

Life Cycles

childhood

Birth: The Assignment of Gender

The assignment of gender began as soon as the baby was born, and it would subsequently be reinforced through family, school, and religious education. At the birth ceremony, besides a name, the baby received a gender label thanks to the symbolic presence of implements associated with its sex: for a girl, there would be a **spindle** and **whorl**, a broom, and a small basket of cotton; for a boy, a buckler and four arrows, so that he would become a good warrior.⁵



The gender ceremony ended when the baby's umbilical cord was detached and buried. For girls it would be buried in the hearth of the home, while for boys it was buried in the battlefield, thereby defining their respective spheres of social activity (domestic and public).⁶

The midwife was in charge of baptizing the newborn; during the ceremony the baby was shown the emblems pertaining to its gender. Codex Mendoza.

- Boys would avoid contact with implements that were not of their gender, for fear of losing their virility and their prowess at war. They were told not to step on the hearth (the quintessential feminine space), because doing so would bring them misfortune in battle, and they would fall into enemy hands.⁷

Names

The parents then sought to name the baby and discover its fortune in life. To this end, they would ask the *tonalpouhqui*, who consulted the *tonalpohualli* (ritual calendar of 260

days, divided into twenty thirteen-day cycles, that governed all activities of society). This calendar revealed the qualities of each day.



The parents went to the *tonalpouhqui* to learn of the newborn's future. Florentine Codex.

The method was as follows: the *tonalpouhqui* asked the hour of birth and what circumstances accompanied it; then he consulted the *tonalamatl*, which specified the influence of the reigning deity for that thirteen-day cycle and other related events and predicted the child's virtues or tendencies. If the child was born under a good sign it would be given a name the following day, but if it was born on an ill-fated day, the parents would wait to assign a name under a more favorable sign, but only within the thirteen-day cycle of the child's birth. The sign of the day characterized what today would be called temperament or personality.⁸



When the birth took place during one of the last five days of the year, which were called *nemontemi* and were considered futile and adverse days in the calendar, the verdict was inevitably negative. In that case a boy would receive a name equivalent to *nemon* (“to be worthless”) and a girl *nencihuatl* (“woman who is useless”).⁹

It is important to note that there was also a class distinction in naming. *Pipiltin* (upper-class people) would be given a name commemorating an ancestor for his exploits, with reverential terms incorporated in the name, while *macehualtin* (lower-class people) would receive only the name corresponding to the calendrical sign under which they were born.¹⁰

Statue showing a mother with her child in her arms.
Collection of the Fundación Cultural
Armella Spitalier INAH 1578-219.

NAHUATL	TRANSLATION
Citlalin	Star
Teuccihuatl	Lordly Woman
Tecpane	Palace Resident
Anican	Not Here
Mazaxochi	Deer Flower
Ilamaton	Little Old Woman
Necahual	Abandoned One
Tonallaxochiatl	Floral Water of Summer
Xoxopanxoco	Fruit of Spring
Cihuanenequi	She Imagines Herself a Woman
Xiuhnentl	Little Doll of the Year of Fire
Mocel	Only One
Teyacapan/Tiacapan	Oldest One
Tlaco	Middle One
Teicu	Younger One
Xoco	Youngest One

Names given to girls in the Nahau regions of Cuernavaca and Culhuacan.¹¹

- Teyacapan, Tiacapan, Tlaco, Teicu, and Xoco were names of goddesses and were given to the great majority of girls to distinguish their birth order with respect to their siblings.¹²

Education

It was customary for girls to remain in their mother's care, while boys, after they were three years old, were under their father's tutelage. Their upbringing was severe. Boys learned to carry water and firewood, go to the market, and pick up grains of maize scattered on the ground; girls began spinning, weaving, and embroidering at age five. "They did not let the girls go idly about, and if one got up from her work before it was time, they tied her feet, so that she would sit down and be still."¹³

At age seven, boys learned to fish and girls learned to grind maize on a metate and to sweep the house.

At the *telpuchpan* girls were taught the sequence of the days, the names of the signs, and the attributions of their gods, as well as to count. They also learned to perfect the duties proper to their sex, such as cooking, sweeping, and cleaning, as well as music and singing.¹⁴



Above: Girls learned spinning from childhood as a women's activity. Codex Mendoza.

Below: Strict punishment was administered from early childhood to correct disobedience. Codex Mendoza.

Within the family or at school, young and adolescent girls received rigorous preparation to make them suitable for marriage and skilled in domestic labors.

At the same time, “they were taught to be very honorable in speech and bearing, both in public and in private.”¹⁵



Discipline in all respects was firm, and laziness was punished. Anyone who refused to carry out their socially imposed role would be pricked with maguey spines over their entire body or forced to breathe the smoke of roasted chilies. This training instilled consciousness of one's social role and guided women to fulfill their duties of biological reproduction and transmission of the established cultural norms.