

Early Years Scotland White Paper: Young Children and Gender.

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The challenge for the early learning and childcare (ELC) sector is twofold. Firstly, for young children to have a positive experience led by practitioners who are confident and knowledgeable about tackling gender barriers and presenting themselves as positive role models. Secondly, for the workforce/apprenticeships to be more balanced in terms of gender.

Viewpoints were gathered from a range of constituent groups including the following:

- Young children
- ELC workforce
- Parents/Carers
- Other professionals working with or on behalf of young children

These groups were convened by Early Years Scotland in March 2021 and the following represents messages that were most frequently stated by the participants:

- **It was considered important for both male and females to be present in ELC roles. However, having an aspiration to achieve a 50/50 gender split was not considered to be desirable as an end in itself. Rather, entry into ELC should be based primarily on suitability for the role irrespective of gender. It was widely stated, nevertheless, that action should be taken to remove barriers so that more men are encouraged and supported to enter the sector. Almost all participants believed that more diversity within the workforce would be beneficial for our youngest children.**

The participants recognised the vital work of the sector, the majority of whom are women. More of a gender balance would also help to dispel myths around what is considered 'women's work'.

- **Structural barriers that potentially prevent or discourage men from pursuing careers in early years - primarily the pay structure and perceived value of the role - need to be addressed. There needs to be an across-the-board change to how the industry is perceived, as this would benefit the children, the staff currently in the sector, and also would encourage more men to consider a career in ELC.**

Along with removing potential barriers, it was widely agreed that a further way to encourage more men into the sector would be to involve those who are already working in the sector. As in most situations, lived experience is persuasive and powerful.

Sometimes, in a bid to recruit and retain males in ELC, support is offered that is intended to be helpful, but may, for some, have adverse unintentional consequences. For example, within initial training programmes or workplaces putting all men in the one class, teams, or break times together, which, in reality, can be a potential barrier to full integration.

“Young men don't necessarily want to be highlighted as an anomaly – they just want to be an accepted member of the sector workforce.”

It was also stated by a number of participants that learning in a 'male only' environment could be counter-productive, as that would not be reflective of the workforce as a whole.

- **Within ELC settings, there can be a difference in the way that children react to male staff.**

Some of the settings involved in the focus groups had male members of staff and were keen to make clear that they had found that having males in the team generally had a positive impact for all concerned. Participants noted that the children acted similarly towards male and female staff, as men got involved in the day-to-day remits within the service, providing a balanced early years experience for the children. Those members of ELC staff who had not worked with male ELC workers made clear they would welcome this opportunity, both from a personal and professional perspective, as well as for the children they support.

“I’ve never worked with a man within an ELC setting, but I think it would be great – they would bring something different, and this could be important in changing people’s mindsets about including men in roles where they are working with young children and families.”

Overall, the participants believed it was beneficial to have men within an ELC setting for a variety of reasons. The current focus on outdoor learning and play, particularly in Covid times, is seen as an ideal context from the perspective of many males, who often appear to feel more comfortable to engage in activities such as den building, or outdoor sports activities. Similarly, from the perspective of the whole staff team, if help is required within a setting with, for example, a DIY project, fathers, and male carers are often asked to help, and this is often found to be an excellent opportunity for males to be introduced, and to become involved in an ELC setting. However, participants also pointed to the risks that this approach could bring as it could inadvertently further compound gender

stereotyping. For example, it was agreed that these activities should also be undertaken by females and male roles and remits should not be defined by gender.

The group agreed that there are many different ways to encourage more men into the sector, which can avoid perpetuating gender stereotypes in the ways highlighted above. These are issues that should be recognised and considered in recruitment and challenged in practice.

“It will always go on if we don’t do something about it.”

It is also worth noting that men who enter the sector do not often remain in their initial practitioner roles, as they are much more likely to seek promotion to a role which has better pay and more responsibility.

“Men ‘disappear’ from face-to-face interaction – that’s a loss to both the workforce and to the children.”

A further main message that came across from participants also included the following:

• **Children should have a choice in play, but gender stereotypes are still very strong within society and often have a pervasive negative impact.**

“Children should be free to explore different toys and play with what they like, not what other people think they should.”

Almost all participants were keen to stress this point, noting the importance that the sector should always place on enabling children to experience a wide a range of play opportunities. Although this is already promoted as much as possible within ELC settings, which is positive, there is always scope for improvement.

It is, however, also important to recognise that other influencers in children's lives often hold different views – for example, not all parents/ carers have the same thoughts about gendered behaviours, and older generations (often grandparents) were perhaps less likely to encourage diversity in play.

Discussions also focused on other factors that contribute to gender stereotypes being perpetuated in ELC, such as advertising aimed at children, as well as the segregation of toys and clothing into 'pink' and 'blue' or 'his' and 'hers' categories.

The importance and increased use of 'loose-parts play' was also highlighted as a positive development. This supports children to develop a curiosity and science-based approach to play, following their own lead as to what they want to do.

“We need to start normalising choice around non-gendered play! Let children lead the way when it comes to play, enabling them to pick the materials or toys they play with, or the imaginative play they want to undertake, based on nothing more than what they've shown an interest and enjoyment in.”

Another recurrent theme focused on the following:

- **Businesses have a role to play in helping children explore the world of work, from sending men and women into ELC settings to talk in a non-gendered way with children about different job opportunities. Other examples may involve including children from a much younger age in regular 'bring your children to work' days. This could and should start before school age so that barriers about preconceived gendered work roles don't build in the first place.**

Across the board it was agreed that toy shops and related environments, which are examples of big business, could be more proactive in challenging gender stereotypes.

“Big stores seem to group toys together for babies, but then the pre-school stage and beyond is heavily focused on separating into 'boys' toys' and 'girls' toys. Why does it have to be like this?”

Participants discussed initiatives to encourage girls to get more involved in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) activities from ELC. STEM represents an area of employment in which women are traditionally under-represented. However, STEM initiatives are typically not in place until late primary or early secondary school. Whilst it was recognised that many ELC settings do already purposefully engage children in STEM activities, unfortunately, it was agreed that, even where this does happen for some children, there is sometimes a relapse as children move into primary school, creating a serious gap between pre-school and secondary school.

Discussions also took place around STEM initiatives such as ‘take your daughter to work’ days, which used to be common, but in the knowledge of the participants, didn’t appear to be happening.

Another issue that was raised frequently, focused on professional learning needs:

- **There is room for improvement around staff development about the benefits of a non-gendered approach. Staff should be encouraged to talk openly with parents about this.**

“We could and should be doing more to include parents/carers in discussions around gender perceptions and practice.”

Practitioners can struggle with using language that doesn’t have the risk of creating gender stereotypes, sometimes defaulting to formulae such as “you’re such a pretty girl” or “you’re a very strong boy”. There was a real awareness of the importance of language, and of ensuring that this is embedded from the very beginning of every child’s and every staff member’s ELC journey.

It is not enough to simply have one-day training courses on equality and diversity. Instead, this must be an integral part of the job, as it can be challenging to have conversations with parents/carers around their attitudes if practitioners do not feel 100% confident in doing so.

- **Parents and family often reinforce gender stereotypes, which can be difficult for ELC staff to deal with in a respectful and sensitive way.**

ELC staff mainly understand the importance of encouraging children to play freely with all toys and resources available, including all dressing-up costumes. However, this approach may not reflect the messages and experiences to which children are exposed in other environments, predominantly at home. Families may not always fully understand why it is important to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes, which is why it is vital that ELC staff undertake professional learning to understand this themselves and to be able to communicate this effectively.

“The more you restrict what children are exposed to in terms of gender, the more you’re restricting development and opportunity.”

As part of the consultation process, children in the age range of 3 – 5 years were asked directly about their opinions on the subject of gender bias.

Children's responses:

More specific learning from the focus group with children includes the following observations:

It was extremely interesting to hear young children's voices as part of this consultation process. There were, as expected, a wide range of responses to questions such as 'do you know what a job is?' and 'what job would you like to do when you grow up?'. The language used in some of the children's answers was often gender specific, for example when naming jobs children would say things like 'policeman', 'fireman', or 'police lady' - there was very little use of non-gendered language here, such as police officer or firefighter.

Similarly, when asked about toys, most of the children highlighted clear gender splits - many children said that boys did not like to play with traditionally female toys, such as dolls, prams and kitchens, and that girls did not like to play with trucks and diggers. When asked what was good about being a boy or a girl, many of the girls responded that they liked being a girl because they loved wearing makeup and

dressing up, with boys noting that they were glad being boys because they got to play with dinosaurs and cars. Boys were also often associated with playing sports in the responses we received, and girls made more comments about their appearance - for example, they liked being 'pretty', having 'lovely long hair' or being able to paint their nails.

While there were a minority of young children who did not respond in gender stereotypical ways - for example, saying that boys got married when they grew up, but girls went to work; that being a girl is good because girls are so fast; or that being a boy is good because you can play with dollies - it is fair to say that the majority did. There is, therefore, clearly still much work to be done to bridge the gap between children's perceptions of gender stereotypes and the perceptions of parents/carers and ELC staff.

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