

FROGS AND SNAILS, SUGAR AND SPICE

Professor Cathy Nutbrown of the University of Sheffield discusses issues of gender stereotyping in early childhood settings...



findoutmore

Cathy Nutbrown is Director of Studies in Early Childhood Education at the School of Education, University of Sheffield. Further discussion of the issues of 'inclusion' can be found in Cathy's book, *Key Concepts in Early Childhood Education and Care* (2nd edn), published by Sage. Visit www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book234324





Gender stereotyping in children's play in early years settings is a much studied topic. Gender identities – what it is to be a boy or a girl – are a strong feature of children's play and often impact on their choices of types of play and 'play mates'.

Despite decades of thinking, and legislation, about gender equality, inequalities still remain for some men and women, and the effects of gender on young children's learning can have implications for their future achievements. The Early Years Foundation Stage makes it clear that all children should have a wide range of opportunities to play and learn. It is important to challenge stereotypes early to give children a breadth of learning experiences.

Boys and girls sometimes show different kinds of behaviour and make different choices in their play. Where girls and boys do share the same play area, they sometimes use it differently – for example, the home play area can be dominated by girls, with boys choosing more risky outdoor play. As Glenda MacNaughton (1999, p81) notes, children's pretend play is rich in information about how they understand gender relations. As they play at 'having babies', 'being monsters', or 'making a hospital', they show others what they think girls and women can and should do, and what they think boys and men can and should do.

What is important to remember is that both boys and girls can miss out on important experiences if their play is limited to only some of the opportunities available in their settings. Problems can be exacerbated by all-female staff teams, which can make it difficult to model how women and men can work cooperatively, and use all aspects of provision. By the same token, male and female staff in mixed teams need to examine the messages they give to children about what men and women 'do' and demonstrate non-stereotypical behaviour.

Challenging limiting stereotypes in early years settings means:

- focusing on gender issues in practitioners' initial and post qualifying training;
- recruiting men and women to work in settings;
- understanding the influence of families on children's constructions of gender;
- observing how children demonstrate what they know about men and women – and girls and boys – in their gendered play;
- remaining aware of the potentially limiting impact of gendered play on learning.

1. Homes and computers

The girls dominated the home corner area whilst the boys preferred the outside space and the computers. When questioned, the children said the home area was 'for girls' and the computers were 'for boys'. The teacher asked who did domestic chores at home and who used the family computer. The children's answers showed that stereotypical behaviour they displayed in the nursery was not reflecting their home lives, where some children saw women using computers and men washing up.

Research has shown that young children often gravitate to stereotypical aspects of provision often defying (or denying) the experience in their daily lives. The stereotypes were challenged through ongoing and deliberate intervention strategies which broadened out opportunities for children.

2. 'Girls only' computer zone

The boys dominated the only computer for several sessions not responding to practitioners' discussions about fairness, sharing and taking turns. The staff declared the computer area a 'girls only zone' until further notice. The boys, clearly shocked by the decision, complained about unfairness. Eventually, staff established a turn-taking system, reminding the boys how they felt when they could not use the computer; this system was often successful when enforced

by staff or when girls reported a breach of the rules.

3. Role-play for boys

In a project to allow boys more access to home corner play the children were first asked for their views. One five-year-old girl said: "The boys can't come in here (the house) 'cos they make a noise and they mess it up, and they act like dogs and angry husbands. Another said: "Sometimes I put the ironing board across the doorway so the boys can't get in... 'cos there's no door and you need one.

As well as maintaining the usual home play space, staff encouraged children to suggest other role-play areas. Over the weeks, they established a garage, a tropical fish shop, a hairdressing salon, a chip shop and an office, which gave rise to fewer instances of gender-dominated play and created spaces for boys to engage in more positive role-play activities which were not heavily dominated by the girls. (Nutbrown and Clough, 2009)

So that all children benefit from a rich and broad range of learning experiences, not limited by developing ideas of what is appropriate for girls or for boys, practitioners need to be sensitive to children's emerging preferences. Girls may need support to extend beyond the home play and to take risks outdoors, and boys may need help to negotiate their way 'past the ironing board' to enjoy domestic play.

Further reading

- Connolly, P *Boys and Schooling in the early years* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2004)
- Gussin Paley, V *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner* (The University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- MacNaughton, G *Even pink tents have glass ceilings: crossing the gender boundaries in pretend play* in Dau, E and Jones, E. *Child's Play: Revisiting Play in early Childhood Settings* (MacLennan and Petty Pty Ltd, 1999)
- MacNaughton, G *Rethinking Gender in Early Childhood Education* (Sage, 2000)
- Nutbrown, C and Clough, P *Citizenship and Inclusion in the Early Years: Understanding and Responding to Children's Perspectives on "Belonging"* (*International Journal of Early Years Education* 17, 2009)
- Tarullo, L B *Windows on Social Worlds: Gender Differences in Children's Play Narratives* in *Children's Play Narratives* in Slade, A and Wolf, P D *Children at play: clinical and developmental approaches to meaning and representation* (Oxford University Press, 1994)