Ten Ways to Challenge Gender Stereotypes in the Classroom

Stereotyped ideas about what’s suitable for boys or girls can limit children’s opportunities to learn and develop. Here are ten things teachers can do to help create an environment which encourages children to think of themselves as individuals, rather than editing their choices through a gender filter.

1. Create a safe space

School should be a safe environment to learn and explore – you can help children by affirming unconventional choices, reassuring them that it’s OK to be different and encouraging a culture of acceptance.

“Boys [in Reception] sometimes want to wear the Princess dresses. This bothers one or two of the staff and sometimes parents object. One boy wanted to wear the Mummy Bear outfit, an apron, and mum questioned this. We encourage staff to support the children’s choices – our role is to accept what comes out of the role play.” Teacher

2. Challenge stereotypes when you hear them

‘Why can’t a boy wear pink? My Dad does.’ ‘Why can’t a girl like football? My wife plays for our local women’s team.’ Children are often very keen to ‘police’ one another and make sure their peers follow the gender ‘rules’ they’ve learned. You can set the example by questioning them, and offering counter-examples from your own experience.

3. Talk about stereotypes

The Let Toys Be Toys lesson plan activities are designed to help older primary pupils start to question stereotypes about boys and girls (Key Stage 2), and we’ve pulled together links to more resources and ideas.

4. Provide a range of role models

Give children real-life examples that counter stereotypes, both in your own activities, and in topic work and external visitors.

“My daughter pointed out to me recently that all the science groups in her Y2 class are named after men. And politicians bemoan the lack of women in science without seeing any connection!”

Caren

Visit lettoysbetoys.org.uk/schools for lesson plans, more information on why stereotypes matter in school and links to other useful resources.
“When I heard the new topic was ‘superheroes’ I was concerned this would be full of aggressive beefcakes ‘to get the boys interested’, but it was great. The staff made sure to include female heroes, and they looked at of different sorts of ‘heroism’ – eg a nurse, plumber.” Jane, Cardiff

“I tell the kids that I’m the person who cooks in our house. I didn’t think of this as breaking down stereotypes until now.” Teacher

“Where possible we also try to get visitors who challenge stereotypes so we always ask if we can have a female firefighter or police officer or a male nurse… We’re also trying to get some of our male staff to help with things like knitting club (they’re willing but need to learn the basics!) and more women playing football.” Teacher

5. Make the most of books

Take a look at the stories and factual books in your classroom. Are there examples of working women, caring fathers, active girls and creative boys? Are all the animals in the stories male?

Carefully chosen books can be very helpful in challenging stereotypes – the It’s Child’s Play report from the NUT’s Breaking the Mould project has suggestions of books with additional notes and ideas for discussion. Inclusive book retailer Letterbox Library has a great selection, including themed book packs for schools and nurseries.

“We picked William’s Doll on purpose partly because the father is in charge at home [William’s mother is not mentioned in the story – only his Grandmother]. But we also wanted the boys to see that they can make their own choices – and to try and stop the other boys telling each other what they should be doing.” Teacher

Labelling a bookshelf ‘Boys’ Books’ might seem like a good way to encourage reluctant boy readers, but this can be counterproductive, reminding boys of the stereotype that they are supposedly less interested in reading, and encouraging the idea that only certain interests are allowed.

6. Look at who uses which spaces and equipment

Do certain areas get dominated by certain groups, or by one gender or the other? Are there changes or movements you could make to encourage children to feel equally free to use the home corner, the reading corner, the bikes, the Lego...

“The colour of things is very significant – often children would play with anything unless it was pink – in which case the boys wouldn’t touch it and, sometimes, the girls would be quite proprietorial about it. Perhaps we should just get rid of anything pink...” Teacher

7. Make sure there aren’t ‘girls’ jobs and ‘boys’ jobs

Who gets asked to do what? Is it always ‘three strong boys’ who move the chairs? Or ‘two trustworthy girls’ who take a message? It’s easy to fall into a pattern – mix it up and try asking someone different.

“EVERY assembly I’ve attended has had all major parts performed by girls even when they don’t need to be. Drives me CRAZY.” Jenny, London

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“I asked some Year 4 girls to put out the chairs. They said ‘great – we never get asked to do that’ – so I think they do notice the different ways in which genders are treated.” Teacher

8. Pick other ways to divide up the children

Are girls’ and boys’ coat peg labels or lunch bag shelves coloured pink or blue? Do boys and girls line up separately? Using gender to divide the children up can be quick and convenient, but it gives them the constant message that being a boy or a girl is the most important thing about them and reinforces stereotypes. Getting the children to line up a different way – by age, birthday, alphabetically – can be a subtle but effective way of encouraging them to think about their identity in different ways.

Encouraging children to work in mixed pairs or groups can have benefits too.

“Working in mixed pairs and groups challenges them – they have to be more adventurous about talking and learning from each other. They stay on task more and talk in full sentences. It keeps them on their toes because it is different from the playground where they tend to play in single sex groups. Some children object but we usually find they are the ones it’s most effective with!” Teacher

9. Use inclusive language

Small changes, like saying ‘children’ instead of ‘girls and boys’ or ‘parents and carers’ or ‘families’ rather than ‘Mums and Dads’ can help to affirm the things we have in common rather than our differences.

10. Think about rewards and sanctions

Are boys and girls rewarded differently, or given different sanctions for similar behaviour? Do rewards imply that you think boys and girls can’t like the same things?

“My daughter was quite upset when ALL the boys were punished for a rowdy game that SOME of the boys had been playing. She could see it was unfair to just assume they all behave the same way. What are they supposed to learn from that?” Jane, Cardiff

“My son’s teacher gave out end of term books, which was really nice of her, but they were wrapped in pink/blue and labelled ‘Boy’ or ‘Girl’. The boys got a dinosaur or pirate book and the girls got princesses and glitter. On the other hand my daughter’s teacher also gave out books; my daughter (7) got a science one as she loves science and the teacher had chosen them books based on their own interests, which was just brilliant. Shows how it can be done!” Jennifer, Essex

“I thought they would complain but they didn’t [when I handed out pink and blue reward stickers randomly]. I realised that I was the one who, unconsciously, had been affirming stereotypes about pink and blue.” Teacher

This material draws on the NUT’s Breaking the Mould project resources. These contain more ideas and examples of how to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom, particularly the report Boys’ Things and Girls’ Things. Quotes are drawn from the project report and supporters of the Let Toys Be Toys campaign.

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