FACT SHEET

WHAT ARE GENDER STEREOTYPES?

By around age two, children start to notice gender stereotypes. The messages they hear and see about what they 'should' play with or how they 'should' behave can influence their choices and interests. This might lead them to stop activities they enjoy or those that support their growth, simply because they don't see others playing or behaving that way.

These messages about what children are 'supposed' to do can come from various sources, including family, early learning environments, cultural norms, toy stores, and media like television and movies.

THE DEFINITION

Commonly held, fixed and oversimplified ideas about what it means to be female or male, which inform social norms about how women and men, girls and boys should act and think, or what they are good and bad at.

(Our Watch, 2021)

SEX VS. GENDER

Sex refers to the biological and physical characteristics that define girls, boys, women and men. For example, differences between male and female genetics and hormones.

Gender refers to the socially learnt roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that any given society considers appropriate for men and women; gender defines masculinity and femininity. Gender expectations vary between cultures and can change over time.

> *Level Playground is about giving children the chance to be themselves – to learn and play in ways that they choose, and to feel safe, supported and inspired to discover new things.*

EXAMPLES OF EXPECTATIONS FOR GIRLS

- Be emotional and caring
- Like pink, rainbows and fairies
- Like singing and dancing
- Are good at art and craft
- Have long hair and present neatly
- Are studious and responsible

EXAMPLES OF EXPECTATIONS FOR BOYS

- Be protectors and strong
- Hide emotions and not ask for help
- Like blue, trucks and superheroes
- Like playing sports and are athletic
- 'Toughen up' and 'don't cry'

FACT SHEET

HOW TO AVOID GENDER STEREOTYPES?

Gender stereotypes can have an impact on the activities children engage in and their development. Help your child develop their personal identity based on their interests and passions, rather than what society expects of them.

Look for opportunities to talk with your children about gender stereotypes. You can do this in a number of ways including using books, play, media and movies to start a discussion.

1 LET TOYS BE TOYS

Provide your children with a wide variety of toys to play with. You might not know what your child is really into unless they're given opportunities to discover new interests.

If children are a bit reluctant to play with something new, why not mix it up to encourage them to give it a go? Building blocks and animals, making playdough food for baby dolls, repairing dollhouses with toy tools - there's no limit to what you can try!

2 WATCH AND TALK

After watching a movie or TV show with your kids, set aside some time to talk about what you've just seen, making sure to discuss how different genders were portrayed.

If there were gender stereotypes, flip them around. For example, if the main character was a male superhero, ask - "do you think girls can save people too?" See where the conversation takes you!

Use 'The Maisy Test' for a simple 4 question test to check whether a show is promoting healthy gender messages. Head to sacraparental.com to find the test along with a list of shows that get it right!

3 THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Comments about girls 'looking very pretty' and boys 'getting big and strong' can make children believe that their other characteristics and qualities are less important than ones that are highly gendered.

Make a conscious effort to talk to your children in ways that recognise their individuality, not their gender and their looks. For more information and strategies, see Level Playground's 'Language that breaks down Gender Stereotypes' fact sheet.

4 EVERYONE HELPS AT HOME

Housework isn't a gendered skill - it's the responsibility of everyone in the household. Let your children learn by watching how everyone in the family takes turns with different chores - washing the dishes, mowing the lawn, folding the washing. Then let them join in - encourage them to help out in ways that are age appropriate, not necessarily 'typical for their gender'. Young children love to help - maybe by putting laundry into the machine, or by wiping the skirting boards with a damp cloth.

FACT SHEET

LANGUAGE THAT BREAKS DOWN GENDER STEREOTYPES

Words and language we use with children carry important messages about gender, power and respectful relationships. These messages can limit how children engage with a particular setting or service and with each other.

It is important to challenge stereotypical views and opinions as they have a significant influence on children's interests and development. Breaking down these stereotypes will help children develop based on skills and interests, rather than by what society expects of them because of their gender. It is important children live in an environment where they can be their true selves, and free to explore all things that interest them in life.

RESPONDING TO COMMENTS

Below are some common comments children might make around gender stereotypes:

- 'boys don't cry'
- 'girls can't play sports'
- 'boys can't dance'
- 'pink is a girls colour/'blue is a boys colour'
- 'girls can't be a truck driver', 'boys can't be a nurse'
- 'that's a boy's chore'
- 'boys are better than girls'

Responses can be simple and straight to the point:

- emotions are for everyone
- activities are for everyone
- colours are for everyone
- occupations are for everyone
- chores are for everyone
- strengths are for everyone
- respect and manners are important for everyone

For more examples of responses to common comments, see the Level Playground 'Challenging Stereotypes' fact sheet.

> *Sometimes, simply asking "why is that?" or "what makes you think that?" can help your children to challenge some of the beliefs they hold around gender and really consider whether those beliefs are true and fair.*

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Role modelling behaviours that breakdown gender stereotypes are important in helping your children be their true selves.

Some of the things you can do are:

- Be mindful of the language that you use around them. Make a conscious effort to talk to your children in ways that recognise their strengths and individuality, not their gender and their appearance.
- Let your children see everyone in the household/classroom doing a variety of chores - everyone can take turns at packing up or washing the dishes from lunch.

FACT SHEET

TALKING ABOUT RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships we have with our friends, families or significant people in our lives are all special in different ways.

The way children interact with others, and the way that others respond to them, strongly influences children's development and their understanding of relationships. Talking about positive and healthy relationships with our children helps them to develop an understanding of how they should treat others and how they should be treated.

IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

Ask your children about the important relationships in their lives. For example—parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, aunties and uncles, family, friends. Talk about the different types of relationships they have with these people and the ways they show them respect.

Ask your children to draw a picture of the most important people in their lives.

BEING A GOOD FRIEND

Ask your children, “what makes a good friend?” Talk to them about the kind of qualities a good friend might have, for example - being kind, caring, considerate, gentle, thinking of others’ feelings and being a good listener.

Together, you can write down these words and create a poster to have displayed in your house. Look for books, TV shows and movies that show examples of great, healthy friendships, and enjoy them together.

HOW DO WE SHOW RESPECT

Encourage your children to think about what respect—looks like, sounds like and feels like.

Ask them, how do they show respect every day? Brainstorm some examples with your children. For example - listening to their teachers, sharing with friends, caring for others, being honest, using their manners, helping with chores at home.

WHO ARE MY HELPERS

Encourage children to talk about trust and relationships.

Who do they go to when they need help or have a problem or worry that is too big to manage on their own? Ask your children to identify the names of five trusted adults they can go to when they need help. Together, you can write down the names of the trusted people and create a poster to have displayed in your house.

FACT SHEET

BOYFRIEND & GIRLFRIEND LANGUAGE

Sometimes, adults place romantic connotations on mixed-gender friendships. "How cute, he's already got a girlfriend", "Is he your boyfriend?" "Look, he's flirting with all the girls already". These comments might be well-intentioned and seem fairly harmless, but they can absolutely damage a great friendship.

MIXED GENDER FRIENDSHIPS

Why are they important? Mixed-gender friendships break down stereotypes that say certain activities and interests are for children of certain genders – they show that anyone can like playing footy, anyone can like dancing, anyone can like drawing and painting. Not all boys are the same, and not all girls are the same!

In fact, mixed-gender friendships are a key developmental opportunity – gender stereotypes mean girls are encouraged to do nurturing and social play and boys are encouraged to build gross motor and spatial reasoning skills through sports and building play, so by playing together, children can learn from each other.

Mixed-gender friendships show that it's ok to play with children of any gender and it's ok to play like them.

WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

What might seem like a harmless comment sends the message to children that the only relationship they're allowed to have with a child of another gender is a romantic one.

For example, if these comments arise every time a girl plays with a boy, both children learn that their friendship is unusual because grown-ups keep remarking on it. This makes it easier for the girl to play with girls and the boy with boys, avoiding confusing comments.

When kids stick to same-gender friendships because boyfriend/girlfriend comments suggest they're not 'supposed' to be friends with the opposite gender, they miss out on seeing children of another gender as individuals with their own interests and personality traits.

CALL IT OUT!

- **Be direct:** "The kids are getting on well, they both enjoy building with LEGO." "He's her friend." "He's not flirting, he's a baby."
- **Break down the gender stereotypes that say:** "They're a different gender from you, therefore you don't have anything in common." Encourage kids to see that personalities, values and interests have nothing to do with gender—and surround them with books and TV shows that reinforce that message.
- **Talk to kids about it:** "That was a strange thing to say, wasn't it? Boyfriends and girlfriends are for teenagers and grown-ups. He's your friend and you like to ride your scooters together."

> *Ultimately, the message we want children to hear is simple: a friend is someone you enjoy spending time with, and who enjoys spending time with you. That's it!*

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FACT SHEET

PHYSICAL SPACES IN YOUR SERVICE

It's important that the physical spaces, both indoor and outdoor, in your service are inclusive and accessible to all children. The environment should encourage all children to use and feel comfortable in all spaces - from the sandpit to the dramatic play area to the construction corner.

MAKING CHANGES

If you notice differences in how children of different genders engage with the spaces, think about changes that can encourage all children to explore all areas.

Here are some examples:

- Change the home corner: transform it into a restaurant, camping setting, or ice-cream shop, instead of a traditional kitchen.
- Offer a mix of dress-up options, including hats, jackets, and fabric scraps, instead of just fairy and princess dresses.
- Mix up the block area by adding animal and people figures, ribbons, and scarves to inspire new types of play.
- Include dolls of all genders in the dollhouse, and provide dolls of different ages and ethnicities.
- Revamp the reading area by providing books that feature a wide range of characters, roles, and adventures. Include stories with diverse gender representation, where all children can see themselves as the hero or explorer.

> *Physical spaces should encourage all children to feel comfortable and welcome, regardless of gender.*

LOOKING AT YOUR SPACES

Observe whether certain spaces are dominated by children of a particular gender. For instance, girls might use the dramatic play area, while boys use the construction area.

Look around and ask if all children feel comfortable using all spaces. Why or why not? Asking the children directly can prompt a discussion about stereotypes.

As educators, it's important to model inclusive language and actions. If you notice children excluding others from certain areas based on gender, gently guide them to explore together and challenge these assumptions.

ENCOURAGING CHILDREN

- If you hear comments like, "Boys can't play with the dress-ups," or "This is boys only!", simply asking "Why?" can help children reflect on their beliefs about gender.
- A one-on-one or group discussion about kindness, fairness, and letting everyone play as they choose (as long as no one is hurt) can also help. You might want to read a book at group time that guides this discussion—visit our website and social media pages for recommendations.
- Invite children to help redesign a play area, asking them what changes would make it fun and welcoming for everyone. This can be a great way to involve them in the process and empower them to think about fairness and inclusivity.

FACT SHEET

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

Gender equality and gender stereotypes can be a difficult topic, especially when there's confusion around language and terms. Here are some frequently asked questions about why we talk to our children about gender equality and breakdown gender stereotypes.

WHY GENDER EQUALITY MATTERS

Why is it important to address gender stereotypes at an early age?
Young children are still forming their ideas about the world. Addressing stereotypes early helps them grow up with a more inclusive mindset and reduces the likelihood of limiting beliefs that can lead to inequality.

Why is there so much hype about boys and girls colours? It's clever marketing! Teaching your children that all colours are for everyone helps counter these stereotypes.

What can I do at home to break down gender stereotypes? Provide varied play options, role model positive behavior, and use inclusive language.

Does promoting gender equality mean that my child can't like pink? No, colours are for everyone! Equality means no child feels any colour is 'off-limits' because of their gender.

Does this mean that you want to ban all gendered toys and fairytales?
Not at all! We want children to be able to choose what they enjoy, regardless of their gender. Toys aren't gendered - they're for everyone.

I don't want my son playing with dolls. Why do you encourage this? Playing with different toys builds skills like empathy, imagination, language, and social responsibility.

HOW TO SUPPORT AT HOME

My child says, "I don't want that one/to do that – that's for girls/boys!" (e.g. certain colours, toys, games, etc.) - how do I respond? This is common as children explore gender roles. Repetition is key: consistently reinforce that colours, toys, and games are for everyone. Use relatable examples, such as, "Your friend Oscar loves playing with dolls," or "Blue is Grandma's favourite colour," to help them see that interests are not tied to gender.

What if my child is influenced by stereotypes from outside the home?
Stereotypes can come from media, peers, or school. Counteract them by discussing what they encounter, offering alternative viewpoints, and reinforcing that all activities, toys, and interests are for everyone.

How can I involve my extended family in promoting gender equality?
Share your values with family members. Encourage them to use inclusive language and avoid limiting labels like "boys don't cry" or "girls don't play rough."

MORE INFORMATION

Visit our website for tips on raising children free from gender stereotypes.
Follow us on Instagram and Facebook, join our mailing list, and share our activities with your loved ones. For questions, email us anytime!

FACT SHEET

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS

Sometimes talking to parents about gender equality and gender stereotypes can be difficult, especially when there's confusion around language and terms. Here are some suggestions on how to answer some common questions that early childhood educators often receive from parents and caregivers.

WHY WORRY?

Why are gender stereotypes relevant for pre-school children? Aren't they too young for this?

From a very young age, children absorb ideas about what boys and girls 'should' do, which can limit their experiences and development.

For example:

- Boys are often encouraged to play with construction toys, which build spatial awareness and problem-solving skills.
- Girls are often guided toward dolls and crafts, supporting fine motor development and nurturing skills.
- Both skill sets are valuable, but gender stereotypes can cause children to miss out on key opportunities for growth.

TAKING THE MESSAGES HOME

What can I do at home to break down gender stereotypes?

1. Offer a variety of toys and activities.
2. Be mindful of the language you use - avoid gendered labels like "that's for boys."
3. Model inclusive behaviour yourself.

How do I respond if my child says, "That's for girls/boys"?

- "Colours are for everyone."
- "Games are for everyone."

Use examples from people they know:

- "Your friend Sam loves dolls!"
- "Grandpa's favourite colour is pink!

GENDER EQUALITY

Why is there so much focus about boys and girls colours?
It's marketing! All colours are for everyone. You can talk with your child about why they like a colour - maybe it reminds them of something they love, like the bright yellow sun.

Why is my child playing with dress ups?
Dress-ups encourage role play, building empathy, creativity, and problem-solving skills. These activities help children develop emotionally and socially.

Does promoting gender equality mean my child can't play with dolls or trucks?
Not at all! At our service, everything is for everyone. We want children to discover and explore what interests them, free from limitations.

Are you removing gendered toys and fairytales from the service?
No. We believe children should enjoy what they love, whether it's fairytales, trucks, or dolls. Our goal is to ensure all children feel free to explore every option available.

MORE INFORMATION

Visit our website for tips on raising children free from gender stereotypes.
Follow us on Instagram and Facebook, join our mailing list, and share our activities with your loved ones. For questions, email us anytime!

FACT SHEET

THREE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BREAK DOWN GENDER STEREOTYPES

We can often reinforce gender stereotypes without even thinking about it, through the words and language we choose to use. Gendered terms for occupations, films that consistently show one gender as stronger, more adventurous, or smarter than another, or books that leave out characters of one gender entirely, can send subtle but pervasive messages to children. These are three simple ways you can send the message that children are valued for who they are as individuals, with unique strengths and skills, rather than for their gender.

1 TALKING ABOUT OCCUPATIONS

When speaking with children, it's important to use gender-inclusive language. Instead of terms like 'fireman', 'workman', and 'air hostess', which suggest that only certain genders can do these jobs, try using gender-neutral terms like 'firefighter', 'construction worker', and 'flight attendant'. Using inclusive language reinforces the idea that anyone can pursue any career they desire, no matter their gender. You can also talk to your child about the different strengths required for various occupations.

For example:

- Scientists are good at asking questions.
- Nurses help people feel better when they're sick or hurt.
- Football players work together as a team.

This not only reinforces that jobs are not limited by gender but also highlights the diverse skills each occupation requires.

> *Small, everyday changes in the way we speak and interact can help create a world where children are free to explore all possibilities, regardless of gender.*

2 THE WORDS

Rhymes, stories, and songs are great for building language skills, but they can reinforce gender stereotypes. For example, in animal stories, larger, "scary" animals are often male, and smaller, "cute" ones are female. Simply switch the pronouns—"The bear was very strong" becomes "She was very strong."
Try changing some words in songs too. In The Wheels on the Bus, have the dads soothe the crying babies. In Miss Polly Had a Dolly, make the doctor a female character with "her bag and her hat."

These small changes show that roles and characteristics aren't tied to gender.

3 TAKE TIME TO TALK IT THROUGH

Sometimes, a book, TV show, or movie your child enjoys might reinforce gender stereotypes. Use these moments as an opportunity to discuss what they're seeing or hearing.
You can ask questions like:

- Where are the girl characters in this story?
- Was it ok when the boy was told to stop crying? What could his friends have said instead?
- How would the story change if the girl joined the adventure?

These conversations can help challenge stereotypes and promote critical thinking about gender roles.

FACT SHEET

MANAGING BACKLASH AND RESISTANCE

Whenever progressive social change starts to challenge long-standing social norms, there's the possibility of resistance or even backlash from the community. While resistance and backlash are positive in the sense that they're signs that social change initiatives are starting to be effective, they can be really challenging to deal with.

If you're receiving resistance or backlash from families who are concerned about implementing gender equality initiatives in an early years setting, here are a few strategies you might like to think about.

- **Approach concerns with curiosity and openness:** "Thanks for sharing your concerns. Can you tell me more about them?" Listening without interruption helps families feel heard and allows you to understand their worries.
- **Seek support from management** and refer to your service's equity and inclusion policy—or suggest creating one if it's missing.
- **Frame the discussion around children's development:** Gender equality supports healthy growth by giving all children equal opportunities to explore their interests, build their skills and feel valued.
- **Highlight your service's values:** If equality, inclusion, and individuality are core values, gender equality aligns with them. Families strongly opposed to these values may need to reconsider if this is the right service for them.

KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER: FAQS

Here are some points to discuss with families concerned about gender equality practices:

- This isn't about gender identity or sexuality; it's about letting kids explore freely, try different types of play, and develop a range of skills without being limited by stereotypes.
- Supporting gender equality doesn't stop boys from playing with trains or girls with dolls—it ensures all children feel free to explore their interests, discover their likes and dislikes, and respect others' choices.
- Gender equality work aligns with the Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Standards, and most centres' values. It's about building on what you already do to support equality and individuality.

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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FACT SHEET

SCHOOL UNIFORMS

Getting ready to start school is an exciting and sometimes overwhelming time in a young child's life. It's a big transition and there's lots to consider - making friends, learning new skills, meeting teachers, navigating a new space, managing lunchboxes. And of course, school uniform. Here are some things for you to think about:

UNIFORM CHOICES

What options are available? Does the uniform policy offer a single list for everyone, or are certain clothes restricted by gender? If so, consider:

- **Changing the policy:** Talk to the school leadership team or join the School Council to advocate for inclusive options.
- **Practicality:** Are skirts and dresses practical for play? Activities like using monkey bars can be tricky if a skirt gets in the way.
- **Choice:** What does your child want to wear? Supporting their choices builds trust and a sense of autonomy.
- **Fitting in:** Starting school can be overwhelming. If your child chooses the school dress to fit in, support their decision while helping them feel confident in their identity.

ENCOURAGING INCLUSIVITY & CONFIDENCE

- **Role modeling inclusivity:** Show your child how clothes don't define us by sharing examples of people they admire who break stereotypes, like male dancers or female firefighters. Highlight their confidence in being true to themselves.
- **Encouraging allyship:** Teach your child to support peers making bold choices. Being an ally means standing up for others and creating a space where everyone feels respected.

PLANNING AHEAD

If you find you're in a position where you're supporting your child to wear a uniform that goes against the mainstream, there are some things you might like to consider to help you, your child and your school anticipate and navigate challenges that may arise:

- **Meet with key staff members:** Before school starts, arrange a meeting to gauge the school's support and ensure everyone is aligned.
- **Talk to your child:** You could say, "Some people believe only girls should wear dresses. They might feel surprised or upset when they see someone who's not a girl wearing one. We know clothes are for everyone, but not everyone sees it that way, and they might say something about it."
- **Practice scenarios:** Role-play responses with your child. Ask, "What would you say if someone told you that you can't wear a dress?" or "What will you do if a classmate comments? Who can you talk to if you feel upset?" Preparing ahead can help your child feel more confident in handling these situations.

> *We believe every child deserves the freedom to explore, play, and learn without the constraints of gender stereotypes.*

FACT SHEET

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

If you have a kinder or school aged child in your life, chances are they might be starting to show an interest in taking up an extracurricular activity. An extracurricular activity can be a great opportunity for a child to build new skills, meet new friends and explore new interests. But how do you choose which one to try? Here are some things to consider:

GIVING CHOICES

It's important that children know they have choices. Before automatically suggesting that a girl tries ballet or gymnastics, or a boy has a go at footy, make sure they're aware that other options are out there, and that you'll support them in their choice, whatever that might be. They may still opt for the more 'typical' activity for their gender – and there's nothing wrong with that - but it's essential that they're aware that other, less typical choices, aren't off limits.

Children may worry that if they want to do an activity that's less usual for their gender, you will be disappointed, or that their peers will tease them - your support can go a long way to giving them the freedom to choose something they're genuinely interested in.

Of course, not all extracurricular activities are accessible for all families. There might be particular reasons (competing timetables, location, cost, ability) for guiding a child to a particular activity, but where possible, always offer suggestions that are based on a child's **interests, strengths and skills.**

To find activities in your area, try your local council website or a site such as Active Activities: https://www.activeactivities.com.au

FOCUS ON STRENGTHS & SKILLS

Activities are for everyone – and that means **everyone**! Children of all genders, abilities and ages should be encouraged to try activities that spark their interest. If they're having trouble choosing just one thing they'd like to try, or if the activity they want isn't available but there might be alternatives they'd enjoy, then bringing the conversation back to strengths and skills can help:

- "You love to move your body and feel strong – that's something you would get to do in karate or ballet."
- "You love running, racing and going fast – maybe you'd like to try athletics?"
- "I know you like doing things together with a team – how about soccer, or scouts?"

LETTING CHILDREN TAKE THE LEAD

- Take advantage of free trials or introductory sessions to let your child experience activities before committing.
- Encourage your child to explore activities with friends for added enjoyment and support.
- Even if your child's interests don't align with yours or seem unconventional, respect their choices. Validate their preferences and show enthusiasm for their interests.
- Once your child has chosen an activity, provide ongoing support and encouragement. Attend their performances, games, or events, and show interest in their progress and achievements.

FACT SHEET

EQUALITY & INCLUSION IN THE LIBRARY

How do you encourage families to engage with books promoting inclusion and equality?

Here are some ideas you might already be using:

- Themed storytime sessions: Focus on topics like colours (showing they're for everyone), occupations (anyone can do any job), kindness, or emotions (helping children identify and express feelings).
- Themed displays: Highlight special events like Pride Month, IDAHOBIT Day, or NAIDOC Week.
- Reading inclusive books: Share them during storytime.
- Book recommendations: Suggest inclusive titles to families.

Whenever progressive social change starts to challenge long-standing social norms, there arises the possibility of resistance or even backlash from community members. While resistance and backlash are positive in the sense that they are signs that social change initiatives are starting to be effective, they can be challenging to deal with, particularly in a customer-facing role.

RECOMMENDED BOOKLISTS

For inspiration, check out these inclusion, equality and respect themed booklsts:

- **Level Playground and Mitchell Shire:** Turning Pages, Inspiring Minds booklist
- **Access Health & Community:** Free To Be Me Book Review Tool
- **Your Library:** Beyond Sparkles and Superheroes booklist
- **Darebin City Council:** Books for Respectful Relationships resource

> *Most people support a more gender-equal and inclusive world – it's just the loud minority that stands out.*

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH RESISTANCE AND BACKLASH

- Enlist the support of management
- Refer to the library's equity and inclusion policy – and if you don't have one, bring it up at the next team meeting
- Approach concerns with openness and curiosity – "I'm hearing that you're really concerned about this. We really appreciate when library patrons take the time to give us feedback. Are you able to tell me a bit more about your concerns?" Giving people the opportunity to feel heard can be helpful
- Consider different ways of framing initiatives and discussions – when we talk about gender equality, we talk about the benefits to people of all genders – for example, the benefits of allowing all children to express the full range of emotions unrestricted by stereotypes means growing up into adulthood with better mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

If library patrons become aggressive or threatening, the best strategy is to keep yourself safe, follow your local policy and seek support as required.

FACT SHEET

INCLUSIVE BOOKS IN THE LIBRARY

Books are an incredible tool. It's through books and stories that children are exposed to new social concepts – diversity, kindness, acceptance and inclusion. Diverse stories with diverse characters are what helps support children's understanding that there's no one single way to be.

People come in different shapes and sizes, different genders, different abilities. That all sorts of people can perform all sorts of roles and occupations, and that there's no one way to be a family.

Reading sparks curiosity and stimulates imagination. The more diverse characters and stories children are exposed to in the books that they have access to the more opportunities they are given to be curious and imagine the ways they might be able to exist in the world, and the ways that other people can exist. There are some wonderful books out there that can broaden children's worldview, or allow children to see themselves reflected in what they read.

OVERHEARD IN THE LIBRARY

If you're hearing comments from parents or caregivers in the library, seize the opportunity to gently educate!

"Put that book back - it's not for you"
"Oh, actually we recommend that book for his age group - it has some great messages about being yourself, and finding out what you enjoy!"

"We love seeing kids make their own choices about books – and if it doesn't turn out to be the right book for you, you can always return it and grab something else instead"

> *Books open doors to new ideas, teaching children that there's no one single way to be.*

HAVE A CHAT

If you're sharing a book during storytime, particularly with older children, and you're coming across outdated gender stereotypes or relationship dynamics, use the book as an opportunity for a discussion. We will never encourage banning a book, but we do encourage you to have a **CHAT:**

C **Check in**
Check in with the children about the story. What just happened? How do they feel about it? You could guide a discussion with questions like, "do you think it was fair that the girl had to stay behind while the boy went on an adventure?" "Was it ok when the boy was told to stop crying?" "What do we say to our friends when they're upset?"

H **Have a discussion straight away,** while the story is fresh in their minds

A **Approach with curiosity**
Be curious rather than critical: "I noticed that the princess didn't really get to do anything in the story. What do you think about that? I wonder how she felt? How might the story have been different if she had joined in the adventure?"

T **Try a different book next!**
Be intentional in your choice - make the next book you pick up and read together something that contains more positive messages and reinforces your service's values around gender equality, respect and individuality.

CHECK LIST

GENDER EQUALITY CHECKLIST

A checklist for professionals working with children and young children

SELF REFLECTION

- ○ Have you taken the time to consider your own biases when it comes to gender - whether conscious or unconscious, and how these might influence your interactions with clients?
- ○ Do you avoid assumptions about interests or abilities based on gender (e.g., assuming boys like trucks and girls like dolls)?
- ○ Do you provide/attend ongoing training and education for practitioners on gender equality and inclusivity?

GREETINGS

- ○ Do you check and respect name preferences and pronouns for all clients?
- ○ Do you avoid stereotypes and binary language when greeting clients?
- ○ Do you avoid making comments on the clients' appearance? i.e. “aren't you cute!” “Wow, your hair looks so pretty!”

ENVIRONMENT

- ○ What posters are on display in your practice? Do they show diverse roles and activities, including non-traditional gender roles for children and adults?
- ○ Do your resources celebrate diversity i.e. gender, ability, ethnicity, family makeup? Are the images on display inclusive of all the children you work with?
- ○ If there are play spaces in your practice, are they accessible for all children?
- ○ Do your play spaces offer a range of different play options for clients?
- ○ Do your play spaces use gender-neutral colours and decorative themes?

LANGUAGE

- ○ Do you provide stories/rhymes that portray a range of diverse characters?
- ○ Do you comfort, praise and encourage all clients in the same way? Do you encourage all clients to talk about and express their feelings?
- ○ Do you use gender-neutral terms for relationships (e.g., parent/caregiver instead of mother/father)?
- ○ Do you value and encourage kindness, caring and respectful behaviour equally in clients of all genders?
- ○ Are you using inclusive language i.e. ‘all children’ instead of ‘boys and girls’ and use gender neutral descriptions i.e. police officer, fire fighter?
- ○ Do you avoid assumptions about interests or abilities based on gender (e.g., assuming boys like trucks and girls like dolls)?
- ○ Do you ensure that when children enter the room they are all treated equally and with respect?

TOYS & ACTVITIES

- ○ Do you provide a wide range of toys and activities for clients?
- ○ Do you encourage all clients to use toys and activities regardless of their gender during a session?
- ○ Do the toys, books etc that you utilise with clients reflect diversity i.e. gender, ability, culture and are they accessible for all children?
- ○ Do you regularly review and update toy selection to ensure diversity and inclusivity?

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CHECK LIST

INCLUSIVE IMAGE SELECTION

ABOUT THIS CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to select photos and images that challenge gender stereotypes. Stereotypes, such as "all girls like dolls" or "all boys like trucks," can shape children's development, self-perception, and interactions with others.

This tool is ideal for creating inclusive resources like websites, brochures, posters, and flyers.

HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

1. Complete the checklist by ticking 'yes' or 'no' for each question.
2. If a question doesn't apply, mark it as 'N/A.'
3. A suitable image will have more 'yes' ticks than 'no' ticks. If an image has more than two 'no' ticks, it's not appropriate.
4. If you need help deciding, contact Level Playground.

Aim to choose images with mostly 'yes' ticks. If an image gets a 'no', consider adding others to ensure the final resource covers this important criterion.

ACTIVITY	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Does the image challenge gender roles? Is it clear that children are not restricted to traditionally 'feminine' and 'masculine' activities and interests? I.e. Girls playing with trucks, boys playing with dolls.			

COLOURS	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Do colours challenge gender stereotypes? I.e. Are girls dressed in colours other than pink, are boys dressed in colours other than blue?			

DIVERSITY	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Is diversity represented in the image? • cultural background • family types • ability/disability • age ranges • body shapes and sizes			

COMPOSITION (FRAMING)	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Are all genders equally distributed across the fore and background? I.e. Are girls included in the foreground or are only boys up front?			

CHECK LIST

INCLUSIVE IMAGE SELECTION

TIPS

- If you can't find the image you need, consider creating your own—good quality photos can easily be taken with a smartphone.
- Searching for the right image can feel overwhelming, so try using keywords that promote gender equity, like 'active girls,' 'girls climbing,' 'boys dancing,' 'boys singing,' or 'children playing together.'
- If suitable, explore the Lean In Collection by LeanIn.Org and Getty Images—a library of creative images showcasing diverse women, families, and men as caretakers and earners. Updated monthly, these images aim to shift perceptions and promote authenticity in media. Access the collection here: **https://leanin.org/getty**.

EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE IMAGES