

Barriers caused by gender that children in the early years face and strategies used to overcome these barriers to improve inclusion.

What is Inclusion?

Inclusive practice is the inclusion of every child no matter what their ethnicity, religion or disability is. Furthermore, inclusive practice means that all children should have equal access and participation to all aspects of their lives (The Pre-School Alliance, 2017; The Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007).

What is gender and how is it defined?

"...the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women." (World Health Organization, 2011)

Therefore, we can say that gender can not be specifically defined. It is dependant upon the beliefs of the society and culture in which people live (Goldhill, 2018).

However, it can be argued that gender is specifically determined by the actual biological differences between the genders (Shen, 2015; Neporent, 2015). Meaning the physiological parts given to a person as well as the specific hormones a gender carries defines the gender of a person and can not be argued.

This is known as biological determinism (Oxford Reference, 2018). However in the case of hormones, this can be argued as some females can carry the male hormone testosterone (SheCares, 2014).

It is further added that not only is there differences in the anatomy of different genders, but there has been clear differences in the brain of males and females (Price, 2017; Goldman, 2018). The left side of the female brain that accounts for analytical thought, logic, language, science and maths is seen to be more advanced in females than males, specifically the females left hemisphere of the brain is seen to be up to 18 months ahead of males.

It is added that this can be seen as an indication of why girls are seen to have better language and speaking skills at a younger age than boys (Price, 2017; Goldman, 2018). It is identified that these societal ideas come from the media perceptions of gender and the stereotypes that can form from these media perceptions (Wolska, 2011; Knorr, 2017; Wood, 1994).

Barriers Children Face

- Stereotypical behaviour, language, attitudes and expectations from those around the child
- Gender specific play areas and toys
- Attitudes of society and family around the child
- Female/male only members of staff at settings (Nutbrown, 2018; Mistry and Sood, 2013; Zero Tolerance, 2013).

Family and Societal Attitudes and Stereotypical Behaviour, Language and Expectations

Stereotypical behaviour, language, attitudes and expectations are seen to form due to the mixture of positive and negative media perceptions society are exposed to. The negative attitudes of children's families and those in the society of children can be seen to impact the way children see gender, how they define it and in turn what they accept from each gender (Kimberly, 2016). Halim et al (2016) agrees and states that the attitudes and beliefs of both children's families and the societies they live in impact upon the way children view gender and how gender is defined and accepted. Gender norms within a family and wider society are seen to have a strong impact upon children and their views and ideas relating to gender (Kelly et al , 1982; Grinberg, 2017; Natcen Social Research, 2013; Moskowitz, 2010). For example, children seeing the mother as the one who looks after the children and cares for the home or parents telling children that pink is for girls only and that a boy is not allowed to play with girls toys. Children seeing this all the time is seen to reinforce gender roles and what behaviour is acceptable from each gender. This is known as Sex – Role Socialization Theory, where children learn what behaviours are accepted from each gender by viewing what society perceives as acceptable (Carter, 2014; Kretcmar, 2009).

The negative attitudes of those around the child can also impact upon the child through the use of certain words and terminology relating to gender when around children on a day to day basis, whether it be positive or negative terminology. Therefore it is identified that those around children should be mindful of their use of terminology in regards to topics in which children's ideas can be easily influenced such as gender (O'Connor and Scott, 2007). This is identified as cultural discourse, where children learn and develop their own ideas from the conversations and terminology they hear from adults and the society around them (Shi-Xu, 2015; Carbaugh, 2017; Lie, 2017).

Gender Specific Play Areas/Toys

Classrooms are seen to have certain sections gender defined, for example, home corners appearing to look very female orientated. These gender defined play areas lead children to feel as though they should not play there due to their gender, this is seen to come from the negative attitudes that comes from parents and those around them, as well as the negativity that comes from the media in regards to gender (Halpern, 2014).

it is identified that practitioners should be the ones to make children feel as though they are able to play with or in what ever area they choose without feeling any negative stereotypes. This should be done in order to make children feel as though they do not have to stick to gender norms and to ensure the right understanding and attitudes relating to gender are instilled in children (Halpern, 2014; Cunningham, 2004; Our Watch, 2018).

Toys within play areas can also be seen to have an impact on the way in which children view gender, the colours of toys used to define gender has been seen to impact the colours children associate with certain genders (Jess, 2017). Furthermore the kind of toys that are designed for each gender are seen to have a negative impact upon how children view the genders, for example girls toys that are toy cleaning kits or pretend kitchens. These kind of toys are seen to reinforce the typical historical gender roles in children (Halpern, 2014). It can also be added that practitioners are reinforcing gender stereotypes by providing children with certain toys in settings (Halpern, 2014; BBC News, 2017; Pope, 2015).

Integration strategies

There are a number of strategies that can be used to integrate children no matter their gender. But firstly it is identified that in order for children to be successfully included and to not face barriers in relation to their gender then the negative stereotypes need to be removed (Medhurst, 2016; Bedel, 2015 and Anerich, 2018).

This includes removing negative stereotypes in both parents and practitioners as they are seen to have the most influence on a child. This can be achieved in a number of ways such as gender training in order to gain a better understanding of the genders and how to effectively include them (Rae, 2017; Aina and Cameron, 2011).

Practitioners have the role and responsibility of nourishing all their learners, for the early years the majority of this is seen to be achieved through active learning through play, therefore gender stereotypes need to be left out of the way in which children play so that there are no limitations to children's play and in turn development (UNESCO, 2007).

Children's play experiences need to allow for equal treatment and opportunities in order to send the message that the child is worthy and valued no matter their gender and furthermore are able to reach their full potential no matter their gender (UNESCO, 2007; Our watch, 2018).

Furthermore, stereotypes need to be removed around the ideas parents and practitioners have in relation to play, mainly the types of play and toys that children should engage with.

This can be achieved in several ways including:

1. Gender neutral toys/play areas
2. Children choose what they want
3. Boys and girls encouraged to play together
4. Wide variety of toys and play experiences offered.

(Rae, 2017; Solomon, 2016; Aina and Cameron, 2011 and BBC New, 2017).

Conclusion

Children within the early years can be seen to face barriers due to their gender such as stereotypical attitudes and behaviour as well as gender specific play areas and toys. However, these barriers can be broken through the use of integration strategies such as removing stereotypes in parents and practitioners through the use of gender training. Also in turn removing the stereotyping from the ways in which children play with the end goal of making all children included no matter their gender.

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