

# Playing fair – gender equity in child care

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Gender equity refers to the equal valuing of males and females and equal opportunities for life and work regardless of gender. Since the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations in 1948, gender equity has been accepted as a fundamental principal of human rights.

Promoting gender equity is about working for fairness in relationships between males and females and being alert to the ways that gender may create inequality.

The purpose of promoting gender equity in child care services is to create equitable and enriching lives for all children. To achieve this child care professionals can work to identify inequities for boys and girls, and plan to overcome these through an ongoing process of self-reflection, observation, planning and evaluation.

## How is children's understanding of gender influenced?

Research suggests that from an early age children's understanding of gender is influenced by their experiences with their family, culture and lifestyle, as well as by the broader community, child care environments and the media. Boys and girls often experience responses and expectations from those around them due to their gender, and gender role stereotypes often influence the way boys and girls begin to experience life and how they play.



### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.5, 2.2 and 3.1 – 3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1 – 1.3, 2.2, 4.2 and 5.1 – 5.7

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.3 – 1.5, 3.3 and 4.1 – 4.6

'...boys are often verbally encouraged to become actively involved in a variety of gross motor activities...Girls on the other hand are often verbally encouraged to become actively involved in the quieter and more passive fine motor activities...'. (MacNaughton and Williams, 2004, p. 83).

## Strategies for promoting gender equity in child care

**Self-reflection:** It is useful for child care professionals to reflect on how much time they spend communicating with boys and girls and the way they interact with them. Research shows that educators interact differently with boys and girls, with girls offered more 'yes/no' questions and boys more often prompted with open ended questions. In addition, more attention, both positive and negative, is given to boys by teachers. (Alloway, 1995). Block, in Alloway, states that research results show that child care professionals '...were not only more likely to respond to boys but they responded in more solution advancing ways, providing more specific information.' (Alloway, 1995, p.73).

It can also be helpful to think not only about how to role model non-sexist behaviour, but also how to step in to children's play to counter sexism. By sensitively intervening and weaving alternatives into children's play, child care professionals can emphasise cooperation and caring between and amongst boys and girls, and can suggest ways of playing that support gender equity. For example, try to challenge dominant masculine play by boys and demonstrate that strength and courage can be shown through cooperative play and caring for others.

**Observing children:** Observing individual children can help to determine whether gender is a factor in their play and this can create the foundations for planning for children. To collect information

### **Reflective questions for child care professionals to consider:**

- What gender biases do you think you may have?
- Are you open to equal and diverse experiences for both girls and boys?
- How and when should you intervene in children's play to promote gender equity?
- How may your everyday practices create sexism/gender inequity even if you consider these to be 'good' practices?
- How do you model a positive attitude toward gender equality in your everyday actions and conversations with children?
- How may your own gender and sexuality influence your expectations of, and interactions with, children?

on the gender dynamics of groups of children, it can be useful to watch how girls and boys play together, and to consider when and why they play together and separately. These observations can assist child care professionals to plan activities and strategies to promote gender equity among children. For example, the following areas of children's play can be observed:

- Play and material choices, use of space, and the time spent at specific activities
- Their choice of friends
- How they play. For example, is their play mostly passive or active, boisterous or quiet?
- How they react to and interact with other children and adults

Also consider the following to help decide if gender is a factor in children's play:

- Is a child avoiding certain areas or types of play because of how other children play?
- Are they participating in or avoiding areas of play because of gender factors?
- Who is influencing or possibly dominating children's play and is gender a factor?

**Reflection with colleagues:** Through discussions with colleagues, child care professionals can question the mainstream view that girls and boys are naturally different in their behaviours and interests. Try to challenge common assumptions about the way girls and boys play. Contrary to traditional beliefs it is important to remember that boys can enjoy environments that allow them to express care and nurture and girls can enjoy scary

and boisterous play. Both genders often show a strong interest in imaginative play.

### **Practical ideas for promoting gender equity in the program**

It can be helpful to consider with colleagues your ideal practices for gender equity and what may make it difficult to promote gender equity in your service. It can also be useful to discuss daily teaching decisions with colleagues and why these were made.

Ideas for children's programs include:

- Reviewing equipment, materials and images used with children to make sure they include gender diversity, non-stereotypical images and non-traditional family lifestyles such as single or same sex parents
- Using the different gender role models depicted in posters, pictures and books to prompt discussions with children
- Varying the usual placement of equipment and toys to promote variety in children's play. For example, place dolls in the block corner and Lego® in the home corner.
- Using games, physical activity, humour, fun, adventure, music, imagination and fantasy to identify and extend boys' and girls' common interests.

### **Ideas for challenging gender play patterns**

In gender patterns of children's play, boys may dominate certain types of play and use aggression to solve problems. Alternatively, girls may use passive verbal means to communicate and may seek to avoid conflict with boys.

'Young Australian boys tend to solve the social problems they encounter with physical force and aggression...In contrast, young girls tend to solve the problems they encounter through verbal reasoning and negotiation.' (MacNaughton and Williams, 2004, p.221).

The following strategies can assist child care professionals to challenge and balance children's play patterns:

- Encourage boys and girls to work together positively and encourage them to identify their similarities and differences
- Spend time with boys to extend and enhance concentration, cooperative play and verbal reasoning skills and with girls to introduce higher levels of physical activity (MacNaughton and Williams, 2004)



- Assist boys and girls to use tools and equipment that is conventionally used by the other gender. For example, encourage girls to use hammers and spades and boys to sew and cook.
- Encourage some boys-only and girls-only groups when you are trying to encourage play in non-traditional gender areas and problem solving exercises
- Provide opportunities for girls' groups to use traditional masculine play props and boys' groups to use traditional feminine props
- Use language that supports gender equity and promotes positive messages about ways of being boys and girls

- Address gender inequity or bias issues such as boys dominating block play, girls laughing at boys in dress ups, and boys and girls sitting separately at mealtimes
- Intervene in children's play to show that aggressive behaviour, teasing and bullying are unacceptable.

### Strategies for conversations with children

Talk with children and invite them to reflect on gender through conversations and stories. Discuss with children how they play and how specific incidents in their play might have been affected by gender traditions or bias.

Useful prompt questions for discussions with children include:

- What do boys and girls often like to do? Are these the same for every one? What things are the same/different?
- What do individual children like to do? Do they like these things because they are a girl/boy?
- Do all mums and dads go to work? What kinds of work do they do?
- Can you be a girl and play with trucks/wear trousers?
- Can you be a boy and wear a dress/play with dolls?

### Conclusion

As gender bias is to some degree present in many people's lives and experiences, child care professionals can encounter barriers to promoting genuine equity for children. By valuing and actively working towards gender equity, the barriers of gender stereotypes and prejudice can be broken down to enable boys and girls to benefit equally from their child care experiences ■

### References and further reading

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