

GENDER STEREOTYPE

Encourage critical thinking and resilience
in the face of limiting stereotypes

THE FACTS

- The more TV a child of any gender watches, the more likely they are to believe that "boys are better", according to a [2013 study](#) by developmental psychologists.
- If asked to [draw a scientist](#), only around 1 in 4 children will draw a woman.
- Stereotypes can work against boys as well as girls. As [Gender Action](#) points out, boys are just as likely to be put off studying English and Drama as girls are to Physics and Business studies.

I WANT TO...Tackle my child's gender stereotypes

For every exclamation that "Girls can't ride motorbikes!" I show them female Motocross riders doing epic stunts on YouTube and ask them if they still think that's true.

- Ella Duncan, [Being a Feminist Mum to Boys, Zero Tolerance](#), May 2019

What?

Frequently question gender assumptions about toys, skills, activities, jobs, sports, personality traits. Be gentle!

Why?

Regular debate is more likely to change attitudes **for good**. This may also help your child's general critical thinking skills.

How?

Ask children *how we 'know'* that girls don't like pirates or *who decides* whether dancing classes are for boys?

What the experts say:

- Children are conscious of gender roles by the age of two. Gender stereotypes sound like, "boys like...", "girls don't, can't or shouldn't", "boys are naturally...". Watch out for them and encourage your children to think critically. Gently challenge why it isn't OK for girls to play with tractors or boys with dolls. Choose books, clothes and toys on the basis of children's interests, not because they're pink or blue

- It's usually unconscious but many parents:
 - ...allow more aggression in their boys, and tolerate more sensitivity and crying in their girls
 - ...hold their boys to higher standards for bravery and physical prowess, and their girls to higher standards for calmness, creativity and focus
 - ...let their boys off the hook for tidying and cleaning, and their girls off the hook for physical exertion and chores like mowing the lawn (remember that [chores have no gender](#), beg the Girl Scouts)

Every now and again, picture your Edward as an Edwina and test yourself: would you still be saying the same thing?

- The Fawcett Society's [Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood](#) review points to children's literature as a 'proven intervention' that can undo already-formed stereotypes
- It's exhausting to confound stereotypes at every turn but try to pick at least one or two areas around the house to show that dads can clean and mums can put up shelves
- With your children, think critically about magazine ads, billboards, music videos, movies, TV programmes and song lyrics. Question the imagery and messaging about sex, sexuality, sexiness, gender stereotypes and the objectification of women that we all take for granted

I WANT TO...push back on friends and relatives

If grandma insists on splitting up the cousins based on gender or only gifting them certain things, you have every right to remind them that "girl" and "boy" are concepts us grownups created.

- Karen Fratti, [6 ways parents can challenge gender stereotypes...](#), Feb 2018

You might be in a rush, you might be tired, you might have already had that exact conversation with that person about that thing they keep saying, you might not feel safe in that situation to speak out, you might be worried about being labelled a [Social Justice Warrior](#), or an [Angry Black Woman](#).

- Jenny Lester, [Zero Tolerance](#)

What?

Gently question stereotypes little and often, without a critical flavour

Why?

Say what you like at home: your children could be **confused by different messages** from carers they love and admire.

How?

Ask questions about how differing beliefs took shape; respect their underlying values and tell your own story

What the experts say:

- Start generalised discussions at low-stress times, without attaching them to criticisms over a particular behaviour. Exploring current affairs together and gently self-questioning can work better than challenge and conflict. Show them this [BBC gender experiment](#) (in which volunteers play with children) or this Scottish [social attitudes survey](#) (finding that many more parents would buy a girl a toy truck than buy a boy a doll). Hypothetically, you could ask, what would you do?
- Lead with empathy and personal stories. Zero Tolerance recommends Kassia Binkowski's blog [How to broach feminism with the unconvinced](#) and Jennifer L. Pozner's blog [How To Talk About Racism, Sexism And Bigotry With Your Friends And Family](#). Both counsel a respectful storytelling approach: "ask questions", "agree where you can" and "be patient and kind".
- Find common ground: try to look at gender issues through a lens they are familiar with or care about. Maybe they've got an all-time favourite dancing show featuring male dancers? Maybe they had some great treatment from a female doctor? Try to validate their perspectives: ridiculing someone's opinion long-held opinion can feel like treading on their history.
- "But it's natural!". "Things have always been this way". When you're challenged, these [myth busters](#) can help.

I WANT TO...Help my child make friends of another gender

My oldest has two best friends - one called Joshua and one called Amelia. One day, I asked him what it was like to have one best friend who is a girl and one best friend who is a boy. His answer? "It's the same. We all like computer games and running around and making up stories and crisps. It's great!"

- Ella Duncan, [Being a Feminist Mum to Boys](#), Zero Tolerance, May 2019

What?

Challenge your own language to make sure you're not drawing boys and girls apart unnecessarily - aloud!

Why?

Setting children into very distinct gender groups may mean they find it harder to interact healthily as young adults

How?

You could start by using the words 'children' and 'people' rather than using 'girls' and 'boys' for no reason

What the experts say:

- Ask your which what they play in school and who they play with – the answer might surprise you.
- It might be easier for children of different genders to foster their relationship outside of school at each other's houses. It's surprisingly easy to fall into single-sex only only. The more you mix boys and girls up, the more gender-neutral their play will become.
- If your is actively restricting their playmates to one gender, try opening the fridge and asking: "if I decided to only eat food from the left hand side of the fridge, what would I be missing out on? Would that make sense?"
- This is important work: later as they start to form, healthy and respectful sexual and romantic relationships may come easier to boys and girls who are used to interacting with people of another gender.

MORE HELP WITH #GENDER STEREOTYPES

1. **A Mighty Girl:** the world's largest collection of books, toys, movies, and music for parents, teachers, and others dedicated to raising smart, confident, and courageous girls. [Go to A Mighty Girl >](#)
2. **Zero Tolerance:** their 'Anyone Can Play' project explores the best ways to talk about gender stereotypes and their effect on children. Includes the Talking Gender factsheet series, posters and social media links. [Go to 'Anyone Can Play' >](#)
3. **Common Sense Media:** This general recommendations service has a great section for parents on sex, gender and body image. Find lists of the best and worst kids' films for gender stereotyping, advice on talking about gender and more. [Go to Common Sense Media >](#)

There's more where this came from:
Visit OutspokenEducation.com

4. **Gender Diary:** follow a mother and father on Twitter as they parent one boy and one girl. They've now published a book – The Gender Agenda. [Go to Gender Diary >](#)
5. **The Good Men Project:** one for positive masculinity enthusiasts – a kind of 'Upworthy for men' with plenty of inspiring content to explore. [Go to The Good Men Project >](#)

Remember: every child is different. Adjust these suggestions for the age and stage of your child. Children with special educational needs and disabilities, looked-after children and children who have experienced abuse may all need different support. If you're in doubt about a child's emotional, physical or psychological development, please seek the advice of a professional.