The achievement of a gendered identity and the invoking of gender as a means of making sense of the world are very important in the everyday lives of young children (Davies, 1989, 1993). Children engage in daily interactive practices that signify, reflect, and express gender. These gendering practices may be viewed as "disciplinary practices" that variously produce and privilege subordinate feminine and masculine bodies (Foucault, 1979). Children actively "do" gender (West & Zimmerman, 1991) by engaging in practices that create differences both between and among them. In the process, femininities (subordinate and emphasized) and masculinities (subordinate and hegemonic) are both reproduced and reinforced (Connell, 1987). This is not to imply that such practices simply replicate dominant, binary forms of gender relations. Indeed, our data demonstrate that children's practices often challenge and contradict a dichotomous understanding of gendered identities and relations.

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Scholars acknowledge the particular importance of sport as a means of demonstrating physical prowess important to the display and achievement of hegemonic masculinity (Bryson, 1987; Connell, 1987; Messner, 1992b). Sport participation, allowing for the competitive display of physical skill and strength among older elementary school children and adolescents, long has been associated with masculinity and prestige (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992; Fine, 1987). Physical skill, strength, size, gesture, and posture provide us with gendered identities and communicate our gender to others. In this chapter, we focus on young children’s displays of physical prowess and how it produces masculinities in particular.

Physicalities, femininities, and masculinities are also interleaved with divisions of social class, race, and ethnicity. For example, Majors and Billson (1992) suggested that many African American men, especially those from lower social class backgrounds, create and adopt particular physical gestures and postures in response to institutionalized racism. These gestures and postures, part of what Majors and Billson call “cool pose,” connote toughness, control, and detachment. The focus of this chapter is at the micro, interactional level. However, class (as measured by income), race, and ethnicity are taken into account, not as variables by which to simply group, label, or compare the children but as important indicators of the institutional and cultural contexts in which masculinities are produced. Our attention is directed toward masculinities per se, as well as toward how the production of masculinities entails the subordination of girls’ physicality and their resistance to such subjugation.

Method

In 1993, the first author began a long-term participant observational study of a group of first-grade children in an inner-city school. The school, selected for its racially and ethnically diverse group of children and personnel supportive of the research, contained about 425 children, 70% of whom came from low-income families of African American (71%), Asian American (13%), Latin American (8%), and Anglo-American (8%) backgrounds.

While the children were in first grade, participant observation was conducted 3 to 4 days per week during a 4-month period. In the children’s second year, observations were conducted 1 to 2 days a week for 4 months. There were 26 girls and 23 boys in the two first-grade classes and 28 girls