

All about ...

Tackling gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are harming our children's health, happiness and career prospects – so what can be done to challenge them? **Annette Rawstrone** reports



PHOTOS: PIXABAY KELVINSIDE ACADEMY AND YORK RISE NURSERIES

The beautiful princess is rescued by the brave prince and everyone lives happily ever after. How many times have we read or seen that and other similar scenarios? All too often, girls are portrayed as the meek, polite and nurturing ones, while boys are told to 'man up', or 'be brave', because they are expected to be strong, bold and daring.

While awareness of gender stereotyping is growing, children are still receiving messages from the world around them about what it means to be a boy or a girl. Dr Elly Barnes, CEO and founder of inclusion

and social justice charity Educate and Celebrate, says society perpetuates gender stereotypes 'through the language we use, gendered spaces and activities, constant reassertion of the binary and general lack of representation and visibility outside of the binary'.

Kirsty Ruthven, head of education at gender equality charity Lifting Limits, argues that the bombardment of gender stereotyping can begin even before a child is born, with 'gender reveal' parties and colour coding – blue for a boy, pink for a girl. This also highlights the common confusion between the terms 'sex'

and 'gender', which are often used interchangeably. Put simply:

- Sex is a label assigned at birth based on a person's reproductive organs.
- Gender is a set of expectations from society encompassing behaviours, characteristics and thoughts.

Children can be described as 'gender detectives' as they search out things that they perceive to be intended for them. Barbara Adzajlic and Susie Heywood of Gender Friendly Scotland point out the

Putting boys and girls into gendered pigeonholes begins very early on

‘commoditisation’ of gender roles: ‘A fairly recent phenomenon is the way toys and clothes are highly gendered,’ explains Adzajlic. ‘It’s capitalism and companies realising they can sell twice as many things if they make the choices of how you dress your child or what you give them strictly binary.’

Ruthven says, ‘There are so many influences on children that we call it “gendered wallpaper” because it can often be difficult to see unless you stand back and see the bigger picture. Research has shown that children from around 18 months already have a good understanding of gender and how they fit in. Through our work we have found that even the youngest of children will police each other and say things like football is for boys or that pink is for girls and that the boys can’t play with the dollies.’

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

‘The problem of gender stereotypes is that they can be harmful – and they can be harmful no matter what your gender is,

whether that’s male or female or if you identify more widely on the gender spectrum,’ says Ruthven.

Stereotypical views of children can have huge consequences in the real world. According to a report from the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Education (see Further information), by the age of six, girls ‘avoid subjects they view as requiring them to be “really, really smart”’, while boys have poorer reading skills as a result of lower expectations of and confidence in their reading ability.

The impact on society cannot be understated, with the 2020 report also finding that gender stereotypes:

- contribute towards the mental health crisis among children and young people
- are at the root of girls’ problems with body image and eating disorders, and self-esteem in general
- are linked to higher male suicide rates and violence against women and girls
- significantly limit career choices, contributing to the gender pay gap.

By demonstrating the breadth and impact – the ‘harms’ – of gender stereotyping, Gender Friendly Scotland aims to inspire people to take action. ‘We want to get the message to the early years before the messages become too fixed and to reduce the effect of those stereotypes on children,’ says Heywood. ‘We want them to be able to recognise stereotypes and have the confidence and belief to be able to challenge them and go against what the world is telling them.’

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

‘Children are so open-minded and do not have preconceptions regarding any of the protected characteristics. Much of our research was through observations of early years lessons where children play freely regardless of their gender, race or faith. Prejudice and stereotypes are generally learnt via the grown-ups and/or media, where only a one-sided view of the world is presented,’ says Barnes.

‘When we witnessed a whole class of three-year-olds stand up after the teacher ▶

case study: Kelvinside Academy Nursery, Glasgow

‘We’ve achieved Gender Friendly Nursery accreditation through Glasgow City Council, but our work around gender equality has not finished,’ says nursery head teacher Tracy Nugent. ‘We’re continually reflecting on policy and practice along with training new staff and engaging with parents. It’s important to address gender equality at an early age because of the harm inequality can have as children get older. Working with parents as partners in this journey is important so children receive a consistent approach.’

‘As colleagues, we are critical friends to each other and point out our unconscious bias and question whether we could say or do things differently. For example, when talking to children we try to not put such a big emphasis on the way girls look or the way boys behave.’

‘We also challenge things the children say, such as that a certain colour is for girls when boys may like it too. We’ve purchased many books that turn stereotypes on their head, but if we are reading a book which contains more stereotypical roles or images, staff now have

the confidence to question the stereotypical contents such as whether it’s right that the female is the one being rescued by a prince. It’s all about having the awareness and confidence to engage in these discussions and challenge the stereotypes.’

‘We reviewed our wording and expectations around nursery and school uniform. Previously we would have provided information regarding the uniform for girls and boys. Now we provide information about the two types of uniform and children are able to make choices about which they wear. We’ve also looked at our communication with parents to ensure there are no biases or assumptions around family make-up. Through our resources and

pictures we aim to show different families – two mums, two dads or single parents, rather than just a mum and a dad, to make sure children are open to those different combinations and demonstrate an accepting and inclusive attitude from an early age. We don’t currently have any male members of staff but, to try and counteract this, we make sure we portray men as carers in the displays around the nursery.’

‘We try to ensure that we’re recognising that every child is unique and that they have the freedom to be that unique person who is encouraged to follow their own interests and not be limited by societal expectations.’



asked all the boys to stand up, it was very clear that the young people had not learnt to segregate by gender. Keeping this gender-free approach can mitigate against stereotyping and allow us to be our authentic selves with no boundaries or expectations.'

Ruthven says early years practitioners are in a 'privileged position' because they can challenge and disrupt the gender norms before they are already fixed. 'We're never going to move people's thinking along if they are feeling defensive,' she says. 'It's not about saying that girls can't put on the Elsa dress or play fairies and we're not saying boys can't like football and playing with dinosaurs. We're not commenting on individual children's choices.'

Reducing gender stereotypes can't be done overnight because it is so ingrained in our culture and society, says Heywood. Instead Heywood and Adzajlic suggest early years practitioners start tackling gender stereotypes by discussing and addressing a number of areas:

- **Remember equity** Think about messages the world is sending and the experiences and opportunities being offered (or not) to certain groups of children. Do what you can to show them that it doesn't have to be that way. Equity – giving everyone what they need to succeed – is how we will achieve equality.
- **Think about representation** All children deserve to see people who look like them

and their family in all aspects of nursery life. Consider stories, books, songs and displays. Do they show all kinds of people in all different roles, including (importantly) non-stereotypical roles? Create opportunities for children to see and interact with as diverse a variety of people as possible.

- **Challenge gender stereotypes and help others to notice them** If we let gender stereotypes go unchallenged, we are doing nothing to tackle a culture where gender inequality continues to harm us all. You can gently challenge or help others to notice or understand stereotypes. For example, if you are reading a story to children and come across a stereotype, point it out, ask the children what they think, and explore it further.
- **Notice and work on your unconscious (and conscious) bias** We have all grown up in a culture which has sent us clear messages about gender roles – this can often impact our practice and interactions, sometimes without us even noticing. When we recognise we have these biases, we can do the work to prevent and address them. You shouldn't punish yourself, but remember that unconscious bias is still bias and you need to do better.
- **Chat with your colleagues and consider further training** Show colleagues this article, ask them their thoughts, and

FURTHER READING

- *Unlimited Potential: Report of the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood*, <https://bit.ly/3FWq8pg>
- *How to Transform Your School into an LGBT+ Friendly Place* by Dr Elly Barnes and Dr Anna Carlile
- *Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years: Changing the Narrative* by Barbara Adzajlic and Susie Heywood will be published in autumn 2022 by Speechmark and Routledge Education
- www.educateandcelebrate.org
- <https://liftinglimits.org.uk>
- <http://genderfriendly.co.uk>

discuss ways in which you might make changes in your setting. Taking time to reflect on the issues as a whole staff team can really help. Consider whether you would benefit from additional training on related issues. Remember that gender stereotypes are only one of many stereotypes and biases which children can face. By increasing our understanding and awareness, we can improve our practice in response. ■

case study: York Rise Nursery in Camden, north London

'It's always good to look at our practice and challenge it so we jumped at the chance to work with Lifting Limits this year,' says manager Becca Coles. 'We've been conscious of reducing gender stereotyping for some time, but we wanted to go deeper.'

'We started by sitting down as a team and considering the language that we use. We realised that some of our comments were unintentionally gender-specific, such as questioning, "What are you girls giggling about?" or "You boys are looking serious". Since then we've been correcting ourselves and each other.'

'Next we looked at the environment to see where children play and what they engage with. I thought maybe we'd see more physical play from boys, but that wasn't the case. We did notice a division around construction and small-world play. The boys were building walls and roads while girls tended to gravitate to the small-world houses or animals. We decided to merge the two areas and immediately



both genders started working together. Children were so engaged that they built a road all around the nursery using a wide range of resources, with both genders working, planning and building together. It had a big impact.

'We looked at our resources, including books, puzzles and posters to ensure there was equal and fair gender representation. With the dressing-up box, boys have always been happy to try on all the clothes, but many girls only wanted to wear pretty princess dresses. We discussed this and decided to take away all the



prescriptive outfits and provide a range of materials instead – from glittery to tartan and plain.

This was a success with children making their own costumes, including many girls in tartan victory capes.

'We have conversations with parents about what their children are doing and the skills they are developing. Sometimes we have to challenge their views, such as a family that was rigid that it will be the boy who earns money, but we'll continue discussing this. We were talking about occupations today. Many children wanted to be mummies and daddies, but we also had girls wanting to be scientists and boys wanting to be nurses. Things are changing.'