



Gender stereotyping: Exploring bias and language

Gender stereotypes limit identities, experiences and life chances. Read on for ideas of how to break the cycle.



Socially constructed and rigid gendered roles have a negative effect on many young peoples' identities, experiences and life chances. This toolkit provides tips and ideas to help you transform this picture.

Purpose of this guide

You can play a positive role in preventing gender stereotypes, challenging sexist language and reducing bias in the classroom.

This guide is an introduction to the prevalence of gendered language and is intended to kickstart thinking on challenging our own biases and those of others.

It will support you to approach your work with a 'gender lens', which will help ensure young peoples' choices are not limited by gender stereotypes.

stereotype

/'stɛrɪə(ʊ)tʌɪp, 'stɪərɪə(ʊ)tʌɪp/

noun

a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

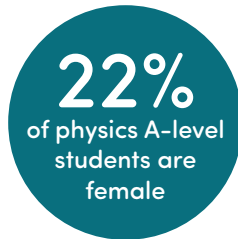
Why does gender stereotyping matter?

- Gender stereotyping is a widely held belief or generalisation about the behaviours, characteristics and roles performed by men and women.
- These beliefs can place limits on the acceptable choices and actions of children and young people and can affect self-perception, mental health and wellbeing, attitudes and participation in a wide range of settings.
- From an early age, young people absorb societal stereotypes about suitable jobs for men and women which can limit their career choices.
- Research shows that being reminded of a negative stereotype about a group you belong to can lead to underperformance, which in the long run can limit life chances.

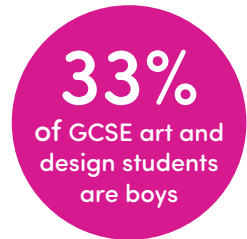
Imbalance is all around us:



Source: UK government, Permanent and fixed period exclusions in England 2016-2017



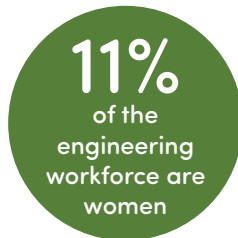
Source: JCQ 2019
bit.ly/physics-jcq



Source: JCQ 2019
bit.ly/38NnSP2



Source: bit.ly/mitey-edu



Source: Women in STEM workforce, WISE Campaign, 2017



Source: Nursing & Midwifery Council, The NMC Register 2019
bit.ly/nmc-nurses

Should we treat learners differently from each other?

When discussing issues of equality, people often say “But I treat everyone the same!” But does treating everyone the same mean everyone is being treated equally?

Making opportunities open to everyone isn't always enough to ensure equal opportunities. For example, an after-school drama or sports club may seem open to all, but for children who have after-school caring obligations or parents/carers that can only collect them at a fixed time, this opportunity is no longer open to them.

There may be other hidden barriers, like girls having ruled themselves out of some sports or topics seen as being ‘for boys’, and of course vice versa. As such, some groups may need extra encouragement to consider certain options.

Equitable approaches are ones which ensure that opportunities are equally accessible and aim to remove barriers to entry.

It is also important not to treat groups as if all members are the same. Making assumptions based on a shared trait is stereotyping. This can occur consciously and unconsciously (see checklist later in this booklet).

As educators, you know what works with one child may not work with another, so being mindful of differences can help you treat everyone fairly. Seeing the children and young people you work with as individuals helps avoid stereotyping and can help challenge assumptions.

Gender equality

“Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys.”*

Gender equity

“Provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men.”*

Watch out for

- 'Boys/girls', 'gents/ladies' or 'guys' – try using 'everyone', 'folks' or 'class'.
- 'Mate', 'buddy', 'darling', 'sweetheart' – pet names tend to treat boys as tough and girls as delicate. It is better to use a child's name, recognising them as an individual.
- 'Headmistress/Headmaster' – try using 'Headteacher/Principal'. Job titles where 'woman', 'man', 'lady' etc. is tacked on the end will all have a more generic option.
- Words such as 'man-made', 'man-kind', 'man-power' – they reinforce the viewpoint that the default type of human is male. Try to use 'artificial', 'humanity' and 'people-power' instead.

How many of the above have you heard recently? Simple greetings and commonplace yet gendered words solidify gender stereotypes.

Reinforcing difference

Reinforcing difference is not only done by language, but can be done by colours, seating plans, classroom layout and timetabling.

Sometimes it is easy to split a group in two by just splitting boys and girls, but this can have unintended consequences. This reinforcing of a divide between boys and girls can reinforce that boys and girls should be separate, and have separate interests, roles and friendships.

Challenge sexist phrases

You throw
like a girl

Be a man

Boys will
be boys

Don't be
such a girl

Man up!

No doubt you'll have heard one or more of these phrases at some point. They're all pretty common, and many would argue, harmless banter.

But dig a little deeper and what are they implying?

- Girls aren't physically strong.
- Girls are emotionally weak and vulnerable.
- Boys need to be strong and stoic.
- Boys behave badly – it's just how they are.

All these phrases are based on stereotypical beliefs about what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how boys and girls should behave and interact. Picture for yourself a 'stereotypical boy' or a 'stereotypical girl'. Are there any young people in your life who don't fit this picture? How might perpetuating these stereotypes affect them and others?



Source: National Education Union and UK Feminista "It's just everywhere" a study on sexism in schools - and how we tackle it, 2017



Source: www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/the_school_report_2017.pdf

Choose your words carefully

Our choice of words tells others how we see the world. Even though not explicitly gendered, the word clouds below show how individual words can become stereotyped in a gendered way.

Do you tend to use certain words to describe boys that you wouldn't use to describe girls? How does the use of these words affect your expectations? How might this over time become self-fulfilling?

Teachers' words for boys



Challenge your bias

Use these checklists to consider the impact of your actions and to reveal any bias blind spots.

In day to day life

What does your language say?

Avoid sending unconscious messages about expectations based on gender. When discriminatory/sexist language is used, outline why this is unacceptable and tackle the attitudes behind it.

Why shouldn't we rely on gut feelings and personal inferences?

Our intuition is unreliable, depending on instinct rather than analysis. By taking more time, you can consciously make decisions rather than rely on impulse.

Is it fair to say we're all biased?

Yes; and we can be blind to some of our biases too. Ask for feedback and be willing to admit bias. This sends a powerful message and makes us more accountable.

Do I consider discrimination and intersectionality?

Bias isn't limited to gender. We hold biases around race, sexual orientation, disability and other aspects of someone's identity. Look for your bias and take steps to counteract it.

Should I speak up?

Always. Share examples of when bias has affected you and don't be afraid to speak up when you see biased and sexist behaviour in others. It can help to offer alternative phrases if you hear inappropriate language.

In the classroom

- Are activities and methods of participating inclusive?**
Try an observation exercise. Does everyone get an equal chance to answer questions? Who takes on what role in practical work?
- Is everyone encouraged and praised using the same words?**
Consider adjectives you use to describe actions and behaviours. Are they disassociated from gender? Or do they reinforce stereotypes?
- Is behaviour managed in the same way for everyone?**
Take note of how you praise and sanction students. Are you consistent? Do you have the same high expectations of behaviours from both boys and girls?
- Is performance perceived equitably?**
Gender-blind studies consistently show men's performance being overestimated and women's underestimated. Removing gender from such decisions improves women's chances of success.
- Are examples and role models diverse?**
Context, understanding the bigger picture and seeing that anyone can succeed in their given subject or career, irrespective of background, is crucial. Are males and females shown an equal amount of times?

Next steps

- ✓ Share this guide with your peers.
- ✓ Get involved in our growing community of passionate and proactive schools, nurseries and colleges.
- ✓ Find evidence-based research, articles and tools for use in your classroom at genderaction.co.uk/online-resources
- ✓ Stick our poster up in your classroom as a reminder!
- ✓ Got a question? Want some advice? We're on Twitter so get in touch.

Who is behind Gender Action?

Gender Action is an evidence-based awards programme for schools, nurseries, and colleges. We support educators and promote work that challenges gender stereotypes.

The accreditation programme is being developed and run by a consortium of experts from the Institute of Physics, King's College London, UCL Institute of Education and the University Council of Modern Languages. It brings over a decade's worth of research to life.

SUPPORTED BY

MAYOR OF LONDON

The Mayor of London funded a rollout in the capital in 2019.



Development Education Centre South Yorkshire (DECSY) is a partner contributing their gender education expertise from three recent projects.



DECSY's gender work is funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union