



Healthy relationships in early primary settings

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Zero Tolerance is a Scottish charity (SC023484) which promotes gender equality and challenges attitudes which normalise men’s violence against women and girls. Our approach is practical and evidence-based.

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Introduction

In Spring of 2016, Zero Tolerance undertook research to establish what work is currently being carried out with young children aged 5-8 on encouraging healthy relationships, and determine its content.

We received one hundred and fifty-nine responses from teachers (18%), parents (77%) and those with responsibility for early primary school children (21%). We asked respondents a variety of questions about their awareness of current resources, what influences they felt were most significant for children's learning and what positive change in this area could look like.

The report below provides a summary of the key findings, discussion of key themes and makes recommendations for policy makers and education professionals in this field.¹

Background

There is mounting research demonstrating that gender inequality and stereotyping underpin the attitudes which normalise violence. Different forms of Violence Against Women (VAW) have all been linked with what are known as "violence supporting attitudes"². This refers to beliefs that, for example, women deserve or invite violence, should accept subordinate roles or expect sexual victimisation as part of the "normal order" of things.

A key part of Zero Tolerance's work is to increase support for gender equality, challenge unhelpful gender stereotyping and encourage healthy relationships at all ages including nursery and early primary aged children.

We believe it is never too early to question what is seen as 'normal' or what is traditionally expected of boys and girls in our society. In fact, we believe that doing so from a very young age helps to protect children from the negative consequences of inequality and discrimination as they grow into adults.

Our work in the early years with nurseries has shown that with appropriate support there can be positive change in attitudes amongst staff delivering care for young children, enabling them to foster environments that actively promote inclusiveness for all, free from limiting gender stereotypes.

¹ For anonymised demographic information of who we spoke with, alongside full data tables please contact amy.marshall@zerotolerance.org.uk

² Flood, M., Jewkes, R. & Lang, J. (2014) "From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and Reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls". The Lancet.

Summary

'I am shocked by the level of violence and sexualised behaviours I find even in primary one. Children need to be taught about respect and healthy relationships'

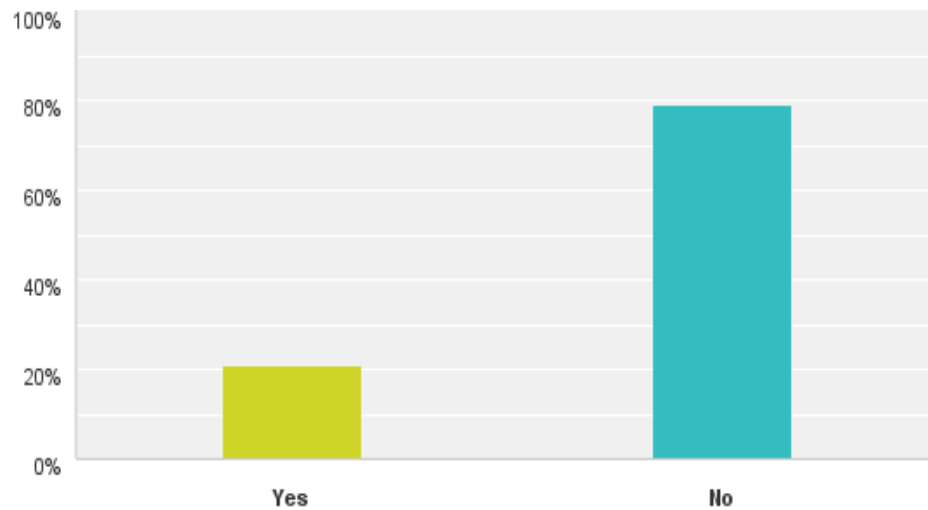
Anonymous

- Our research found there was overwhelming support for young children to receive healthy relationships education, with **97.5% of respondents agreeing that 5-8 year olds should receive education on healthy relationships.**
- This ambition was not matched by resources however, with **over 80% of respondents reporting that they were not aware of any specific materials available** for children aged 5-8 on navigating social relationships.
- Those who were aware of resources, highlighted the **limited support or understanding these resources were able to provide on how gender affects understanding of healthy relationships**; specifically, a lack of focus on basic consent, challenging of gender assumptions or challenging of gender based bullying or even the promotion of respecting difference.
- When asked, **57% of parents reported seeing a marked change in attitudes towards gender roles displayed by their children when making the transition from nursery to primary school** (i.e. boys as dominant and strong, girls in subservient roles, assumed to be pretty or homemakers).
- Social relationships were rated the most important influencers of how young children learn gender stereotypes, with **teachers, other students and parents** identified as having the most influence over young people's opinions.
- Respondents thought that **leadership from Education Scotland and local authorities** was important in ensuring that young children had access to resources that helped them navigate relationships.
- Respondents favoured a **holistic approach** in schools when implementing a strategy, favouring coherent school policy, engagement with parents, lessons and playtime content that was gender equality aware. They also wanted this approach applied to the guidance and training support that teachers received.

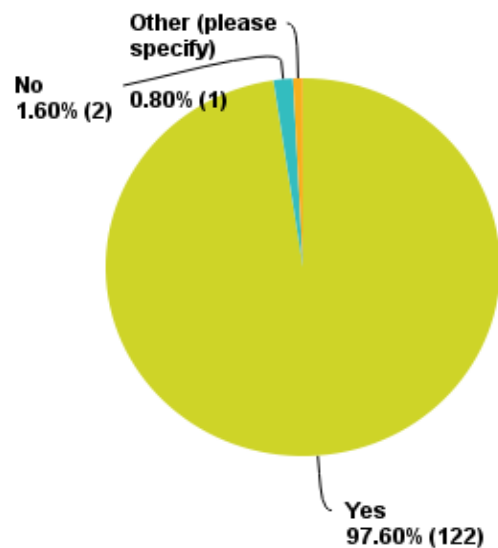
Key findings

There is a lack of support for early primary school children in developing healthy relationships with others, but respondents strongly felt there should be more resources

When asked whether they were aware of any specific education or support for children of this age group (5-8) in Scotland, over **80%** of respondents replied that they had not, suggesting that overall there is a lack of resource either in training or classroom content.



Nevertheless, there was positive support from respondents (**97.5%**) for action in this age bracket, suggesting that whilst resources were lacking, there was an appetite for education at this particular stage of development.



These findings chimed with the question asked of parents only on whether they saw an attitudinal shift from nursery to primary school in gendered attitudes (i.e. boys as dominant and strong, girls in subservient roles, deemed to be pretty or homemakers).

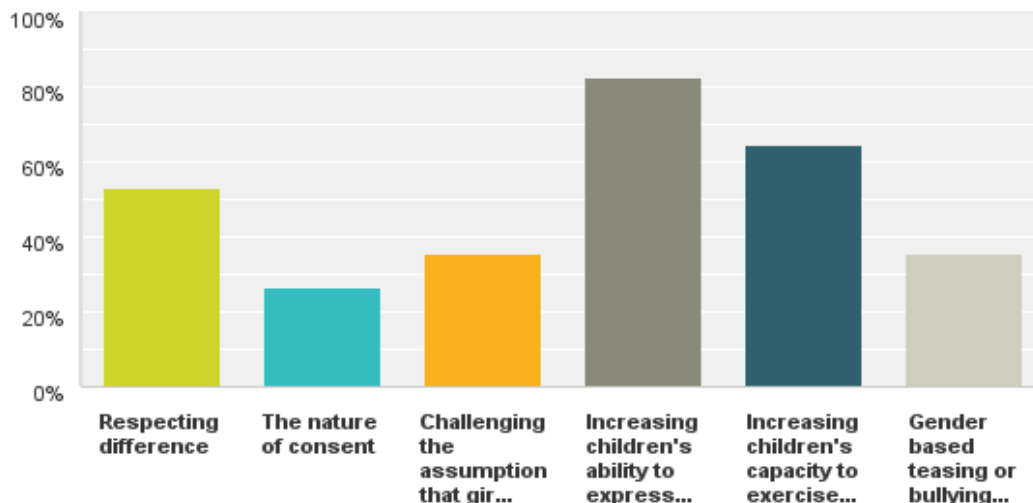
Over **57%** suggested there was a marked change in perceptions at this critical time, suggesting that this was considered a transitional period of change, and of exposure to new ideas for young children. This was also backed by findings below which suggest that other children, parents and teachers are the main drivers of influence at this age.

There is a lack of understanding on how gender influences children’s ideas of healthy relationships

The respondents who had seen resources were asked to describe the content of the resources. They regularly described these in comments as;

‘Nothing other than the basic health education at school which covers respecting yourself and others and building friendships’

Participants were asked to select from options that included key criteria of the curriculum for early primary aged children for health and wellbeing (such as ‘Increasing children’s ability to express themselves’ and ‘Increasing children’s capacity to exercise their rights and responsibilities’) as well as options from outside of the curriculum (such as ‘The nature of consent’; ‘Challenging the assumption that girls and boys are naturally interested in certain subjects, toys etc.’; ‘Gender based bullying’ and ‘Respecting difference’). The graph below shows that options from the curriculum were selected more often than those from outside of the curriculum. This suggests that schools are following the curriculum, but are not being supported to carry out work in areas beyond the curriculum that require further attention.



Of particular note was that the respondents tended to describe resources that focused on building relationships in specific contexts i.e. children that had witnessed crime and a focus on restorative contexts³. Of the resources mentioned in an 'everyday' curricular context, these were described as being related to general health, friendships and emotions rather than resources that reflected a wider understanding of how gender affects relationships.

'My daughter often has classroom based discussions about emotions (P1) that we then continue at home. I feel her school is doing a reasonably good job in this particular area at her stage, however the classroom discussions do not seem to have any particular focus on gender'

More generally, respondents felt there was a gender divide in behaviour that was reinforced either through explicit policy or through reinforced codes of practice at school e.g. saying 'boys' and girls' rather than 'children', lining up boys and girls separately, giving girls Barbie/Disney themed items, gendered uniform policies, implicit ideas about who could take up playground space and who was allowed to play with who, and gendered titles for teachers. This was also reflected in bullying;

Schools need to do much more to build conflict resolution and non-violent communication skills in children - too often when there is bullying or teasing kids are told to sort it out themselves without being taught the skills to do so.

Respondents felt that social attitudes were reinforced in the school and home environment. In particular respondents felt that parents (78%), staff (52%) and other children (68%) were seen to influence these attitudes – a finding also backed by Zero Tolerance's report into parent's views of the early years⁴. In some cases, this had lasting effects on children's ambition and goals, actively affecting their choices;

When my older daughter entered P1 she played with boys. One boy said 'girls can't play football' so she stopped. This was never challenged by staff; I only became aware a long time after.

When considering parents and teachers, it is unsurprising that those who spend the most time with children retain a high level of influence. Bearing this in mind, our results suggest that one off interventions or resources may have limited impact without sustained work with those who hold positions of influence and power in children's lives.

³ These included examples such as cedar from women's aid, spark packs from relationship education and post domestic abuse interventions

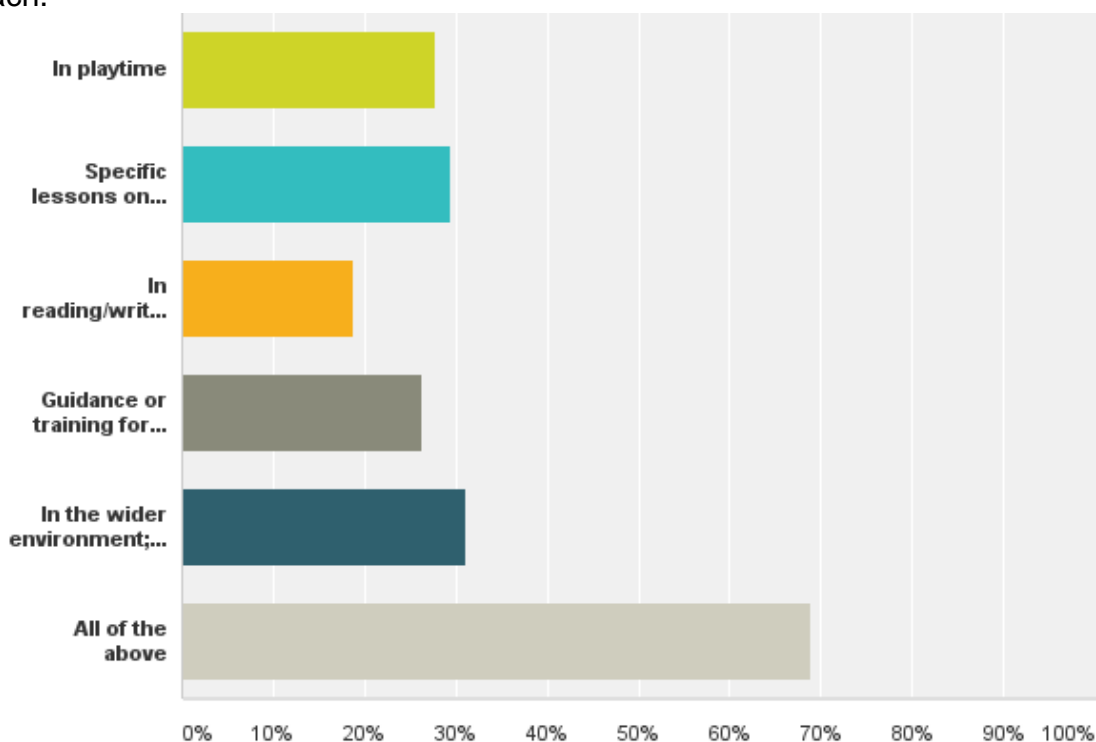
⁴ Zero Tolerance (2016) "The default setting": what parents say about gender stereotyping in their children's early years. Available here: <http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/default-setting-what-parents-say-about-gender-stereotyping-their-children%E2%80%99s-early-years?destination=node%2F333>

Leadership and holistic interventions are required when taking action

All the relationship stuff, most, happens at break time. So what do we do? We put the least experienced, youngest, lowest paid staff with the slimmest life experience on duty at this time. If a child raises a concern with such a staff member they're usually told; 'just ignore it', or 'go and play with someone else'. They are not given the tools to deal with the situation.

When asked about which areas of the school environment children could receive access to learning on relationships, respondents were given options including Playtime, Specific lessons on content, in reading and writing materials, Guidance or training for teachers and support staff, In the wider environment (school policy, engagement with parents, and in the curriculum) and All of the above. Their responses are shown on the graph below.

Over 70% answered 'all of the above', suggesting a desire for an integrated and holistic approach.



When asked which actors needed to take responsibility for improving this landscape, commentators felt that a mix of local provision and Education Scotland leadership would be the most efficient way forward. 35% of responses highlighted Education Scotland, 30% highlighted local education authorities and 30% picked 'others' - all explicitly supporting the idea of a partnership amongst all of the options presented including actors on the ground such as head teachers, quality improvement officers, school inspectors, staff and support staff. Participants also mentioned that charities and civil society actors were important to them as well.

I think all these need to be involved. Primarily the teachers and support staff need to be mindful of the language that they use when talking about gender norms, but equally these need to be supported by the other stakeholders involved. The teachers and support staff need to be educated. We can only do so much at home, and we cannot control the language that is used in schools and nurseries.

Participants also mentioned that school partnership and all aspects of the environment should be involved to ensure consistency of approach particularly work with parents, mentioning that much was 'taught' out with the formal curriculum (assemblies, circle time, opportunistically).

Discussion and recommendations

The transition from nursery to primary presents a new set of social circumstances for children and our research has highlighted a gap in the early years of primary education for children when navigating these relationships; relationships that will be heavily imbued with a whole range of expectations about what it means to be a boy or a girl. This research indicates that these expectations can be heavily enforced both in official policy and in attitudes.

Although it has not been the focus of this piece of research, it is also highly likely that these gaps extend to the latter years of primary school as well.

The Scottish Government has invested significant resources in recent years into the future of the next generation. The willingness to invest in children's futures includes the expansion of childcare, commitments to closing the attainment gap and improving the health and wellbeing of young people at school. Education is the policy by which the Scottish Government is set to judge its own record by 2021.

Now presents an excellent opportunity for the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to consider how to close the gender gap in education; the one which prevents young people from achieving their full potential and which can lead to discrimination and inequality in later years. Gender based bullying, limits on free expression and sexism is no context in which young girls and boys can achieve.

The ambition of the Scottish Government's Equally Safe violence against women strategy supports a shift towards prevention and has set new standards in long term attitudinal change through mapping attitudinal change by publishing the VAW social attitudes survey⁵. Our research reaffirms that shifting social attitudes remains an important and often missed area for long term progress in this area.

At a time of increased attention to development of the early years and the prevention of violence against women, policy coherence will be key. Our research has shown that this was particularly relevant given respondents wanted leadership and action from Education Scotland on gender.

Zero Tolerance's work in the early years with nurseries continues to show that with appropriate support there can be real and positive change in attitudes amongst staff delivering care or lessons for young children, enabling them to foster environments that actively promote inclusiveness for all.

⁵ <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2015/november/new-findings-on-attitudes-to-violence-against-women-in-scotland/>

Zero Tolerance makes the following recommendations:

- **Create policy drivers for tackling gender stereotypes in the early years:** Key drivers need to be built into policy that support and motivate staff to take action to explore new ways of ensuring an awareness of gender inequality is effectively incorporated into early primary education. This could include pre-qualification and post qualification training standards, the role of quality improvement officers, inspectors, health and wellbeing and curricular guidance - all of which should explicitly recognise the importance of gender equality. National policy drivers are required from Education Scotland and Local Authorities need to drive implementation of these at a local level.
- **Recognise the role parents play:** Parents have the most one to one contact with their children. Zero Tolerance's research over the past year suggests there is considerable appetite to look at the role that parents can play, particularly as the primary caregivers for young people in shaping healthy attitudes towards gender and violence. Their role in developing social attitudes towards gender needs to be recognised in policy development.
- **Enhance joined up policy making:** policy makers and professionals require support to enable them to understand the relationship between developing attitudes that explicitly support gender equality in the early years and how this work contributes to VAW prevention efforts. Policies to enhance gender equality and to prevent VAW can then be better aligned with one another.
- **Enable holistic responses that consider the wider school environment:** Leadership is important, but teachers, head teachers and support teachers need to integrate a whole systems approach to changing culture. A 'whole school approach' to gender equality means carrying out anti sexism work in different spaces across the school in a way that is ingrained in everyday life - including within the curriculum, policy, extra-curricular activities, teacher training and engagement in the wider community. It means doing this in a coordinated way that links to an overarching vision.