FACT SHEET

HEALTH PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH BABIES & YOUNG CHILDREN

From the moment someone finds out the sex of their baby, rigid ideas around how children of a particular gender 'should' act, what they 'should' play with and the things they 'should' be interested in, influence the clothing and toys that are purchased, and the language and interactions that people will have regarding and with that baby.

By around age two, children start to become consciously aware of gender stereotypes, and begin to change their behaviours and interests based on the messages they receive. This fact sheet contains some important things to consider when working with children and their families.

IMPORTANCE OF SELF REFLECTION

We all have unconscious gender biases shaped by our experiences. Reflecting on these biases and how they influence our behaviour is a key step in challenging stereotypes. Ask yourself: What are my beliefs about gender, and how have they been shaped? How can I consciously challenge them?

GENDER DISAPPOINTMENT

Some parents or caregivers may feel gender disappointment, often tied to unconscious biases and expectations. If this happens:

- Acknowledge their feelings.
- Gently ask why they feel that way.
- Explore the reasons behind their preference, which are often based on stereotypes (e.g., wanting a boy to kick the footy or a girl to dress up).
- Reassure them that these activities can be enjoyed with any child, regardless of gender.

> *From birth, gender stereotypes shape the toys, clothes, and language around a child. Reflecting on our biases helps break these patterns and lets every child be themselves.*

WORDS AND LANGUAGE

The words and language we choose to use with children carry important messages about gender and respectful relationships. These messages can potentially limit how children see themselves and how they engage with others. Here are some great tips to challenge common stereotypes that arise during or after having a baby.

Encourage parents and caregivers to:

- Make a conscious effort to talk about their baby in ways that recognises their individuality, not their gender and their looks.
- Changing pronouns: rhymes, stories and songs are a great way of building their babies language skills, but can often promote gender stereotypes. Swap the pronouns around or change a few words to make a big impact.
- Respond to people who have strong opinions on their baby's appearance, behaviour or interests by providing them with simple statements to respond to stereotypical comments i.e. “let them be”, “colours are for everyone”, "activities are for everyone", "let kids be kids”, “toys are for all children"

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