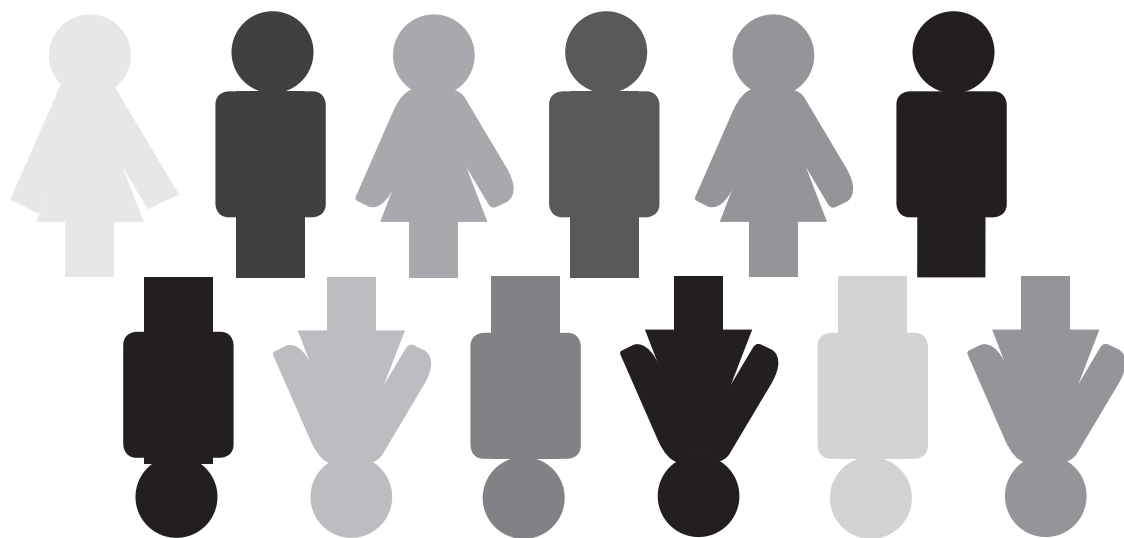


DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

An Introduction



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Gender and inclusion

Chapter overview

This chapter focuses on issues around inclusion in relation to gender and early childhood from the perspective of children, parents and practitioners. The stereotyping in early childhood settings is observed when children are denied access to specific resources, in how the setting is organised and the activities available. Male carers or fathers may feel ignored by the female practitioners or by mothers of other children, and male carers may be treated differently by other staff members and some parents. The rationale behind the experiences of children and adults (parents/carers and practitioners) in early childhood settings are explored in this chapter.



UNICEF (2011a: 11) has clarified that it is not enough for children to have physical access to educational settings, and explain: 'Children require not simply access to education but also equality of opportunity when in education and quality teaching to ensure enhanced learning outcomes and successful progression through education.'

Several reports highlight that girls have been excluded from education, facilities, accessing resources or curriculum. Although authentic sources claim that boys and girls have equal access to education (UNICEF, 2011b), these assertions may be shrouded by hidden discriminatory practices of practitioners as well as parents/carers. However, it is not only the practitioner but also parent(s) or carer(s)

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of the child, or even the child, who might prefer to be excluded from specific activities owing to their culture, religion, abilities and interests.

This chapter explores how children are excluded on the basis of their gender and what are the ways in which children can be excluded or included while conforming to orthodoxies or when challenging stereotypes. The attitudes and experiences of adults and children will influence the process of inclusion or exclusion. What are the reasons underlying the exclusion on the basis of gender? The rationale behind inclusion and exclusion on the basis of gender is influenced by several factors, such as media reports, past experiences, stereotypes, culture, expectations, peer pressure, and so on. Theories around gender identify how they influence inclusion or exclusion. An attempt is made to outline the legislation around gender that will influence practice in settings. Examples of inclusion and exclusion in early childhood settings are illustrated. Debates and controversies around gender and inclusion are identified. The challenges of defying stereotypes around gender and enabling all children to access resources and activities in the settings are discussed.

Some food for thought

Does the gender of a child influence what it means to be a child, how a child plays, how society constructs childhood especially expectations from girls and boys? From the perspective of an early years practitioner, does it matter if the practitioner is a male or a female, do employers provide opportunities for women and men to become childcare practitioners, are men restricted in their roles and responsibilities towards children and their families? Do the stereotypical attitudes and beliefs of a practitioner influence their practice in relation to children and their family members?

There are also issues around a parent's perspective – are fathers and mothers treated the same by the practitioner? Do practitioners (who are traditionally female) prefer to communicate with men or women as carers of children and are they explicit about their attitudes on a day-to-day basis? What about single parents and same-sex couples?

What are the stereotypical ways in which gender is the basis for exclusion? Are children pushed towards conforming to the society's stereotypes? What is the major influence – is it nature or nurture that drives a child to be compliant to the expectations of the society? Is it possible to mould a child to challenge the stereotypes dictated by

the society? What is the impact of media and technology, peer group, local cultures and expectations of the society on inclusion and exclusion on children?

Contexts of inclusion and exclusion

It is important to clarify the differences between gender and sex as these terms are used interchangeably. These concepts have been defined from social and biological perspectives.

Sex and gender

The term 'sex' usually refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that are used to define men and women. 'Gender' on the other hand, is a socially constructed concept relating to roles, acceptable behaviour, and activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Male and female are sex categories, while masculine and feminine are gender categories. Owing to the differences in culture, aspects of gender may vary greatly in different societies, while aspects of sex will not vary generally between different societies. It is more common to use gender differences as a blanket term for sex and gender differences.

It has been realised that gender and sex are often used in literature by authors and practitioners interchangeably with similar meaning. However, it will be useful to clarify the meaning of these two concepts and how these two concepts are defined from sociological as well as biological perspectives.

A definition from the World Health Organization (WHO) clearly distinguishes between gender and sex. "Gender" is used to describe those characteristics of women and men, which are socially constructed, while sex refers to those which are biologically determined. People are born female or male but learn to be girls and boys who grow into women and men. This learned behaviour makes up gender identity and determines gender roles' (World Health Organization, 2002: 4).



Points for reflection

- What are the ways in which a child, a practitioner or a parent can be included or excluded in an early childhood setting? Reflect on your childhood experiences and discuss the ways in which boys and girls were included or excluded in a setting.

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Continued

- Consider the factors that influenced or caused a barrier.
- How does your reflection on your childhood experiences of inclusion and exclusion compare with the experience of children in the contemporary context? What are the significant differences?
- Presentation of activities and layout of environment can restrict access by children (boys/girls) due to stereotyping.
- Girls or boys are usually engaged in gender stereotypical play.
- Attitudes of employers and parents can prevent a male practitioner from being recruited or taking a specific caring role.
- Practitioners may stereotype parents' role in care of their children – mothers are given more opportunities to access information about their child; fathers are overlooked by female practitioners.
- Parents prefer a female practitioner to a male practitioner to take care of their child/ren.

Parents may tend to encourage stereotypical play and not be happy about challenging stereotypes. Some parents insist on their children (especially boys) being involved in traditional stereotypical activities in an early years setting. Girls are encouraged to play with dolls and 'home-making' types of play. They are also encouraged to be less active than boys, for example, sitting colouring/looking at books – and not getting their clothes messy! Girls who play against their stereotype are labelled 'tomboys'. Girls engaged in non-stereotypical activities are widely accepted whereas several parents express reservations when boys do the same.



Activity

What are the expectations for girls and boys in different societies/countries? Relate this to behaviour, dress code, play and education. How does it change in different generations and in different cultures as well as geographical locations?

Chat with people from different generations, cultures and countries about their childhood and analyse the impact of external factors and differences in the expectations for boys and girls.

Discuss any stereotypes that promoted exclusion. Were girls and boys excluded from specific situations? How did it influence the child's holistic development?

It is common practice to have gender-based stereotypical expectations of children, for practitioners as men or women and as parents. Children pick stereotypes from their environment – parents, early childhood settings, their peer group and early childhood practitioners – as role models. Practitioners and teachers may not be aware that they are excluding a child or stereotyping, as it has been a ‘normal’ practice. For example, a nursery teacher in a foundation stage would not have realised a 4-year-old child’s dilemma when she related the following to her parents at the end of the day: ‘When I was in nursery, our teacher asked us to copy a letter to Santa requesting a Christmas present. All children had to copy what the practitioner wrote on the board: girls – Barbie, and boys – a car!’ The child, a girl, further added that she really did not want a Barbie from Santa! Is this teacher promoting stereotyping and encouraging children to conform? A child’s own choice is not allowed, resulting in low self-respect and confidence. However, some settings are encouraging practitioners to be open and flexible, to change their practice by giving opportunities for children to express themselves positively.

Children and gender

Shepherd (2010) reports that girls as young as 4 believed that they are ‘cleverer, more successful and hardworking’ than boys. This belief is accepted by boys at a later age. The study further pointed to this supporting the principle of self-fulfilling prophecy that may be the reason for boys’ perceptions.

Freeman (2007) reports another study that demonstrated that children aged 3 years were able to distinguish between girls and boys. Five-year-old children were rigidly following gender stereotypes more than their 3-year-old counterparts. This may be a result of the response of their parents to their cross-gender play. Adults’ approval or disapproval of their children’s choice of toys or games may influence children’s stereotypical or non-stereotypical attitudes.

Are gifts for children stereotypical – driven by gender of the child? When a newborn baby is given gifts, do they have to be in gender-specific colours – pink for girls and blue for boys – is this hype created by society, media or markets?

Market research provides evidence of promoting gendered play. For example Mattel’s website (<https://shop.mattel.com/checkout/index.jsp?process=login>) has toys categorised under gender. Some of the examples include:

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Boy – Action figures and accessories, Electronics games and puzzles, Lifestyle party supplies, Role-play vehicles.

Girl – Dolls and accessories, Dress-up DVDs, Electronics games and Puzzles, Party supplies, Role-play apparel subscriptions.

Does this encourage children and their parents to stick to the limits suggested by Mattel? Further, when a toy shop is visited, sometimes it can be seen that toys for girls and boys are in separate locations and boldly coloured in pink and blue, forcing parents to comply with the traditional stereotypes. Is this pushing children to conform?

Practitioners and gender

Traditionally, childcare practitioners are predominantly females. Early childhood education remains one of the most gender-skewed of all occupations. This has been a global phenomenon with statistics pointing to 2–6 per cent male practitioners mainly involved as play workers or in after-school clubs or as childcare practitioners in outdoor settings (Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), 2009). At least 9 per cent of settings employ at least one male childcare practitioner. Lack of male childcare practitioners has been reported not only in the UK but all over the world. In developing and underdeveloped countries a male childcare practitioner is not even considered an option. As working in childcare has not traditionally been considered as a job for men, several governments are challenging the stereotype by inviting men to work in childcare settings. The reasons for poor recruitment of men as childcare practitioners are that it is non-traditional, has low pay and poor status, there are fears for the safety of children and the stigma of possibly being a paedophile.

Women are overrepresented in the early childhood workforce as well as in primary schools. For example, in the Netherlands 85 per cent of the teachers are women; in the UK it is 86 per cent and in Denmark 76 per cent (Peeters, 2007). In 2002 the government of the Flemish community of Belgium approved new regulations recommending childcare settings to hire males as well as females, as well as ethnic minorities, as childcare workers, and increased the salaries in the day-care centres by 30 per cent. The government has replaced the name with a more gender-neutral name for the care profession. The reference to care in the name of the worker was replaced by a more pedagogic word, '*kinderverzorger*' or 'child carer' became '*kinderbegeleider*' or 'companion of children'.

In order to support new male childcare practitioners, a number of local authorities in the UK offer a male mentor to new male childcare workers/teachers and student trainees. In Norway the male childcare workers have their own association that organises meetings and social activities where trainees and experienced childcare workers can meet and talk about their work (Hauglund, 2005, cited by Peeters, 2007). In Belgium and New Zealand, all male childcare practitioners were invited to a meeting and a national network for male teachers is being set up.

Another interesting example from Belgium (cited by Peeters, 2007) illustrated how early childhood training could be made more attractive to men by modifying the pedagogue course in the Kolding Paedagogseminarium (Wohlgemuth, 2003, cited by Peeters, 2007). They introduced the option of 'sport and outdoor activities' in their pedagogue course, at undergraduate level. The number of male students opting for 'sports and outdoor activities' was 50 per cent and the total number of male students in the institute rose from less than 15 per cent to 24 per cent.

Several experts have recommended 'multiplicity of gendered identities' (Cameron et al., 1999) in relation to gender, ethnicity and culture. It has been reported that the employment of diverse practitioners is a norm in some settings such as the Sheffield Children's Centre, and the Pen Green centre prides itself on its gender-neutral policy. It has been recognised that male practitioners are not only role models for children but also for their fathers, in addition to making the centre father-friendly.

Tavvecchio (2003, cited by Peeters, 2007) reported that the response of male and female teachers to the rough and tumble behaviour of boys varied significantly. While male practitioners related the boisterous behaviour to 'boyish' nature, female practitioners related the same to being aggressive. The proportion of the number of women working with children is higher in settings where younger children are cared for (Moss, 2003).

The British government tried to target men by raising awareness of men working in childcare in their national childcare recruitment campaign in 2000. In 2011, only 2 per cent of males were working with children under 5 in contrast to the target of 6 per cent. Norway was much more positive, expecting to recruit 20 per cent of males to work with young children. However, Norway's government's strong commitment and policy helped to recruit only 9 per cent of men (Johanssen, 2007, cited by Peeters, 2007). An increasing proportion of men are enrolled in

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professional childcare courses. In Denmark, men form 25 per cent of enrolled students on professional courses. In 2009, 7 per cent of childcare practitioners were males working in centres for under 3s, 11 per cent in kindergartens for 3–6 year-olds, and 13 per cent in mixed age centres for children from birth to 6 years. This has been as a result of the increasing number of males gaining qualifications and training as professionals. Further, a broader professional perspective provided more options and pathways for promotion in addition to positive employment conditions with job security and a better salary. In Germany, men accounted for 3.4 per cent of early childhood practitioners. The numbers in urban areas are higher, at 9 per cent (Oberhuemer, 2011).

The absence of men in the early childhood sector would reinforce the notion that it is mainly women who are responsible for the emotional, social and intellectual development of young children. On the other hand, male practitioners have often presented the curriculum and environment from a different perspective that has attracted children's attention.

Male practitioners provided positive role models to those children from single-mother families. Ninety-eight per cent of mothers and fathers were in favour of men caring for children between the ages of 3 and 5 in 2009 compared with 55 per cent in 2005. Currently, less than 3 per cent of nursery staff are men (CWDC, 2009).

Men may sometimes present a threat to female practitioners because they may progress earlier in their careers just by being male. They may also be perceived by some parents to be a potential threat to young children.

Although men are underrepresented in the early years sector, it has been reported that a male practitioner may struggle to be accepted by parents as an efficient practitioner as a result of challenging the stereotype. Male practitioners often express frustration at being excluded by the management and other practitioners when they are not allowed to help in some childcare contexts, for example, to change nappies or to be solely responsible for taking care of children after the regular working hours.

The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2009) reported the results of a survey that urged men to take childcare jobs so that young children will have male role models. The survey also indicated that single mothers would like their children to have male role models. It has been revealed that 36 per cent of children had fewer than six hours per week of contact with a male and 17 per cent have fewer than two hours a week.

The CWDC (2009) research reported children may be conforming to societal pressures that they pick up from their family, which is showcased in their behaviour during play or their responses to stories or other contexts of the day. It also reported that children from single-parent families, especially single mother families, lack positive male role models. Fifty-five per cent of parents wished that a male practitioner cared for their child. This research further reported that it is not only male role models that the mothers are looking for. In addition, men are believed to offer a different set of skills for, for example, playing outdoors, allowing children to be independent, and being more friendly with children (Brandth and Kvande, 1998) Further, 37 per cent of parents believe male practitioners will set boys a good example, while a quarter say they believe boys will behave better with a man (CWDC, 2009).

Parents and gender

Trends such as divorce and remarriage, as well as more women having children outside marriage, result in a weakening of the role of fathers in the lives of their children. Practitioners from early childhood settings who are predominantly women are likely to communicate with mothers rather than fathers due to their stereotypical perception of mothers as the primary carers of children. With an increase in the numbers of children in single-parent families (usually living with mothers) and the predominance of female childcare practitioners, many children lack positive male role models.

Fathers who are carers and especially those who head single-parent families may find themselves excluded. The Fatherhood Institute website has several case studies of good practice that have involved fathers in diverse ways. Peters et al. (2008) found British mothers only a little more likely than fathers (53 per cent versus 45 per cent) to say they feel 'very involved' in their child's education. A UK survey (Peters et al., 2008) found 70 per cent of two-parent family fathers and 81 per cent of non-resident parents (mainly men) wanted to be more involved in their children's education.

In contrast to father's involvement in developed countries, fathers among the Aka Pygmies, who live in a tropical forest in the African Congo, are considered to be most involved with their infants, spending at least 47 per cent of their time with their infants. They pick up, cuddle and play with their babies at least five times more than fathers in other societies.

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Kahn (2006) has conducted several research studies into how fathers can be successfully engaged in childcare settings, and developed four models to engage fathers:

1. Inclusive communication – practitioners are encouraged to use language that enables fathers to feel included in the setting. They have to use a range of language skills such as verbal, non-verbal and written language to attract fathers to become involved in the early childhood setting.
2. Father-directed activities – organise activities when it is convenient for the fathers to attend, for example over a weekend. Use technology such as sending reminders through text or email to remind them about forthcoming events.
3. Gender talk included challenging gender stereotyping and encouraging fathers to participate in the settings. This model suggests that if practitioners consider fathers to be primarily the breadwinners and secondarily to be carers of their children, the fathers may not realise the importance of their involvement in the early childhood settings.
4. ‘Fathers matter’ leaflet – this leaflet included issues and activities that would be appropriate to engage fathers in settings.

It has been found that fathers and mothers are both important and influence children’s development. Research suggests that children do better educationally, psychologically and socially when fathers are actively involved. ‘Fathers matter’ is a guidance leaflet produced by Kahn that provided some ideas and tips on how to involve fathers in an early childhood setting. Some settings plan specific activities for fathers as they are considered to be hard to reach owing to their long working hours, and maternal gatekeeping.

Gender and culture

Exclusion of girls: although parents are protective of their pre-school-aged sons and daughters, in some communities there is more concern about girls’ in-class safety as well as their safety walking to and from pre-school, especially in some developing as well as under-developed countries and particularly if they have to travel long distances to get to school. Unless older siblings or other escorts are available, girls may be excluded. In families where sons are valued more than daughters and the family is unable or unwilling to fund the education of all their children, daughters may be deprived of early childcare and education (ECCE) or be given the lower-cost, and

often the lower-quality, option. If a girl is characterised by multiple categories of disadvantage such as being poor, disabled, belonging to an ethnic minority group, and living in a rural area, then this child is more likely to be excluded than a boy. Further, some cultural groups may prefer to exclude their child from attending a school because of safety concerns of their girls in school (lack of gender-specific and clean toilets in a setting) as well as when walking to and from school (Sharma, 2010).

The stereotypes are promoted in some cultures in which girls are not encouraged to go to school as the assumption is that they could develop caring skills at home rather than at school. So parents of these girls would prevent them from attending a school. On the other hand, families may not have access to a school close by. If the school is far away, parents may decide against sending their daughters to a distant school for fear of safety of the girls. This supports the theory that girls are weak and boys are strong. Girls are discouraged from attending schools in Asian and African cultures owing to girls having less access to schools in rural and poor areas. This might result in the girls and boys conforming to the societal expectations and roles when they become adults for the reasons stated above.

Theoretical base

There are several theoretical perspectives of gender. One of these perspectives is viewed 'as fluid, socially constructed and continually negotiated, rather than a biologically determined binary divide' (Sumison, 2005: 115).

Brain and gender

Is there any difference in the brains of males and females? Are there differences between the maturation of girls and boys? What is influencing children's behaviour – nature or nurture? These questions have been strongly contested/debated by researchers and educationists. It has been argued that there are differences in the brains of girls and boys: male brains are bigger than female brains, resulting in boys being intellectually superior. This discourse drew a lot of scepticism and is inconclusive, and is not supported by evidence which shows that girls do better than boys in education at different levels.

Women can be dominant left-hemisphere of the brain resulting in better linguistic skills and males can be right-hemisphere dominant

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resulting in better visuo-spatial skills. Does this explain boys' obsession with cars and blocks and girls being attracted to the home corner to play with kitchens or dolls? This is further complemented by research that indicates that a lot of girls are able to speak clearly at 3 years, whereas boys do not speak clearly until they are 4½.

Further, how do society and media influence practitioners and parents to embrace stereotypes – boys as noisy, strong, physical, energetic, rough and boisterous, and girls as caring, soft, organised and weak – and promote the same by their provision of environment and resources to children at home and in an early childhood setting?

Functionalism theorists believed that the division of responsibilities between males and females has been entrenched owing to its benefit to society. Conflict theory states: 'If men can prevent women from developing their potential then they can maintain the status quo. If men keep the traditional division of labour, men continue to enjoy the privileges they have.' Conflict theorists see the traditional roles as outdated and inappropriate for an industrial society. Women who prefer to enter career fields that were reserved for men have the right to make that choice, regardless of whether it is functional to society. Symbolic interactionists focus on how boys and girls learn 'how they are supposed to act'. This process is called gender socialisation; gender is acquired in a large part from interaction with parents, teachers and peers, as well as through the mass media.

There are some theories that propose how children develop their gender identity. These theories are influenced by some popular theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky.

Social learning theory: children learn their behaviour from their environment. Children are influenced by adults' (parents' and practitioners') use of language and behaviour. This can result from reinforcement provided by adults in response to children's behaviour.

Kohlberg's (1966) development of gender identity: a child develops an understanding of gender in various stages. As the child grows older, their understanding of gender is more complex. Gender identity is the first stage, in which a child is able to correctly identify themselves based on their own sex, and is usually reached by the age of 2 years. The second stage is gender stability in which a child realises that their gender remains the same across time, and is usually reached by the age of 4 years. At this stage, external features such as hair and clothing influence their understanding. The third stage refers to gender constancy, which is usually reached by 7 years. In

this stage the child starts to understand that gender is constant irrespective of external features.

Munroe et al. (1984) conducted a cross-cultural study and found that children in several cultures had the same sequence of stages in gender development.

Bem (1993) links both cognitive and socialisation theories. Children form categories of gender influenced by the existing categories in contemporary society. She argues that parents around children transmit on a social constructionist approach perceives gender acquisition as a result of external influences. Bem has identified three key 'gender lenses': gender polarisation (men and women are different), androcentrism (males are superior to females) and biological essentialism (the first two lenses are a result of biological differences between the sexes).

Children may develop stereotypical attitudes as a result of being put into orthodox learning environments and as adults they may not challenge the traditional perceptions of being a man or a woman guided by the societal norms.

Gender schema theory: children learn about being male and female from the culture in which they live. This theory suggests that children adjust their behaviour to fit in with the gender norms and expectations of their culture.

There are some feminists who strongly reject gender stereotypes and bring up their children defying the traditional stereotypes. Risman and Myers (1997) conducted their research on children living in feminist and egalitarian households, specifically focusing on their gender performances, ideologies and attitudes. The authors suggested that parenting styles and philosophies have an influence on children, although they may be conflicting with stereotypes provided in schools, churches, the media and by their peers.

Legislation

Legislation around the world exists to promote equality in relation to gender. The legislation around gender mainly highlights the way males and females are treated differently, resulting in exclusion from certain key aspects of the setting in the context of exclusion and inclusion. In response to a significant number of girls not accessing education, the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI)

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was launched in 2000 to ensure all children are able to complete primary schooling.

Until 1 October 2010, gender equality was emphasised by law in different legislation. One of the earliest pieces of legislation in the UK that recommended equality of sexes was the Equal Pay Act 1970. This law prohibits any less favourable treatment between men and women in terms of pay and conditions of employment across any sector. However, statistics recognise that even in the current context there are differences in pay between the sexes with similar qualifications and experience (Pike, 2011).

The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 protects men and women from discrimination on the grounds of sex or marriage. The Act concerned employment, training, education, harassment, the provision of goods and services, and the disposal of premises. This Act was replaced by the Equality Act 2010 on 1 October 2010.

The Equality Act provides a modern, single legal framework with clear, streamlined law to tackle disadvantage and discrimination effectively. This Act extends to and includes gender reassignment and sexual orientation, as well as sex, which are some of the protected characteristics.

The Equality Act 2010 is law in England, Scotland and Wales, and brings together all existing legislation around discrimination. This legislation defines some of the protected characteristics, and recommends that all categories of people listed under protected characteristics are shielded from discrimination. This legislation hopes to bring in positive changes in the practice in early childhood settings, and will have significant impact on the employers and service providers. The changes could relate to recruitment policies, as well as ensuring equality of access for children and families, positive role models, reviewing attitudes of practitioners, and effective communication with parents and carers as well as professionals.

Examples of good practice

The policy and practice of settings should reflect anti-discrimination, challenge stereotypes and positively value diversity. All early childhood settings must ensure children have equal access to a curriculum, both indoors and outdoors, which supports and extends learning and develops their understanding, skills and knowledge.

All carers – mothers, fathers, grandparents or others – must be valued and respected. A partnership between parents (or other carers) and practitioners will need to be embedded in all practice to ensure equal value is placed on involving them irrespective of their gender.

Continuing training and professional development should be available and accessible to enable all early years practitioners to build on previous training and qualifications to sustain the quality of their practice through review and reflection. Settings should develop policies that actively facilitate the involvement of all staff in appropriate training, development and education opportunities. There should be an attempt to attract recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups, especially men.



Case study

A conversation between two 5-year-old children (a girl and a boy) in the school:

Lisa: Did you see the fire engine today in the school?

Matte: Yes, I did.

Lisa: Wasn't it exciting? I would love to go on it. It was very fascinating to see the firemen showing us how to splash water on the objects on fire ... I would like to be a fireman – no firewoman when I grow up!!!!

Matte: No, you cannot as girls can't be fireman. Don't you see it is FIREMAN AND NOT FIREWOMAN!!! Have you ever seen a firewoman or heard about a firewoman in a story? You are silly!!!

Lisa: But I will be a fireperson when I grow up! What if we do not know any woman being a fireman! It is silly – it should be a FIREPERSON and not a FIREMAN. Do you remember, in the programme 'Bob the Builder' we saw Bob building with Wendy's help ...?

The conversation was stopped when they saw their teacher behind them.

As their teacher, how will you encourage the boy to understand that girls can be firepersons too?

How can the teacher promote gender equity in the setting?

How can this be embedded into the curriculum of the class which these two children belong to?

What should be the plan of action of the teacher to follow up?

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Best practice ideas

As an early childhood practitioner:

- Do you meet the individual needs of all children?
- Do you ensure you provide positive images of gender to children in their daily routines?
- Do you ensure all children have access to all resources in the setting challenging gender stereotypes?
- Do you ensure the setting communicates and provides opportunities for both parents of the child to be involved?
- Does the setting make sure they provide appropriate opportunities for practitioners (males and females) in the recruitment process as well as meeting the needs of children?
- Do you challenge any prejudice or discrimination by children or adults?
- Are children provided with non-stereotypical activities in the early childhood settings?
- Do you have informal chats with children and their families on gender and stereotyping?
- Do you encourage young children to reflect upon what it means for them to be 'a boy' or 'a girl'?
- Do you encourage them to broaden their interests/activities – adaptation of the layout and use of the setting itself to challenge existing gender stereotypes and patterns of behaviour (posters and displays, use of and access to resources and materials), books to portray males and females in a positive way?
- Does your setting organise a 'dad's stay and play' session on a Saturday when dads can bring their children and join their children in nursery activities?
- Is there a role-play area to attract boys and girls with appropriate resources and materials?
- Do you challenge traditional stereotypes – invite parents engaged in non-traditional roles such as male nurses, female police officers, firewomen, show films that depict characters of men and women in challenging traditional and stereotypical roles?

Debates and controversies

Nature versus nurture – gendered play – is it nature or nurture that influences boys and girls to play games that they are naturally

inclined to or are they driven by stereotypes, for example boys in rough and tumble play and girls in caring roles in role play situations or with dolls? How much does an early childhood setting influence a child to develop stereotypical roles?

Practitioners – males versus females – traditionally, females are early childhood practitioners. But, who makes a better practitioner? What are the reasons for men not being employed as childcarers? Are they not accepted or do they not feel inspired to be a childcarer? Research and literature report that male practitioners are not allowed to take care of children in their groups (Owen, 2003), for example, changing nappies, or some settings ensure a female carer is included in the rota of caring for children when a male practitioner is responsible. A female carer is allowed to take sole care of children while some males are not. Some parents are apprehensive when their baby or child is taken care of by a male carer. Do the low status of being a childcare practitioner and the poor pay and conditions not attract males as early childhood practitioners? Are males apprehensive of being accused of being a paedophile by parents? Is there discrimination in male and female early childhood practitioners in relation to their pay? Do males get better pay compared to their female colleagues?

Stereotypes – are children encouraged or given opportunities to access resources, activities, play or curriculum subjects or environment? Does the early childhood setting expose children to non-stereotypical resources or positive role models of both genders?



Points for reflection

Reflect on your own experiences as a child or practitioner or student in placement or as a parent of a child attending an early childhood setting. Consider if the setting is inclusive.

Implications for practice

All children need to have opportunities where they can develop a range of skills reflecting their potential. Children will relate to non-sexist roles and responsibilities. Accept and respect differences, morals and values. Children are stereotyped as a result of society's attitudes and an expectation of what is supposed to be a girl or a boy. If these expectations conflict with the traditional stereotypes as a result of moving to another country, parents may be hesitant and not confident enough to challenge stereotypes.

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Parents should be given opportunities to articulate their opinions about the quality of their child's experiences. Parents should be motivated to engage in pre-school activities and to collaborate with childcare practitioners irrespective of their gender.

Provide diverse opportunities for parents to challenge stereotypes. Give both parents opportunities to participate in the activities of the setting. Be aware of the values and beliefs of parents and raise their awareness of their role in continuing care. Ensure children receive messages at home that are reflecting, and not conflicting with, those received in the childcare settings. Ensure communication sent to parents uses non-sexist language.

Practitioners have to get opportunities to share good practice with other practitioners in their authorities. Do the settings offer opportunities for their staff members to update their knowledge and understanding of gender and inclusion? Provide opportunities for men and women to be recruited in the early childhood settings.



Research issues

Some areas of published research that have been conducted around gender include:

- Does a childcare practitioner's gender influence their role and effectiveness in Children's Services?
- Are children's choices of activities influenced by gender stereotypes?
- Does gender influence achievement?
- What are the risks taken by girls and boys in play?
- Involvement of fathers in pre-school settings.
- Is gendered play a result of nature or nurture?
- Do learning styles of girls and boys influence their success and achievement?
- Do boys miss male role models in early childhood settings?
- The influence of media on gendered play.

This section refers to research published around some significant issues around gender. The abstract for each research document is followed by some questions that will stimulate thinking and critical analysis of findings.

Refer to this link for some interesting case studies: 'Engaging boys in the Early Years: the experiences of three Islington settings' at

http://www.islington.gov.uk/DownloadableDocuments/EducationandLearning/Pdf/PSEYT_engaging_boys_early_years.pdf.

Practitioners and students on placement could collaborate to evaluate these innovative ways to engage children in non-stereotypical activities to promote their holistic development.

Holland (2000) 'Take the toys from the boys? An examination of the genesis of policy and the appropriateness of adult perspectives in the area of war, weapon and superhero play', *Citizenship, Social and Economic Education*, 4(2): 92–108.

This article considers the genesis of a zero tolerance approach to war, weapon and superhero play in early years settings in the UK over the past 30 years. This exploration is located in the development of anti-sexist perspectives and concerns about effective early intervention in the spiral of male violence and it is suggested that this has resulted in the 'Othering' of young boys in settings where this policy is enforced. Research challenging assumptions about the connection between war, weapon and superhero play and aggressive behaviour is discussed, and the possible benefits of a more relaxed approach to these areas of play, which are more consistent with Scandinavian notions of gender pedagogy, are highlighted.

- List the key issues from the article. Does the author present her arguments around zero tolerance in a balanced way?
- Find any follow-up research that has been inspired from this article.
- Have there been any significant changes in the attitudes of practitioners towards zero tolerance in the past 10 years?
- What is the relevance of this article in other countries?
- What are the limitations of this article?

Sumsion, J. (2005) 'Male teachers in early childhood education: issues and case study', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 20: 109–23.

Much of the debate about the desirability or otherwise, of attempting to address the gender imbalance in the early childhood teaching profession has been limited by a reliance on rhetoric rather than empirical evidence. The purpose of this article is to assist in shifting this debate to a more empirical basis by reporting findings from an exploratory empirical investigation of children's perceptions and gender positioning of their male pre-school teacher. Children's drawings of their teacher and accompanying text generated in conversational interviews were analysed inductively with the intent of gaining preliminary insights into whether the presence of a male teacher might challenge their gender stereotypes. Children focused mostly on typical teacher roles. Traditional gender roles and attributes were reflected in their play. While it is difficult to draw

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definite conclusions from the study, for these children the presence of a male teacher did not appear to disrupt gender stereotypes.

- List the key findings of this research.
- What is the relevance of this research in other countries?
- Can this study be replicated in your setting with similar results and conclusions?
- What are the strengths of the methods used to obtain data and analyse findings?
- What are the limitations of this research?

Further reading 

Browne, N. (2004) *Gender Equity in the Early Years*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Holland, P. (2003) *We Don't Play with Guns Here: War, Weapon and Superhero Play in the Early Years*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

MacNaughton, G. (2000) *Rethinking Gender in Early Childhood Education*. London: Sage.

Risman, B.J. and Myers, K. (1997) 'As the twig is bent: children reared in feminist households', *Qualitative Sociology*, 20(2): 229–52.

Roberts-Holmes, G.P. (2011) 'Working with men as colleagues in the early years: issues and ways forward', in L. Miller and C. Cable (eds) *Professionalism, Leadership and Management in the Early Years*. London: Sage.

Thorne, B. (1993) *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Useful websites 

Equality Human Rights, <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/>.

Preschool Learning Alliance, <http://www.pre-school.org.uk/practitioners/inclusion>.

Fatherhood Institute, <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>.

Men in Childcare, www.meninchildcare.co.uk.