family is strongest during infancy and toddler years. After that the media, then peers, and finally school challenges its exclusive access to the child. By later childhood the family's power as a socialization agent has weakened considerably. In the adolescent years that power is further weakened by peer group influences and the predominance of the media in teenage subculture. Overall there has been an historical trend of the family's power as an agent of socialization being steadily eroded by the media, peer subculture, and schooling.

The family returns as a predominant agent of socialization during the adult years with the roles of marital partner and parent.

Mass Media

Includes:

- Television
- Radio
- Movies
- Music
- Books, magazines, etc.
- Internet

Somewhere around the age of two or three, children in our society first encounter the media as an agent of socialization in the form of TV. Socialization comes through from children's shows, cartoons, and, most especially, commercials.

Socialization comes through the characters, images, words, and narrative story lines. Some media specifically acts to be an agent of socialization (e.g., children's programs such as Sesame Street) but most only strive to be entertainment.

Today the media seriously challenges the family. Children spend as much or more time in front of the TV as interacting with parents. Messages and values carried by the media are powerful and seductive. Many of those messages and values challenge or directly contradict what parent's teach their children.

Media influence continues and strengthens in adolescence based on a merger of teen subculture, pop culture (music & movies), and corporate marketing. Sports, increasingly a branch of marketing, become especially influential for teenage boys. The internet (web pages, e-mail, chat rooms) have emerged as another media source important to teens, again especially boys

The power of the media declines in adult years but still remains strong. Pop culture continues strong but loses its subculture support. Sports and the internet continue as agents of socialization, especially for males. News (both TV and print) emerge as new agent of socialization in the adult years.

Peer Groups

Peers are people of roughly the same age (same stage of development and maturity), similar social identity, and close social proximity. They're friends, buddies, pals, troops, etc. Typically, children encounter peer group influence around age three or so. Usually these are neighbors, family members, or day care mates. With peers, the child begins to broaden his or her circle of influence to people outside of the immediate family.

Often peer interaction in the earliest years is closely supervised by parents so it tends to parallel and reinforce what is learned in the family. What is added to socialization, even in these closely supervised situations, are social skills in group situation with social equals. Before this time children basically dealt with people in a superior position.

As childhood progresses, peer group interactions become more autonomous (less observed and supervised by adults). The lessons learned also progress from basic rules of group interaction to more complex strategies of negotiation, dominance, leadership, cooperation, compromise, etc. These lessons are learned first in play and later through games. Peers also establish the platform for children to begin challenging the dominant power of parents and family.

In adolescence, peer group relationships become extremely important, rising up to directly challenge the family. In direct alliance with the media, teenage peers form their own subculture. They learn how to navigate the complexities and nuances of group interaction largely without adult guidance or supervision. Peer group socialization also becomes linked to puberty and the all important role of sexuality and sexual relations in life. Peer groups are where teens largely learn about sex and being sexual and practice the skills of sexuality. Paralleling this, the gender role socialization begun in the family is extended, deepened, and reinforced.

In the adult years the demands of work and family overwhelm most peer group relations and the influence of peers seriously declines as an agent of socialization, only to return during the elderly years.

School

Traditionally around seven years old the child enters the school system in the first grade. Today the process often starts earlier in Kindergarten or day care.

Socialization takes three forms in school:

Official curriculum

What the school system and its teachers announce as their content and goal. It includes the knowledge & skills learned in English, math, history, etc. The school is the official place where our society transmits its accumulated knowledge and skills from one generation to next. It's also the place where we officially pass on our cultural values, tradition, and heritage, at least the "official" heritage.

This curriculum often reinforces but what was learned in the family but it can also challenge family socialization (e.g., teaching values of tolerance to a child from a racist family)

Social curriculum

This is learning social behavior appropriate for peer groups that are not friendship groups, which then become the model for secondary group interactions. Many of the skills learned in peer groups are transferable but now the child learns to communicate, negotiate, dominate, etc. with peers outside of their immediate social circle, often from diverse social backgrounds. In many ways this social curriculum reinforces and deepens gender role socialization started in the family and continued in the peer group.

By middle school and high school, teens have largely learned the social curriculum. It is replaced more and more by peer social interaction in the hallways, in the parking lot, under the bleachers, etc. and broadens away from general group interaction to interaction in sexualized situations. In addition, many adolescence are introduced to the social curriculum through organized sports.

Hidden curriculum

This is learning the rules of behavior need to function in formally organized groups. It includes such behavior maxims as:

- Don't talk when the teacher is talking
- Get your assignments in on time
- Not all teachers have the same rules for their class
- When a teacher tells another student to stop talking, it is not a good idea to start talking to your neighbor since the teacher has already expressed disapproval of that action

It includes positive reinforcement for such values as:

- Precision
- Self-reliance
- Competitiveness
- Obedience

As preparation for the adult world of formal organization and workplace authority, the hidden curriculum stresses such things as formalization and standardization, following instructions, obedience to authority figures that are not Mom and Dad, learning to control behavior and fit into the group, pleasing (even manipulating) authority figures, and working in teams.

Other Agents of Socialization

Religion

Work Place

The State

Military