

# **Supporting Gender Identity in the Early Years**

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With society becoming increasingly more fluid (Hines, 2018; Perry et al. 2019), the practitioner's attention should be drawn to encouraging the healthy growth of gender identity in early childhood, with self-actualisation being a primary concern for children's wellbeing (Maslow, 1943).

I will present the conversation of gender identity in the early years whilst giving practical suggestions for practitioners to implement in language or physical activities, using psychology and traditional theory to aid my discussion. Practitioners should be aware that educating oneself on gender identity and the correct pronouns is of the utmost importance before structuring settings surrounding the growth of gender identity in the individual child.

Early years professions are being respected more in recent years, primarily due to lockdown affecting families (UNICEF UK, 2020) and qualifications are being raised along with expectations as the government realises the importance of this sector concerning the economy (ecsdn, 2021; Shukry, 2017). We cannot rely on this growth alone as the government's primary concern seems to be commodification and marketisation of education (Shukry, 2017; Dixon, 2010). Therefore, it is the practitioner's responsibility to bring back the humanism of the sector in this new push for identity growth in society. By law, practitioners must do all they can to promote equality in the workplace (gov.uk, 2010), so the conversation of gender identity is incredibly valuable and necessary in the early years.

Whether working with LGBTQ+ parents, supporting a child through social gender transitioning or more everyday things like avoiding stereotypical, binary language such as 'pretty dress for a pretty girl' and 'big strong boy', everything makes a significant impact (Hines, 2018). Olson et al. 2016 supports this as their research shows the mental health of children who are supported in their gender identity is significantly better than those not. Practitioners will encounter opportunities to encourage flourishing; this supports self-actualisation and therefore gender identity because it occurs when development is most expressive (Narvaez, 2016).

The NSPCC website is a helpful resource to start thinking about how we can support a child in their identity expression through active listening and giving the child as much autonomy as possible (NSPCC, 2021). Early years framework should include key steps such as those listed by the NSPCC. This way, all practitioners are working towards a shared goal for the sake of the child's wellbeing.

In my experience, conversations surrounding gender identity can be uncomfortable but necessary and rewarding. Practitioner concerns of being politically incorrect could prevent valuable conversations surrounding these issues. Despite this, politics cannot be avoided in early years settings as our work is inherently political. Consequently, it is essential to be educated and have compassion in today's climate to work with families more effectively for the child's sake (DfE, 2021).

This need for collaboration is recognised throughout the sector and in broader society as the Children Act that the UNCRC is based on is globally accepted (gov.uk, 2004), the early years foundation stage and development matters documents are based on children's rights and reflect the freedom of expression with the unique child in mind (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012; DfE, 2021). Overall, practitioners must have qualifications that reflect a core understanding of holistic development and collaboration in practice. Collaboration should place the child at the centre, with practitioners valuing the child's voice (Dunlop & Fabian 2007; O'Farrelly & Hennessy 2014; O, Conner, 2017), especially when it comes to the child's identity. Children have more autonomy with their own gender identity in the UK today, as the psychological damage that restricts children and parents' decisions about their identity is being recognised by the courts (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2021).

Gender affects every aspect of a person's life (Hines, 2018; Miller, 2016). First, it is essential to remember that one's sex refers to their biological attribute, whereas gender refers to the socially constructed role we assign to a person (Hines, 2018; Parker, 2016). Many scientists see gender

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as a combination of biological and social systems, with gender not wholly fixed (Hines, 2018). Gender identity is an individualised process of how one sees themselves (NSPCC, 2021).

One of the main concerns of opening this conversation in the early years sector is that it is of a sexual nature (Oswalt, 2021). However, gender identity and development of sexuality occur from the earliest stages in one's life, with gender labelling between children occurring as early as 3 (Kohlberg cited in Fagot et al. 1985; Neary & Cross, 2018).

Psychological perspectives can help us understand gender identity. As psychology is already valued in the early years sector, we can develop contemporary conversation. Behaviourists emphasise the role of the environment in shaping our behaviour and self (Wanderson, 2016), a process that can be labelled as socialisation (Szkrybalo, 1998; Benson, 2001). If we apply this concept to practice, we can encourage identity expression in children, as everything we do and say impacts how they express themselves. However, behaviourists subscribe to the dominant ideology which in this discussion is the restrictively stereotypical approach to sex and gender, therefore we must be critical when applying these theories.

Equally, practitioners are likely to be familiar with Bandura's modelling theory and how the adult role impacts the child. If we can take the time to understand this, then we can consider his theory of gender development as modelling is a crucial part of gender stereotyping (Martin et al. 2004). These stereotypes are a limitation of societies full potential (Hines, 2018), they prevent students from taking subjects they are talented in at school out of fear of being judged (Makarova et al., 2019).

We can utilise these theories to inform our planning of activities in early years settings through tools such as the identity box activity in which I designed in my second year of university. The process of creating the box is a journey where the adult supports the child in feeling comfortable within their identity to reach self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Ivtzan et al. mirror this idea of achieving wellbeing through self-fulfilment, in which they cite Levinson's idea of Identity formation (Levinson cited in Ivtzan et al., 2013). Forming identity is also mentioned in article 8 of the UNCRC (UNICEF UK, 1989).

Ivtzan also states that failure to work at one's issues with identity results in relationships that lack emotional depth which is why this activity can be the beginning of an open conversation between adult and child to access self-realisation as Carl Jung would say (Parker, 2009). Throughout this conversation, practitioners are responsible for broadening their creativity and sensitivity towards approaching these issues by utilising resources and language awareness. This idea synthesises with the Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (EYFS), especially in the understanding the world section (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012; DfE, 2021) as it models the openness that they need to bring to everyday interactions.

Moreover, children must experience a level of familiarity to ease the anxiety of liminality, according to Leigh & Wilson, (2020), as this journey of self can feel unsafe. Turner 1967 states that gender transitioning can bring about the feeling of being betwixt and between as it likens to the liminal period during a rite of passage. The identity box was designed to alleviate this discomfort as Olson et al. research in (2016) shows significantly higher rates of anxiety and other mental health issues in transgender children.

Partnership with parents is vital in encouraging identity expression. It is the goal that the identity box is created with the child's home environment in mind, culture, and sense of belonging which fulfils the graduate practitioner competency of working with families. Children whose social gender transition is not supported by their family may find comfort in this activity as they may not feel this sense of belonging and identity at home. This is in line with the EYFS, (DfE 2021) as it helps the child become familiar with the setting and aims to build a relationship with their parents. The EYFS does not give guidance on these situations so practitioners must find a way to access this communication relative to the circumstance. Keeping the child at the centre of this process gives

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rise to Article 13 freedom of expression and Article 14 freedom of thought, belief, and religion (UNICEF UK, 1989).

The adult needs to be sensitive to help children work through their frustration and feel at ease in their environment as they have the legal right to feel safe and heard (UNICEF UK, 1989). The child may benefit from their key person having a close relationship with the caregivers so that a working unit can be formed, ensuring their feeling of security. Psychologist Melanie Klein would have likely favoured this approach as they valued support systems, stating that they are necessary for healthy development (Wright, 2015). The system also fulfils competency '7.1 Evidence understanding of the importance of partnership with parents and caregivers in their role as infants and young children's first educators.' (Graduate Practitioner Competencies 2020:4). It also aligns with the development matters document which stresses the importance of working with the family and building a functional relationship for the sake of the child (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012).

The identity box process could take place between an adult and a child about 40-60 months. In development matters, it describes this age as 'Confident to speak to others about their own needs, wants, interests and opinions. Can describe self in favourable terms and talk about abilities' (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012:11). However, research shows that children start being vocal about what they identify as by three years of age therefore the activity is easily adaptable to any age (Neary & Cross, 2018).

Throughout this process, we deviate from the idea of the adult being the more knowledgeable other because the child is given room to show how they express themselves. The use of language is essential, as Dunlop 2007, O'Farrelly & Hennessy 2014 and Conner 2017 say the child's voice is the most important during these periods. Uprichard 2008 affirms this with his notion that the goal is to make the child feel like a being instead of a becoming. This sense of agency is essential during the process where the child collects materials and photographs and decides every aspect of the box's design. Adapted by Montessori's directress theory, the adult's role is to ask questions that supports this process (Lillard, 2016). If the child needs more support, the adult could work on their own box beside them, saying things such as 'I am using this colour because it makes me feel ...', mirroring the idea of Bandura's Modelling (Martin et al. 2004). This allows the adult to learn from the child so that open communication can flourish and a better relationship with families can be built.

It is important to be mindful of how we plan these activities as we do not want the child to feel like a victim or outcast. This can be avoided by taking them into a quiet area away from the other children as well as including some of their friends. Furthermore, open discussions and updates with families are needed, as well as a letter home explaining the importance of this process for the child's health and options for families to be assured that their child will not be included so that the partnership with families can be maintained.

There is no direct reference to the transgender struggle within the Development matters 2012 document, or the 2021 EYFS. With the government neglecting these issues in the early years, practitioners can find direction within research and attend events from Schools Out UK and utilise advice from the Tavistock clinic, all of which informed my work.

In terms of educational resources for practitioners, a must-have for understanding gender identity is Sally Hine's clear and easily readable 'Is Gender Fluid?' Resources like this are a significant contribution to the new world that we are working towards. This simple knowledge could prevent you from using the wrong pronouns and being respectful could make someone's whole week as well as modelling how we should treat people so that our children can lead by example.

These are accessible and practical ways that we can encourage gender identity expression in early years settings. However, we have a significant blind spot in safeguarding policy and an overall framework that prevents full flourishing in child development by not giving specific attention to gender identity and LGBTQ+ struggles. The framework for supporting a child with

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their gender identity should take the structure of the NSPCC website. Any activities and resources surrounding gender identity should be designed to elicit comfort and alleviate identity struggles which harm the child's development. This process is educational for the child, other children around them and is reflective for the practitioners and family involved. These conversations and suggestions support the forefront of early years development matters which is the idea of the unique child. It gives a sense of regularity that children and adults miss out on within the liminality of development, as well as providing comfort amongst the unstable and unfamiliar feelings that the pandemic heightens.

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