



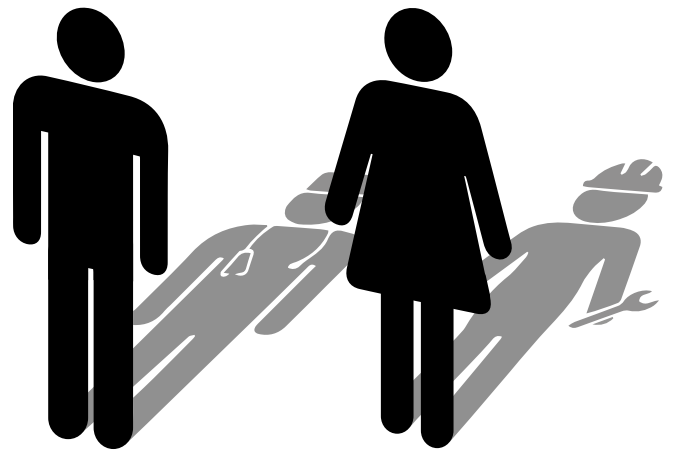
IMPROVING GENDER BALANCE SCOTLAND

Gender Stereotypes: an introduction for practitioners in schools and early learning centres

This guide provides a brief introduction to gender stereotypes and their impacts through unconscious bias and stereotype threat. It should be read in conjunction with the accompanying action guides, which provide practical steps for practitioners to address these issues in the early years, primary and secondary schools.

Accompanying guides:

- Action guide for early learning and child care centres
- Action guide for primary schools
- Action guide for secondary schools



CREDIT: Jack Glennon of Ravensbourne College, London

3%



Only 3% of engineering modern apprenticeships in Scotland were filled by girls in 2015

17%



Girls accounted for just 17% of entries for Higher Computing Science in Scotland in 2016

8%



Only 8% of Primary School teaching staff in Scotland are men

80%



Boys account for 80% of permanent exclusions in England

87%



87% of girls asked (aged 11-21) think women are judged more for their looks than ability

18%



In the UK, women earn an average of 18% less than men

38%



38% of dads lie to their boss to take time off work to spend with their children

75%



In the UK in 2015 – suicides were approx. 75% male, 25% female

What are gender stereotypes?

A gender stereotype is a widely held belief or generalisation about the behaviours, characteristics and roles performed by women and men. Female stereotypical roles include being emotional, caring and in need of protection. Male stereotypical roles include being rational, career driven and strong. These assumptions can be negative (eg women are irrational, men are insensitive) or seemingly benign (eg women are nurturing, men are leaders). However, all stereotyping can be limiting.

Where do gender stereotypes come from?

Gender stereotypes originate from local culture and traditions. Children learn what constitutes female and male behaviour from their family and friends, the media, and institutions including schools and religious bodies. The prevalence of gender stereotypes in our culture can have an adverse effect on both girls and boys, who are constantly bombarded with messages about how they should look, behave and play according to their gender. These socially accepted and often unconscious ideas start to form in infancy.

What are the negative impacts of gender stereotypes?

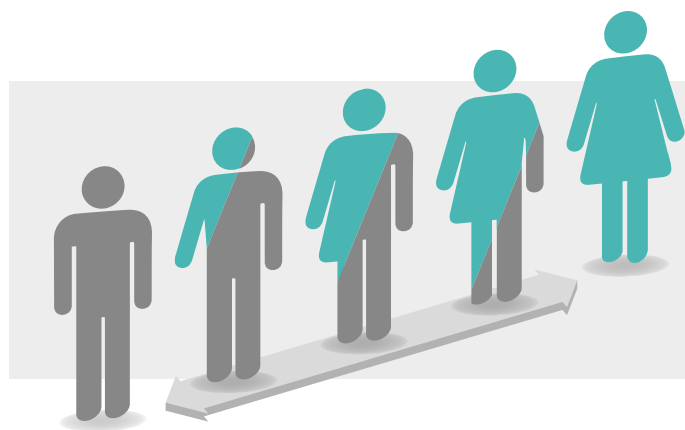
Gender stereotypes shape self-perception, affect wellbeing, attitudes to relationships and influence participation in the world of work. In a school environment they affect a young person's classroom experience, academic performance or subject choice. The assumptions we make about boys and girls may be conscious or unconscious and can result in different treatment of one group compared to another.

Gender stereotypes can have a negative impact on both boys and girls.

What is the difference between sex and gender?

Sex and gender are different concepts. Sex is determined at birth, is based on physiological differences, and is usually fixed: a person is born as a man, woman or intersex. Gender refers to sets of learned behaviours. These are socially defined characteristics and expectations attributed to being male or female. Gender is fluid and can change.

The challenge comes if we confuse sex and gender and start to view gender as innate. Gender is not fixed and should not prevent girls or boys from participating in an activity or making a life choice. In reality there are very few activities or choices that are not open to both boys and girls.



Reflective exercise:

- **Think about what opportunities and limitations you had as a young girl/boy. Now compare these to those that your mother/father had. Now compare those of your mother/father to your grandmother/grandfather. Have ideas of gender changed over time?**

The gender spectrum

Girls, women, boys and men can have both female and male characteristics. Gender is not binary and is more complex than being simply female or male. It can instead be viewed as a spectrum, with people identifying at various points along it, or at multiple points at the same time (non-binary gender). Some people feel they do not fit within the spectrum at all (agender).

What is unconscious bias?

We can minimise the harmful effects of gender imbalance and gender stereotyping by understanding unconscious bias. Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, which happens outside of our control. Our assumptions are influenced by our background, personal experiences, social stereotypes and cultural context.

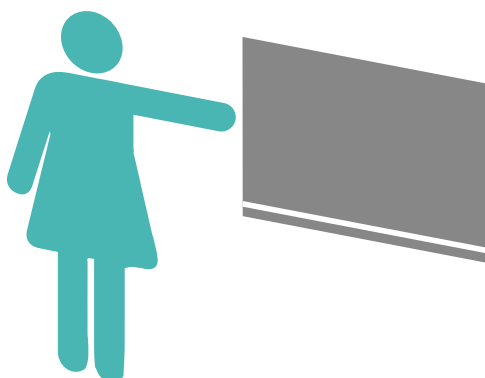
Unconscious bias arises because our brains have to process vast amounts of information every second. In order to avoid being overwhelmed, our brains have to make assumptions based on previous experience and find patterns to enable fast decisions. These assumptions however tend to be based on simple characterisation of people such as their age, race or gender. They are communicated through micro-messages such as body language and choice of words. They are more likely to manifest when we are stressed or tired, and can be problematic if they affect our beliefs and treatment of others.

Everyone has unconscious biases. These biases do not necessarily make a person ageist, sexist or racist. An individual can be unconsciously influenced by a stereotype even if they do not rationally subscribe to the limitations implied by the stereotype.



Unconscious bias in the classroom

In the classroom, unconscious bias can manifest itself in teacher-learner interactions. For example, girls are more likely to be praised for being well-behaved while boys are more likely to be praised for their ideas and understanding. A disruptive girl may encounter more criticism than a boy who exhibits similar behavior, while quiet boys are often overlooked in classrooms. These expectations can be harmful to both groups. Girls may learn to be compliant and not take risks, while boys may opt out of education if understanding does not come readily.



What is stereotype threat?

Stereotype threat occurs in situations in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to a stereotype about their social group. It has been shown to affect performance in a wide range of tasks, both mental and physical. For example, one study showed that in sporting activities, African American athletes did worse than their white counterparts when they were led to believe that they were being tested for strategic intelligence, but performed better than them when they were told they were being tested for natural ability.

There seems to be just one prerequisite for stereotype threat to exert an influence - the person must care about their performance in the task. An individual does not have to believe in the stereotype to be vulnerable to it. They just have to be aware of the stereotypes held by others.

In education, stereotype threat has been linked to academic performance. For example, girls who are aware of the stereotype that boys are better at mathematics perform worse on tests if they are asked to state their gender prior to the test.

Counteracting stereotype threat

- **For practitioners** - avoid collecting personal data at the beginning of an exam/survey/feedback form and collect it at the end instead.
- **For individuals** - becoming aware of the concept of stereotype threat in itself can help reduce some of the threats.

The cross-cutting nature of gender identity

The prominence of a person's gender identity also depends on the context. It may change as it intersects with other aspects of a person's identity such as age, ethnicity, religion and social class. For example, a white girl may be strongly aware of her female gender identity in a classroom full of white boys, whereas in a more racially mixed group her skin colour may become more salient.

It is important to challenge gender stereotypes that treat groups of all girls as the same, or groups of all boys as the same.

Tackling common misconceptions

Boys and girls are just different

There is overwhelming evidence that this is not the case. There is more variance within groups of boys and within groups of girls, than there is between boys and girls. Gender differences are learned, not innate.

We can just run an annual girls into science event with lots of female role models

One-off activities or interventions do not have a lasting impact. They need to be part of a wider strategy. Role models can have a positive impact, but usually only where there is an ongoing relationship.

It's unfair to do something just for girls or boys

One group should not be preferentially treated compared to any other group. However, if one group is being disadvantaged, then positive action should be taken. For example, if a lunch-time languages club only attracts girls, the organiser could consider ways to encourage boys to participate.

We need more women physics teachers

The evidence indicates that the gender of the teacher is not a large influencer on subject choice. The vast majority of students respects and responds to good teaching, irrespective of whether the teacher is male or female.

All pupils know they are free to choose any subjects they want

Unconscious bias and normalisation of stereotypes means there are often unspoken barriers. Simply informing students they are free to choose, without addressing these barriers, is not sufficient.

A lesson on the science of make-up will encourage girls to take an interest

Attempts to make a subject more appealing by reinforcing a stereotype are unlikely to be effective. Make-up, for example, may appeal to some girls, but will make others feel patronised and will deter most boys.

Next steps

- Keep in mind that work to tackle any gender imbalance in the school must be regarded as a whole school issue, and all strands of gender imbalance must be tackled together.
- Read our action guides for practical advice on challenging gender stereotypes in your school
- Share the guides with colleagues and members of your senior leadership team and start the conversation.

Useful links

- ***The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence***, PISA, OECD Publishing. A report exploring what the PISA data can tell us about gender equality.
- ***Addressing Gender and Achievement: Myths and Realities, Department for Children, Schools and Families***. A guide for educators with links to relevant research.
- Fine, C. (2010) ***Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences***. An exploration of gender stereotypes. Icon Books.
- Steele, C. (2011) ***Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do***. An introduction to the research and findings on stereotype threat.
- Aspires: ***Young people's science and career aspirations***, King's College London. Findings from a five year longitudinal study of students age 10-14.
- ***Research briefing: Looking at gender balance in STEM subjects at school***, Education Scotland. A summary of research and suggested action points for teachers.
- ***Education Scotland guidance on embedding employability skills in 3-18 learning*** (with a focus on equality and diversity).