

The default setting

What parents say about gender stereotyping in their children's early years



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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.

April 2016

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Summary

'This is a serious issue for all genders, including those of uncertain gender. Everyone suffers.'

This report summarises the findings of a survey of 1,386 parents¹ of young children in Scotland.

Parents describe their attitudes to bringing up girls and boys to be equals, and the influences on young children within and outwith the home which make that difficult.

The overwhelming majority of parents surveyed thought that it was important to treat boys and girls the same in early childhood. Although most parents thought that children aged one to five naturally like different things, they recognised that other social factors influence young children to show 'gendered' preferences.

Parents surveyed thought that gender stereotyping is most prevalent in commercial settings (such as toy and clothes shops); in the attitudes of other parents; and in children's television and films.

Apart from themselves, parents thought that the attitudes of other children were most likely to influence their child(ren), closely followed by television and the attitudes of other parents.

Most parents said they would find it useful to have support to challenge gender stereotyping. They thought that support through events, networks and campaigns would be more useful than resources such as 'how to' guides. They also wanted to help their children deal with gender-stereotyped expectations and comments.

Parents would most like to receive support online and through nurseries, primary schools and community centres.

When asked about skills and knowledge, parents wanted to know about good-quality research evidence to back up their discussions with others. They also wanted early years' health and education providers to promote gender equality with their staff, with very young children and with new and prospective parents.

The findings suggest that the parents in this survey are not looking for individual support for bringing up their children, but for a mainstream approach which reinforces what they are doing at home to promote gender equality. They think this should start within early years work by health and education professionals.

¹ In this report we use the term 'parent' to mean caregiver in the widest sense including birth parents, adoptive parents, foster carers, kinship carers and anyone else with the primary responsibility for bringing up a child.

Introduction

‘As a parent of two small boys it shocks me how widespread gender stereotypes are in society and how easily the boys adopt them, even when we try not to adopt them at home.’

‘I feel very strongly about this. As a mother of a near three-year-old girl, I’ve been horrified at the pretty pink princess clothes and toy culture. We want her to choose her interests, not have very limited choices imposed on her.’

Background

Many parents² are concerned about the restrictions on children which derive from common assumptions about what it means to be a ‘girl’ or ‘boy’. The prevailing view that boys and men are supposed to be strong and dominant and girls are supposed to be weak and subservient is hard to counter in the face of mass-market advertising, media images and a dearth of alternative role models for children and their parents.

Assumptions about what it means to be male or female, over everything from appearance, emotions, hobbies, interests, education, attainment, jobs to being a parent, can have negative consequences, both in children’s earliest years but also for their life chances. Studies continue to link belief in traditional gender roles with attitudes which condone violence against women.

Zero Tolerance wanted to find out more about what parents think about gender stereotyping in the early years and to what extent they think it a problem. We also wanted to find out whether parents were looking for support to promote gender equality and challenge stereotyped attitudes, and if so, what kind of support they would like and how they would like to receive it.

Method

We ran a short survey in late 2015 through our social media networks and those of our partners. The survey aimed to gather quantitative and qualitative information from parents with children under ten and who were likely to have an interest in these issues. There was an excellent response – 1,386 parents. There are some limitations with the data: responses indicate that not all parents had children under ten; nor do we have a demographic profile of parents. Nevertheless, the findings are useful as they illustrate parents’ views of the influences on their young children and what support they would like to challenge stereotypes. The findings will be helpful for guiding Zero Tolerance’s continuing work on preventing violence against women.

² In this report we use the term ‘parent’ to mean caregiver in the widest sense including birth parents, adoptive parents, foster carers, kinship carers and anyone else with the primary responsibility for bringing up a child.

This report

The report sets out the main findings of the survey and illustrates these with quotes from the parents who responded.

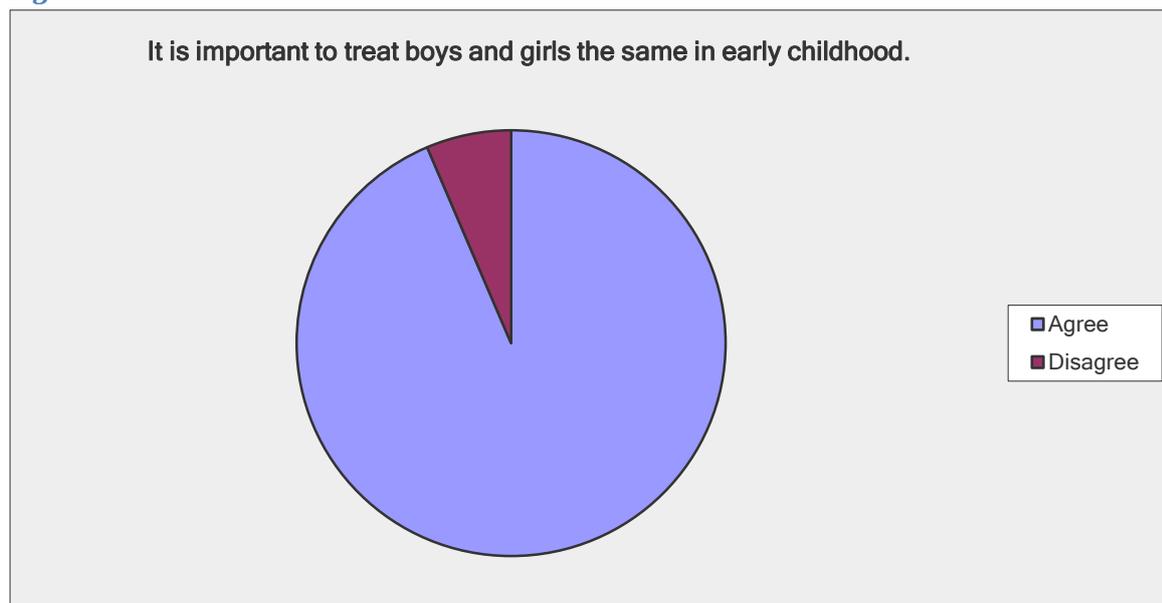
The 'word clouds' highlight the significant words which parents used in their responses, in proportion to frequency of use.

Findings

Treating girls and boys the same

In order to find out parents' aspirations for their children, we asked them whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'it is important to treat boys and girls the same in early childhood'. More than nine out of ten parents agreed that it was important to treat boys and girls the same in early childhood (see table 1 in data tables). A few disagreed but did not give clear reasons for this.

Figure 1



1,374 parents

Parents emphasised the importance of nurturing each child's needs and interests and thought that these should guide children's learning and development, rather than gender stereotypes which might inhibit them: They thought it was important to respect differences between children whilst treating them equally:

'It's important to focus on the individual – their needs, likes, interests – irrespective of gender.'

They thought that gender stereotypes normalised behaviour which might not otherwise be tolerated:

'I feel a lot of parents allow bad behaviour in boys because 'boys will be boys.'

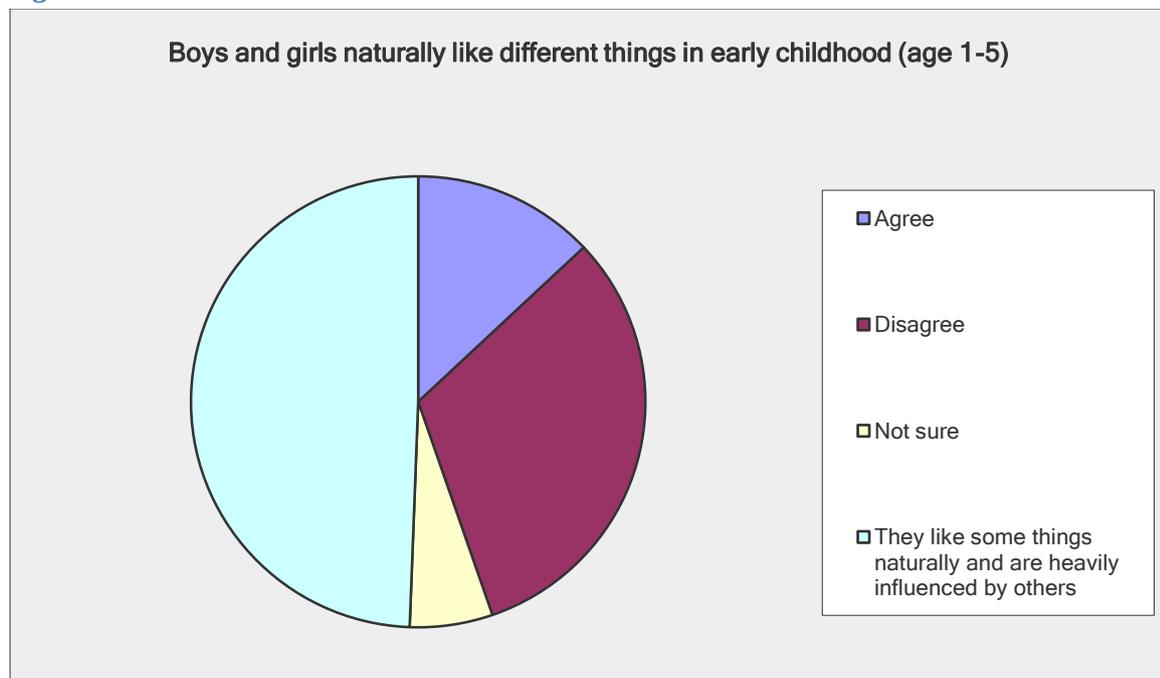
They also thought it was important to help children notice and challenge stereotypes for themselves:

'When it comes to encouragement, love, support for intellectual and physical development, then yes, it is important to give these equally to boys and girls. However much we might want to erase gender disparity, though, children do not exist in a gender-less world, and it's more productive to address gender stereotypes and encourage children to engage with them critically than to ignore their existence. This necessarily might mean treating boys and girls differently, even if the goal is to reduce gender stereotyping and disparity.'

What children like

Do young girls and young boys 'naturally' like doing different things? Almost half of parents surveyed thought that girls and boys like different things as a 'natural' choice but that their preferences are also heavily influenced by others. Almost a third of parents surveyed thought that girls and boys do not 'naturally' like different things. Taken together, most of the parents in this sample thought that there were influences on children's preferences beyond those which might occur 'naturally' (see table 2 in data tables).

Figure 2

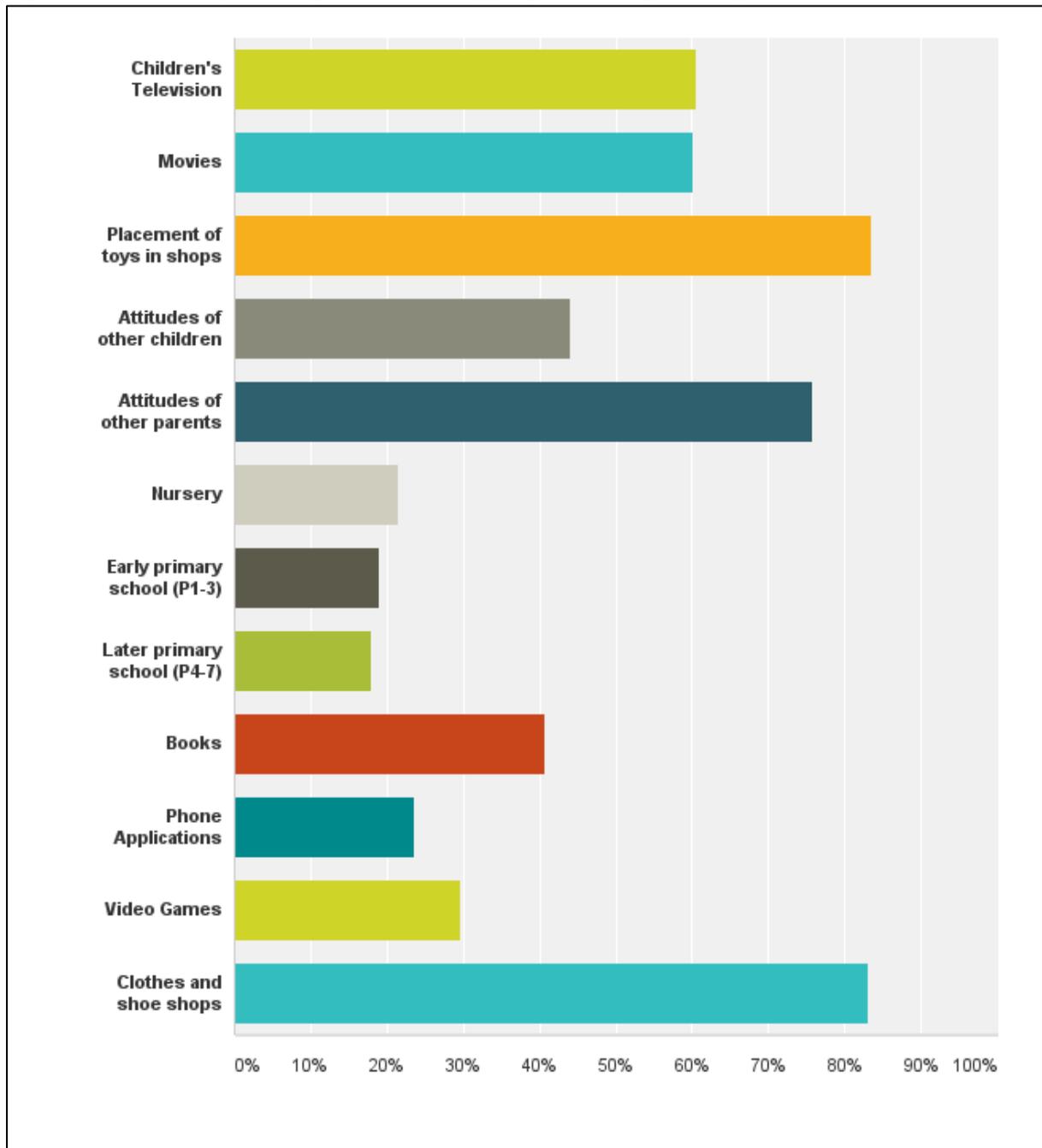


1,370 parents

Where parents see gender stereotyping

We asked parents where they tended to see gender stereotyping. The responses indicate that parents see gender stereotyping most often in commercial settings (toy and clothes shops); in the attitudes of other parents; and in children's television and films. They see it less frequently in educational settings such as nursery, early primary school and later primary school (see table 3 in data tables).

Figure 3: Where do you see gender stereotyping occurring most often?



1,353 parents

Parents Cards Books CBeebies Adverts Family TV Shows Shops

Older Child Grandparents Language Toys

Ideas Attitudes Friends Children Catalogues

Advertising Primary School Media Adults Internet

Magazines

Parents said that gender stereotypes proliferate:

'Gender stereotyping is everywhere, and from a young age is subconsciously conditioning children to conform to these pointless gender roles.'

Comments indicate that people out with the immediate household are influential, including grandparents, extended family and even strangers. Parents also thought that advertising and toys/games encourage stereotyped roles for girls and boys; their design and placement are influential:

'Shops splitting toys and clothes into boys and girls and the pinkification of all things to do with women at all ages.'

'The Lego website has been a huge influence on my son and a lot of it is very negative. The police videos are a huge problem as are 'Brain Attack', 'Invasion from Below' and some other games. The website is currently banned in our house.'

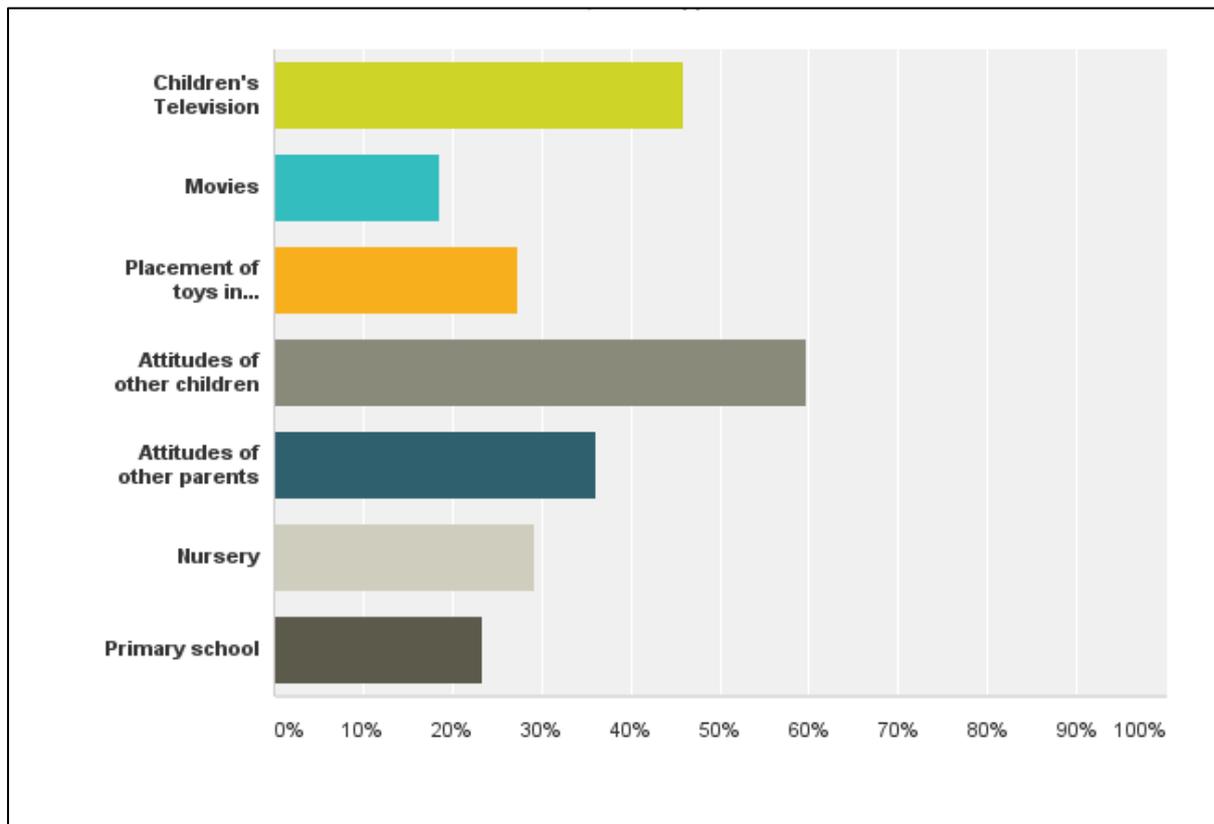
Parents were concerned about the consequent limiting of children, for example:

'Girls' shoes are not designed for use outdoors. I put my daughter in 'boys' shoes until she was four and then she started to complain as she became aware of the difference. I then just put her in trainers but now she has started school and can't wear trainers so she is now wearing the usual flimsy ridiculous girls' shoes.'

What influences children most

Apart from themselves, parents thought that attitudes of other children were most likely to influence their child(ren), closely followed by television and the attitudes of other parents (see table 4 in data tables).

Figure 4: Which of the following has most influence on your children?



1,327 parents

Adverts Toys Disney Movies Advertising School
 Media Music Videos Clothing Grandparents
 Attitudes Parents Shops Family
 Games Nursery Influence Books

'I suspect there are influences from Disney movies, toys, etc., but even a kid who isn't hugely exposed to those comes away with the same ideas, so I think it must be massively amplified by attitudes of other children and adults around them, and as much as overt attitudes, by subconscious behaviour e.g.

women's reflex tendency to comment on other women's and little girls' clothes.'

'My son doesn't watch TV or films but has constantly been told by adults that he has 'a girl's name', a 'girl's haircut' and that he looks like a girl...'

Parents thought that nursery schools were significant in having both a positive and negative influence on their children's development. For some, staff attitudes were helpful, while those of other children and their parents were not:

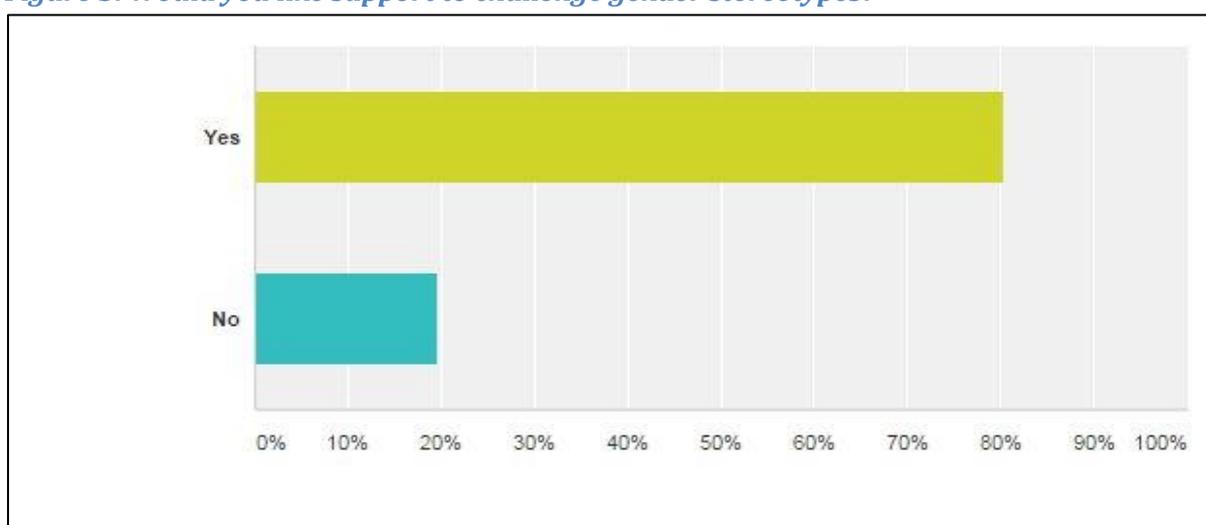
'My daughters' nurseries and especially primary school have been good at emphasising flexible attitudes to gender and we have tried to do so too so that now my older daughter will fiercely defend the right of both boys and girls to like all kinds of stuff.'

'My son has very limited exposure to TV so it's mostly from his peers at nursery.'

Support to challenge gender stereotypes

We asked parents if they would find support to challenge gender stereotyping useful. Eight in ten parents surveyed said they would find this useful (see table 5 in the data tables). One said, 'Personally, I don't need individual 'support' to resist gender stereotyping - I need actual changes to policies, training and marketing!'

Figure 5: Would you like support to challenge gender stereotypes?

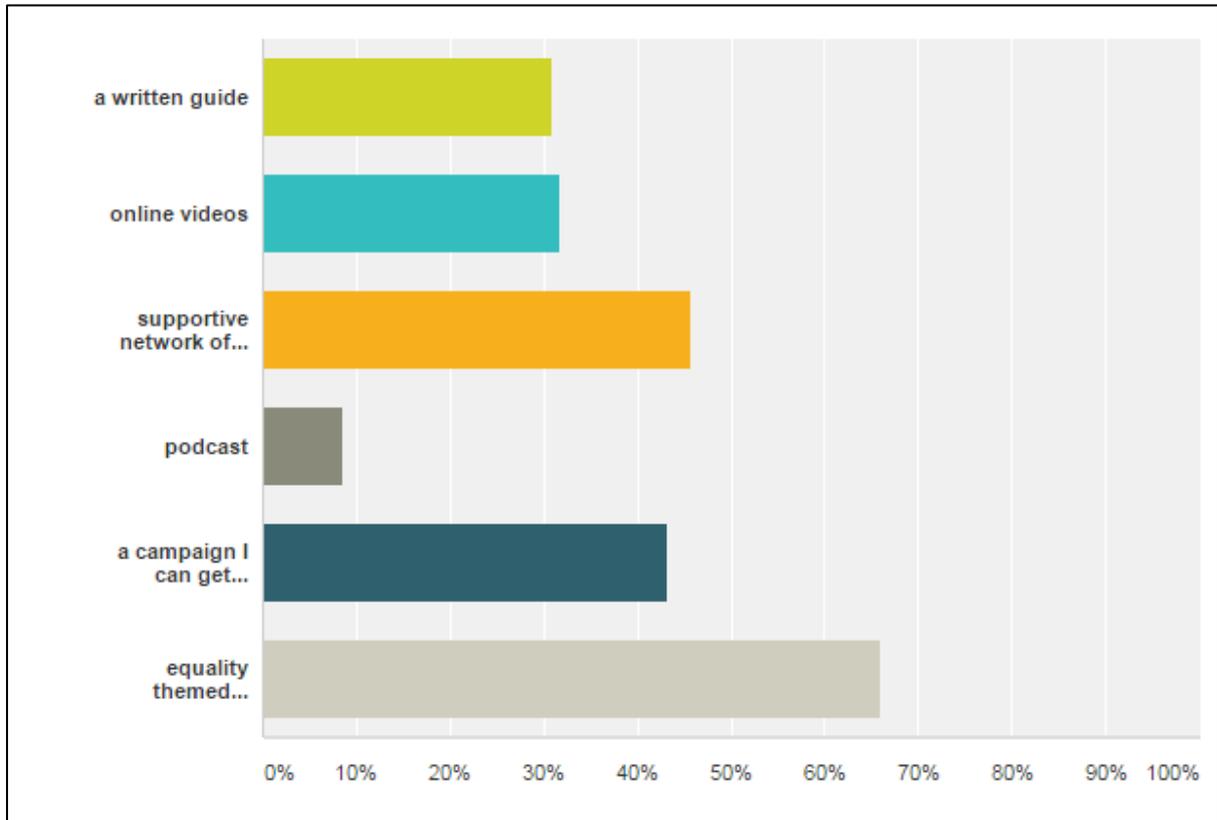


1,367 parents

We asked what kind of support would be most useful. They said that the most useful kind of support would be equality-themed children's events (66%); followed by a supportive network of other parents (46%); and a campaign they could get involved in (43%). They thought that events, campaigns and connecting with other likeminded

parents would be more useful than resources such as written guides or online videos (see table 6 in data tables).

Figure 6: What kind of support would you find most useful?

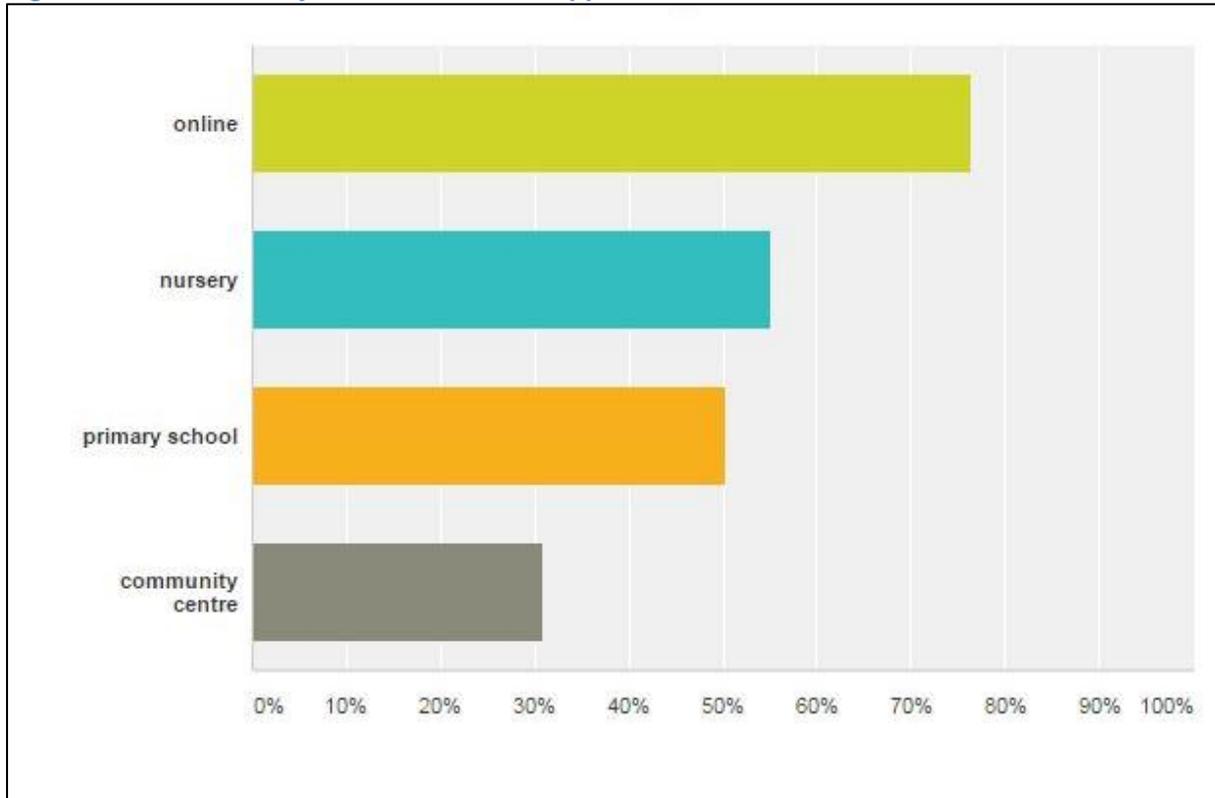


1,234 parents

We also asked parents where they would like to receive support. They would most like to receive this online (some already used social media and other web-based sources) and through nurseries, primary schools and community centres (see table 7 in data tables)

Public Media Shops Early Years Workers **Campaign**
 Role Models **Toys** Stores **Books** Society **Schools**
 Nursery Education

Figure 7: Where would you like to receive support?



1,235 parents

Many parents thought that gender equality should be part of what early years health care, nurseries and primary schools should be doing with their own staff, as well as with young children and their parents:

‘Ultimately you need to find a way to work with new and prospective parents. It needs to be embedded in school curriculum. Advice for new parents around things like play/toys/impact of language.’

Some wanted campaigns on marketing, clothes and gender roles to reinforce how they are bringing up their children:

‘Widespread campaigning at grassroots, making people aware of unconscious stereotyping.’

Community Venues Play Groups Events Video
 Local Media Gender Health Visitor
 Schools Businesses Support National Library Nursery
 Baby

Parents' skills and knowledge

We asked parents what skills and knowledge would help them challenge gender stereotypes.

Advice Stats Facts Role Models Statistics Research Awareness Parents Stereotypes Communication Case Studies Attitudes Public Common Sense Confidence

They said they would like to know about research which challenges assumptions about gender and which they could use in discussion:

'Understanding of child psychological/social development – why do children go through phases of intense identification with all things stereotypically feminine/masculine? Do sparkly things intrinsically appeal to all children but boys learn to inhibit this – ditto for wheels and vehicles, etc. for girls? What teaches children that (e.g.) boys shouldn't cry or boys take active roles more than girls? What are little kids' own ideas about gender; they surely have their own logic which adults probably don't quite appreciate? I would like to have a better understanding of these issues so as to have more to go on than my own prejudices.'

Parents also wanted confidence and strategies to challenge the stereotyped attitudes they found in everyday life. This included what to say in order to be effective and persuasive and not counter-productive. They wanted to be able to share these strategies with their children:

'Ways of challenging stereotypes creatively without ranting (which is sometimes my default setting!).'

'Helpful things for you/your child to say to others who are being unhelpful.'

They thought that positive role models were important, in school and learning environments, in books and toys, and more generally. They also wanted to improve their skills and knowledge through case studies, guides to bringing up children in a 'neutral' environment, and how to speak to children about gender equality. Examples included:

'Handy tips for how to redress the balance in daily life. Gender neutral toy recommendations.'

'Case studies, family friendly posters and resources.'

'What alternative wording to use with children when addressing boys and girls together.'

'More resources. Especially for combating male gender stereotypes.'

Awareness of resources

We asked parents if they were aware of any resources on gender stereotyping. Less than half (42%; 576) responded to this question. Of those, over half (57%; 322) were not aware of any resources on gender stereotyping. Some had looked but had not found anything:

'None and I work in the nursery and early years education sector.'

'Not really, and I work with multiple equalities organisations in the charity sector.'

Conclusions

The vast majority of parents in this survey thought it was important that girls and boys are treated the same, as individuals, in early childhood, and thought that children's aspirations and experiences should not be determined or limited by gender.

They recognised that gender stereotypes influenced their children's preferences. They noticed gender stereotyping most in retail settings; in the attitudes of other parents; and in children's television and films. They thought that their children were most likely to be influenced by advertising/media messages, by their peers and by other parents.

For parents who want to bring up girls and boys to be equal as adults, this is difficult in the face of commercial interests and the attitudes of others, both individuals and professionals.

Parents wanted support to challenge stereotyped attitudes about gender, not so much individual support for parenting, but a mainstream approach which reinforces, and does not undermine, what they are already doing. They favoured equality-themed children's events; supportive networks of other parents; and campaigns they could get involved in.

Most would look online for support but a significant number would look to nurseries and primary schools.

They wanted skills and knowledge to confidently challenge stereotyped attitudes but also for this to be supported out with the home, notably by early years education and health staff. They also wanted good role models for their children.

Parents saw nursery and primary education as influential in their children's lives both as a source of gender stereotyping and for challenging it. Some comments suggested that children were influenced 'negatively' by other children and staff, while others thought that staff had a positive influence. Clearly, early years settings are not consistent in their approach to gender stereotyping.

Some parents were aware of books and websites but many were not aware of them, suggesting that there would be some value in promoting these more actively.

Gender stereotyping significantly influences children, with consequential effects on child wellbeing, life chances, choices and potential. It is clear from the findings of this report that parents and caregivers in Scotland want to see a more mainstreamed approach to challenging gender stereotyping in the early years. Zero Tolerance therefore intends to use the findings of this survey in our prevention work with early years policymakers consistent with Equally Safe, Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls, and other strategies such as the Parenting Strategy and Early Years Framework.