

Gender Equality

Category: Early Years

Risk Management and Legal Implications

Failure to manage risk may impact on the delivery of Service objectives and the outcomes achieved by Service users. Education and Children’s Services aim to mitigate the implications by ongoing management and review of risk in all elements of work activity.

The production of this document is one way in which we aim to reduce our exposure to risk. By providing staff with information on good practice, making reference to other guidance that is available across the Council and providing clarity on how we should do things, we can ensure that the management of risk is intrinsic to what we do.

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Gender Equality

“It is never too early to question what is seen as ‘normal’ or what is traditionally expected of boys and girls in our society. Indeed doing so from a very young age helps to protect children from the negative consequences of inequality and discrimination as they grow into adults.

Zero Tolerance is seeking to mainstream gender equality through all early learning and childcare provision in Scotland including introducing the topic to pre-qualification practitioner training.”
(Zero Tolerance & Care Inspectorate)

“Children receive and absorb gender-stereotyped messages about what they can and cannot do according to their sex from a very early age.

It is crucial that children are given the opportunity and encouragement to access all areas of the curriculum from this early stage, so they have equality of opportunity in the future. We are expert in focusing on the needs of an individual child and being child-led.

We all have unconscious biases, and it’s important to be aware of these in our interactions with babies and young children. They affect the ways we interact differently with girls and boys, the assumptions we make and the advice and directions we give them.”
(Realising the Ambition – Being Me)

As early years practitioners, we know that what happens in the first few years of a child’s life is crucial to how they develop. This is equally the case for battling stereotypes too. There is no doubt that stereotypes can be incredibly harmful. They help to fuel inequality long into adulthood and can have a harmful effect on both boys and girls. A gender equal setting gives children the freedom to choose their own interests and takes active steps to tackle gender stereotypes to ensure that no child feels that certain options are closed off to them.

Gender stereotyping in children’s play in early years settings is a much-studied topic. Gender identities – what it is to be a boy or a girl – are a strong feature of children’s play and often impact on their choices of types of play and playmates.

Despite decades of thinking, and legislation, about gender equality, inequalities remain for some men and women, and the effects of gender on young children’s learning can have implications for their future achievements. How Good is our Early Learning and Childcare makes it clear that all children should have a wide range of opportunities to play and learn. It is important to challenge stereotypes early to give children a breadth of learning experiences.

Boys and girls sometimes show different kinds of behaviour and make different choices in their play. Where girls and boys do share the same play area, they sometimes use it



differently – for example, the home play area can be dominated by girls, with boys choosing more risky outdoor play. Children’s pretend play is rich in information about how they understand gender relations. As they play at ‘being mum’, ‘being monsters’ or ‘making a hospital’, they show others what they think girls and women can and should do, and what they think boys and men can and should do.

What is important to remember is that both boys and girls can miss out on important experiences if their play is limited to only some of the opportunities available in their settings. Problems can be exacerbated by all-female staff teams, which can make it difficult to model how women and men can work cooperatively and can impact positively on experiences for children. By the same token, male and female staff in mixed teams need to examine the messages they give to children about what men and women ‘do’ and demonstrate non-stereotypical behaviour.

Challenging limiting stereotypes in early years settings means considering the following:

Unexpected job roles

For many children, a huge part of their play centres on role playing certain jobs. It is crucial for children to develop their interests and they should all be made to feel like nothing is out of their reach. Yet many jobs have connections to certain genders within society. We see this in stories we read, the TV, the people we meet. It is important that we observe how children demonstrate what they know about men and women – and girls and boys – in their gendered play. By exposing children to unexpected job roles e.g. male dancers, nurses, full time fathers, female mechanics, builders, scientists, we could inspire a child to change the whole way they view their future.

Terms of endearment – sweetheart, lads!

Terms of endearment tend to group children easily by gender, which reinforces segregation between genders. It is crucial that we use terms which we can apply to all children equally.

Blanket statements – Boys don’t cry, Girls don’t fight.

These statements are harmful as they specifically relate to inequality, namely that boys and men are not good at expressing their emotions and that girls and women struggle with self-confidence.

Traditional stories

Traditional stories don’t reflect modern gender roles and tend to highlight girls and women as ‘damsels in distress’ and boys as the hero who comes to save them. We must look for alternatives whereby there is a more balanced portrayal of both male and female characters.

Skills and achievements



We tend to stereotype girls in particular by talking about how they look. This can contribute to a society of young women who are obsessed with how they look and have low self-esteem. It can also make them use the way they look to derive a sense of worth. Empowering young children of all genders is important and focusing on skills and achievements is vital in this process.

Challenging behaviour

It is important to understand the influence of families on children's constructions of gender. It is crucial to have equality in the early years and by having discussions with children about problematic language, including using gender as an insult or putting other children down because of their choices e.g. toy, clothing can help critical thinking and help guide them towards seeing things more equally.

Environment and resources

Children may tend to gravitate towards the so-called 'usual' activities for their gender. It is important to make sure that the nursery environment and activities are gender neutral.

Children should be encouraged to explore new things and be involved in the decision making about the activities in the nursery. It is important to remain vigilant about the nursery environment and how resources can impact on stereotyping children's play and the potential limiting impact of gendered play on learning.

Observing children in role play areas helps us to understand what ideas children have about gender and can help to stimulate discussion.

Modelling

Modelling our behaviour as the adults in the nursery can stop enforcing gender stereotypes. The language we use, the examples we show, the attitudes we display can all impact on children's learning.

Treating genders differently

Without meaningful intention, we as adults in the nursery can treat genders differently. This relates to the idea that we see girls as more nurturing and boys as more boisterous. Children will appreciate and respond to different communication styles.

Pink and blue

Pink for girls, blue for boys is a standard choice that many adults make without thinking. It is also another way that people subconsciously and unintentionally segregate boys and girls. It is important that we are conscious of using colour to refer to gender and the impact this may have on children's choice.

Working with Parents/Carers

To ensure their potential for success children need to live and work amicably and effectively alongside others from a wide range of racial and cultural groups, backgrounds and abilities. One of the greatest obstacles to this is prejudice. Children need to



understand that there is no place for prejudice or discrimination during play or at home or in the nursery and parents/carers play a crucial role in helping to dispel prejudice and discrimination.

Prejudice is learned through living in and observing a society where prejudices exist. Children's opinions are influenced by what the people around them think, do and say. We should be a model of tolerance, but children could still be exposed to influences such as the media where difference is not always respected or where stereotypes are reinforced. If no one explains that this is wrong a child may grow up thinking that this is the way it is supposed to be, and that people who have been discriminated against deserve this treatment. Therefore it is so important to address issues of prejudice and discrimination when and wherever they occur, to point out inequities, and to let children know such ideas and actions are unacceptable.

It is crucial therefore that we the nursery, and parents/carers work together to ensure that no child or person is excluded or discriminated on the basis of race, religion, nationality or ethnicity, accent, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or appearance. We need to work together to ensure children are aware of and are sensitive to other people's feelings. Sharing stories and books with children help them to understand the points of view of other people. When personal conflicts occur, we should encourage children to think about how the other person might be feeling. Caring, empathic children are less likely to be prejudiced.

Each child is unique and special. We should work together to let children know that we recognise and appreciate their individual qualities. Children who feel good about themselves are less likely to be prejudiced. We should notice unique and special qualities in other people and discuss them with our children. Children who have poor self-images are more vulnerable to developing prejudices. A stereotype assumes that all people who share a characteristic will conform to a certain type of behaviour; stereotypes prevent us from seeing people as individuals.

As an early years workforce we can undertake a number of activities designed to bring about change with the aim that gender equality is promoted from birth.