

Exploring gender stereotypes with toys and colours

(Early Years / 3-5 year olds)

Summary:

This activity is aimed at children aged 3-5, who are in Pre-school, Nursery or Reception settings across the UK. Children are asked to think about the toys they like playing with and the colours they like to wear. The older children (4-5) can be introduced to the term 'stereotypes', so are asked to think about gendered issues in terms of 'fair/unfair' and why some toys and some colours are seen as 'for girls' and some as 'for boys'.

Learning objectives:

- To recognise gender stereotyping in a range of scenarios.
- To understand that all toys are for everyone, regardless of whether they are a boy or a girl.
- To understand that all colours are for everyone, regardless of whether they are a boy or a girl.
- To understand that all children, regardless of whether they are a boy or a girl, can choose what game or toy to play with, and the colour of their clothes, and that this is the case for all children.

Early learning goals:

- Understanding the World
- Personal Social and Emotional Development
- Communication and Language

Duration:

30 minutes

Age group:

Early Years:
Nursery / Foundation Phase
in Wales, Foundation Stage in
Northern Ireland, Primary 1 and 2 /
Early level in Scotland

Materials required:

- Pictures of toys – see slide show.
- Pictures of t-shirts – see slide show.
Please use as many or as few slides as you like of the clothes and toys, you can edit the slides as you wish. If you prefer, you can hold up actual toys from your setting or classroom instead of the slide show.

Instructions:

Step 1:

- Start by asking children to share what their favourite toy is – what do they like playing with? Younger children might like to do this in circle time, older children (aged 4-5) could do this in talk partners. Please adapt as you need to for your setting and class.
- Ask the children to share with the group or class and make a note on the whiteboard or flipchart of what they have said.

Step 2:

- Show the slide show images of different toys. If you prefer, you can hold up actual toys from your setting or classroom.
- For each toy, ask the children two questions: 'do you want to play with this toy?' and 'who else do you think likes playing with this toy?' They may respond with 'me', or with names of people they know. If a child says 'a girl' or 'a boy' for a particular toy, ask them why.

If they name a friend who you know is a boy or girl, ask them why they think that child would like to play with the toy.

- Alternatively, have two teddy bears, one called 'Jack' and one called 'Lily' and ask the children, 'which toys do you think Jack would like to play with? Which toys would Lily like to play with? Why do you think that is?' Responses may be about colour – the toys that are pink are for girls, the toys with blue / green on them are for boys – or about the type of toy.
- If a number of children do not respond in a way which suggests an influence of gender stereotypes, make a point of saying 'that's right, anybody - boys or girls - can play with any toy they want. Some people say that boys can't play with dolls etc. but we can all play with whatever toy we choose' to reinforce the message in a positive way. Also explain that the colour of a toy doesn't matter, and there are no such things as 'girls' toys' or 'boys' toys'.
- If time, go back over some of the toys and ask them to think again about who likes playing with those toys.

Step 3:

- Show the slide show images of different t-shirts. For each t-shirt or group of t-shirts, ask the children 'who is this t-shirt for?' and 'who would like to wear this t-shirt?'. They may respond with 'me', or with names of people they know. If a child says 'a girl' or 'a boy' for a particular t-shirt, ask them why.
- You could use the two teddy bears again, if you like, and ask 'is this t-shirt for Jack, or for Lily? Why?' Responses may be about colour or the motifs used on the t-shirts – pink, unicorns, flowers etc for girls; blue, green, gaming and dinosaurs for boys.
- Explain that the colour and image on a t-shirt doesn't matter, and there are no such things as 'girls' colours' or 'boys' colours'. All colours, animals and images are for everyone.

Step 4 (for children aged 4-5):

- Introduce the phrase 'gender stereotype'. An example of a gender stereotype is saying all boys wear blue and like football, and that all girls wear pink and like ballet. They are often wrong and unfair. Girls and boys can like or do anything they choose to.
- Introduce a few scenarios for the children to explore how gender stereotypes might make them feel, and how they can be unfair. You could use the two teddy bears again, if you like. Here are two examples but you could add more:
 Jack's friend laughed at him when he saw him cuddling a doll (Why do you think his friend laughed? How do you think that made Jack feel? What would you do if you saw Jack cuddling a doll?)
 Lily's brother said she is not allowed to play with toy cars (How do you think it made Lily feel when her brother said that? What would you say if someone said that to you or to one of your friends?)
- Ask the class what their favourite colours are. Explore the children's favourite colours and highlight how much variety there is. Make sure girls and boys in the class get the chance to say what they like, and don't like. Teachers, Teaching Assistants and other practitioners could add what their own favourite colours are too.
- Gender stereotypes can be limiting. What if all girls had to always do one thing and all boys had to do a different thing. You'd never get to try new things out and it would make the world a boring place. Talk about how we all like to play with different toys or wear different colours. Teachers could use real world examples, of what colours they like to wear or what toys they liked as a child or activities they like as an adult (football, cookery, gaming).
- If time, go back over some of the t-shirts and ask them to think again about who would like to wear them.

Appendix 1

Supporting Information

Classroom activity

Teachers and Early Years practitioners can choose to split these activities over a week or a series of lessons, if they prefer. You could do steps 1 and 2 together one day, and then steps 3 and 4 another day.

Glossary (for teachers and practitioners)

- Stereotype - fixed and widely held ideas about a group of people based on a shared characteristic – e.g. sex, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality.
- Gender stereotype - socially constructed roles and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men, girls and boys.
- Gender stereotypes are often seen in assumptions about behaviours, occupations, physical appearance or personality traits – for example that a girl will be nurturing, feminine, care about her appearance and prefer reading and art to maths and science. Or that boys are boisterous, confident and would rather be running around with a football than reading or drawing.