

# An evaluation of the North East Glasgow pilot of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme

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## Introduction

The Gender Friendly Nursery (GFN) was delivered as a pilot programme in North East Glasgow from October 2016-April 2018. The GFN programme was developed and delivered by North East Health Improvement staff with the support and advice of national organisations with an interest in improving gender equality: Zero Tolerance, *Respectme*, LGBT Youth Scotland, Men in Childcare and Fathers Network Scotland. Inspiration came from the 2014 *Respectme* conference, Gender Is Everyone's Agenda, where Zero Tolerance presented their new resource for promoting gender equality in Early Years, *Just Like A Child*. An idea was mooted about an award, in keeping with the Breastfeeding Friendly Award, which recognised good practice around gender in early years settings. A steering group composed of representatives of the organisations mentioned above met to discuss, and the Gender Friendly Nursery programme was created.

## About the Gender Friendly Nursery Pilot

The programme in the pilot phase consisted of a full-day training for the full staff group of early years establishments who indicated an interest in taking part. This was mostly undertaken on in-service days; however two courses were delivered as twilights over three sessions. The training was delivered by staff from the North East Glasgow Health Improvement Team with support from Glasgow East Women's Aid.

During the training course staff were introduced to the concept of gender and discussions around equity and equality; gender stereotypes and where they are found; their relationship to gender inequality and the many harms this can cause. Staff were asked to reflect on their own practice by starting work on an audit highlighting their existing good practice and later on exploring areas for development, considering areas of leadership and management; staff awareness; curriculum, learning and teaching; environment; resources; and communication with parents, carers and the wider community. They were provided with a variety of tools and resources (including *Just Like A Child* and a support pack developed by Health Improvement). In order to receive the award establishments are asked to work on an agreed action plan (taken from areas for development in the audit) and within approximately a year should be ready to apply for GFN status.

Nine nurseries engaged with the process over the pilot phase and the first two of these have been recognised as Gender Friendly Nurseries. Four other nurseries are working towards their award and three have not yet progressed since the training. Overall approximately 170 staff received the GFN training.

## Evaluation Methodology

The purpose of this evaluation was to investigate whether the GFN programme was successful in increasing knowledge and skills of nursery staff around the topic of gender. The evaluation hoped to find out if the programme had initiated changes in practice in the nursery setting. 5 nurseries took part in the evaluation. A number of methodologies were utilised in the evaluation.

**1.** Participants were asked to rate themselves against a series of **attitudes/knowledge statements** prior to and following completion of the training course. These were analysed using the Mann Whitney test to demonstrate where there has been a statistically significant difference in the median rank scores between the before and after scores.

**2. Post course feedback** was collected at the end of each training session. Participants were provided with postcards to complete with the following headings: Something I learned today; something I need to think more about; something I will do or change after today; something that challenged me. In addition post it notes were provided for feedback on the organisation and delivery of the training itself.

**3. Interviews** were conducted with 4 nursery managers/team leaders.

**4.** 16 nursery staff members took part in **focus groups** or completed an **online survey**.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed. A thematic analysis of all qualitative evaluation material was then conducted. Ethical approval was not required for the evaluation; however participants gave their consent to take part.

There were limitations to this evaluation. Only a small proportion of the staff took part in the focus groups, interviews and online survey and as such the sample size is low. This was for a number of reasons (nurseries who had only recently received the training were not invited to be part of the evaluation, staff unavailability, scheduling issues, difficulty accessing IT in the nursery environment) but the nurseries who did take part included a balance of those who had and had not progressed through the GFN award process. The evaluation was conducted by members of staff who were involved in various ways in the development and/or delivery of the GFN programme; however care was taken to ensure that interviews and focus groups were not conducted by staff members who had been part of the direct training delivery to each nursery taking part.

### **Findings from Post Course Feedback**

Post course feedback was collected immediately following the training session. Analysis indicates that that the training had:

**Increased knowledge around gender:** participants indicated a greater understanding of the definitions of sex and gender, an awareness of the wider impact of gender stereotyping and the impact that the media and culture has on people's attitudes and beliefs about gender.

**Challenged attitudes:** there were strong indications that the training had challenged participants attitudes towards gender. In addition many participants wrote about feeling surprised or shocked when learning about other people's attitudes towards gender. This was particularly the case with the findings of Nancy Lombard's research<sup>1</sup> into the attitudes of primary school pupils.

**Affirmed existing practice:** many participants felt that the training helped them to feel confident that their current practice was already in line with what was recommended.

**Provided ideas and provoked intention for changes in practice:** specific areas that were commonly identified included being more careful with the language used with children and parents, sharing information and knowledge from the training with colleagues, parents and friends, and an intention to return to the nursery and look at the resources which are currently being used with an eye to gender.

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<sup>1</sup> Lombard N (2011) Young people's attitudes about violence (PDF), Edinburgh: CRFR.

Following the training participants were also asked to give more general feedback on the training session as a whole via post-it notes. The feedback was very positive. Participants commented on the quality of delivery as well as the relaxed discursive style of the activities. They particularly enjoyed the videos, clips and media presentation that form part of the programme. Many participants valued the opportunity to think over and discuss some of these issues, and found the training informative and useful.

### **Findings from Pre and Post Attitude Statements**

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements both prior to and following the delivery of the Gender Friendly Nursery training.

- **Gender and sex mean the same thing**
- **Gender stereotypes can lead to negative outcomes like inequality, violence and unequal resources**
- **No matter what we do girls will inevitably gravitate towards things like the home corner**
- **There are easy to implement ways to ensure gender stereotypes are reduced at nursery**
- Equality means treating everyone in the same way and is the best way to approach gender
- It's not my job to teach children about gender - that's up to the parents
- There are many benefits to having male nursery staff

There was a statistically significant difference in the median rank scores before and after questionnaire in each statement above in **BOLD**.

The results showed an increased understanding of the difference between sex and gender and the negative outcomes of gender stereotyping. Participants were less likely to agree that girls are inevitably drawn to the home corner and more in agreement that there are ways that nurseries can ensure gender stereotypes are reduced. However the results also suggest that the Gender Friendly Nursery training needs to be clearer about the differences between equality and equity, and what this means for work around gender, as it was the intention for participants to recognise that it may not always be most appropriate to treat boys and girls exactly the same when in some circumstances certain groups may need extra support or encouragement above the others. It should be noted here that many staff were keen during discussions to stress that nurseries took a child-centred individual approach to working with children which was not influenced by gender but by the preferences of each child. There was very little change in the statements related to job role and male nursery staff; however this was because the pre-course views of most participants were in line with the training content.

### **Findings from follow up Focus Groups/Interviews/Survey**

Interviews and focus groups with nursery managers, team leaders and staff were conducted over a number of months after nurseries had received the training. As such these provide a greater indication of practice change and the impact of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme.

Almost all staff felt that the Gender Friendly Nursery programme was **relevant and important** for their nursery and their individual practice. There was a belief that steps that are taken in the nursery setting can have a long term as well as immediate impact on the children.

*"I think everything you do on this route always makes a difference, because we are the first educators of the children. Some of the kids are in here at 6 weeks and are here till they are 5 so when it comes to those kids it is embedded, and I think those kids are more confident and have a better sense of self when they go to school."*

*"Our impact might seem minimal, but it's not, it's really quite, it's drip feeding what we do, and it's making a small impact, though we are hoping it's making a big impact."*

There was a strong sense from participants that the Gender friendly nursery programme both **affirmed and enhanced existing knowledge and practice**, however for most participants and establishments there was additional learning which made the process worthwhile.

*"When reflecting on our practice, most aspects of what we do is promoting equality and a gender friendly environment, however the training was almost certainly thought provoking on the long term effects of gender inequality."*

A small number said that the training wasn't relevant for them or their nursery, and felt that nurseries were already doing this work and that their practice was already gender friendly. It is clear that as a workforce early years staff already work to the equality agenda and that practice and knowledge as a whole around gender is generally very good. However what was apparent from discussions with the nurseries who had moved forward with the Gender Friendly Award, and who had either completed or were close to completing the full Gender Friendly Nursery process, was that on reflection they were easily able to identify areas for improvement or action.

*"When we actually sat down to do our audit we would have thought we were good, but actually when you delve into it, and really look at things, it's about being honest."*

This suggested that there was still some room for improvement in practice in most establishments. This finding was further reinforced by the number of examples of practice change which nurseries and staff described as part of the evaluation. These are described later in this report.

It was clear, both from the experience of the Gender friendly nursery trainers and from the feedback from staff that the topic of gender generates a lot of discussion, and that this **discussion formed a key part of the programme**. Staff described lots of discussion between staff on the training day itself, which continued into the staff room in the days and weeks afterwards, and beyond as nurseries worked towards their accreditation. Some staff groups received the training as a series of twilight sessions and felt this was beneficial in allowing discussion and reflection between sessions, and one staff group who had been part of a joint delivery with another nursery felt that this was useful in creating a healthy debate as there was a greater mix of opinions and experience.

*"It gave the staff a chance to take a step back and look into it, and say well actually maybe we have to think differently...so I think those conversations we had at the training were very relevant and very important."*

It was clear that for some staff the content of the course was challenging, and for some may conflict with long held beliefs. Because of this difference of opinion the Gender Friendly Nursery process was felt to be useful as it not only facilitated this conversation and allowed staff to work

through their own attitudes and values, but it also enabled nursery managers to set out the stall of what was expected.

*“It was quite good that staff felt they could voice their opinion, but everybody did take on board that we do work for the authority and if it’s policy and procedure, whatever your opinion is doesn’t really matter when you are at your work.”*

A small number of staff were concerned that the training did not allow sufficient time for everyone to have their own views heard and explored, and a small number felt that there were occasions where the issues raised in the discussions were not adequately addressed. Skills and knowledge levels of the trainers were felt to be an important factor in facilitating these discussions and responding to participant questions. Several nurseries commented on the knowledge levels and passion of the trainers who were delivering the programme. There was a sense that this was vital in getting the messages of the programme across. They felt that without the first hand knowledge and experience of these trainers the programme might be diluted.

*“People might leave bits out or not discuss certain bits. It could become quite biased because it would come from somebody else’s point of view.”*

Staff were asked whether they felt that having the training tied to an award was useful. There was a sense that **having an award was useful** and it had a number of functions. It provided an incentive for nurseries to fully engage and commit to making changes, it made them reflect more on their practice, and it was also a good conversation starter for engaging with parents around the topic of gender. Not all nurseries who engaged in the pilot took the steps necessary to complete the award. There appear to be various reasons for this including staffing changes, not having the time currently, or not fully understanding what was required.

The **flexibility** of the Gender Friendly Nursery award process was appreciated by staff and felt to be essential in order to fit around the busy nursery year. In order to achieve Gender Friendly status nurseries had to complete 10 actions, 5 of which were mandatory and 5 of which were chosen by the nursery themselves informed by the audit process. This ability to identify and select actions was seen as important by staff as it allowed them to choose actions which were most appropriate to their individual nursery environment. Nursery managers and staff know the needs of their nursery better than anyone and therefore are best placed to know where learning can be adapted into current practice most easily and most effectively. Perhaps related to this was the finding that the process for achieving Gender Friendly Nursery status was felt to be robust whilst still being straightforward and not too onerous on already overstretched staff teams. The programme was also felt to sit well alongside other initiatives and training programmes including Early Protective Messages<sup>2</sup> and Equalities training and the PATHS programme<sup>3</sup>.

Although none of the nurseries who contributed to the evaluation had permanent **male members of staff**, they were able to recognise the benefits of having males in the nursery environment. Some nurseries had experience of male students having their placement in the nursery and saw first hand the impact this had on children.

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<sup>2</sup> Early Protective Message training is currently delivered to nurseries by the NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde Health Improvement Team - Sandyford. For more information of the types of areas covered in this training see <http://www.sandyford.org/parents-sandyford/pre-5/early-protective-messages/>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.pathseducation.co.uk/>

*“It was fantastic and you could see the boys that weren’t very expressive before and didn’t interact, come out of their shell and be a wee bit more comfortable”*

Staff were also very clear on the **need to engage with parents** on the topic of gender, to not only challenge their attitudes and practice around gender, but to reinforce the good work that takes place in the nursery environment. There was a commonly held acceptance among staff that although addressing gender in the nursery setting is crucial, there was only so much impact nurseries can have as children will inevitably be influenced more by what happens at home or when they move on to primary school.

Staff were generally confident in challenging parental attitudes around gender, with the most commonly cited example being the father concerned at seeing his son in a dress or pushing a pram. Staff generally challenged parents in a friendly way, and staff felt that parents generally listened and accepted what they were saying.

*“I’ve challenged a couple of parents on a couple of things, not jokingly but in a light hearted way, but with the message that we shouldn’t be talking like this anymore. And that’s the hard bit for staff; it’s easy with children with this kind of stuff, but harder with adults.”*

It was very clear that nursery staff have a good relationship with parents, which allowed them to challenge these attitudes safely, and suggested a legitimate role for nurseries in engaging with parents around this topic. Staff felt that the Gender Friendly Nursery training provided them with additional knowledge to support these conversations with parents and explain why they practice the way they do. Staff were also very mindful of the impact that culture, ethnicity, religion and socio-demographics can play in some of the attitudes of parents, and so were able to be sensitive in their responses. Nurseries felt that there was potential for them to engage more formally with parents on the topic of gender if suitable materials were available, for example by holding a parents event on the theme of gender, or by presenting information at curriculum evenings. One nursery felt that there was a growing awareness of gender issues particularly in the media and therefore parents might be more accepting of any input.

On a similar vein a number of staff felt that there may be **a need to look at how gender is approached in primary and secondary schools**. Staff felt that while nurseries can do brilliant work with their own staff, children and parents, there is a huge risk of any progress being undone when children progress to primary school, where there may be an entirely different environment and approach. Nurseries recognised also that as children approach school age there may be more pressure on parents to make sure their children conform to stricter gender stereotypes out of fear of their child being seen as different and consequently being targeted by other children.

### **Changes to Nursery and Staff Practice**

The greatest indicator of the success of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme was changes in practice among nursery staff and of nursery establishments. As part of the evaluation staff were asked to describe any changes that had been made since they attended the training. It was clear that most had made changes, though these were most apparent in the nurseries that had gone on to work towards the full award.

Actions taken and changes made among the nurseries who contributed to the evaluation included:

**Adding Gender Friendly Nurseries to the nursery Improvement Plan:** this was felt to be vital in order to keep the nursery on track towards the award and kept Gender Friendly Nurseries on the nursery agenda. If something was in the improvement plan then it had to be done.

**Development of a specific gender policy:** while nurseries had general equalities policies in place, a policy specific to gender allowed them to be more specific about issues and work around this topic.

**Further training / reflection:** several nurseries had offered catch up sessions or twilights to staff who had been unable to attend the initial training, or staff were made aware that the Gender Friendly Nursery support pack was available for them to read. One nursery had held staff sessions to work through the audit process, while others had delegated this to a specific member or group of staff. Staff had also undergone the Early Protective Messages training and felt this complimented and enhanced the learning from the Gender friendly Nursery training.

**Small changes:** most nurseries and staff were able to describe a number of small changes which had taken place since the training. Very often these were changes to usual practice in the nursery. For example no longer buying gender specific birthday cards or gifts, no longer dividing the children by gender for specific nursery activities or having a mum's race and a dad's race at sports day, and letting children choose the gender and clothing of Take Home Ted on their turn to take it home.

**Resource audit:** Staff described auditing the resources and displays within the nursery and making changes and new purchases in order to make them more open ended and gender friendly. For example adding books which show children of different genders in different roles, books which show different types of families, and removing books which may reinforce gender stereotypes.

*"like when you are doing your book corner, it's to make sure there are books about dad's being parents and mum's being parents, because I think that's something that comes into play, quite a lot in here are single parent families and a lot of them are single mother families, and it's trying to promote a good image of a father, a good image of a man within the home. So having books like that and having books that depict men and women in both jobs"*

**Communicating with parents:** Parents had been informed about the Gender Friendly Nursery programme in a number of ways: via social media, newsletter, noticeboards, posters, leaflets and through a curriculum evening for parents. Staff also reported feeling more confident about challenging the views of parents.

*"I have changed at least one parents idea about their child crying, helping the parent to understand that children need to express their emotions and help them to talk about how they feel and that it's ok to cry."*

*"One father was not happy when there was a picture of his son playing with a buggy. I approached this by reminding him this would help make him a good father one day and asked did you push your son in the pram? He acknowledged that he did and left a little happier, but not entirely convinced."*

One member of staff described how she looked after a boy who often liked to wear dresses from the dressing up corner but whose dad was likely to be uncomfortable about this. Prior to the



training she would make sure the child had removed the dress by the time his dad came to collect him, but after the training she stopped doing this as she felt confident in addressing this with the dad should he express any concern.

**Language:** staff reported that they were pausing to think about what they were going to say before responding or reacting to children, and had noticed colleagues doing the same. Changing the language used was seen to be a difficult one to tackle as often habits or phrases are ingrained and are said without thought, so it is useful to know that staff were attempting to make these changes. As part of their identified actions one of the nurseries chose to conduct a staff peer observation exercise with a specific focus on language and interaction with the children. Whilst this was felt to be the most challenging of the actions chosen, and the one that staff were most nervous about, it was felt to be important in order to ensure that the language used in the nursery was fully gender friendly.

*“even though I’m a gender friendly champion, this is everything I believe in, personally and professionally its very difficult to change your way of speaking because you’ve been doing it for years. You’ve been doing it the way your mum and dad did it which is really hard. Its not that its offensive its just that when you are speaking you just use language that you normally use. Its just about taking that step back and thinking of what you are saying, why you’re saying it and how you’re saying. And what affects this has on your children, that’s the main thing and the positive outcome for your children.”*

What was clear from the evaluation is that the programme initiated practice change in nurseries – be that at a whole nursery or an individual staff level.

### **Key Learning and Recommendations for Roll Out**

Another important function of the evaluation was to capture key learning from the pilot phase of the project which will inform any roll out of the programme.

**Acknowledging the good practice already happening:** It is clear that the programme needs to continue to recognise and acknowledge the excellent work already taking place within early years settings. The evaluation showed that among staff there is already a good base knowledge on this topic, while there are clear indications that the training was able to build on this and influence practice change. It is important that during training participants feel that their existing practice is valued and that they do not feel patronised by the programme content.

**Audit is a key step:** Of the nurseries who were interviewed as part of the evaluation, all but one had completed a thorough assessment of current nursery policy and practice using the audit tool provided. They reported this being a very useful process and a way of reflecting on current practice. It was interesting that many staff reported as part of the immediate post course feedback that they felt that theirs and their nurseries’ practice around gender was already very good, but that those nurseries who spoke about the audit described a reflective and honest process whereby they were able to clearly identify areas for improvement. This indicated that the audit is a key step in aiding nurseries to fully consider their current practice in relation to the key areas of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme. This could also be an indication that there is a need for continued revisiting of and reflection on nursery and staff practice, that receiving the award is not an end point. Any roll out may wish to consider a revalidation process putting in place specific requirements for upkeep of the award status.

**Flexibility is useful:** As previously mentioned, the flexibility in the Gender Friendly Nurseries was appreciated by staff and any roll out should continue with this approach. As well as flexibility in the time frame for achieving the award, and mix of mandatory and chosen actions, the pilot programme also incorporated flexibility in how the training session was delivered. Several nurseries received a series of twilight sessions which were very successful and allowed the training to fit around the busy day to day life of the nursery and the number of other training, development and in-service options open to staff.

**Passionate knowledgeable trainers:** Staff felt that the background and knowledge levels of the trainers was important to getting the full messages of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme across to staff. They felt that given the high levels of discussion and variance in opinion it was crucial that trainers had the knowledge, skills and kudos to manage this whilst maintaining the integrity of the message. There was also a sense that there was a danger of the message being diluted or biased if it was being received second hand. It is therefore important that any future roll out which includes a cascade model of delivery builds in some sort of quality assurance process to ensure this does not happen. There may be learning from other similar models of training such as the What's the Harm or Scottish Mental Health First Aid training programmes which could help inform any such developments.

**Allowing time and space for discussion:** The high levels of discussion and differences of opinion described above mean that any roll out has to allow time for this. It feels important that for a topic like this which has the potential to challenge long held attitudes and values, that the participants in the training are allowed time and space to reflect on these. There should continue to be significant time for discussion to allow participants, if they feel comfortable, to share their own beliefs and attitudes and feel heard and understood. Some staff felt like a follow up discussion session would have been useful once they'd had time to digest the information presented on the day. The twilight model of delivery was felt to be particularly beneficial in allowing this time for reflection, as well as the opportunity to try things out or speak to the children themselves about some of the things they had learned on the course.

**Ensuring discussion is managed appropriately:** As mentioned above trainers have to be skilled and knowledgeable to be able to sensitively challenge views and opinions when they differ from the ethos of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme. Likewise nursery staff should feel equipped with the tools and skills to challenge the beliefs and attitudes of parents when required. The Gender Friendly Nursery support pack could be further developed to provide additional guidance on this topic. Any cascade model of training should ensure that time is dedicated to equipping future trainers with skills in supporting or managing discussions, differences of opinion and challenging attitudes.

**Build in support for participants:** As with any group undertaking any training, the Gender Friendly Nursery programme needs to be mindful that there may be staff who have been or are being directly affected by some of the topics for discussion e.g. gender based violence, mental health concerns, suicide. The training needs to acknowledge this, offer immediate support to anyone affected and signposting to ongoing support should it be needed.

**Supporting communication with parents:** Nursery staff were very clear on the need to communicate the messages of the Gender Friendly Nursery programme to parents. This was not only to ensure parents were fully briefed on what was happening within the nursery, but also to

challenge their own attitudes about gender in the hope that the good work in the nursery might be reinforced rather than undermined in the home environment. Any roll out needs to build in support and advice for nurseries on doing this and may wish to consider providing adaptable materials for nurseries to use for communicating with parents at groups or school events.

**Ensure continuing relevance of training:** Gender is a fairly hot topic currently and there are constantly new resources, videos, talks and representations of gender (positive and negative) being produced which may be incorporated into the training. As such there may be a need to regularly assess these and ensure that the training remains up to date and in line with current nursery practice and evidence and policy.

**Consider expansion to cover schools:** This is not to say that there is not great work already being done in schools around gender; however there may be benefits for schools to take a similarly methodical approach to examining gender related practice and policy in order to ensure continuity of message as children journey through the education system.

### **Conclusions**

The Gender Friendly Nursery programme appears to have been successful in influencing the knowledge levels and practice of nursery establishments and staff. Participants enjoyed being part of the programme and found the training enjoyable and useful. Whether any changes in practice are sustained remains to be seen, but there is clear indication that nurseries and staff see this work as important and relevant. There are a number of lessons learned from the evaluation which should be considered prior to any roll out of the programme.