

Chwarae Cymru

Play Wales



Play and gender

www.play.wales

This information sheet aimed at playworkers and other practitioners with a responsibility for children's play explores the gender differences between how all children play and how we can support children to experience the broadest play opportunities in our settings.

In playwork we often talk about 'the child' or 'children' and rarely about 'girls' and 'boys'. Why is this? Is it because we are keen not to stereotype or perhaps because we like to think that when it comes to play it makes no difference?



Many gender scholars however, tell us that the differences between boys and girls are greatest when they are playing. Research consistently shows that from a young age there are some marked differences in the ways girls and boys play. Boys are more likely to play rough and tumble and take up physical space and show a preference for moving objects like balls and trucks, while girls show a preference for playing with dolls and spending time chatting and drawing and creating small spaces to inhabit.

Does this support our own experience of children? Are boys generally more physically active and rough and do girls regularly role-play family life or princesses? Many parents say yes, even if they try to encourage non-stereotypical play. But is this because we have all – adults and children – been socialised to think that men and women, girls and boys are different in various ways?

History has demonstrated this through separated gender roles across the centuries – we are bombarded with messages through books, films, cartoons and advertising from birth onwards that tell us males and females do not think, feel, look and behave in the same ways as each other. In most westernised cultures we say they are equal (although in practice that is still often questionable) – but different.

So, if these differences do exist, where do they come from – are they natural and innate, or are they learned behaviours?

In recent decades there has been an abundance of research that explores gender differences and much of it is contradictory. With developments in neuroscience and therefore research into possible differences between female and male brains, many give evidence^{1 2 3} both for and against the existence of possible hard-wired and hormonal differences while others^{4 5 6} argue that there are far more differences within genders than between them.

Cealy-Harrison and Hood-Williams say⁷:

'We might say of research into the differences between the sexes that it tells us more about the social, political and intellectual concerns that animate it, than about the difference between boys and girls.'

There are most likely companies, businesses and organisations with a vested interest in proving or disproving such differences. The debate will no doubt continue for as Lipppa says:

'The study of sex differences is contentious and controversial. Some scholars exaggerate sex differences, others minimize them. The truth probably lies somewhere in between.'⁸



So, what can we who are concerned with children's play make of all this? Certainly, we will be aware of the stereotypical play encouraged by the toy industry and animated film merchandise, by children's books and films (although a few companies are resisting this trend and promoting more gender neutral or gender inclusive toys). None of us can fail to see how pink and blue dominate supermarket aisles, birthday cards and cakes, children's clothing and even bikes and toy bricks.

But we may not realise how deep-seated gender stereotyping is and how much it saturates our own thoughts and influences our behaviour – often without us even knowing. Many experiments have been done showing adults, unconsciously using words like 'pretty' or 'strong' and offering a doll or a car to a baby they think is a certain gender⁹ simply because of the way the baby is dressed. Many more studies highlight how parents unconsciously protect or 'push' young children because of their gender¹⁰. We cannot be immune to this – no matter how much we try to be conscious of this in our reflective practice.

Whilst it's still questionable whether there are any hard-wired differences in children's brains before birth, we can say with some certainty that young children are definitely socialised into particular gender roles and ways of being. So much so that children of around four and five years old tend to act as the gender police themselves and insist on conformity – letting other children know if their hair is too long, their shoes the wrong colour or they are playing the 'wrong' way. Around this age, children also tend to segregate themselves and have close friends mostly of their own gender – with both girls and boys regarding one another as 'other' – sometimes with playful banter and sometimes with serious intent.

In the midst of this we also have a growing understanding that 'gender is becoming more fluid and flexible – society's attitude to gender is changing'¹¹. We are slowly recognising that gender is not a binary thing (there are only two genders and we are all either female or male) but a more complex mix of chromosomes, hormones, genes and culture that means gender is not fixed. We are all somewhere on the spectrum between male and female, masculinity and femininity and we may travel either way on that spectrum as we grow up and grow older. This of course has been highlighted by the growing recognition in medical and psychiatric circles of transgender children and people – although there is still a great deal to learn and understand.

All of this is also set against a backdrop of sexuality with society still coming to terms with not just homosexuality but a range of possible sexualities. Whilst this is not the subject in hand here, there are connections and all kinds of cultural messages to children, who mostly still learn early on that one day they will grow up, get married and be a mother or a father. Warner¹² termed this 'heteronormativity' – the process by which both children and adults alike assume that all young children are heterosexual and a definite boy or girl with little room to manoeuvre.

It is little wonder that, in children's attempts to make sense of and develop their own identities, the concepts of gender and sexuality feature often in their playing. Interestingly, despite the reams of research and information available on these subjects, very few

researchers have actually asked children themselves what they think or objectively observed children playing to see how they are navigating their own way through the minefield of gender.

Gender and children's play

So, if we are adults around children playing – if we are parents, childminders or playworkers, what is our role and how do we behave? Do we just leave children to play and hope they work it out for themselves? Do we leave them to play but observe and listen to have a better understanding of what is going on or intervene when we hear boys saying 'girls stink' and girls say 'boys are rubbish'? Do we try to only buy gender neutral toys, books and clothes? Do we try to be a non-stereotypical role-model – play football and wrestle if we are female and cook and do craft activities if we are male? Do we try and create a non-genderised environment where activities and attitudes are non-stereotypical?

If, as playworkers believe, children control the content and intent of their playing, then shouldn't we leave well alone? And if the sociocultural messages children are getting about gender are so strong, will anything we do – or don't do – have any impact anyway?

Let us consider the subject of gender more carefully and reflect on how it affects us as well as the children in our lives. Kilvington and Wood¹⁹ have proposed there are different kinds of gendered playwork practice that help us think more critically about our own role.

Gender ignorant

These playworkers don't give any consideration to gender therefore the play environment is based on their personality and experiences and the assumption that what has worked for them personally (in their own childhoods or previous practice), will be fine for the children they work with now.

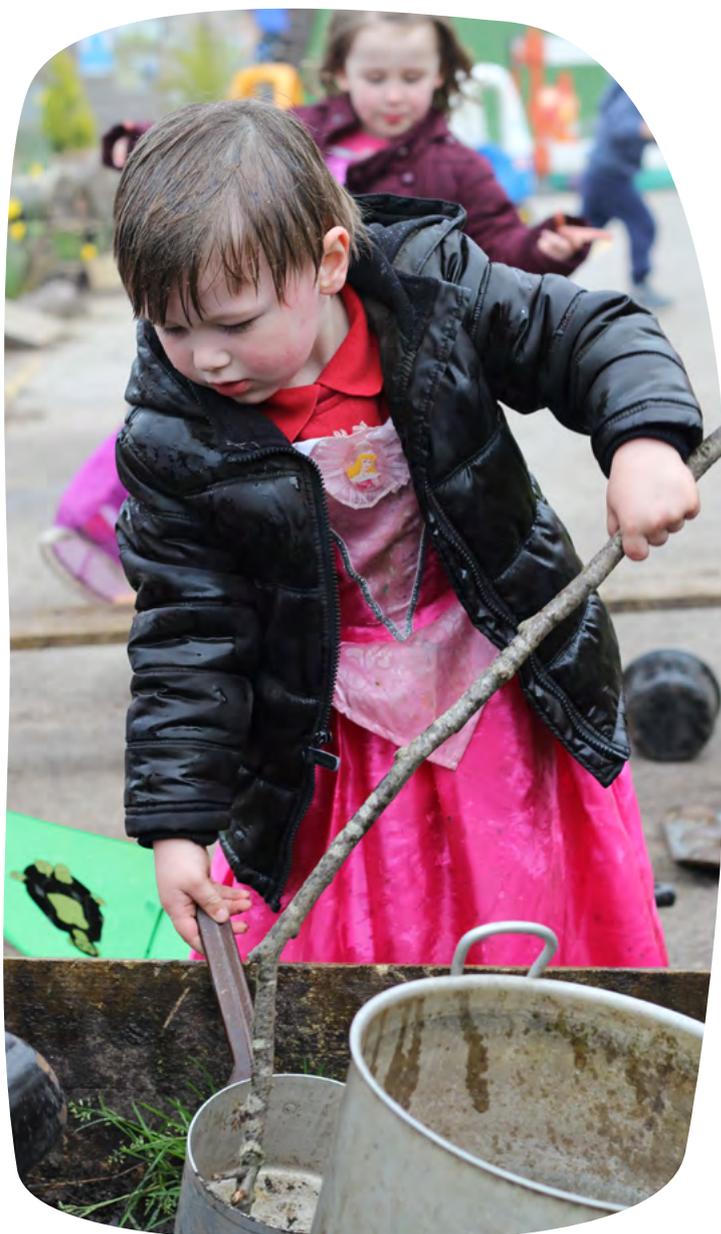
Gender neutral

These playworkers believe that fundamentally there is no difference between boys and girls playing, apart from what has been socially constructed through their prior experiences. They therefore create and resource

an environment that is non-gendered and believe and expect that given the opportunity, both girls and boys will be happy to have a go at anything and should be left to play as they choose.

Gender controlled

These playworkers decide that boys and girls are reluctant to take part in play that is considered to be the other gender's forte and therefore attempt to ensure that stereotypical play will not happen. They probably ban weapons and encourage girls to play ball games and rough and tumble and encourage boys to take part in creative activities and dressing up. They routinely intervene in conversations where girls or boys are putting each other down on account of gender.



Gender stereotyped

These playworkers believe that 'girls will be girls' and 'boys will be boys' therefore cater for both by providing 'girly' and 'macho' play opportunities. The male playworker will be outside facilitating physical activities and sports and the female playworker inside facilitating creative activities and cooking.

Gender similar

These playworkers decide to create and resource an environment that will focus on the similarities of boys' and girls' play. They may deliberately encourage games like rounders rather than football on the grounds that both genders will participate. They may 'go large' with craft projects like constructing a life-size crocodile on the grounds that both genders will enjoy and access this.

Gender appreciative

These playworkers believe that there are differences in boys and girls' play due to socialisation, so they create a gender-neutral environment and let the children do what they choose – but sometimes arrange specific events or provide resources that will mostly appeal to one gender, for instance a rap workshop, a dance workshop, rubber sumo wrestling suits or beadmaking kits.

Gender specific

These playworkers believe that children need support to counteract the effects of socialisation and so they encourage children to 'break the mould' and be themselves. They role-model this by behaving in ways that might be unexpected for their gender and look for innovative and creative ways to support and spark children to explore gender identity and new possibilities, without directly leading anything. Examples might include providing piles of black velvet or pink tools, experimentation with lighting and music, male playworkers riding a pink bike or dressing up and female playworkers using tools or refereeing.

They also encourage their own professional development by branching out and developing new skills that might be more typical of the other gender, for example male playworkers baking and female playworkers structure-building.



Do we recognise ourselves in any of the above? We may find that several apply at different times and in different contexts. But are some of these better or worse than others?

Children are far more capable and competent than we think and throughout their childhood, they will be trying out identities and testing out reactions and exploring responses as they work out who they are and what gender is all about¹⁴. They will learn a lot more from each other than they will from us and they can probably teach us more than we can teach them. This doesn't excuse us as playworkers however. We still have a responsibility to support children, to treat them equally and to consider the

impact of our own gender and our own words and actions. It's important we recognise that every one of us have been influenced by our family and society as part of our upbringing. We have inbuilt biases and prejudices that affect the way we practice and what we offer. This can lead us to unwittingly create and resource gendered spaces, with our own gender subconsciously dictating the way we react and respond to both girls and boys.

How many of us women have worried about playfighting tipping over into a real fight or assumed that only girls

will want to try nail varnish? How many of us men have ignored a boy crying or not thought to ask if girls want to join the team? There are endless everyday examples like this.

Gender inequality ultimately affects every aspect of our lives – family life and the roles played by and required of fathers and mothers, the world of work and job choices and salaries, the school curriculum and environment, leisure, sport and recreation, the military, the judiciary, our political systems. It will be a long time before there is true gender equity.



Supporting children's play

As playworkers we can support children to play our part in moving towards a gender equal society and in empowering the next generation to play their part too. Here are some ways in which we can do this.

1. Value play as the natural way that children make sense of the world (including gender) and work hard at not controlling or directing their playing – give them freedom to explore, take risks, make mistakes and discover things for themselves. If boys (or girls) want to be wild, large-scale, aggressive and competitive, they can be and if they don't, that's fine too. And if girls (or boys) want to role-play and chat and do small-scale glittery things – they can and if they don't, that's fine too. Give them plenty of opportunity to control their own playing.
2. Give children as much time as possible to play outdoors. The differences between girls and boys playing are always fewer outside because outdoor environments are always seasonally changing and cue all children to explore and have adventures. Also indoor environments are more likely to be genderised or stocked with gender prescriptive toys.
3. Collect and offer as many loose parts play materials as you can for children to play with. Loose parts are usually non-prescriptive and spark children's imagination far more than toys and they don't come with any gender labels. They also cost little or nothing and it doesn't really matter if they get damaged or broken. Keep on gathering and providing these so there is an ongoing source of novel possibilities.
4. Look at the toys and books you already have – what messages are they giving and how are children responding to and using them? Look out for and choose non-stereotypical ones wherever possible and don't be precious about them. Painting black pointy teeth on a toy pony or throwing a doll about, are actually examples of children's experimentation with gender expectations.
5. Take time to subtly watch and listen to children playing – discover what interests them, see how they manage their feelings and behaviour, learn to recognise their underlying play narratives, grow to understand them.
6. Try to see the world through children's eyes. It is a very different place and is not the same world you inhabited as a child. We tend to expect children to see things from our perspective, when it should be more the other way round.
7. Think about what messages you give out – both in what you say and how you behave. We may sometimes use phrases like 'Be careful', 'Girls can do anything' or 'He's a typical boy' without considering the context of a situation or who the individual is (and what gender they are). Consider the tone in which you say things and answer any of their questions honestly. But don't assume children don't already know what you tell them – they may be testing it – or you – out!
8. Reflect on your own gender and what it has meant to you at different times in your life. How has it constrained you, affected you, influenced you in the past and in the present? Remember that 'we do not see things as they are, but as we are'.
9. Talk about gender with your friends and colleagues and with parents. Stand up for children's right to play in their own way in these conversations, especially when adults say things like 'Don't let her get dirty' or 'I don't want him dressing up'.
10. Most of all believe in children's capabilities and competencies. We shouldn't assume they don't know or can't look after themselves. Take a step back and give them the chance to be themselves and to test themselves – whatever their gender.



References

¹ Hines, M. (2004) *Brain Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

² Eliot, L. (2010) *Pink Brain, Blue Brain*. Oxford: One World Publications

³ Fine, C. (2010) *Delusions of Gender*. London: Icon Books

⁴ Kane, E. W. (2013) *Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in Childhood*. London: Bloomsbury

⁵ Shibley-Hyde, J. (2005) 'The Gender Similarities Hypothesis', *American Psychologist*. Available at: www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/amp-606581.pdf (accessed 27 May 2018)

⁶ Thorne, B. (1993/2009) *Gender Play – Girls and Boys in School*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press

⁷ Cealy-Harrison, W. and Hood-Williams, J. (2002) *Beyond Sex and Gender*. London: Sage Publications Ltd

⁸ Lippa, R. A. (2005) *Gender, Nature and Nurture*. New York: Psychology Press, Taylor and Francis Group

⁹ 'Girl toys vs boy toys' uploaded to YouTube by the BBC from their programme *No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?* (aired in the UK on 16 August 2017): www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWu44AqF0il

¹⁰ Article written by Clara Moskowitz reporting on research led by Eric W. Lindsey of Penn State Berks University in Pennsylvania, and published on 2 June 2010 in the journal *Sex Roles*: www.livescience.com/6621-kids-learn-genderstereotypes-home.html

¹¹ Professor P. Leman from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, at Kings College London in response to a survey by MadeforMums – a popular website for parents and parents-to-be: www.toynews-online.biz/marketing/weve-gotto-break-the-carsforboys-and-dollsforgirls-habitclaims-madeformums-following-gender-study

¹² Warner, M. (1991) Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet, *Social Text* 29 (4): 3-17

¹³ Kilvington, J. and Wood, A. P. (2016) *Gender, Sex and Children's Play*. London: Bloomsbury

¹⁴ *Gender, Sex and Children's Play*





Author: Ali Wood

Ali is a playwork trainer, researcher and writer and is the co-author of *Reflective Playwork For All Who Work with Children* and *Sex, Gender and Children's Play*. She also co-manages Meriden Adventure Playground in Birmingham.

www.play.wales

Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.