

# BUILDING CHILDREN'S RESILIENCE THROUGH RESPECTFUL AND GENDER EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS

## LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY



## INTRODUCTION

The City of Melbourne is committed to preventing violence against women, which is why we developed and endorsed our three-year *We Need to Talk – Preventing Violence against Women Strategy* in 2013.

Research tell us that in addition to gender inequality, some of the key drivers of violence against women are structures and cultures, attitudes and behaviours that reflect disrespect for women, low support for gender equality, and the acceptance of stereotypical gender roles and norms (Our Watch, 2015). These attitudes, behaviours and cultures can excuse, condone or even lead to violence against women.

With sexism and gender stereotypes playing such a significant role in driving violence, one of the aims of the *We Need to Talk Strategy* is to change those attitudes – and to stop them forming in the first place.

Currently, there are a variety of programs designed to promote respectful relationships and gender equity for young people running in some youth orientated settings. In support of this important prevention work, recommendations generated from the Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2016 included a state-wide to introduce respectful relationships education into all Victorian primary and secondary schools.

However, by the time children start school, many sexist beliefs and gender stereotypes have already formed. Increasingly, policy makers and experts are recommending finding age-appropriate ways to foster respectful relationships in younger children in early childhood settings.

The City of Melbourne has commissioned a pilot project, to be trialled in a council-run children's centre, which aims to foster respectful and gender equitable relationships in preschool children. Supporting children to have healthy and respectful relationships will help them become resilient and well-functioning adults, and should play an important role in preventing violence against women into the future.

To inform the structure and content of this pilot, the Australian National University's Centre for Social Research and Methods was commissioned to undertake a literature review, looking at studies done over the last 10 years in Western countries that:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of programs aimed at promoting gender equity and addressing gender bias in preschool children, and
2. Examine the development of gender roles, bias and stereotypes in preschool children.

The findings of the review will help form the design of the Building Children's Resilience through Respectful and Equitable Gender Relationships Pilot Program, which will be implemented over a six-month period in 2017. The design of the program will also take into consideration best practice in respectful relationships education, as well as input from children's centre management, educators, parents and children.

**This summary provides a short overview of the key findings of the literature review, and the resulting recommendations that will contribute to designing the pilot program. The full literature review can be found at [melbourne.vic.gov.au](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au).**

## THE FINDINGS

As well as confirming that gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes begin to form very early in life, the literature review touched on evidence about why and how these attitudes and behaviours come about in this age group.

### What is meant by 'bias', 'stereotypes' and 'prejudice'?

The idea of 'bias' is made up of three aspects:

- Stereotypes – *beliefs* (positive or negative) about the characteristics of a particular group
- Prejudice – *emotions* and feelings about a particular group
- Discrimination – *behaviour* toward a group and its members

Bias can be expressed as positive feelings toward a group, but can still have a negative impact. A bias toward one's own group (in terms of, for example, gender, nationality or race) can result in discrimination against people outside those groups.

It has also been suggested that this kind of 'positive bias' can be a key driver of gender inequality. Widespread attitudes and beliefs that are generally supportive of women, but see them as powerless, needing protection and lacking competence, play a fundamental part in keeping women in a subordinate role, by discriminating against those who don't confirm to this stereotype (Dixon, Levine et al. 2012).

### Early formation of gender stereotypes

Very young children are actively seeking to understand their world, readily classifying and sorting things into categories. As early as three years old, gender stereotypes are already taking hold, as children seek to learn, and then enforce, the 'rules' relating to gender.

- Some cognitive theories of gender development see children as seeking to understand the meaning of their own gender as a first step in their development (Martin, Ruble et al. 2004).
- This early understanding of gender leads children to seek out more information about gender distinctions, and leads them to act in ways they think they should according to their gender (Halim, Ruble et al. 2014).
- Some researchers found that between the ages of three and five children become very rigid in their attitudes to gender norms (Cherney and Dempsey 2010).
- Those rigid attitudes decrease over the age of five (Ruble, Taylor et al. 2007) and there's also greater tolerance for play that crosses gender stereotypes after that age (Kelly 2012).
- Very young children tend to believe their own stereotypes and prejudices are accurate, and widely held by others (Bigler and Wright 2014).
- It's not until middle childhood (above the age of five) that children begin to develop an understanding that social prejudices and stereotypes exist (Quintana and Vera 1999).
- Crucially, a longitudinal study found that, in both girls and boys, three year olds that adopted gender stereotypical behaviour were still focused on gendered behaviour a decade later, at age 13 (Golombok, Rust et al. 2012).

### How ideas about gender affect young children

Research found that ideas about appropriate gender behaviour tend to manifest differently in boys and girls. Girls are more likely to express their gender through their physical appearance, while boys are more likely to express their gender through action.

- Young girls are particularly influenced by ideas of gender in terms of appearance – they're much more likely than boys to dress in ways that are seen as 'girl appropriate' (Halim, Ruble et al. 2013).
- Children's stereotypes about girls tends to focus more on appearance, while stereotypes about boys focus on behaviour and activities (Miller, Lurye et al. 2009).

### The effect of the media on gender stereotypes

Unsurprisingly, the media and popular culture has a part to play in forming stereotypes around gender, and can cause children to develop unhealthy gender attitudes.

- One report found that young children exposed to more television were more likely to believe that boys were better than girls (Halim, Ruble et al. 2013).

### The effect of toys on girls' views of their gender

Even the toys children play with can have an impact on how they see themselves and their gender – which, in turn, can have an effect on how they view their career choices and aspirations.

- One study asked children about their career options after having them play with toys, and found that girls playing with Barbie dolls reported fewer career options than girls playing with Mrs Potato Head toys (Sherman and Zurbriggen 2014).
- Another study found that some girls became more interested in feminine activities after playing with Barbie dolls, while playing with a Playmobil doll did not have this effect (Coyle and Liben 2016).

### Types of play have an effect on gender attitudes

The kind of play children engage in, and who they play with, can have an effect on how they see gender and themselves.

- A study found that despite the improvisation and imagination being used, girls engaging in 'Disney Princess' play tended to encounter the social limitations of their princess identities (Wohlwend 2009).
- A study showed that girls who played with boys tended to engage in more 'masculine' activities, and boys who played with girls tended to engage in more 'feminine' activities (Goble, Martin et al. 2012).
- Play that happened in natural, outdoor spaces seemed to invite unsegregated play between preschool girls and boys. The study authors speculated that this was due to natural areas not containing the gender coding often found in human-made environments (Anggard 2011).

### Young children's sensitivity to language use

The way language is used matters. It fundamentally affects how we think about the world – particularly when starting out in life.

- Researchers created a preschool environment where gender differences were highlighted – using things like gender-specific language and physical separation – and found that children showed increased use of gender stereotypes, played less with children of the opposite sex and were more negative about members of the opposite sex (Hilliard and Liben 2010).

- Another study showed preschool children are particularly sensitive to categorising others and themselves. It demonstrated that introducing an arbitrary, invented category of a person caused them to immediately take up and start applying the new social category (Baron 2010).

### **The influence on educators on children's attitudes**

Educators can have a significant influence on preschool children, particularly when it comes to learning, development and attitudes toward gender stereotypes.

- One study found that educators tended to see girls as more caring and helpful, and were surprised when boys showed this kind of behaviour – sometimes even seeing it as strange or abnormal (Rodriguez, Pena et al. 2006).
- A Canadian study found that, although educators tended to rate the girls in their classes as being more caring than boys, when objectively evaluated the girls and boys in their class were equally caring (Bouchard, Coutu et al. 2015).
- Another Canadian study examined the difference in attitudes between male and female educators, finding that female educators tended to see the physical play of young boys as problematic, while male educators saw such play as normal (Bosacki, Woods et al. 2015).

### **Allocation of domestic chores can affect attitudes**

Even something as seemingly harmless as the assignment of housework can have an effect on children's ideas about gender.

- A study found that young girls in households with a traditional gender allocation of housework tended to believe that society viewed boys as superior to girls (Halim, Ruble et al. 2013).

### **Gender counter-stereotypes may have a detrimental effect**

There might be an assumption that gender stereotypes can be shifted by bombarding young children with counter-stereotypical images and examples, such as like female mechanics, knitting males and stay-at-home dads. However, there is evidence that this is not necessarily effective – and might even strengthen stereotypes.

- A study found that counter-stereotypical examples tended to place an emphasis on gender, which can actually strengthen stereotypes among preschool children (Liben and Bigler 1987).

## **FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN PROGRAM PLANNING**

One of the key findings of this study is how sensitive preschool children are to gender classification. In actively trying to understand the world around them, they're constantly seeking to group things into categories, making them particularly susceptible to gender stereotypes. The more they're exposed to ideas about gender, the more they'll seek to use those ideas to classify themselves and the people around them.

However, there are concrete steps to take to reduce the power and effectiveness of these gender stereotypes, and to help promote healthy and respectful gender attitudes in early years settings.

### **Avoid distinction on the basis of gender**

Young children are 'gender detectives', seeking to interpret the rules of their own gender and its place in the world, so it's important to minimise the importance that gender plays in a child's world. Some practical ways to do this include:



- Avoid using gender as a category to divide children by. Avoid separating boys and girls, or having designated 'girl-only' or 'boy-only' activities. If children need to be divided up, consider having a red team and blue team instead of dividing by gender.
- Avoid referring to children as 'girls' or 'boys'. Instead, refer to them as 'children' or 'kids'.
- Avoid commenting on what people of a particular gender are like, or what they should do.

### **Avoid toys that are overly gendered**

Toys like Barbie dolls and Bratz dolls tend to narrow down play options for girls, and confine them to limited gender roles.

### **Support educators to understand their unconscious gender bias**

The unconscious stereotypes that educators carry about gender can readily be passed on to preschool children, and can affect how they are treated in the classroom.

It's important for educators to be supported and encouraged to examine their own biases and attitudes around how they expect boys and girls to behave, so as to lessen the impact of these preconceptions on their students.

### **Avoid emphasis on gender counter-stereotypes**

Simply presenting counter-stereotypical images and examples of gender (e.g. female truck drivers, male nurses) can actually strengthen stereotypes, since they emphasise gender as a category.

Presenting examples that go against gender stereotypes is not enough. A more nuanced, discussion-based approach is needed.

### **Use 'story time' to provoke discussion of gender equality**

Teaching children directly about gender stereotypes can sometimes be ineffective, or even counterproductive, but using stories and books to introduce concepts around gender equality and ideas about fairness can be a more effective way to trigger engagement and discussion.

### **Promote play in natural environments**

Natural environments are free of areas 'fenced off' by ideas of gendered play – they make ideal places for boys and girls to play together without reinforcing gender stereotypes.

### **Reduce boundaries between 'boy' and 'girl' toys**

Make sure the types of toys on offer don't encourage gendered play or confirm to gender stereotypes. For example, remove highly feminised toys like Barbie dolls and Bratz dolls and masculine toys like army figures, and provide dress-up clothes that don't conform neatly to gender stereotypes.

### **Take a comprehensive approach**

Take an approach that implements these strategies not just in the classroom, but across all aspects of the preschool organisation, including:

- a full review of policies and practices
- staff training and support
- audits of the physical environment, toys, books and visual material
- parent engagement
- child engagement

### Properly monitor the approach or initiatives taken

The program being developed and delivered needs to be properly monitored and evaluated, to make sure it is effective and to better inform these kinds of projects in the future.

## APPLYING THE FINDINGS

These recommendations will be used to guide the design of a six-month pilot program to be run in a City of Melbourne children's centre, focusing on promoting gender equity, challenging gender stereotypes and encouraging respectful relationships.

### Measuring success

To properly gauge the effectiveness of the program, the project will include an evaluation to measure the knowledge, awareness, attitudes and behaviour of children, parents, educators and child centre staff.

The evaluation will include a pre-program assessment to establish a baseline, ongoing reflective activities during the program and a post-program assessment at the conclusion of the pilot.

Based on the results of this pilot program, the City of Melbourne hopes to introduce a respectful relationships model into all our children's centres, and to share our experiences with the early childhood sector more widely.

## MORE INFORMATION

The information here is a summary of the full review *Building Children's Resilience through Respectful and Gender Equitable Relationship Pilot Project – A Literature Review*, which you can find at [melbourne.vic.gov.au](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au).

### Resources

For further information relating to preventing violence against women and respectful relationships education, you may find the following interesting:

Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia, Our Watch, 2015 <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/0aa0109b-6b03-43f2-85fe-a9f5ec92ae4e/Change-the-story-framework-prevent-violence-women-children-AA-new.pdf.aspx>

Best Practice in Respectful Relationships Education: Evidence Paper, Our Watch, 2015

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/4a61e08b-c958-40bc-8e02-30fde5f66a25/Evidence-paper-respectful-relationships-education-AA-updated.pdf.aspx>

Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria, VicHealth, 2007 <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/preventing-violence-before-it-occurs>

Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), VicHealth, 2013 <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/2013-national-community-attitudes-towards-violence-against-women-survey>

Zero Tolerance Parents Survey, Zero Tolerance, 2016 <http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/default-setting-what-parents-say-about-gender-stereotyping-their-children%E2%80%99s-early-years?destination=node%2F333>

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