Equal Opportunities Commission

The Development of Gender Roles in Young Children

Sex stereotyping is one of the EOC's key themes. The main focus of this theme is to raise awareness of the pervasive nature of sex stereotyping and the social and economic damage it causes, to increase young people's opportunities and to act as a catalyst to bring about a reduction in occupational segregation.

Much of the EOC's work on this theme concentrates on young people in secondary education and the move from school to training, further or higher education or work. Despite this, attitudes towards gender and what is seen as gender appropriate behaviour are formed in early childhood. Although these views may change as children grow older, they will still influence choices and decisions which are made throughout life. Those subject and career choices can contribute to job segregation leading to poorer pay and prospects, particularly for women.

The Research

In Autumn 2000, the EOC commissioned Christine Skelton and Elaine Hall at the Department of Education, University of Newcastle to conduct a literature review. The main aims were:

- To pull together recent studies and other literature which address the development of gender roles in young children aged between three and seven;
- To identify the main theoretical approaches towards gender development;
- To consider the role of key influences on young children;
- To consider broad policy initiatives in Britain which are aimed at this age group or those working with young children, the effect of these interventions and implications for future initiatives.

Background

Following Government investment and development in the early years, interest in effective early childhood services has grown as care and education are brought closer together. There have been initiatives in training provision for early childhood workers through the Childcare Framework and campaigns aimed at increasing recruitment into childcare and play work. Education initiatives include baseline assessment of all children aged 4 to 5, and the Early Learning Goals which set out what most children are expected to achieve by the end of Reception Year.

Funding has also been made available for a variety of childcare programmes. The National Childcare Strategy aims to provide affordable and accessible childcare for up to one million children by 2003. The Sure Start programme has been launched to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children. These initiatives are welcome. If early years provision is to meet the early learning and caring needs of young children, the needs of working parents for quality childcare, and provide appropriate training and reward for those working at all levels with young children, then a renewed emphasis on promoting gender equality amongst those both in receipt and delivery of early childhood services, is required.

Considerable care has been taken in the new initiatives to provide examples of good practice with children in relation to some aspects of early years provision, and there has been a rapid growth in the literature on young children. But although research
outlines numerous ways in which gender impacts upon the daily lives and experiences of young children and many of the new initiatives have an equality requirement, good practice guidelines on gender equality issues are not readily available. This report identifies a range of factors and key ideas contributing to how and what young children learn about being a boy or a girl. Although the focus is on gender, children form their social identity in a wider context and other factors including ethnicity, social class, culture, religion and age also have to be considered. It is hoped that this report will help all those who work with young children in either a caring or educational role, both to promote the development of young children and to free them from the limiting effects of stereotyping.

KEY FINDINGS

How children become 'boys' and 'girls'

From an early age children are keen to identify themselves as either a boy or a girl. Asking whether gender is a result of socialisation or biology is now generally thought to be unhelpful, because the two are closely interrelated. By gender, we mean the social differences between women and men that have been learned over time and may differ within and between cultures, rather than the biological characteristics which differentiate people as males or females.

There are two main perspectives on how gender identity is formed in young children, with sufficient evidence to indicate that socialisation has a crucial role to play.

Sex role theories

These have occupied a central place in the literature since the late 1970s. Basically, children learn ways of relating to the world by observing how people act, and by being rewarded or punished for appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. So children model their behaviour on same-sex members of their family, their friends, and the images they come across.

These theories have been the most influential in the development of strategies aimed at improving equality of opportunity. Such interventions are based on the idea that by providing access to non-stereotyped materials and role models and encouragement to enter 'opposite sex' areas, young children will, by their own choice, adopt nontraditional attitudes and behaviours.

Gender relational theories

These see children as actively involved in developing their own gender identities and argue against an approach which suggests that all girls or all boys have similar interests and behaviour. Children's concepts of gender are thought to change constantly, depending on the context and recent work suggests that young children's understanding of gender is shaped by social class, ethnicity, religion, age and culture. Strategies based on these theories suggest that adults need to intervene directly in children's interactions, in order to help young children understand and question conventional gender stereotypes.

Gender in the early years

In building up a picture of who they are, children gain information from a number of key sources, not least: parents, local communities and peer groups, early years professionals, and the media.

Parents

Many parents hold deep seated and seemingly unconscious perceptions of their
children based on gender. Even before birth, expectations based on gender may affect how a child is perceived by its parents. Some parents, especially fathers, hope their firstborn will be a son in order to continue the family name and to be a protector to any younger (girl) children that follow. Once a child is born they are treated in gendered ways and studies have shown that a mother will react differently to a baby depending on whether they are told that it is a girl or a boy.

Parents are keen for their children to exhibit acceptable gender behaviours. Fathers, in particular, are anxious that their sons should conform to stereotyped behaviour and will take steps to limit non-conventional behaviour. Similarly, stereotypical beliefs often underpin parents' perceptions of their children's academic abilities.

**The local community**

The ways in which boys and girls, women and men are viewed in the local community; the roles they are expected to play; the attitudes and behaviour they are expected to portray; plus the views of their peer groups; will all affect young children's knowledge and understanding of what is acceptable gender behaviour. Sex role theories have recommended that children should be provided with a nonsexist environment and that it is sufficient to encourage children to 'take on' nonconventional gender behaviours. In contrast, gender relational studies have suggested that children's desire to demonstrate publicly that they are clearly a boy or a girl requires active intervention on the part of adults to help them understand that a variety of behaviours is acceptable.

**Early years settings**

The main gender issue of recent times has been seen as the behaviour, attitudes and underachievement of some boys. It has been argued that the feminised culture of early years settings is one of the factors contributing to this. This is clearly debatable as for years, girls had failed to achieve as well as boys although they had experienced the apparent benefits of feminised education.

Some of the management and organizational practices in early years settings have been found to differentiate between boys and girls. A number of strategies aimed at raising the awareness of those working with young children towards these aspects of gender stereotyping have been developed and incorporated into equal opportunities policies.

Although early years workers may hope that they treat all children the same, perceptions of what is expected or appropriate for boys and girls remain a matter of personal as opposed to professional attitudes. Professional training courses for student teachers, for example, do not currently teach how gender discrimination occurs, nor how easily it is introduced into daily routines and practices. The Early Learning Goals are not yet supported by guidelines for teachers on how to pursue gender equality and challenge stereotyping.

**Other influences**

A continuing source of conventional gender stereotyping is the mass media. Toy manufacturers also develop and market toys specifically for girls or boys. Not only are they stereotyped, but many boys’ games and toys are noticeably violent and aggressive.
Opinion is divided on whether or not toys which are aggressive in nature elicit the same type of behaviour in the children playing with them, and trying to find a simple causal link between violent images and aggressive play is unrealistic. Yet it does give cause for concern and it is important that adults should intervene with young children's use of technology, not least to assist them to differentiate between fact and fiction.

'Laddish' boys are often popular with children and adults alike and it has been found that offering alternative images of what it means to be a boy is not enough to change behaviour. Boys do not want to be seen as 'wimpy', 'girlie' or 'soft' and other types of intervention are necessary to help them understand that there are different ways in which someone can be seen as, for example, strong or brave.

**Policy and practice: the education of young children**

Due to social, economic and political changes, more prominence is now being given to work with young children. One result has been for the early years curriculum to become more prescribed and monitored. Although equality issues are raised in the Early Learning Goals, they may not be viewed as a priority because of the emphases on curriculum and measurable outcomes.

The term 'early years professional' refers to staff working with under fives in a variety of settings and may include: a nursery nurse; childminder; creche worker; teacher; playgroup leader; family centre worker; or classroom assistant.

The qualifications of 'early years professionals' cover a wide range: from a Specialist Teachers' Assistant accreditation (STA), through to an NVQ or BTEC vocational qualification, to a post-graduate degree in early childhood education (BPhil in Early Years).

However, many childcare workers are unqualified. Childminders, for example, view themselves as professional childcare workers but there is no requirement for them to be trained or qualified. Nursery managers need not have any early years training or experience, and many of those who are qualified only have an NVQ level 2 award which, it is suggested, should be seen as a minimum requirement.

The drive to produce qualified individuals in the most cost effective way has meant that both initial and post-qualification training has tended to concentrate on issues of the curriculum and its implementation, rather than on reflective practice and action research.

Although practitioners are urged to challenge stereotypes and to use materials which reflect diversity, guidance materials and good practice examples of how to achieve gender equity are not forthcoming. This compares unfavourably with the guidance provided for specific subjects, such as early mathematical learning. Indeed, even in subject specific areas there is no focus on how to promote gender equality.

Assumptions about gender which are hidden within the main theoretical approaches to the development of young children are largely unchallenged. The theoretical basis of early years professionals' understanding of young children is inclined to emphasise the importance of the adult's role in childhood development. It tends to undervalue the importance of children as social actors in their own right.

Early years settings are regarded as having a feminised culture. This is partly the
result of staff being predominantly female but, more significantly, is also dependent
on a view of early years work as essentially nurturing and caring. Thus working with
young children has always been considered 'a woman's job'.
This has important implications both for the value attributed to workers regarded as
'mother-carers' and for the status of male early years practitioners. The absence of
men in early years work transmits the message that it is only women who are involved
in the emotional, social and intellectual development of young children.
It also introduces tensions for male childcare workers around the issues of power and
abuse. Men are seen to pose a threat to female workers because they may obtain
higher status positions just by being male. Because of concerns around sexual abuse
they may also be perceived, by some, as a potential threat to young children.
The culture of assessment hinges on an agreed version of 'the ideal child'. If this is not
unpicked in terms of gender, it can mask assumptions about gender appropriate
behaviour and reinforce stereotyped images.

Implications for policy and practice
The researchers identify a number of implications for policy and practice, both at
national and individual levels.

Practice with the early years
Parents and other adults could ask themselves questions regarding their interactions
with, and observations of, young children in order to understand and address their
own subconscious gender stereotyping. These might include:
□ Do I expect children to act differently because they are boys or girls?
□ Do I have different expectations of their abilities or potential based on whether
they are a boy or a girl?
□ What messages are the children getting about the way to be a 'proper' boy or
girl from the toys they use, television or videos they watch, and the books they
read?
□ In their play activities what images of boys and girls are the children acting
out? Early years workers should establish what images of males and females
children bring with them into the institutional setting. For
example:
□ What are the children's favourite games, toys, television and book characters?
□ What do these tell children about the 'correct' way of being a boy or a girl?
□ What kinds of boys and girls, men and women feature in their play activities
and stories?
□ What types of work or other roles do men and women take on in the local
community?
□ Are children used to seeing women working outside the home?
□ Are they familiar with men taking part in child care responsibilities, for
instance, involving themselves in the playgroup or nursery?
Early years workers should provide children in their care with a non-sexist
environment. They should ensure that children are offered non-sexist reading books
and materials, a wide variety of activities and pictures, photographs and other display
materials depicting men and women in non-traditional roles and from a variety of
cultures.
In addition, attention should be given to the messages put across to the children in terms of day to day routines, experiences and practices. These could include:
- To what extent do I differentiate between the children. Am I aware that 'girls' and 'boys' bare not homogeneous groups; for example, some girls will act in assertive ways and some boys will play co-operatively?
- How do my interactions influence children and their understanding of what it means to be a girl or a boy?
- What aspects of my daily work practices help children to understand themselves and others as girls and boys?
- How do I behave as an early childhood educator? For example, when I am observing children do I collect information on their gender behaviours and attitudes?
- What are the main theories and ideas that define my work with young children? Do these take account of gender?

It is recommended that adults intervene in children's play to enable them to question stereotypes and to recognise that there are numerous acceptable ways of being girls or boys. For example, female workers should involve themselves in the full range of activities and be particularly aware if they are avoiding certain spaces, such as the block play area or sand and water activities, which tend to be dominated by boys. Children could be presented with imaginative play opportunities where they might devise and explore gender images and be provided with texts depicting a range of ways of being a particular character. For example, princesses are portrayed differently in traditional fairytales, modern renditions of tales, feminist fairytales, stories from different cultures and in factual books. Adults should ask children questions to recognise different but acceptable versions of characters in stories, for example:
- Are all princesses young and beautiful?
- Do all princesses wear long dresses?
- Can princesses do real jobs?

Children's storylines should be investigated to identify the ways in which children make sense of themselves and others. Similarly, ways of weaving alternate storylines into children's play which treat the themes of children's stories seriously, but are fun, should be found.

When early years practitioners work with boys, it is suggested that they should talk with them about what aspects of boys' behaviour the children like, and why; explore with them the difficulties involved in different ways of being a boy; look at the choices which boys make about how to be boys and the knock-on effects of those choices; curtail those boys who are violent and aggressive; offer strong support to those who are non-violent; provide different images of what it means to be a boy; and help the children to develop their own views of what it means to be brave, strong and admirable etc.

**National Policy**

Agencies responsible for policy on the recruitment and training of practitioners, early years curriculum and guidance, and for assessing the quality of provision (DfES, QCA and Ofsted), should ensure that all programmes and policies recognise and address the need to promote equality, both for the young children who use the services, and for the early years workers.
Those agencies and government bodies involved in early childhood services should work together to create a clear definition of 'the early years professional'. This should include consideration of the purposes of early years work and the pay, terms and conditions for all those involved in this sector. A positive evaluation of the skills required and the importance of the work undertaken in the early years would help to raise the status of staff in this area.

Staff should be provided with planned and systematic programmes of training and development, and encouraged and helped to participate in training. This should be appropriate to their level of employment in early years work. Training programmes could include elements of child development, psychology and sociology, plus aspects of the curriculum. Awareness of gender stereotyping should be a key component of this training.

Both initial and continuing training programmes should provide professionals with guidance in exploring their fundamental beliefs about early childhood and in recognising the effect which their own beliefs have on their work with children, including attitudes towards gender and the sex stereotyping of roles.

The expansion of early years services has brought new career opportunities in management and this should be taken into consideration in devising training and development programmes.

Recruitment strategies should take account of differing career paths into early years work. Careers advice offered by schools and colleges is the main route but there are alternatives.

Government aims to increase the number of under-represented groups, including men, in the early years workforce and the activities of the Early Years National Training Organisation are welcomed. As early years professionals, men may be seen in nontraditional roles, reflecting the true diversity of society.

At the same time, it is important that what is appropriate behaviour for all childcare workers should be determined, and protection policies for both workers and children established. This will ensure that a diverse workforce is welcomed and accepted by parents.

National targets for the recruitment of male students and workers which have been set to increase from a baseline of 2 per cent in 1998 to 6 per cent in 2004, should encourage colleges and employers to focus on the gender differentiation of the workforce. These targets should not be seen as static, but should be regularly reviewed whilst the policies and practice designed to meet these targets should be evaluated to measure their success.

There are tensions between providing adequate services for young children and their families and investing in a reflective, sophisticated group of professionals: there is a challenge here for Government to balance the expansion of the Childcare Strategy with the potential of the new Training Framework.

The Government has recognised the importance of continuous professional development for early years workers and targets have been set to improve training opportunities. It is important that these targets are monitored, and that funding is provided at a local level for this development, both at individual centres and in conjunction with early excellence centres. In this way, groups of early years
practitioners across the range of services, from childminders to teachers, can share good practice and develop the most effective ways of working together.

The Development of Gender Roles in Young Children by Christine Skelton and Elaine Hall, Department of Education, University of Newcastle, was published in the EOC Research Discussion Series in November 2001. It is available free of charge from the EOC and can be downloaded from the EOC website.

Please see the Bibliography in the full report for further reading on this topic.

For further information about EOC research and statistical work, please visit www.eoc.org.uk/research or contact us at research@eoc.org.uk
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Note
This will be covered in the new Teacher Training Agency standards, which are not yet implemented.

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