8 Ways to Challenge Gender Stereotypes

Early years' educators need to ensure that all children get the opportunity to experience different types of play, toys and situations, to allow them to grow into different types of people with a range of skills for the future. Stereotyped ideas about what's suitable for boys or girls can limit children's opportunities to learn and develop.

Here are eight things you can do to help create an environment which encourages children to think of themselves as L'nu, rather than editing their choices through a gender filter.

1. Create a safe space

Pre-school or childcare centre should be a safe environment to learn and explore – you can help children by affirming unconventional choices, reassuring them that it's OK to be different and encouraging a culture of acceptance. For example, a parent may question boys dressing up with dresses – your role is to support the children in their choices.

2. Challenge stereotypes when you hear them

'Why can't a boy wear pink? My Dad does.' 'Why can't a girl like hockey? My wife plays for our local women's team.' Children are often very keen to 'police' one another and make sure their peers follow the gender 'rules' they've learned. You can set the example by questioning them, and offering counter-examples from your own experience and community.

3. Provide a range of role models

Similarly, give children real-life examples that counter stereotypes, both in your own activities, and in topic work and external visitors. Ask for female fire fighters, male nurses or female police officers when there's an outside visit. Join in with hockey if you're a woman, do a bit of beading as a man. Superheroes aren't just male fictional characters: they can be nurses or plumbers.

4. Make the most of books

Take a look at the stories and factual books in your setting. Are there examples of working women, caring fathers, active girls and creative boys? Are all the animals in the stories male? See our "Early literacy" section for books recommendations and activities suggestions.

Labelling a bookshelf 'Boys' Books' might seem like a good way to encourage reluctant boy readers, but this can be counterproductive, reminding boys of the stereotype that they are supposedly less interested in reading, and encouraging the idea that only certain interests are allowed.

5. Look at who uses which spaces and equipment

Do certain areas get dominated by certain groups, or by one gender or the other? Are there changes or movements you could make to encourage children to feel equally free to use the home corner, the reading corner, the bikes, the Lego...

Is it about color coding and signage? Maybe remove all pink, and all blue!

6. Pick other ways to divide up the children

Are girls' and boys' coat peg labels or lunch bag shelves colored pink or blue? Do boys and girls line up separately? Using gender to divide the children up can be quick and convenient, but it gives them the constant message that being a boy or a girl is the most important thing about them and reinforces stereotypes.

Getting the children to line up a different way –by age, birthday, alphabetically – can be a subtle but effective way of encouraging them to think about their identity in different ways.

7. Use inclusive language

Small changes, like saying 'children' instead of 'girls and boys' or 'parents, grandparents and carers' or 'families' rather than 'mums and dads' can help to affirm the things we have in common rather than our differences.

8. Think about rewards and sanctions

Are boys and girls rewarded differently, or given different sanctions for similar behaviour? Do rewards imply that you think boys and girls can't like or do the same things?