

**How gender can
influence a child's
ability to thrive in a
diverse society**

Contents

Abstract	1
Inclusion in the Early Years	1
The concept of gender as an inequality	2
Can physical differences create excuses for behaviour?	2
The law surrounding the concept of gender as an inequality	3
Best practice for Early Years Settings	4
Conclusion	4
References	6

Abstract

Inclusion is considered a difficult word to define (Andreasen, 2014 and Savage, 2015). This report will cover the concept of gender as an inequality for children. Brain development is considered and discussed as a potential for the difference in behaviour between boys and girls, yet there is no physical evidence yet to prove this (Rivers, 2011), meaning, in a nature versus nurture debate, the nurture side is more prominent in giving evidence for the way in which language and advertising of children's toys affects their behaviour (Bluiett, 2018; Owen, 2016). This report also discusses best practice in regards to practitioners within settings and how this can affect children's views on gender stereotypes.

Inclusion in the Early Years

Inclusion is considered a powerful, yet difficult word to define (Andreasen, 2014 and Savage, 2015). The idea of inclusion is to accept every student's individual learning needs; however, some view it as having to conform to the 'normal' way of learning (Andreasen, 2014). This makes it difficult to impose on everyday learning for teachers who need to create different lesson plans for different learning styles present in the classroom (Andreasen, 2014). In terms of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the concept of the 'Individual Child' means that practitioners must take into account every child's individual learning needs (Early Education, 2017). Under the inclusion section of the National Curriculum for primary schools, individual needs are recognised in terms of children with disabilities and children with English as an additional language (DfE, 2013). However, there is no mention of children without disabilities or those who have English as their first language. Comparing this to the EYFS (Early Education, 2017), where all children's individual needs are taken into account to ensure inclusion occurs, the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) is somewhat lacking in their approach to the inclusion of all children.

In order to devise a holistic piece of legislation for all forms of equality, the Equality Act (2010) was created. Within this, the importance of equality within the Early Years can be seen, as practitioners cannot discriminate against a child on the basis of age, gender, disability or religion (*Equality Act 2010*). Therefore, settings must now make reasonable adjustments in anticipation of a child starting at the setting instead of waiting until they arrive. For example, a child who is a wheelchair user would require a ramp in order to be able to access a setting with steps. This ramp would need to be built in response to the setting not being inclusive for everyone, rather than waiting until the child starts. This should come as naturally as the setting providing toilets for both girls and boys as they cannot discriminate against the gender of a child.

The concept of gender as an inequality

Despite the biological differences separating one sex from another, the identity of a person goes deep into their upbringing and how their culture views gender (Weinclaw, 2017). A study by Cohen (2009) points out the important role which schools play in ensuring children learn to behave in a socially acceptable manner. These socially acceptable behaviours often stem from the society's expectations of gender roles and, therefore, the responsibility rests on the school to ensure that children understand their place in society (Cohen, 2009). However, with this responsibility comes the opportunity to educate children about how to accept behaviour from all genders in order to encourage inclusive views as children grow – as noted by Savage and Brodie (2015), who also mentioned that it is not just teachers in schools who have a duty to create holistic views for the children, but also those in Early Years settings. With almost all pre-school aged children in some form of child care (Savage and Brodie, 2015), and the coincidence of discovering their own gender identity at this age (Bluiett, 2018; Halim *et al.*, 2013), practitioners have a duty to ensure that children are not unfairly excluded from anything based upon their gender (*Equality Act 2010*) to ensure the development of children with a holistic view on how to approach gender stereotypes which they will encounter throughout their life (Savage and Brodie, 2015).

When these perceptions become unequal, the prospective outcomes of children differ depending on their upbringing. A case study looking at how teachers treated the children in the class in terms of their expectations revealed that boys are expected to be livelier and more outgoing compared to girls, and that girls should display a neat appearance (Bhana, 2009). This subconscious expectation could be argued to derive from sayings such as “boys will be boys” and “good girl”, which create beliefs about how children should behave and where we can excuse certain behaviours (Bhana, 2009). In an Early Years setting, boys are expected to take up more of the teacher's attention due to their outgoing behaviour (Bhana, 2009). However, this could have an impact on the girls' ability to thrive in the environment – studies have shown the negative impact that this can have on their academic achievement (Sax, 2005).

A study carried out in Pakistan, where the concept of gender still very much reflects that of a traditional father-breadwinner, mother-homekeeper approach; suggests that all-girls schools provide the opportunity for girls to learn in an environment free from the stigma of subjects being for certain genders and allows all the girls to thrive in confidence (Baig, 2015).

Can physical differences create excuses for behaviour?

Male and female brains differ slightly in terms of how they react to stimulus in the environment. The parietal lobe of the brain, the part involved in “spatial and mathematic reasoning” (Rivers, 2011, p. 17), is slightly larger in boys than girls which could explain the

reason for boys achieving better outcomes in the STEM subjects (Rivers, 2011). In comparison, on average, girls perform better across all subjects at school and not purely the STEM subjects (Mcmaster, 2017). Another physical difference is that the average girl reaches maximum brain capacity four years before boys. Despite some studies claiming this makes a difference to their academic achievement, there is no evidence to make this theory viable (Rivers, 2011).

Hart (1996, cited in Montgomery, 2017, p. 1152) suggests that gender stereotypes affect the way in which children learn emotional behaviour, discussing how girls are more likely to be exposed to behaviour which encourages them to help others – to put others first – compared with boys who are more likely to become the leader but not display their emotions. These differences link back to the subconscious expectations that come from the way we talk to children when they are young. The saying ‘boys will be boys’ is essentially excusing them from the behaviours which encourage leadership qualities, yet simultaneously suppressing these abilities in girls (Bhana, 2009; Montgomery, 2017). ‘Daddy’s little girl’ (Richardson, 2015, pp2) suggests that girls cannot be independent of their fathers and rely on them for their financial support – a frequent stressor which fathers feel responsible for (Montgomery, 2017).

The law surrounding the concept of gender as an inequality

The Equality Act (2010) lays out the law for ensuring that a person’s gender is not discriminated against. In terms of Early Years settings, a practitioner cannot discriminate against a child based upon their gender. This could include withholding toys which they believe are for the opposite sex, or giving one gender less work to do only based upon their gender and not their actual academic achievement. As is shown above, it is a common stereotype that boys should be given more independence and that girls require more guidance (Bhana, 2009). In an Early Years setting, if a girl for example wanted to climb a tree – something which is stereotypically more common in boys, they cannot be held back from wanting to do this due to their gender (*Equality Act 2010*) and the practitioner should encourage the child to challenge the stereotypes which could, potentially, hold them back in the future (Savage and Brodie, 2015). When a child is prevented from being able to carry out any activity they wish, it affects their ability to thrive and can instil the gender stereotypes further into their development which could prevent them from wanting to attempt anything which is stereotypical of the other sex (Bluiett, 2018).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF UK, 2010) includes a clause to protect children against discrimination. Article 2 of the UNCRC (UNICEF UK, 2010, p. 4) ensures that children are not to be discriminated against based upon their gender and, alongside Article 13 (UNICEF UK, 2010, p. 5) which states that children have the right to express themselves, practitioners cannot prevent a child from wanting to go against the gender stereotypes. However, despite legislation (*Equality Act, 2010*; UNICEF UK, 2010)

making it illegal to discriminate against a child based upon their gender, low-level exclusions still occur on a daily basis. A practitioner's own upbringing and biases can affect the way that they interact with a child in a setting. An example given by Bluiett (2018) highlights the importance of being aware of the language used when talking to a group of children. She notes the difference between asking children to line up using clear, ungendered vocabulary, for example "let's all line up" (Bluiett, 2018, pp 40) and using gendered slang such as "line up guys" (Bluiett, 2018, pp 40). By removing the gendered connotation of the sentence, the teacher has remained inclusive to the whole class and has not, potentially unintentionally, encouraged the children to use the word "guys" in their everyday language and play, which could be considered an exclusive term, only referring to the male gender (Bluiett, 2018).

Best practice for Early Years Settings

Despite countries, such as Sweden, having an explicit emphasis on gender equality policies, children's toys are still considered incredibly influential in terms of encouraging gender stereotypes (Spinner *et al*, 2018). In terms of an Early Years setting, children are exposed to a range of stereotypes in terms of the toys which the setting provides and in doing so, are influenced by these toys to instil the stereotypes further. Studies (Hinitz and Hewes, 2011) have shown that children absorb gender stereotypes as young as 2 years old due to the clothes and toys they are given by adults who already have a concept of stereotypes.

Research on how children's toys are advertised suggests that most toys aimed at girls are featured inside the home, often as domestic roles; this can be compared to toys aimed at boys which often occur outside the home, encouraging action, aggression and often showing signs of construction and destruction (Owen, 2016). A best practice approach for a practitioner would be to encourage children to partake in both levels of activities by having specific indoor and outdoor time so the children have time to interact with each other in both environments without either sex taking over the play led in the different situations.

The Steiner Waldorf approach embraces the concept of using natural materials and wooden objects (Paschen, 2014). For children, these objects are not coloured using stereotypical boy's or girl's colours and encourage children to play together without the fear of judgement they might receive from other children, as has been witnessed in settings (Bluiett, 2018). For a setting trying to encourage this holistic approach towards gender equality, bringing these wooden and natural toys into the setting could help achieve this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gender is a subject which is often discriminated against, despite legislation making it illegal (*Equality Act 2010*; UNICEF UK, 2010). Children are bombarded from an early age with gender stereotyped toys and are taught to behave in certain ways which follow the rules of their gender (Cohen, 2009). Settings find it difficult to manage these behaviours and often excuse them with sayings such as 'boys will be boys' (Bhana, 2009),

despite the fact that the physical differences between boys and girls have not yet had any evidence to show that they make a difference to behaviour (Rivers, 2011). There are different approaches that practitioners can follow in order to encourage best practice in their settings; however, the language they use makes a big impact on how the children view their gender and those of the opposite gender (Bluiett, 2018).

References

Aina, O. E. and Cameron, P. A. (2011) 'Why does gender matter? Counteracting stereotypes with young children', *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 39, pp. 11-19.

Andreasen, F. E. (2014) *Inclusion: teachers' perspectives and practices*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Baig, A. (2015) 'Exploring the contribution of teaching and learning processes: constructing students' gender identity in an Early Years classroom of a government girls primary school in Pakistan', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(3), pp. 1-17.

Bhana, D. (2009) "'Boys will be boys": what do early childhood teachers have to do with it?', *Educational Review*, 61(3), pp. 327–339.

Bluiett, T. E. (2018) 'The language of play and gender-role stereotypes', *Education*, 139(1), pp. 38–42.

Cohen, D. S. (2009) 'No boy left behind – single-sex education and the essentialist myth of masculinity', *Indiana Law Journal*, 84(1), pp. 135-188.

Department for Education (2013) *The national curriculum in England Key stages 1 and 2 framework document*. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425601/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf (Accessed: 14 November 2018).

Early Education (2017) *Statutory framework for the Early Years foundation stage*. Available at:

https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2017/03/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf (Accessed: 14 November 2018).

Equality Act 2010, c. 15. Available at:

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/pdfs/ukpga_20100015_en.pdf (Accessed: 14 November 2018).

Halim, M. L., Ruble, D., Tamis-LeMonda, C., and Shrout, P. E. (2013) 'Rigidity in gender-typed behaviors in early childhood: a longitudinal study of ethnic minority children', *Child Development*, 84, pp. 1269–1284.

Hinitz, B.F. and Hewes, D. W. (2011) 'Practical applications from the history of gender and early childhood education', in Jacobson, T. (ed.) *Perspectives on gender in early childhood*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf, pp. 21-37.

McMaster, N. C. (2017) 'Who studies STEM subjects at A level and degree in England? An investigation into the intersections between students' family background, gender and ethnicity in determining choice', *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(3), pp. 528–553.

Montgomery, J. E., Chaviano, C. L., Rayburn, A. D., and McWey, L. M. (2017) 'Parents at-risk and their children: intersections of gender role attitudes and parenting practices', *Child and Family Social Work*, 22(3), pp. 1151–1160.

Owen, P. and Padron, M. (2016) 'The language of toys: gendered language in toy advertisements', *Journal of Research on Women and Gender*, 6, pp. 67-80.

Paschen, H. (2014) 'Waldorf education and Rudolf Steiner schools as a topic of educational science', *Croatian Journal Educational*, 16(1), pp. 191–204.

Savage, K. and Brodie, K. (2015) . London: Routledge.

Sax, L. (2005) *Why gender matters*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Spinner, L, Cameron, L, and Calogero, R, (2018) 'Peer toy play as a gateway to children's gender flexibility: the effect of (counter) stereotypic portrayals of peers in children's magazines', *Springer Open Choice*, 79, (5–6), pp. 314–328.

UNICEF UK (2010) *The United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. Available at: http://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary.pdf (Accessed: 6 January 2019).

Wienclaw, R. A. (2017) *Salem Press Encyclopedia: gender differences: biology and culture*.

Available at:

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=89185491&site=eds-live>

(Accessed: 6 January 2019)