



## 16 GENDER NEUTRAL PLAY

In this information sheet, we are sharing ways in which to support play without gender specific toys, resources, roles or influences. There are many studies both for and against gender specific toys such as dolls for girls and trains for boys, but here we are assuming that settings are supportive of a broad range of experiences and want to provide either some areas or times where gender is not reflected by the resources, toys and practices offered.

There are two main ways to support gender neutral play. One is to reset your own perception of gender and the other is by introducing resources that do not typically stereotype genders.

### Our Behaviour

As people, we can be conditioned to behave in different ways towards boys and girls. Extensive studies show that people automatically treat baby girls and boys differently –our voices change when speaking to them tending to be more gentle and sweet talking to girls and a bit gruffer and rougher addressing boys. We make assumptions that girls would prefer to play with soft toys and pink items and introduce cars and construction play to boys. Therefore, we could in our settings try to pull this behaviour back by speaking more evenly to both boys and girls as well as being more careful about which toys we present. This should help children see themselves as who they are and not who they are expected to be. At story time, we can be careful with what we choose. Stories about damsels in distress and brave knights can easily be avoided with the vast range of materials available. The language we use can also be important, so remembering that when we use words and sentences that segregate and highlight supposed differences between boys and girls. Use inclusive language that shows everyone can be included. This also means challenging behaviours and statements that reinforce gender roles, from both children and adults.

### Boisterous Play v Sedentary Play

What language do we use around these types of play. Do we say no to a lot of boisterous or fighting style play, does this then make it appear as something only naughty people do? Do we support sedentary play, such as home corners, colouring in etc. to make our lives easier as it needs less supervision and intervention? Consider which gender is generally involved in these plays. By using the actions above are we promoting the fact that active and loud play is wrong in some way, and enforcing ideas that boys are naughty?

If we reinforce sedentary play as being good, are we denying the opportunity to girls of being more physically active? Also, are we enforcing the knowledge that being passive is a good thing. This would have negative effects in the long term.



### Did you know ?

**Strength and physical performance is similar in boys and girls up till the age of 8 years. Even then significant differences only appear after children enter puberty.**

**In the early 20th Century it was generally promoted that pink clothes was for boys and blue clothing was for girls. Fashions frequently change over time.**



## Outdoor Play

Setting up play outdoors can often be much easier to offer gender neutral play. Introducing loose parts in to your setting can develop vital dexterity, social and problem solving skills. Loose parts can range from cable drums to bread crates and pretty much anything that children can carry and play with. All loose parts should be checked for safety and the best ones have no pre-conceived purpose to the child, just huge play potential and the ability to stimulate their imagination. Sometimes children enjoy role playing with loose parts and this may take a 'traditional' gender role such as cooking with pots and pans. This should never be discouraged, but the practitioner may want to ensure that all children have the chance to role play with all resources if they want to.

## Dressing Up

Dress up play can be enjoyed by all children and you can put out a mix of different clothing items, material, belts, hats etc. and children will have great fun. Children should be allowed to explore what they would like to wear, and no judgements made about what they choose. Dressing up allows children to build their vocabulary, improve problem-solving, increase empathy by seeing the world through others eyes, develop emotions, improve motor skills, develop imitation, improve socialization and imagination, as well as build their brains through play.

## Dolls / Home Corner

Playing with dolls and play in the home corner can often be viewed as more feminine due to the language they hear, as well as children imitating what they see in the world around them. There are some boys that also want to join in but could feel judged for doing so, whether by other children or adults. So how can we make everyone feel more welcomed and relaxed so that everyone can join in with this play? If we encourage this play, reminding people that everyone can join in and that males are carers as well, then hopefully everyone can explore their feelings around nurture and caring through this play. Children will also use this opportunity to develop and learn feelings about how it is to be a parent or carer, which they will take into their future lives.

### Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your project, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or [admin@smartplaynetwork.org](mailto:admin@smartplaynetwork.org)

## Building Blocks

The toys children play with have an impact not only on how they see themselves and on what skills they learn, but also on how their brains physically develop. Some psychologists argue that this helps to explain why certain professions are so male-dominated. Research by the IET (The Institution of Engineering & Technology) found 31% of STEM toys are listed as "for boys", compared with just 11% for girls. Research shows that girls lack confidence in mathematics and science, and achieve worse results despite outperforming boys overall.



### Further Reading

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/magazine-40936719/gender-specific-toys-do-you-stereotype-children>

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/reality-check-with-polly-curtis/2011/dec/13/women-children>

<https://blog.bellalunatoys.com/2016/10-benefits-of-dress-up-play-for-children.html>

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

