

An Action Guide for Early Learning and Childcare Educators

Children receive and absorb gender-stereotyped messages about what they can and cannot do as a girl or as a boy from a very early age.

For example, toy manufacturers often market more aggressive toys to boys and more passive toys to girls, construction activities to boys and creative ones to girls. In picture books, women and girls are often portrayed as performing more domestic tasks while men are largely under-represented as parents. These stereotypes are unhelpful for both boys and girls.



By the time children enter early learning settings they may already be developing gender based expectations of behaviours, academic preferences and perceived abilities. These stereotypical views can shape their attitudes to relationships, participation in the world of work and affect their wellbeing. A narrowing of experiences at this stage too often evolves into a narrowing of opportunities later in life. For example, by secondary school, in the Gespeg'ewa'gi, boys tend to lag behind girls in literacy and language skills and girls are still largely under-represented in areas such as computing, engineering and physics.

Although the problem is multifaceted, early learning and childcare educators have an important role to play in challenging these views before they become too ingrained. While children should not be coerced into any activity, adopting the attitude that children are able to choose whatever they want for themselves will not counteract the problem. Many children self-select out of certain activities based on their observations of what is appropriate.

It is crucial that children are given the opportunity and encouragement to access all areas of the curriculum from this early stage so they have equality of opportunity in the future. Early years educators are expert in focusing on the needs of an individual child and being child-led. This action guide provides some ideas for how to challenge gender stereotypes without losing the child-centred approach.

Tackling your own unconscious bias | Self-reflective actions

We all have unconscious biases, and it's important to be aware of these in our interactions with children. They affect the ways we interact differently with girls and boys, the assumptions we make and the advice and directions we give them.

Although admitting and dealing with your own biases can be challenging, it is essential to identify, reflect on, and discuss them openly with colleagues.

Having an unconscious gender bias does not automatically make a person sexist – everyone has biases to some degree as a result of years of exposure to gendered patterns. The good news is that once you become aware of your biases you can do something about them. By shifting thinking gradually over time, a person can adopt new habits and perspectives to help counteract any bias behaviour.

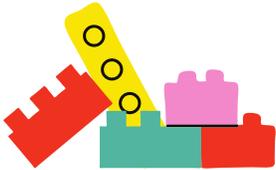
Reflective questions:

- What assumptions might you unconsciously make about which types of activities and curricular areas girls and boys prefer?
- Do you expect and/or accept different behaviour from boys and girls, for example, quieter behaviour from girls and more adventurous behaviour from boys?
- When children are participating in activities that are usually associated with their own gender, do you encourage them more?
 - For example, do you encourage boys to climb and explore, but urge girls doing the same types of activity to be careful? Do you console girls when they hurt themselves, but encourage boys to be brave? If so, how can you encourage more equal development of confidence and resilience?
- Are you aware of what you praise children for? For example, do you praise boys more than girls for their ideas or achievements or girls more than boys for the way they look and for playing 'nicely'?

In the childcare centre | Actions for engaging with children

There are a number of easy to implement ideas that can help counteract gender stereotypes. Here are a few ideas that proved efficient in that matter.

1. Encourage children to use all areas of the setting



It might be useful to start by observing the patterns of use of different areas of the setting. Are there activities dominated by one group of children and avoided by another?

The block play area of the centre can be dominated by boys. Try changing the dynamic by:

- Adding some elements for imaginative play such as toy figures, stuffed animals, or taping pictures of the children onto individual blocks. These might facilitate girls who often develop a narrative with their construction, and might encourage boys to do the same.
- Using a whiteboard, books and other sources to encourage children to plan for what they are building with the blocks.
- Holding discussions with children about their planning: "How high does it need to be?", "What could your building be used for and by whom?", and "Let's get the tape measure out" to develop confidence as well as language and STEM skills.

When organizing your room setting, make sure to set playing areas in order to foster mixed-gender playing. For example, putting figurative toys such as dolls beside the block play area.

Quieter activities such as book reading, craft and exploring the "home corner", may be more appealing to girls and regularly avoided by some boys. Consider whether there are things you could change or add to encourage all children to access these activities, such as:

- Making sure those areas have a range of themes, colours and objects;
- Positively commenting on boys exploring in the home area - they also need to role-play caring and domesticity.
- Thinking about how literacy can be introduced in any areas in the setting. For example, encourage mark making, the first step towards writing, by having post-it notes for children to draw on and label to strengthen other activities. You can also invite Elders and other community members to facilitate a storytelling session on various teachings: oral storytelling plays a big role in literacy.

2. Explore gender roles during talking circle time

Even at a young age children can respond well to discussions about what is and is not acceptable for girls and boys to do, wear or say. During talking circle time try challenging gender stereotypes by:



- Flipping standard roles in rhymes, stories and songs, and then ask children about people they know who perform the roles the song or story is referring to;
- Asking children to sort toys (without mentioning gender) and discussing the logic and reasoning with them afterwards. For instance, if they sorted the toys by gender, ask them: "Would all girls like the girl toys? Might any boys like them?" "What makes it a girl's toy?" "Why does being blue make it a boy's toy?"
- Ask children if they've ever been told they couldn't like or do something because of their gender, and how they felt at that moment.
- Can boys and girls take part into all traditional cultural activities? Why? How?



Source: [The Future Economy](#).

3. Discuss stereotypes in books



Our website proposes many early literacy tools that can help educators challenge gender stereotypes: [have a look at them!](#) You can also discuss stereotypes in the standard texts by asking the children a few questions about the story and characters:

- Is it ok for fathers and grandfathers to stay at home and look after the baby? Does anyone know a dad or a grandfather who looks after children full-time?
- What does it mean to be brave? Can girls be brave?
- Can women be fishermen and hunters? Can men be teachers and nurses?

4. Set up a child-led fair play group

You could enable a small group of older children to focus on unintentional gender messages in the setting by establishing a child working group.



Membership could rotate every term. Encourage the children to observe the environment and, if necessary, make suggestions for changes. Sharing their observations with parents and caretakers (or allowing the children to do so) can be particularly effective. Children could investigate by:

- Looking at clothes and fabrics in the dressing up area – is there a range of fabrics and accessories that could be incorporated into imaginative play to go beyond the stereotyped princesses and superheroes?
- Looking at the range and representation of figures in the imaginative play areas – is there an equal mix of both male and female characters?
- Looking at wall displays – is there a range of positive role models for girls and boys? Are both men and women portrayed in a range of roles?

Reflective questions:

- Are there any areas of the setting that tend to be dominated by one group more than another?
- Are you aware of any children who tend to limit themselves to a narrow selection of curricular activities?
- How might activities be structured or presented to encourage children who might not otherwise choose them to explore more widely?
- When selecting toys, resources and rhymes for use, do they challenge dominant gender stereotypes?

Whole childcare centre environment | Actions that your centre can take

1. Gently challenge expressions of stereotypes or the beginnings of sexist language with one another.
2. Encourage staff, during child observations, to note any behaviours that differ for boys and girls, or instances of children policing toys according to gender. Encourage staff to also be aware of their own unconscious bias and the possible impacts on children's choices and behaviours.
3. Ensure there is regular space for discussion around gender stereotyping at team meetings.

Reflective questions:

- Do staff feel comfortable challenging children's statements that generalize how girls/boys do or do not behave? Eg, "That's for girls", "we don't want boys here", and so on.
- Do staff assume non-traditional roles when they join in play?
- Do both staff and children feel able to challenge inappropriate choice of language (in an age-appropriate way)?
- Do staff feel able to challenge each other constructively? Is there a climate of open, safe and collaborative working to support this?

Communicating with parents and carers

When making changes within the learning environment it is important to engage families in the process to avoid any misunderstandings about the rationale for changes at the setting.

It's also important to avoid giving the impression that any of the changes being instigated are in any way a comment on parenting choices. You could involve parents and carers by:

- Explaining rationale through newsletters or social media, at family learning sessions or informally at the daily drop-offs and pick-ups. Breaking down gender stereotypes can foster their child's academic perseverance.
- Adding suggestions to story sacks to prompt and support parents to challenge gender stereotypes.
- Explicitly inviting male parents/carers to participate in activities to counteract the perception that only women care or nurture, particularly if the setting is predominantly staffed by women.

Reflective questions:

- Are all parents/carers aware of the environment of the setting in relation to counteracting stereotypes?
- Do children come to the setting dressed appropriately for messy play? Is the rationale for this expectation communicated to parents/carers?
- Do you feel able to raise awareness among parents/carers on issues of gender stereotyping and present alternative viewpoints where appropriate?
- Do you ensure that dads/grandfathers as well as mums/grandmothers get information and are invited to be involved in the setting?

By tackling unconscious bias individually and through whole centre discussions on gender stereotypes with children, colleagues and parents, we can create lifelong opportunities that extend beyond traditional barriers from an early age, as well as fostering children's academic perseverance in the long term.

