Just like a child

Respect gender equality in the early years

A guide for chidcare professionals

This guide is an adaptation from the one produced by Zero Tolerance for Scottish childcare educators. It has been modified to fit the needs of this project and the Mi'gmaq context.

About this guide

This guide is aimed at childcare professionals who work with very young children in childcare/educational settings. The information it contains is also helpful for parents and carers.

It gives some policy context for tackling gender stereotyping within early years work; explains some common terminology (see glossary); and provides ideas and examples for work in childcare centres, primary schools and other early years settings along with details of resources, contacts and further reading.

It is not a blueprint but offers some practical suggestions for you to use or to give to parents/carers. We hope you will be able to pick and choose whatever is useful for you. We are keen to add to and develop work in this area, and we welcome your ideas, resources, and case studies.

Context

It is never too early to promote equality, tackle stereotyping and discrimination, and raise children who can participate fully in the world. Indeed, this is central to any childcare professional's relationships with children and their families.

There is a wealth of evidence indicating that the earliest years of life are crucial to a child's development and future life chances. What happens to children when they are very young influences how they are as adults: early influences shape how people treat themselves, their children and other people and affect the opportunities they have throughout their lives.

Why tackling gender stereotypes matters

Children learn from the world around them. Gender stereotypes perpetuate inequality and reinforce difference between men and women, rather than individuals being L'nu first and equals.

This can affect many aspects of life such as jobs, income, self-esteem and self-belief. Gender stereotypes encourage ideas of what it means to be a boy or a girl; man or woman, which limit men and women alike.

Although there has been enormous change in recent decades, inequalities persist. For example, men are less likely than women to take on caring roles within the family or workplace. Although women dominate certain professions (such as education), their male colleagues are more likely to be promoted to senior positions.

The stereotypes are persistent. Generally speaking, boys are encouraged to be active and adventurous in their play, they are expected to behave more aggressively; whereas girls are expected to be and to look ‘nice’ and to take on caring and nurturing roles from a very young age. This is mirrored, for example, in toys which are often presented and promoted to children on the basis of their sex.

Many toys are gender neutral but companies often work hard to make their toys gender-specific. Toys aimed at girls often focus on looks and domestic duties. Toys aimed specifically at boys are often based on engines and motors, construction and physical activity. At their worst, some ‘boys’ toys’ encourage a particular kind of aggressive masculinity, based on fighting and war.

How children are dressed can limit what they do, how they see themselves and how other people see them. For example, girls wearing short skirts may be discouraged from certain types of rough play for modesty reasons. Shoe styles might stop them running around or being active. And boys may find themselves being teased if they wear certain colours or styles. There are also concerns about the sexualisation of very young girls through clothes. Clothes aimed at boys are often dark and may have ‘tough man’ slogans and images.

People are all different. That is something to celebrate! But not if it means inequality as, fundamentally, this creates vulnerabilities in some people and gives too much power to others. At the extreme, gender inequality is linked to domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence which are internationally recognized as being overwhelmingly committed by men against women.

Children have a right to this

Children have rights to equality and an enriched life free of discrimination. The UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Canadian government, sets out what a child needs to survive, grow, participate and fulfill their potential. According to this declaration, all children should be born into a world where being a boy or a girl does not restrict their life chances. This means thinking about how we treat children from the earliest age; what we can do to change cultural assumptions and expectations; and how we can enrich all children's lives.

Discrimination, stereotyping and the early years

Children do not exclude or devalue each other or set limits upon themselves until they learn to do so from adults. Children learn from a very young age that their behaviour, likes, dislikes and expectations should follow 'rules' about male and female roles. However, these 'rules' are really only assumptions.

These assumptions may mean identifying with certain toys, activities and role models, and this can limit children. For example, action, construction and technology toys are mainly marketed at boys; social role play and arts and crafts toys are mainly marketed at girls. Marketing toys in this way is problematic because play is crucial to how children develop and learn about the world. Boys need the chance to practice social skills; and girls need to be active and learn spatial and problem-solving skills.

Short-term effects of stereotyping

The damaging effects of these early gender stereotypes are experienced by children from a young age. This includes young girls being overly concerned with body image; bullying of children who do not meet stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a boy or a girl; and children who do not conform to gender stereotypes experiencing negative feelings about themselves.

One found that girls as young as 12 had experienced pressure from their peers to send topless pictures of themselves by text and instant messaging services. Gender-based violence also begins at a much earlier age than once assumed. Another study conducted by the Direction of Public Health in the Gespeg'ewa'gi tells us that the rate of sexual offense directed at minor girls in the area is nine time the adult's rate, and that 8,2% of girls from the area have already had, during their life, a forced sexual relation, compared to 2,2% of boys.

Long-term effects of stereotyping

It matters if we treat boys and girls differently from a young age because it sets up a pattern for life, based on difference. Although there is nothing wrong with difference in itself, when it leads to limitations and discrimination it is problematic as it can affect long-term confidence, opportunity, achievement, health, relationships and more. When children get into high school, boys and girls who embrace gender stereotypes the most are also the ones who drop out of school the most.

Changing cultural expectations

We are all socialized according to our sex (male or female) at birth, whether we like it or not. The influence of culture and society is huge. And because marketing and money are often involved, the messages are very powerful and very successful. Colonization must also be taken into account when looking at current expectations towards gender roles: if traditional Mi'gmaq societies used to have distinct roles for men and women, these roles were equally valued. The gender stereotypes that were brought by colonization are the ones we are aiming to unpack with the current project.

Many parents and childcare professionals have the best of intentions that they will not limit children according to assumptions about what makes a girl and what makes a boy (gender stereotypes). And then, as they watch pink-clad girls playing with dolls or boys in superhero costumes fighting 'baddies', wonder what they can do about it. **There is a lot you can do.** Take your inspiration from the changes that you can make in your own workplace or family. Remember that gender and socialisation are learned. And what can be learned, can also be unlearned. Society can and does change over time. Pink used to be for boys!

Step one: awareness

The first step in changing cultural expectations is awareness. You cannot avoid gender stereotypes around you and the children in your life, they are ingrained and often unconscious. They affect how you are, what you believe, your values, your work practice and how go about your life. But this does not mean that you cannot question or change these stereotypes. As soon as you begin to notice gender stereotypes around you and your children it is possible to challenge them. This guide will help you become more aware of gender stereotypes and the limitations these impose.

Step two: changing practice

Changing gender stereotypes goes beyond encouraging boys to play in the home corner. Indeed, research indicates that it is easier to encourage girls to be active and adventurous than boys to be gentle and passive. There are powerful pressures, not least of which is peer pressure. But, the more aware you are of gender stereotypes, the more you can try to mediate their effects. This guide gives you some ideas about how you can do that. You can try out some of the ideas in your work setting and with other children in your life.

Step three: changing society

Tackling gender stereotyping goes beyond the childcare centre or school gate. Parents, grandparents and other concerned individuals are challenging companies and organizations which perpetuate gender stereotypes to ensure that future generations of children are protected from such pressures and limitations. Whether letter writing, signing online petitions or speaking to shops and suppliers, there are many ways to make changes. Participating in this project and talking about it in your community is another way of encouraging change in our society!

Some ideas for practice

The following two sections suggest ideas and resources to help childcare professionals develop 'non-gendered' practice. This includes:

- Thinking about how you speak to children and using inclusive language
- Talking about gender roles and providing a variety of role models for all children
- Using 'unisex' toys, games and activities
- Using pictures and stories which depict men and women in a variety of and non-traditional roles
- Encouraging all children to use all toys and areas
- Having books and other resources which are 'non-sexist' and which challenge some of the unwritten rules

Language and communication

Think about how you speak to children. Often people compliment girls on what they look like and boys on what they are doing, or tell boys not to cry, and girls to 'smile' and be 'nice'. Research indicates that adults are more likely to engage in conversation with girls than boys. They may even use a different tone of voice. It's good to speak to all children in the in the same way and about the same things. You could practice the following:

1. Tell a girl she's great because of what she does and not because of how she looks; try, 'I like your skipping' not 'I like your hair'.
2. Praise a boy when he shares and displays co-operative behaviour with other children.
3. Tell a girl it's OK to say if there's something she's good at.
4. Encourage girls to play in the mud or get sweaty.
5. Encourage boys to play in the home corner, or with dolls.
6. Tell girls it's OK to get angry and to express this in a healthy way.
7. Tell boys it's OK to be scared, upset or emotional.
8. Tell a boy that it's OK to dress up as a nurse or butterfly and a girl that it's OK to dress up as a fire-fighter or fisherman.
9. Tell a boy that being called a girl isn't an insult, because boys and girls are equally important.
10. Encourage all children to think about things that they have in common with each other, and emphasize their similarities over differences.

Challenge behaviour which shows signs of sex discrimination. Examples are; children referring to a boy as a 'girl' as an insult; or children ostracizing or laughing at others because of their choice of toy or clothes. Turn the challenge into a discussion and not a criticism!

Surroundings

Think about how the space and the children are organized. Suggestions are:

1. When lining up children, going out on trips or sitting down for snack, avoid dividing children into groups by sex. Think of other ways of doing this, such as the month they were born, or assigning different colours to different groups (avoiding blue and pink might by a good idea!)
2. Think about colours and decoration. For example, a pink or pastel 'home corner' gives a strong message that this area is for girls only. You could decorate the home corner in greens, reds, yellows, blues and oranges.
3. Think about how you organise the space. The presence of a 'home corner' and a block area can unconsciously segregate girls and boys. Think about how the home corner is used. You could place the toys which are often seen as 'boys' toys' in the home corner and put dolls amongst or beside the blocks. This may encourage different kinds of play and attract children into different parts of the centre.
4. Many activities and toys are 'gender neutral' such as blocks, paints and crafts.. You'll still have to work at how children use them – but they are a better starting point than dolls and cars!
5. Check through the resources in your childcare centre. Do they promote particular ways of being girls/women or boys/men? **www.strongnations.com** has a fantastic collection of books, toys and other materials which portray positive images of First Nations girls and boys and men and women and challenge gender and other stereotypes. They also propose materials and books inspired by nature and Indigenous Art, which usually stay away from gender stereotypes.

Intervening in free play and imaginative play

1. Suggest alternative storylines and ideas for children's play. The rigidly-defined gender roles in many children's TV programmes and films are very influential. You could suggest new storylines with heroic girls who rescue boys, or cast girls as builders or dragons and boys in caring, mediating and domestic roles.
2. Shape the play by joining in and use your role to challenge children's assumptions. If you are a woman, you could take on the role of a scientist or explorer, fisherman or the local doctor. If you are a man you could encourage boys to try cooperative games, or take on the role of father or nurse.
3. Talk to children about how they understand gender and sexism. Young children may have strong ideas that a particular toy or behaviour is not appropriate for their gender. When a child says that something is 'not for girls' or 'not for boys' ask them why not and explore this with them.
4. For dressing-up games, make it clear that all the children can dress up in whatever clothes they choose and avoid assuming that boys want to be pirates and girls princesses.

Roles and role play

Simply talking about how people live and the jobs they do can help children keep their horizons wide and their options open.

Role-playing games are good for exploring gender stereotypes with young children and encouraging them to participate in a wide range of activities. Try assigning roles at random, or use a 'magic sorting hat' or a bag containing different role cards.

One idea is to help the children plan a building, kitchen or garden on paper and then use the building blocks to construct the design. They could make and wear badges with an E for 'engineer', C for 'cook' and so on to affirm their roles.

You can also encourage children to explore roles and try out different activities by having a time when only girls can play with blocks or only boys can use the home corner. BUT make sure you explain that 'girls only' or 'boys only' time is necessary because you have noticed that they do not play in certain areas often.

Creating spaces

In a project to allow boys more access to home corner play the children were first asked for their views. One five-year-old girl said: 'The boys can't come in here (the house) 'cos they make a noise and they mess it up, and they act like dogs and angry husbands'. Another said: 'Sometimes I put the ironing board across the doorway so the boys can't get in... 'cos there's no door and you need one'. As well as maintaining the usual home play space, staff encouraged children to suggest other role-play areas. Over the weeks, they established a garage, a tropical fish shop, a hairdressing salon, a chip shop and an office, which gave rise to fewer instances of gender-dominated play and created spaces for boys to engage in more positive role-play activities which were not heavily dominated by the girls (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009).

See our website for more activity ideas and resources!

www.enseignerlegalite.com/mic/