

October 2023



A Fair Start: Facilitating child-led play free of gender stereotypes

Introduction

Our children deserve a Scotland free from men's violence against women. But how do we create this future?

Gender equality.

One simple action we can take is to challenge gender stereotypes and facilitate genuinely child-led play.

All children deserve to play freely in a fair, loving environment, which gives them the best possible start. They should be able to learn and explore without people limiting what they do, and can achieve, because of their gender.

This briefing for setting managers will show that:

- When girls and boys play differently to each other, this is because of gender stereotypes.
- Gender stereotypes cause us to treat boys and girls differently, which encourages gender-stereotypical behaviours.
- Challenging gender stereotypes is a vital part of early years' practice and facilitating truly child-led play.

...when educators are aware that typical play may be caused by gender roles or stereotypes, they appear to view situations differently and plan each experience in a way that will be inclusive of [all] children.

Chapman, 2016



What does the evidence say?

Both boys and girls enjoy and need varied kinds of play, including physical and nurturing activities (Fawcett Society, 2019: 4; Heywood and Adzajklic, 2023).

Family, media, and the surrounding world teach girls and boys gender stereotypes (Fawcett Society, 2019: 4; Heywood and Adzajklic, 2023). They are always learning what it means to be a boy or a girl (Fawcett Society, 2019: 4; Heywood and Adzajklic, 2023).

When they come to nursery, many children act out gender stereotypes in their play.

We see girls 'gravitating' towards the home corner and boys being more confident about trying construction. This is the result of the gender stereotypes they see on an everyday basis (Fawcett Society, 2019: 4; Heywood and Adzajklic, 2023).

Gender stereotypes influence children's beliefs about what activities people can do, what jobs they and others can do, and who is a trustworthy source of information (King et al, 2021: 120).

Many children 'police' gender roles in other children, which creates toxic environments where children do not feel free to be themselves. Children whose friendship groups emphasise traditional gender stereotypes have lower overall wellbeing (Fawcett Society, 2019: 5, 8).

However, biases and stereotypes are malleable in early childhood (King et al, 2021: 112). Social and cultural environments matter (King et al, 2021: 112) and early years settings can make a difference, giving all children a loving, fair, and equal start.



Challenging gender stereotypes and facilitating child-led play

We all have unconscious and conscious biases which affects how we treat girls and boys (Wingrave, 2018; Fawcett Society, 2019: 4). Practitioners can unknowingly pay boys more attention than girls and reward 'gender appropriate' behaviour (such as praising boys for being strong or girls for being helpful) (Fawcett Society, 2019: 4). Studies have shown that practitioners will offer boys more outdoor and active play than girls (Chapman, 2016; Wingrave, 2018).

This means that girls have less access to physical play and boys have less access to play that helps develop empathy and emotional literacy. To have an equal start, children need to learn a range of skills through their play.

Some approaches to tackling gender stereotypes in the early years focus on being gender neutral (Heywood and Adzajklic, 2023). This means treating children of all genders the same. However, Susie Heywood and Barbara Adzajlic (2023) argue that in a Scottish context, gender neutrality is not enough. We need to actively work to counteract gender stereotypes by creating gender transformative early years spaces which question the stereotypes children absorb in the rest of their lives. We can do this by:

- Encouraging girls to try construction, science and active play, and boys to try caring and nurturing role-playing.
- Provide books and toys that are gender neutral or counter stereotypical.
- Interrupt gender stereotypes when they are being played out by children.



What can setting managers do?

We know that practitioners are passionate about ensuring all children have the best start in life. We also understand the competing challenges and pressures early years practitioners are facing.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to support childcare settings by delivering a well-resourced, holistic approach to embedding gender equality in the early years.

Despite the challenges, there are actions you can take now to interrupt gender stereotypes in early years spaces. We call on Setting Managers to:

- Develop a 'Challenging Gender Stereotypes' Policy' with your team using the Gender Equal Play resource for support.
- Include the Gender Equal Play resource in your induction pack for new starts.
- Role model interrupting gender stereotypes to the rest of your team.
- Read 'Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years: Changing the Narrative'.

Resources for practitioners

- Susie Heywood, Barbara Adzajlic , 2023. 'Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years: Changing the Narrative.'
- Zero Tolerance and the Care Inspectorate, 2018. 'Gender Equal Play.'
- Video about early years and gender stereotypes for Glasgow's Gender Friendly Nursery Project

References

Chapman, R. (2016). 'A case study of gendered play in preschools: how early childhood educators' perceptions of gender influence children's play,' *Early Child Development and Care*, 186:8, 1271-1284, DOI:10.1080/03004430.2015.1089435

The Fawcett Society (2019) *Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood: A Literature Review*.

Heywood, S., and Adzajklic, B. (2023). *Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years*, Routledge, Oxon.

King, T. L., Scovelle, A. J., Meehl, A., Milner, A. J., and Priest, N. (2021). 'Gender stereotypes and biases in early childhood: A systematic review,' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 46:2, 112-125

Wingrave, M. (2018). 'Perceptions of gender in early years,' *Gender and Education*, 30:5, 587-606, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1258457

Zero Tolerance is supported by



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot