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Kilburn, Cathy (2024). **“Boy kittens play over there”** Preschool children’s role in reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes whilst playing with their peers. Paper presented on the 32nd Annual EECERA Conference, Brighton/United Kingdom, 5.9.2024.

This study aimed to identify the techniques that preschool children use to reinforce their peers’ knowledge and adherence to gender stereotypes and norms. Early childhood settings have become increasingly aware of the negative impact that gender stereotypes can have on children’s long-term outcomes, and future potential, over the last decade (OECD, 2019; Phair, 2021). However, despite early childhood practitioners working hard to ensure that their settings promote gender equity (Børve & Børve, 2017), preschool children are still exposed to gender stereotypes. The theoretical framework for this study draws on Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological model, as well as general theories of gender development. This research is situated within a social constructivist paradigm and utilises a qualitative methodology. The methods used include video-recorded observations, video-stimulated conversations with the children and a picture task. Ethical concerns identified included the use of video recording and digital voice recording. Children with parental consent took part in assent conversations where an information booklet was shared with them using appropriate language. Children’s assent was negotiated daily, and pseudonyms have been used for all participants. The findings demonstrate that whilst early childhood settings work hard to reduce the stereotypes and inequalities that children are exposed to, preschool children use a range of techniques to reinforce gender stereotypes with their peers. This research identified that preschool children are actively involved in reinforcing gender inequality with their peers which raises challenges for practitioners whose attempts to provide gender-equitable education for the children in their care are being thwarted by the children themselves.

Keywords

preschool children, gender stereotypes, children's agency, practitioner's role, gender-equitable

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“Boy kittens play over there”

Preschool children’s role in reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes whilst playing with their peers

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Range of methods identified

- Reinforcement of the gender binary
- Verbal control
- Coercive behaviour
- Gendered environment
- Use of body language
- Manipulating the play

Coercive behaviour

- Participants were aware of the risk of being excluded by their peers if they break gender accepted behaviours.
- Participants shared that they excluded opposite gender peers that they wanted to include, due to their peer's response.
- Participants attempted to gain entrance to play through offering toys as 'gifts', this technique was also used as a means of encouraging non-conforming children to conform.



Gendered Environment

- Participants were aware of areas of the environment that were “boys only” or “that’s for girls”.
- Participants also controlled access to resources due to the perceived appropriateness for a child’s gender – “boys don’t do letters”
- Resources were used in attempt to gain access to play – children were more likely to be successful in their attempt if they were of the same gender.



Use of body language

- Participants used facial expressions to convey their approval or disapproval of cross-gender play.
- Body position was also used – participants positioned their body as show whether a peer was welcome or not.



Manipulating the play

- Participants were observed to manipulate their play as a means of excluding or marginalising the involvement of an opposite gender peer.
- Method used more by girls than boys.
- Effectively used by younger children to exclude older opposite gender peers.



Concluding thoughts

- Preschool children are very aware of gender, and it has an impact on their interactions and experiences within ECE environments.
- Preschool children are aware that practitioners may not approve of their gender reinforcement behaviour and adapt their methods to reduce the potential for detection.
- Preschool children are active participants in the construction and reinforcement of gender stereotypes and norms.
- Practitioners need to be aware of where gender may be influencing the experiences of the children in their care, and they need to challenge gendered beliefs.

References

- Bateman, A. & Church, A. (2017) Children's use of objects in an early years playground. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(1), 55-71.
- Børve, H. E. & Børve, E. (2017) Rooms with gender: Physical environment and play culture in kindergarten. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(5-6), 1069-1081.

