**Gender Equality Policy**

**Purpose**

In the early years, children begin to learn about gender roles and expectations, and will pick up messages from their surrounding environment about what is perceived as ‘normal’ for boys and girls. They are influenced by their environment and the adults around them. They learn from everything they see, hear and do. This shapes how they see themselves and others as they grow up and supports them to follow their own wishes and expressions of identity.

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

Research conducted in Scotland by Zero Tolerance found that nine out of ten parents agreed that it was important to treat boys and girls the same in early childhood . Yet outdated gender stereotypes remain common in our society and the lack of awareness about how to challenge these harmful patterns is a fundamental obstacle to providing children with an equal start in life.

Early Years practitioners are in a unique and important position to influence children’s development. They also have the capacity to create environments that encourage equal and respectful relationships, break down harmful gender norms and promote gender equality to ensure that children are free from limiting gender stereotypes.

**What is a stereotype?**

Gender stereotyping is a deep-rooted and common issue. Stereotypes perpetuate inequality and reinforce preconceptions about what a person will like or how they will behave, simply because they belong to a particular group. When it comes to gender, stereotypes are based on an assumption that all boys will be the same and like the same things, and all girls will be the same and like the same things. This puts pressure on boys and girls to conform to certain notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ which can really limit and restrict young children. Stereotypes influence the activities children engage in, their interests and skills – and, ultimately, the roles they take in society as adults.

Examples of common stereotypes and perceived gender roles

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Boys | Girls |
| Expectations | Strong, adventurous, practical, rough, leader, non-emotional ‘boys don’t cry’, like to get dirty, aggressive, independent, dominant, decisive, logical, unemotional, assertive, tough, stoic, active, worldly, boisterous, brave, challenging, loud | Sensitive, caring, vain, gentle and ‘proper’, weak, dependant, passive, kind, intuitive, submissive, emotional, illogical, talkative, indecisive, giving, quiet. |
| Socialisation | Toys focused on: action, construction, technology, fighting and conquering. Social reinforcement through: social media, TV, authority figures (parents and carers). | Toys focused on: baby dolls, cooking, princesses, art and craft. Social reinforcement through: social media, TV, authority figures (parents and carers). |
| Gender Roles | Men must be physically strong, aggression is an acceptable part of male behaviour, a willingness to take risks (superheroes / action figures). | Women are expected to highly value appearance (being pretty), being compliant (nice, sweet, gentle), submissive roles (princesses). |

**Why does avoiding gender stereotyping matter in the early years?**

A gender equality approach means helping children to achieve and be happy. We want children to be whoever they want to be and make them feel equally comfortable playing football or taking dance classes and aspiring to a wide variety of careers and pathways.

Breaking down gender stereotype from a young age helps to stop the negative consequences of inequality and discrimination as it can support children grow into adults who aren't limited by expectations based on their sex. By providing children with environments that encourage non-gendered norms and expectations, children can feel more accepted and celebrated for their individuality. They can broaden their aspirations and be more open to a wide range of opportunities.

**What are the harms of gender stereotyping in the early years?**

**Impact of gender stereotyping on health and wellbeing**

Rigid gender norms and gender stereotyping have a negative impact on children’s outcomes and can lead to poor mental health, self-esteem and body image. The damaging effects of these early gender stereotypes also have an impact on children later in life. Stereotypes from social gender norms can lead to a range of issues in adulthood and may contribute to an inability to express your emotions or feelings or a feeling of constantly trying to be something you are not. Children are also bullied for not meeting stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a boy or a girl; and children who do not conform to gender stereotypes may experience negative feelings about themselves.

**Impact of gender stereotyping on learner pathways and career choices**

One of the harmful impacts of gender stereotyping is that they limit how children image their futures. Stereotypes can convince children that certain options are open to them while others are not. This early influence has long-term consequences first in school subject choice and later in career choice. This might take the form of little girls feeling like they cannot be interested in block play and cars or pursue a career as a fire-fighter and little boys feeling like they should not show nurturing skills or pusue a career in Early Years Care.

**How we challenge gender stereotyping**

**Start with ourselves**

It is important to be aware of the ways in which gender may create unequal opportunities or experiences for children in your care. Personal reflection is a great start in identifying ways in which we can begin to break down stereotypes and foster an inclusive setting.

We often reflect on the below questions:

* What are some of my own biases, values and belief systems in relation to gender?
* How might these gender values / beliefs influence the way I interact with children? Do I engage differently with boys and girls?
* How can I model a positive attitude to gender equality in my everyday activities, actions and conversations with children? What am I already doing?
* How can I promote and strengthen gender equality in my practice?

When considering if something is a gendered stereotype we ask:

* Would this be the same for either gender?
* Why is it like that? Is it only like that because it always has been?
* Is that fair? Does it strike you as equal and similar? or the opposite?

**Audit the environment and resources**

We regularly look at the environment and do a gender audit.

* Are certain areas of the room favoured by one gender in particular? If so, talk to the children about why they like or don’t like playing there. If they feel it is ‘just for boys’ or ‘just for girls’ talk to them about how this is not the case.
* We think about the organisation of the space Does everything flow nicely from area to area and seem open and inviting to all children.
* Are we displaying posters that show adults in non-stereotypical jobs.
* We check through the resources in the setting - toys and books. Do they promote particular ways of being girls or boys/ men or women? Ensure that the books we have our show an equal amount of male and female characters.
* Ensure dressing up and role play props offer variety and are not limited to costumes that may be aimed specifically at boys or girls.
* Always aim to have a variety of open-ended resources that are not perceived as gender specific - loose parts that inspire creativity and excite all children to play with them.

**Think about your language and interactions with children**

Research about education shows that boys are praised more than girls for sharing correct knowledge, and wrong answers provided by boys are likely to be overlooked. In contrast, girls are more often criticised for incorrect answers, and teachers tend to provide less praise for correct answers given by girls.

**Improve own gender-neutral language skills**

The words we use to communicate influence how we think and act. Think about where what you say to the children reinforces gender stereotypes, and if so, use more neutral and inclusive language. This will support their understanding that everyone can do or like anything, regardless of gender.

**Support the children by helping them think about their language**

We talk to children about how they understand gender and sexism. Young children may have strong ideas that a particular toy or behaviour is not appropriate for their gender. When a child says that something is ‘not for girls’ or ‘not for boys’ we ask them why not and explore this with them. We use these opportunities to have a discussion with the child about why they feel like that or have that view.

**Talk to colleagues, parents and carers**

Parents and carers usually have the one to one contact with their children and enabling them to challenge gender stereotyping offers a unique opportunity to help prevent violence against women. Parents and carers can plan an important role by modelling respect and equality in relationships; challenging rigid and harmful gender stereotypes; and promoting diverse interests, opportunities and experiences for all children.

We also:

* Make sure all visitors are aware of our settings Equality Policy
* Support colleagues to respond consistently to sexist comments from parents and children.
* Encourage parents and carers to support gender equality by raising their awareness of how stereotypes limit children.

This policy and approach was discussed and implemented on the date below. All staff sign to say they understand the policy and will follow it at all times.

Signed Director………………………………… Date ……………………………….

Signed ………………………………………… Signed ……………………………

Signed ………………………………………… Signed ……………………………

Signed ………………………………………… Signed ……………………………