



IMPROVING GENDER BALANCE SCOTLAND

An action guide for primary schools

Children receive and absorb gender stereotyped messages about what they can and cannot do as a girl or as a boy from a very early age. For example, toy manufacturers often market more aggressive toys to boys and more passive toys to girls, construction activities to boys and creative ones to girls. In early reading books, female characters are often portrayed as performing more domestic tasks while male characters are largely under-represented as parents. These stereotypes are unhelpful both for boys and for girls.

When children begin primary school at the age of four or five, many will already be self-selecting activities, books, toys and friends influenced by gender-based beliefs. Many children will have expectations that girls are inherently quiet, compliant and nurturing, while boys are boisterous, confident and should avoid anything traditionally considered feminine. At around five to seven years old, children tend to identify strongly with expectations of their own gender and are likely to actively conform to stereotypes.

These stereotypical views shape their attitudes to relationships and participation in the world of work, and affect wellbeing. A narrowing of experiences at this age too often evolves into a narrowing of opportunity later in life. For example, by secondary school, boys tend to lag behind girls in literacy and language skills while girls are under-represented in areas such as computing, engineering and physics.

Although the problem is multifaceted, teachers have an important role to play in challenging these views before they become too ingrained. Learners need to be exposed to multiple and ongoing opportunities to explore and learn about gender stereotypes and how they affect choices. It is crucial that children are given the opportunity and encouragement to access all areas of the curriculum from an early age so they have equal opportunities in the future, irrespective of gender. This action guide provides some ideas for where to start.



A Tackling your own unconscious bias – self-reflective actions

We all have unconscious biases and it is important to be aware of these in our interactions with children. They invariably affect the way we interact differently with girls and boys, the assumptions we make and the advice and directions we give them. Although admitting and dealing with your own biases can be challenging, it is essential to identify, reflect on, and discuss them openly with colleagues.

Having an unconscious gender bias does not automatically make a person sexist - everyone has biases as a result of years of exposure to gendered patterns. Once you become aware of your biases you can do something about them. By shifting thinking gradually over time, a person can adopt new habits and perspectives to help counteract any bias behaviour.



Are you aware of your own unconscious biases? Take the Harvard Implicit Association test to discover your unconscious preferences here:

Reflective questions:

- **What assumptions might you unconsciously make about which curricular areas and types of activities girls and boys prefer?**
- **Do you expect and/or accept different behaviour from boys and girls, for example, quieter behaviour from girls and more boisterous behaviour from boys?**
- **Are you aware of what you praise or criticise children for? For example, are you more accepting of messy handwriting from boys, or more likely to praise girls for the presentation of their work?**

B. Tackling stereotypes – actions for the classroom

Care needs to be taken when initially exploring learner attitudes to gender. For example, when asked directly about jobs that women and men can do, children will generally answer positively and be confident that “anyone can do anything”. However, children’s attitudes will still be influenced by gender stereotypes and unconscious biases.

B.1. Books and stories



Many fictional texts uphold traditional stereotypes. You could:

- Discuss the stereotypes with learners. What stereotypes does the book illustrate? Are they justified?
- Ask children to rewrite a traditional fairy story with the main characters’ roles swapped, or write a story about a brave heroine, or a male protagonist who needs rescuing.
- Alternatively, provide learners with modern stories that specifically challenge stereotypes. Try to include those with caring male characters as well as strong female protagonists. Some recommendations are:
 - Princess Smartypants by Babette Cole
 - My Mummy is an Engineer/a Scientist/a Plumber by Kerrine Bryan & Jason Bryan.
 - Goodnight Mister Tom by Michelle Magorian

B.2. Class discussions



Use a range of materials and activities to stimulate discussion. For example:

- Ask learners to each write three words they associate with girls and three words they associate with boys. Ask them if they see any patterns in the words. Are the words fair? Do the words apply to all girls and all boys? How do the words make them feel? Is it okay to use them?
- Ask learners to draw a range of professionals (such as a firefighter, scientist, teacher, gymnast, doctor or farmer). Ask them to identify which ones they have drawn as women and which they have drawn as men. Why did they make those choices? Are there any jobs only women/men can do?
- Ask children to examine toy advertising. How are they marketed? Is the advertising fair? Why do they think advertisers market in the ways they do?
- Which sports are accessible to women and men? Which sports are shown on TV? How much are professionals paid? How much prize money can they win? For older children, this could be extended to broader conversations about the gender pay gap. (In the UK women earn an average of 18% less than men.)

B.3. Classroom interactions and layout



The pattern of classroom interactions can unintentionally reinforce messages of expected and accepted behaviours. You could:

- Review your seating arrangements. Are these designed for learning or behaviour management? What are the impacts on well behaved girls who are often inadvertently used as behaviour management tools?
- Use cooperative learning strategies. Explicit roles for discussion and group work will allow less confident children to contribute and can help the more exuberant class members learn how not to dominate.

Monitor your classroom interactions. High-achieving boys are more likely than girls to put their hands up and get attention. Lower-achieving boys are least likely to contribute at all. Download a self-evaluation template at



Reflective questions:

- Does the class have sufficient and regular opportunities within the school year to consider gender stereotypes, unconscious bias and their effects?
- Are learners encouraged to identify and challenge gender stereotyping in an open, safe and constructive environment?
- Do you regularly use inclusive teaching strategies to enable all children to participate equally?
- Are all children in the class able to enjoy a genuinely equal experience of all aspects of the curriculum?

C. Whole school ethos – actions that your organisation can take

There are some steps you can take with colleagues to ensure a school-wide approach to tackling gender stereotypes.

C.1. Leadership and peer support



It is important that the whole staff, including support staff, feel able to tackle these issues, both individually and collectively. You could approach this by:

- Ensuring there is dedicated time at staff meetings for discussion on gender stereotyping, unconscious bias and any related concerns.
- Supporting a staff member or working group to lead in researching and developing an action plan.
- Planning opportunities for teachers to observe each other and discuss patterns of classroom interaction in supportive ways.
- Working with the Parent Council to ensure its members understand the initiatives and to gain their insights.

C.2. Language and behaviour



There is still a surprising amount of sexist language and behaviour used in society and this can be picked up and imitated by young children. You could tackle this by:

- Monitoring how far this language filters into the classroom and dealing with sexist language in the same way as racist and homophobic language.
- Supporting both staff and children in constructively challenging inappropriate behaviour or unfortunate choice of language.
- Raising awareness of instances of subtler gender stereotypes in language. For example, the question: “Is anyone’s dad an engineer?” can be an ongoing reinforcement of the idea that mums cannot be engineers, just as “Did your mum check your homework?” reinforces the idea that women do the bulk of childcare.



C.3. Careers awareness and employability



Ideas about what children are good at, and subsequently what paths are accessible to them, are embedded from an early age. The school can take some simple steps to avoid inadvertently steering children away from subjects based on cultural perceptions of whether they are girls’ or boys’ subjects, easy or hard subjects.

You could:

- Look at how different subjects are presented and whether all subjects and topics are presented as equally challenging and accessible. Do all staff take care to avoid inadvertently reinforcing the idea that certain subjects are harder than others? There is a particular issue nationally with maths and science being perceived as difficult.
- Develop a network of former learners who are willing to visit and talk about their jobs, the courses they studied and the choices they made.

C.4. Set up a learner-led group



Establishing a learner group with representatives from different year groups can be very powerful. Allowing the children to share their observations with peers, staff and parents/carers can be particularly effective.

The children could:

- Audit wall displays to confirm there is a range of positive role models for all children, including women and men portrayed in a range of roles in both the workplace and the home.
- Audit resources throughout the school, eg fiction and nonfiction books, imaginative play figures for younger children, workbooks for older children. As far as possible, do the resources celebrate diversity?
- Plan, deliver and analyse a survey for learners (and/or parents and carers) about their opinions on what it means to be male or female, thoughts on future jobs and equal pay.
- Plan and deliver assemblies to raise awareness, across the school community, of gender stereotypes.

Reflective questions

- **Does a member of staff have the role of gender champion? Having someone with gender balance on their remit can be useful in maintaining a whole school reflection on gender.**
- **Are all substantial differences between boys and girls in achievement and participation noted and identified as gender issues? Eg, do boys enjoy reading? Are girls active in PE?**
- **Do staff feel able to challenge each other and learners constructively? Is there an ethos of open, safe and collaborative working to support this?**
- **Are learners able to lead on school projects /surveys focused on gender issues and share their findings with others?**

D. Communicating with parents and carers

Long-lasting cultural change will only be achieved if all members of the school community are involved, including parents and carers.

You could involve parents and carers by:

- Explaining rationale through newsletters and social media, at family learning sessions or at parents' evenings.
- Adding suggestions to story sacks to prompt and support parents to identify and discuss gender stereotypes when reading with their children.
- Inviting male parents/carers to participate in activities to counteract the perception that only women care or nurture, particularly if the school is predominantly staffed by women.
- Supporting parents/carers in not passing on any anxieties they themselves may have about certain subjects eg the perception that mathematics is difficult.

Reflective questions:

- **Are all parents aware of the ethos of the school in relation to counteracting gender stereotypes?**
- **Do you feel able to discuss issues of gender stereotyping with parents/carers and to present alternative viewpoints where appropriate? If not, can work be done with colleagues to identify good strategies for gentle and effective communication?**
- **Do you ensure that dads/grandfathers/male carers as well as mums/grandmothers/female carers receive information from the school and are invited to be involved?**

By tackling unconscious bias individually and through whole school discussions on gender stereotypes with children, colleagues and parents, we can create lifelong opportunities that extend beyond traditional barriers from an early age.

Useful links

- **Improving Gender Balance 3 – 18, Education Scotland**
Links to research and resources,
- **Breaking the Mould, National Union of Teachers**
Resources to counteract gender stereotypes in early learning and primary settings,
- **Let Toys be Toys**
A campaign to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys,
- **Closing Doors, Institute of Physics**
A statistical study exploring the links between gender and subject choice,
- **Career Education Standard**
Education Scotland guidance on embedding employability skills in 3-18 learning (with a focus on equality and diversity)