



# IMPROVING GENDER BALANCE SCOTLAND

## An action guide for early learning and childcare practitioners

Children receive and absorb gender-stereotyped messages about what they can and cannot do as a girl or as a boy from a very early age.

For example, toy manufacturers often market more aggressive toys to boys and more passive toys to girls, construction activities to boys and creative ones to girls. In picture books, women and girls are often portrayed as performing more domestic tasks while men are largely under-represented as parents. These stereotypes are unhelpful for both boys and girls.

By the time children enter early learning settings they may already be developing gender based expectations of behaviours, academic preferences and perceived abilities. These stereotypical views can shape their attitudes to relationships, participation in the world of work and affect their wellbeing. A narrowing of experiences at this stage too often evolves into a narrowing of opportunities later in life. For example, by secondary school, boys tend to lag behind girls in literacy and language skills and girls are still largely under-represented in areas such as computing, engineering and physics.

Although the problem is multifaceted, Early Learning and Childcare Practitioners have an important role to play in challenging these views before they become too ingrained. While children should not be coerced into any activity, adopting the attitude that children are able to choose whatever they want for themselves will not counteract the problem. Many children self-select out of certain activities based on their observations of what is appropriate.

It is crucial that children are given the opportunity and encouragement to access all areas of the curriculum from this early stage so they have equality of opportunity in the future. Early Years practitioners are expert in focusing on the needs of an individual child and being child-led. This action guide provides some ideas for how to challenge gender stereotypes without losing the child-centred approach.



### A Tackling your own unconscious bias – self-reflective actions

We all have unconscious biases, and it's important to be aware of these in our interactions with children.

They affect the ways we interact differently with girls and boys, the assumptions we make and the advice and directions we give them. Although admitting and dealing with your own biases can be challenging, it is essential to identify, reflect on, and discuss them openly with colleagues.

Having an unconscious gender bias does not automatically make a person sexist – everyone has biases to some degree as a result of years of exposure to gendered patterns. The good news is that once you become aware of your biases you can do something about them. By shifting thinking gradually over time, a person can adopt new habits and perspectives to help counteract any bias behaviour.



**Are you aware of your own unconscious biases? Take the Harvard Implicit Association test to discover your unconscious preferences here:**

### Reflective questions:

- **What assumptions might you unconsciously make about which types of activities and curricular areas girls and boys prefer?**
  - **Do you expect and/or accept different behaviour from boys and girls, for example, quieter behaviour from girls and more boisterous behaviour from boys?**
  - **When children are participating in activities that are traditionally associated with their own gender, do you encourage them more?**
- For example, do you encourage boys to climb and explore, but urge girls doing the same types of activity to be careful? Do you console girls when they hurt themselves, but encourage boys to be brave? If so, how can you encourage more equal development of confidence and resilience?**
- **Are you aware of what you praise children for? For example, do you praise boys more than girls for their ideas or achievements or girls more than boys for the way they look and for playing 'nicely'?**

## B. In the ELCC setting - actions for engaging with the children

There are a number of easy to implement ideas that can help counteract gender stereotypes. The following suggestions were developed and/or observed as part of the IGB Scotland project.

### B.1. Encourage children to use all areas of the setting



**It might be useful to start by observing the patterns of use of different areas of the setting. Are there activities dominated by one group of children and avoided by another?**

The block play area of the setting can be dominated by boys.

Try changing the dynamic by:

- Adding some elements for imaginative play such as toy figures, small tiles, and electric tea lights or taping pictures of the children onto individual blocks. These might facilitate girls who often like to develop a narrative with their construction, and might encourage boys to do the same.
- Using a whiteboard, books and other sources to encourage children to plan for what they are making.
- Holding discussions with children about their planning e.g., “How high does it need to be?” and “Let’s get the tape measure out” to develop confidence and STEM skills.

Quieter activities such as book reading, craft and exploring the ‘home corner’, may be more appealing to girls and regularly avoided by some boys. Consider whether there are things you could change or add to encourage all children to access these activities, such as:

- Making sure those areas have a range of themes, colours and objects.
- Positively commenting on boys exploring in the home area - they also need to role-play caring and domesticity.
- Thinking about how literacy can be introduced in any area in the setting. For example, encourage mark making, the first step towards writing, by having post-it notes for children to draw on and label to strengthen other activities.

### B.2. Explore gender roles during circle time



**Even at a young age children can respond well to discussions about what is and is not acceptable for girls and boys to do, wear or say. During circle time try challenging traditional gender stereotypes by:**

- Flipping standard roles in traditional rhymes and songs eg In “Miss Polly had a dolly who was sick, sick, sick...” the doctor could be a she instead of a he, and so on.
- Asking children to sort toys (without mentioning gender) and discussing the logic and reasoning with them afterwards eg, “Would all girls like the girl toys? Might any boys like them?” “What makes it a girl’s toy?” “Why does being blue make it a boy’s toy?”

### B.3. Discuss stereotypes in books



**You could discuss stereotypes in the standard texts by asking the children questions about the story and characters:**

- Is it ok for dads to stay at home and look after the baby? Does anyone know a dad who looks after children?
- What does it mean to be brave? Can girls be brave?
- Can mums have jobs?
- Can women be firefighters? Can men be teachers?

You could also choose texts specifically for their ability to challenge perceptions of who can do what. There are many to choose from. Some recommendations are:

- My Mummy is an Engineer/a Scientist/a Plumber by Kerrine Bryan & Jason Bryan.
- The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch
- Dogs Don’t Do Ballet by Anna Kemp & Sarah Ogilvie
- Rosie’s Hat by Julia Donaldson and Anna Currey.
- The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires.

#### B.4. Set up a child-led fair play group



**You could enable a small group of children to focus on unintentional gender messages in the setting by establishing a child working group.**

Membership could rotate every term. Encourage the children to observe the environment and, if necessary, make suggestions for changes. Sharing their observations with parents (or allowing the children to do so) can be particularly effective.

The children could investigate by:

- Looking at clothes and fabrics in the dressing up area – is there a range of fabrics and accessories that could be incorporated into imaginative play to go beyond the stereotyped princesses and superheroes?
- Looking at the range and representation of figures in the imaginative play areas – is there an equal mix of both male and female characters?
- Looking at wall displays – is there a range of positive role models for girls and boys? Are both men and women portrayed in a range of roles in the workplace and in the home?



#### Reflective questions:

- **Are there any areas of the setting that tend to be dominated by one group more than another?**
- **Are you aware of any children who tend to limit themselves to a narrow selection of curricular activities?**
- **How might activities be structured or presented to encourage children who might not otherwise choose them to explore more widely?**
- **When selecting toys, resources and rhymes for use, do they challenge traditional gender stereotypes?**



### C. Whole ELCC setting ethos – actions that your organisation can take

There are some steps you can take with colleagues to ensure a setting-wide approach to tackling gender stereotypes.

- C.1. Gently challenge expressions of stereotypes or the beginnings of sexist language.
- C.2. Encourage staff, during child observations, to note any behaviours that differ for boys and girls, or instances of children policing toys according to gender. Encourage staff to also be aware of their own unconscious bias and the possible impacts on children's choices and behaviours.
- C.3. Ensure there is regular space for discussion around gender stereotyping at team meetings.

#### Reflective questions

- **Do staff feel comfortable challenging children's statements that generalise how girls/boys do or do not behave? Eg, "That's for girls", "we don't want boys here", and so on.**
- **Do staff assume non-traditional roles when they join in play?**
- **Do both staff and children feel able to challenge inappropriate choice of language (in an age-appropriate way)?**
- **Do staff feel able to challenge each other constructively? Is there an ethos of open, safe and collaborative working to support this?**

## D. Communicating with parents and carers

When making changes within the learning environment it is important to engage families in the process to avoid any misunderstandings about the rationale for changes at the setting.

It's also important to avoid giving the impression that any of the changes being instigated are in any way a comment on parenting choices. You could involve parents and carers by:

- Explaining rationale through newsletters or social media, at family learning sessions or informally at the daily drop-offs and pick-ups.
- Adding suggestions to story sacks to prompt and support parents to challenge gender stereotypes.
- Explicitly inviting male parents/carers to participate in activities to counteract the perception that only women care or nurture, particularly if the setting is predominantly staffed by women.

### Reflective questions:

- **Are all parents/carers aware of the ethos of the setting in relation to counteracting stereotypes?**
- **Do children come to the setting dressed appropriately for messy play? Is the rationale for this expectation communicated to parents/carers?**
- **Do you feel able to raise awareness among parents/carers on issues of gender stereotyping and present alternative viewpoints where appropriate?**
- **Do you ensure that dads/grandfathers as well as mums/grandmothers get information and are invited to be involved in the setting?**

By tackling unconscious bias individually and through whole centre discussions on gender stereotypes with children, colleagues and parents, we can create lifelong opportunities that extend beyond traditional barriers from an early age.

## Useful links

- **Just Like a Child, Zero Tolerance**  
A guide to preventing gender stereotyping in the early years,
- **Breaking the Mould, National Union of Teachers**  
Resources to counteract gender stereotypes in early learning and primary settings,
- **Let Toys be Toys**  
A campaign to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys,
- **Closing Doors, Institute of Physics**  
A statistical study exploring the links between gender and subject choice,
- **Career Education Standard**  
Education Scotland guidance on embedding employability skills in 3-18 learning (with a focus on equality and diversity),

