

**‘Tying Pencils to Dinosaurs’:
Gender Stereotyping in Initial Teacher Training
and Continuing Professional Development**

A Report by Let Toys Be Toys



lettoysbetoys.org.uk

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Executive Summary

In order for girls and boys to thrive in education, from Early Years onwards, gender stereotyping needs to be challenged throughout a school or an Early Years setting.

This report describes research that Let Toys Be Toys conducted to examine the extent of gender equalities training in either initial teacher training (ITT) or within continuing professional development (CPD), across Early Years, Primary and Secondary. It complements the work that Let Toys Be Toys is part of with the Fawcett Society, as Commissioners on its Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood.¹

The evidence for how gender stereotypes impact children is stark and unequivocal.

The Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood's initial literature review outlines some of the impacts stereotyping has, as well as the processes by which it occurs.² Stereotyping results in harms that include those to children's wellbeing, educational outcomes, and the subject and career choices they feel are open to them. Research shows that challenging gender stereotypes, not following them, is the best way to counteract this risk.

Only 19% of teachers were advised as part of their ITT to challenge gender stereotypes, and they were not always given ways to do that effectively. For those teachers who did learn about challenging gender stereotypes during ITT, gender stereotyping was mentioned and discouraged, but a number of teachers said they were not provided with actual strategies on how to approach and combat the issue.

Wider ITT training tends to be more likely to reinforce than challenge gender stereotypes. Teachers were much more likely to say that their wider ITT reinforced rather than challenged gender stereotypes. A quarter of teachers said that ITT reinforced gender stereotypes. A common theme perpetuated by trainers was an expectation for boys to underachieve – particularly in reading.

The vast majority of teachers had not received CPD that discussed gender stereotypes. Eight out of ten of teachers had not been offered any CPD in the previous five years about challenging gender stereotypes and unconscious bias. Overall, most teachers who responded to our survey were disappointed with the lack of CPD in this area, or with the effect of the CPD actually working to reinforce gender stereotypes.

The report recommends that Government supports ITT providers to integrate challenging gender stereotypes into their courses and support schools to provide good quality CPD covering gender stereotyping.

¹ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/the-commission-on-gender-stereotypes-in-early-childhood>

² Fawcett Society (2019), *Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood – A Literature Review*, accessible at <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/gender-stereotypes-in-early-childhood-a-literature-review>

Background

Let Toys Be Toys is a campaign that challenges gender stereotypes in childhood. Our award-winning campaigns and research into gender stereotyping in toy shops, advertisements, and catalogues have been widely cited and led to changes in retailer behaviour.

We regularly hear from parents who tell us that their young children encounter gender stereotypes when they start nursery, pre-school or Reception. Those stereotypes might come from other children and parents or they might come from staff. In order for girls and boys to thrive in education, from Early Years onwards, gender stereotyping needs to be challenged by all staff.

Since 2014, we have offered many resources for parents, teachers, schools and childcare settings, including lesson plans from Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) through to Y9/S3, advice to parents on how to raise concerns with their child's school, and our popular '10 ways to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom' (adapted from the National Union of Teachers' Breaking the Mould project).

In 2017, a BBC documentary 'No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?'³ drew upon the existing academic evidence, and implemented many of these tips for challenging gender stereotypes in the classroom. It showed remarkable results for the seven- and eight-year-olds taking part: the girls' self-esteem improved, the boys' behaviour improved, and children became more confident and articulate.

On social media, the response to the BBC documentary showed how teachers were keen to implement the same approach in their own classrooms, but didn't always know where to start. Through this, alongside discussion with teaching unions, the Institute of Physics, schools and teacher training institutions, we became aware that very little gender equalities training is offered to those working in education, particularly around gender stereotypes, at either ITT level, or within CPD across Early Years, Primary and Secondary.

This report describes research we undertook to examine the extent of gender equalities training in those contexts. It complements the work that Let Toys be Toys is part of with the Fawcett Society as Commissioners on its Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood.⁴

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09202jz>

⁴ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/the-commission-on-gender-stereotypes-in-early-childhood>

What do we know so far?

Gender stereotyping holds children back

The evidence for how gender stereotypes impact children is stark and unequivocal. The Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood's initial literature review outlines some of the impacts stereotyping has.⁵

The Breaking the Mould resources from the National Union of Teachers (NUT)⁶ note that although some girls achieve better test scores than boys – and are more likely to go on to higher education – this does not translate into equality at home, at work or in wider society. In 2018, only 22% of students progressing on to A-level Physics were girls, while only 26% of English A-level students were boys.⁷

Stereotypes impact boys negatively in terms of rates of mental ill-health and exclusions. Some boys feel that learning is not seen as 'masculine'. The permanent exclusion rate for boys is four times higher than that for girls, and more boys enter the youth offending system than girls. Suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 45 in the UK.⁸

Primary-age girls are known to associate being slim and conventionally attractive with social and economic success. Girls as young as 12 feel under pressure to be sexually available – and boys feel similarly pressured into making such demands on girls. Sexual bullying and bullying in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity remain widespread and are closely linked to ideas of how women and men – and boys and girls – are expected to look and behave.⁹

The 2017 annual Girls' Attitudes Survey from Girlguiding investigated the impact of gender stereotypes on girls and young women, finding that nearly half (47%) aged seven to 21 reported that gender stereotypes affected how much they participate in class.¹⁰

What works to change it – and what doesn't

Dr Becky Francis and Professor Christine Skelton have conducted evidence-based research for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education). In 2009, they published *Gender issues in school – what works to improve achievement for boys and girls*, in which they state that:

Schools which attempt to alter the curriculum to provide a 'boy-friendly' curriculum not only exacerbate gender stereotypes, but their actions have been shown to be ineffective. In playing to gender stereotypes, they reinforce the idea that only some activities and behaviours are gender appropriate, and thus limit rather than enhance pupils' engagement with the curriculum. Rather,

⁵ Fawcett Society (2019), *Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood – A Literature Review*, accessible at <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/gender-stereotypes-in-early-childhood-a-literature-review>

⁶ Now part of the National Education Union (NEU)

⁷ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-a-level-gender-gap-attainment-and-entries-1996-2018/>

⁸ <https://www.thecalmzone.net/help/get-help/suicide/>

⁹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009), *Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls* <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9094/1/00601-2009BKT-EN.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2017.pdf>

what is required to address such attitudes is a whole school approach to challenging gender cultures, which covers the school's ethos, its teaching practices and its organisation.¹¹

This reflects the evidence collected across academia, and cited in the Fawcett Society report, which shows that a whole-school approach built around challenging gender stereotypes, rather than appealing to them, is most likely to achieve positive outcomes.

Research has shown that restrictive stereotypes reinforcing the idea that boys will underachieve can often lead to them fulfilling this expectation. In order to help boys achieve academically, teachers need to challenge that stereotype. A University of Kent study of over 150 children showed that from a very young age, children think boys are academically inferior to girls, and they believe adults think so, too.¹² Even at these very young ages, boys' performance on an academic task is affected by messages that suggest that girls will do better than they will.

¹¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009), *ibid*

¹² <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/02/130212100554.htm>

Methodology and profile of respondents

The research in this report was collected through an online survey of teachers and educators across the UK. It asked a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions to a self-selecting sample gathered through networks and social media. A total of 370 respondents answered the survey between 22 August and 23 September 2017.

The survey asked teachers and educators in the UK 10 questions about their experiences in understanding gender stereotypes in their initial teacher training, their ongoing training as part of continuing professional development, as well as where they worked in the UK, when they had initially trained and what age group they taught.

The regional spread reflected population numbers across the UK. Respondents skewed more to Primary and Early Years, compared with the current number of Secondary and Primary school teachers in the UK. Respondents' ITT was evenly spread across one to five, five to 10, 10 to 15, and 15-plus years ago (about one-fifth to one-quarter for each five-year span).

Initial teacher training does not often cover gender stereotypes

- **Only 19%** of teachers said their ITT included any guidance about challenging gender stereotypes, and that they were not always given ways to combat stereotyping effectively
- **79%** of teachers could not recall having been asked to consider gender stereotyping as part of their ITT

Frequency of training

As outlined in figure 1, our survey found that very few teachers could recall that they were ever asked to consider gender stereotyping as part of their ITT. For those who could, they reported that training was usually only included as just one seminar per course or per year.



N: 307 respondents who were teachers or teaching assistants

Comparatively speaking, teachers who completed training over 10 years ago received more gender equalities training than those studying today. We expect that this could be because there were fewer routes into the teaching profession 10 or more years ago. Teachers from BEd and PGCE courses had at least one seminar in their ITT about gender stereotyping, and were more likely than trainees with Teach First or School Direct to have had at least one seminar about gender stereotyping.

Quality of training

For those teachers who did learn about challenging gender stereotypes during ITT, only a very small minority were given resources and techniques to do so. In these cases, gender stereotyping was mentioned and discouraged, but a number of teachers described how actual strategies of how to approach the issue were not suggested:

'Gender stereotypes were touched on very briefly but only to outline that they can narrow children's experiences and it was only done in the context of girls might like trains too, rather than any deeper understanding/information given.'

NVQ L3 (equivalent) Early Years Educator, East of England

'Just to be careful about prejudices and making assumptions – very vague session during the university-based part of my training.'

Primary school teacher with up to five years' experience, SE England, PGCE ITT

Another problem was that, although training encouraged teachers to challenge gender stereotypes within specific circumstances, this approach to gender equality wasn't reflected across the whole of their training.

For example, classroom layout, along with lessons in PE and science were cited as good opportunities to challenge gender stereotypes, but rarely with strategies of how to approach the issue in discussion. These isolated examples may only be encountered by children once or twice a week.

'PE is a big one for girls typically not wanting to participate, and literacy for boys not being their strongest working point. I was told to not allow children their self-fulfilling prophecy and lead by example.'

Primary school teacher, up to five years' experience, School Direct or similar, SW England

*'As a science teacher, that girls needed to be encouraged to take science, but no thoughts on *how* to do this.'*

Secondary school teacher, 10 to 15 years' experience SW England, PGCE ITT

There were examples of good practice – but only from a minority. A few teachers received a grounding in being aware of their own unconscious biases, to think about what language they used when talking to boys and girls and what imagery they used in the classroom or for role models.

'Alternative children's literature – skewed princess stories, kind caring boys, families with actively present and caring fathers/working mothers. Subconscious bias testing and evaluating where our own personal biases are (and how to change those), use of resources and imagery that present a range of roles for all genders (i.e. not just old white men as scientists).'

NQT Primary school teacher, London, PGCE ITT

'It should be central to everything you do. Ways of incorporating positive role models, anti-sexist ethos; strategies; teaching resources & pedagogy.'

Primary school teacher with over 15 years' experience, London, PGCE ITT

However, there is a lack of consistency across and within training programmes. Both negative and positive experiences occurred across all types of training, across all regions and from Early Years to Further Education.

The wider environment

This lack of training can be viewed as contributing to a lack of understanding of, or positive approaches to, this issue in many schools. A number of teachers described in free text answers experiences of stereotyping encountered once they had begun working in schools, some of which

contrasted with positive or neutral approaches in their training. These occurred within additional training, examples set by other teachers or by timetabling. Again, there was a lot of frustration with how the focus was on underachieving and badly behaved boys or on 'typical' girl or boy behaviour:

'We were encouraged to think about boys and literacy, ensure we didn't choose English texts that were too "feminine". I have had lesson observation feedback that encouraged me to consider how I might adapt my teaching if I taught the same lesson to a group of boys.'

Secondary school English teacher, over five years' experience, school-led training, London

'I taught maths: my PGCE course assumed that maths was not gender-specific, so all students had the potential to do well in maths. But in schools, I often found department heads or leadership making assumptions about who could/would do well in the subject based on gender stereotypes. Timetabling was also often influenced by gender stereotypes, as subjects were grouped in traditional blocks. So students who wanted to study maths and drama, or maths and music, for example, found they could not because of timetable blocks.'

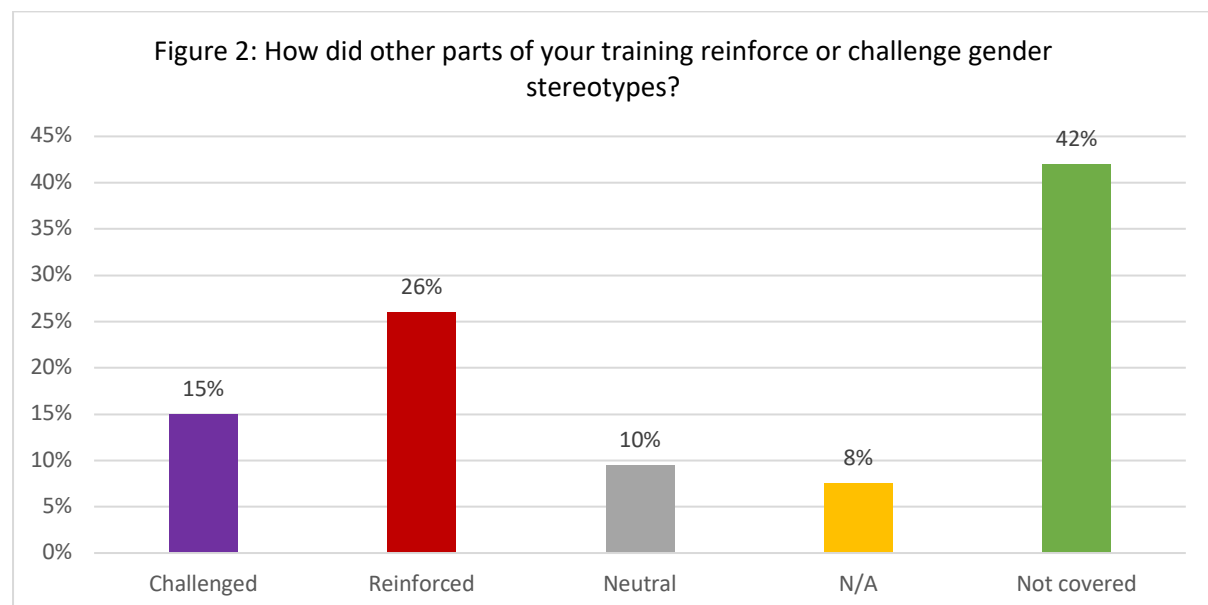
Secondary school teacher, West Midlands, 10 to 15 years' experience, PGCE ITT

Training is more likely to reinforce than challenge gender stereotypes

- Teachers were much more likely to say that their wider ITT reinforced rather than challenged gender stereotypes
- A quarter of teachers said that ITT reinforced gender stereotypes

Coverage of gender in wider ITT

Looking beyond any elements of ITT that were specifically aimed at challenging gender stereotypes, we asked about the impact that other parts of training had on the issue. For 15% of respondents, training offered challenges to gender stereotypes, as outlined in figure 2. However, this was outweighed by the 26% who said that training reinforced gender stereotypes, and by the many teachers (42% of the total) who reported that the issue was simply not covered.



How are stereotypes reinforced in wider ITT?

The qualitative responses of teachers shed further light on the ways that those stereotypes might be reinforced. A common theme perpetuated by trainers was an expectation for boys to underachieve – particularly in reading. The methods suggested to engage young boys were often restrictive and underpinned by gender stereotypes.

'Lots of info about boys doing worse at school and needing to interest them and coming up with ideas such as football games, army reading corners etc.'

Primary school teacher with 10-15 years' experience, Wales, PGCE ITT

'To write you need to tie pencils to dinosaurs and set up building sites and car wash stations outside. To get girls interested in maths you need to number fruit and veg in the shops and dolls in the home corner. This was four years ago. I engaged the teacher suggesting these in some serious debate as to whether all things might not appeal to all children, if given the opportunity and encouragement, what with them being FOUR and all...'

Primary and Early Years school teacher, up to five years' experience,
School Direct or similar, SE England

'There seems to be a focus on engaging boys by selecting "boy friendly" themes, which don't necessarily exclude girls but are in my opinion a missed opportunity to challenge narrow boy interests.'

Primary school teacher, E Midlands, 10 to 15 years' experience, PGCE

Another theme perpetuated throughout ITT and by other experienced teachers were stereotyped assumptions of what girls and boys are interested in, and how they will behave:

'We were taught that girls will hold grudges against teachers more than boys and will be more embarrassed/offended by teacher comments than boys. They never explained why this might be.'

Secondary school teacher, six to 10 years' experience, PGCE, Yorkshire & the Humber

'Boys don't read, girls shy away from maths! Even in training! Infuriating! How will that change if we're trained to think like this?'

Early Years Teaching Assistant, one to five years' experience, NW England

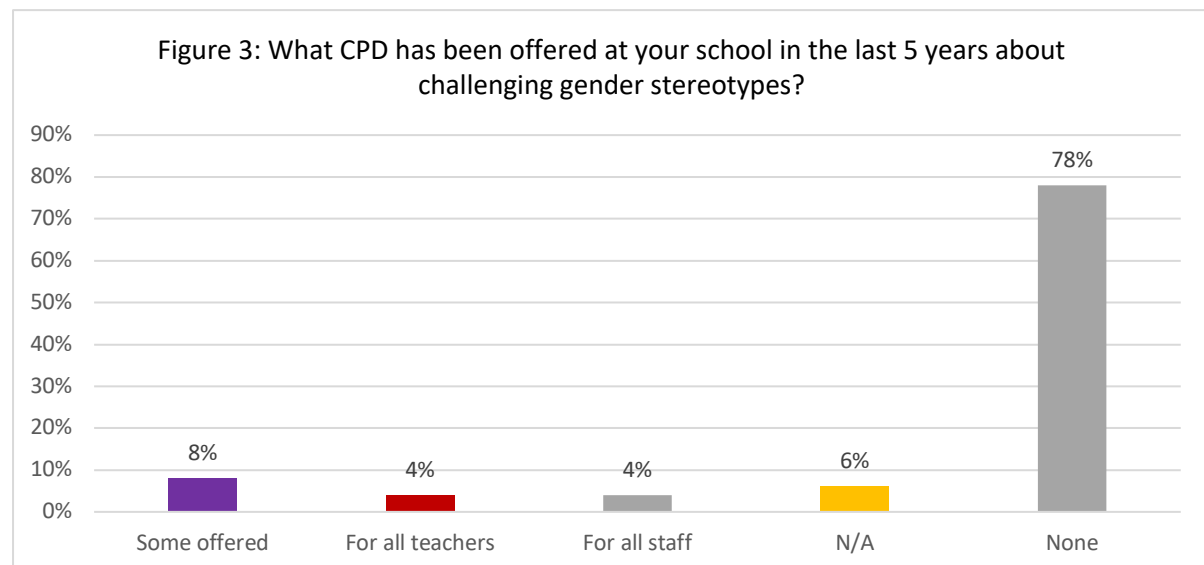
'Told [in training] to build relationships with students by talking about football with boys and fashion with girls.'

FE Teacher, London, one to five years' experience, PGCE FE

The vast majority of teachers had not received CPD on challenging gender stereotypes

- Eight out of ten of teachers had not been offered any CPD in the previous five years about challenging gender stereotypes and unconscious bias

Overall, most teachers who responded to our survey were disappointed with the lack of CPD, or the effect of the CPD actually reinforcing gender stereotypes. 78% of respondents had not been offered any CPD around challenging gender stereotypes and unconscious bias in the five years previous to the survey. Of the 16% who said they did receive some CPD in this area, the overall picture was of sporadic provision.



As with ITT, in some cases CPD sessions on other topics tended to perpetuate gender stereotypes:

'I think CPD has only strengthened my belief in the fact that we need specific CPD in this area. We had CPD on computing and the speaker made several references to "boys' natural ability" with technology and that girls may need encouraging with fairy and flower decoration on the hardware.'

Early Years school teacher, one to five years' experience. London

'We are now accepting boys into sixth form and so we received one session... telling us what to expect e.g. boys are lazier, less neat, less organised but funnier. Personally, I thought the whole thing was outrageous!!!'

Secondary school teacher, over 15 years' experience, West Midlands

Some respondents did have positive experiences. They referred to teaching unions (NEU/NUT and EIS) as offering CPD, as well as some specific Scottish organisations and LGBTQ training. Awareness of gender equality was also an incidental benefit of Growth Mindset training.

When CPD was mentioned most positively, it was offered to all staff, and was about making CPD that challenged gender stereotypes a whole-school priority. However, sometimes CPD about challenging gender stereotypes was only focused on science or, even more specifically, physics.

'Full staff – challenging the attitude of "boys will be boys"'

Secondary school teacher, Yorkshire and the Humber, six to 10 years' experience

'[Training was offered to] physics teachers about "girls in physics", three individual sessions'

Secondary school teacher, SE England, 10-15 years' experience

Training from LGBTQ organisations often offered the incidental benefit of highlighting the effects of gender stereotyping on both boys and girls.

'The LGBTQ training was useful in creating an atmosphere of general acceptance, and to challenge the idea of fitting gender in a specific blue or pink box.'

Secondary school teacher, London, up to 10 years' experience, PGCE ITT

Recommendations

This report makes some initial recommendations specifically on the extent to which initial teacher training and continuing professional development relating to gender stereotypes are funded by Government, included by training providers and prioritised by schools.

Throughout, a solid understanding of the content of the issues, as provided by the *Breaking the Mould* report and the work of the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood, will be vital to ensuring that ITT and CPD approach these issues from an informed and positive perspective. Implementing these recommendations must take into account the multiplicity of routes that now exist for trainee teachers.

ITT providers

- Tackling sexism and challenging gender stereotypes should be a core, compulsory component of all ITT courses.
- ITT providers offering all courses must offer, as a priority within existing curricula, at least one seminar or workshop on gender stereotyping within each course, whichever route their students are taking.
- ITT providers to take the first available opportunity during a curriculum review to ensure that gender equality is embedded in their resources for trainee teachers.

Government

- Department for Education to work with higher education institutions and other ITT providers to encourage them to develop their approach to tackling gender stereotyping in their training.
- Department for Education and Government Equalities Office to create a fund dedicated to gender equalities training in education, that can be used by ITT providers, schools, FE colleges and unions to provide the CPD and training recommended above, to ensure that all teachers and school staff have strategies in place to combat sexism in education.

Schools

- Schools to offer CPD for all school staff on challenging gender stereotypes as part of a whole-school approach, and to consider how this learning can be shared with the wider school community.

About us

Let Toys Be Toys is a grassroots campaign that grew out of a thread on parenting site Mumsnet in 2012, which brought together parents frustrated by the increase in marketing and promotion to children that they believed pushed narrow stereotypes.

Our award-winning campaigns have been very successful in persuading UK toy retailers and children's book publishers to drop the 'boy' and 'girl' sign-posting. Our research into gender stereotyping in toy shops, advertisements and catalogues has been widely cited and continues to lead to changes in retailer behaviour.

Since 2014 we have worked with teachers and other educational professionals to develop a range of resources to challenge gender stereotypes in schools, all freely available on our website.

For more information, visit lettoysbetoys.org.uk.

Credits

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