



LEARNING WEEK 2021



Transcript for 'Taking a gender friendly approach: lessons for all from the Gender Friendly Nursery Project'

Barbara – Hello and welcome to this session on taking a gender friendly approach: lessons for all from the Gender Friendly Nursery Project. My name is **Barbara Adzajlic** and this is my colleague **Susie Heywood**, and together we have developed a programme called **The Gender Friendly Nursery** over the past 5 or so years. What we would like to do is share some of the ideas and our learning from it around how you can use some of the lessons that we have learned from the programme in your own practice and we are going to give you some practical tips and ideas and just other things that you can think about to help use a gender friendly approach and to help to bring other people along with you.

Susie – So what is a Gender Friendly Nursery? So we believe that a gender friendly nursery is one in which children staff and families are not limited by the social expectations placed upon them because of their gender, and where everyone can be protected from the many limiting negative consequences of gender inequality and discrimination. So gender friendly nursery is a whole setting approach to gender stereotypes. It is something we have been working on for 5-6 years now and it basically uses a whole setting approach and works at every level and every aspect of nursery life to look at how we can reduce and minimise gender stereotyping. So although this is an approach that came out of the early years and nursery world we fully believe that those lessons are transferable for anyone who is working with children and families and that everyone can and should consider taking a gender friendly approach to their work.

Barbara- Just to talk about what we mean by gender stereotypes and stereotypes. First of all the definition of a stereotype which I'm sure you are familiar with is –it's a widely held but a fixed oversimplified idea or image of a type of person or type of thing. So when we are talking specifically about gender stereotypes, we are talking about these idealised and unrealistic images and messages that we are sent by society about what it means to be a boy or a girl or to be a man or a woman. By way of an example, this is an activity that we use in our training where we ask people to think through and

define some of the stereotypes that are commonly heard around men and women. As you can see there is a lot of kind of strong dominant tough stuff about being a man and the opposite around being a woman being submissive and emotional. There are also very stark differences in terms of careers and families: so for men its career first and for women its family first. Also you may notice some quite difficult mixed messages for women on the box on the right-hand side around being expected to be sexy, being expected to make an effort, but on the other hand not too sexy but still being modest so there are all sorts of difficult messages there. So clearly these are old fashioned stereotypes and we would like to think we have moved on from them in today's society, However as we will talk about we maybe haven't entirely. And clearly we don't always fit neatly within these boxes. Very few people will fit within these boxes all of the time. So if we move on these just look at how these translate into what we expect from boys and girls so you have everything from old fashioned nursery rhymes around frogs and snails verses sugar and spice and to how we expect children to like to play what kind of things we think they should be interested in and even down to the bottom there that we expect boys or assume that boys have a spark of genius as opposed to girls who we expect to be hard working or persevering and that is something that feeds into things like educational disparities and career paths.

Susie- These messages about what it means to be a man or a woman or a boy or a girl have been around for a long time and despite all our advances and knowledge and understanding they still persist. Over the next few slides we are going to demonstrate some of the places where we see these gender stereotypes continuing to be reinforced. These are places that we might come across at various times in our lives and places where these messages and these gender boxes are given to us time and time again. So this slide here is talking about those early days of when we have a baby. So as soon as we know the sex of a new baby there is a lot of evidence that as adults we adapt our behaviour towards that child depending on whether they are a boy or a girl and based on those messages that we picked up about gender. So in this slide here we can see some baby greeting cards which over and above the very clear blue and pink divide gives subtle messages about what we expect of a boy and a girl baby. So we are seeing a kind of active boy with "toys of the world" (a phrase that they use cars and sports toys and active things) where as the girl is much more passive and messages around appearance behaviour sweet and soft and beautiful - these kind of messages. So as I said there is loads of research, some that are mentioned here in the slides, that show that when adults are aware of the gender of a young child that they adapt their behaviours and responses in ways which match or reinforce these stereotypes we have aligned to boys and girls. For example there is research that suggests that parents, particularly mothers, speak to female infants much more than they do to male infants

and that they use much more emotion speak with girls which might raise questions then about what factors might be causing boys the slower language development which is often talked about. This YouTube clip here at the bottom of the slide is from a programme called No More Boys and Girls by the BBC and it's well worth a watch if you have the time because what it demonstrates is that a lot of these things are unconsciously done. We speak in our training about the idea of unconscious bias and of those messages that we receive throughout our lifetime and that we take on board, and that they are unknowingly impacting on our thoughts and our behaviours. So we really want to be careful that we are not blaming the parents around this stuff, because it is just something that society is pushing and we are unwittingly being part of that.

This next slide looks at children's television and when we deliver our training we ask participants to note what they see in this side and very often the first thing that comes up again is that pink and blue divide, which is in itself not problematic. Pink and blue are just colours, but it's the meanings that we ascribe to those colours that are problematic. Another thing that we would mention here is the roles that the different characters play. So very often within children's television (and there are reports that have been done and research that has been done that shows this) but very often the male characters are more active more dominant more powerful but often have less emotional depth to their characters, whereas girls are often in the sidekick role very often kind of take that stereotypical female role. At the bottom here we have peter rabbit where we have "bossy" Lily rabbit as the clever smart sidekick. And there is also very much focus on their appearance which shows in some of the outfits they are wearing. And I guess just generally around representation there are far less female characters than there are male characters. Even when within a programme there is a gender balance very often a female characters have less screen time or less things of importance to say. So why does this matter? I guess very briefly, and anyone working with children will know how important play is to their development, so we are seeing through children's TV that we are restricting the kind of roles and things that children can take on in play. We know they are doing a lot of role play and things and that in itself can have an impact on how they are developing, but also that idea of you can't be what you can't be and if we aren't showing children characters of both genders in a range of roles then perhaps we are having an impact on what they believe they are able to be or what they are able to do.

Barbara- So following on from that we are looking here at some, I suppose, messages that society send us again, but that are geared more towards older people. But as you'll know these things will be seen by children and much younger people as well. So first of all the way that violence against women has been glamourised and sexualised within the advertising industry among others. So these are some quite stark images showing obviously male

dominance and control and glamourising basically dead women and abused women. We have also got very contrasting images of men especially if you look at the film and TV industry so these are some examples of how violent and dominant masculinity is portrayed very much in the media. Again they are geared towards adults but small boys are playing out these roles within the nursery and within their play so clearly it has an impact on everyone really from very small children that are coming across this to older young people and ideas that they are getting about what we expect from them.

Moving on again we have got the music industry which has a lot of very portraying things like pimping and pornography, those kind of themes coming through a lot in the videos as well as some very harmful messages in the songs and the lyrics themselves sometimes. One of the most infamous examples being the top one here "Blurred Lines". If people are familiar with the lyrics of that song it is very much about rape culture. Also just again those stark differences between the ways that women are portrayed and the ways that men are portrayed or what is expected of young women coming up in the music industry verses what is expected of young men. Clearly the difference here is that men tend to be fully clothed and also in control a lot of the time.

The pornography industry has changed massively over the last couple of decades and we know that porn is easily and freely accessible to very young people whether they are looking for it deliberately or by accident, which is the way that some young people come across it. We know that there are very harmful messages there around what is realistic and what is expected from women and men within sexual relationships and who is expected to enjoy it and who is expected to do the hard work and that kind of thing.

So why is this a problem? This is a list of the reasons I suppose that Susie and I came to this gender friendly nursery project from and these are things that we and our colleagues in public health were working on in our day job. You may well be familiar with some of these issues and the reasons why gender stereotypes are an underlying cause. With them some of it is obvious from the slides that we have just shown, but also it is important to get an understanding of this because we see these gender stereotypes as feeding the inequality that we see in our society. And in turn that gender inequality feeds into these public health issues. They are not the only cause but one of some underlying causes, so getting familiar with links between gender stereotypes and gender inequality and these issues is really important. It's important because we find in our work not everybody really understands at the outset exactly how much gender stereotypes and gender inequality can impact on their life. But once you understand this wide range of issues and how they can affect different people in different ways, then you start to win over hearts and minds because everybody will find they have an interest in

this in some way or another. I suppose it's just spending a bit of time, if you want to take on this gender friendly approach, spending a bit of time working through these links and helping people to understand. That can help you to bring people along with you on your journey

Susie - One of the things we are often asked when we are talking about gender stereotypes is these throwaway comments or jokes – “what's the real harm”. Barbara has just touched on some of the very real harms that we see associated with that, but this scale here which many of you might have come across before is something that we used to demonstrate the importance of challenging these behaviours when we come across them. This is the Allport Scale of Prejudice which is a measure of the manifestation of prejudice in a society and was developed by a guy called Gordon Allport in the 1950's. The reason he developed this was to help answer the question that people were asking following World War II about how ordinary people within Nazi Germany were basically able to sit back and watch the behaviours towards different groups within society including Jewish people or homosexuals go from those seemingly harmless behaviours like stereotypes and jokes and gradually get much much worse to the point of extreme violence and genocide and the holocaust. The principle of this scale is that if we ignore these acts at the bottom of the pyramid then what we are doing is creating a culture where if these things are accepted then some individuals may feel emboldened to be able to then take that behaviour a little step further and progress into more harmful behaviour. By not challenging these harmless acts at the bottom of the pyramid which would include gender stereotyping we are contributing to a culture which continues to uphold these gender boxes which are doing very real harm. So I guess what we are not saying is that telling a sexist joke causes the high rates of domestic abuse that we see within our society for example, but by allowing those sexist jokes and these behaviours to go unchecked we are actually doing nothing to change that culture a culture where women are seen of being less value of less importance, where we can sometimes minimise domestic abuse and where gender inequality continues to drive some of these huge public health issues which affect us all. And the same I guess goes for other types of discrimination around inequality because we know that gender inequality is not the only inequality or issue that is driving poor health in our society. I think the other thing that is important to note is that we have all been in that situation where someone says something, whether it is a joke a throwaway comment that we know is wrong, and we have wanted to challenge it and for whatever reason haven't and then felt a little bit guilty about it. We are all human beings - we are wired for connection. We don't want to upset people. We want to keep people close, so sometimes it is hard to make a stand, especially if it is close friends or colleagues. But I think one of the big messages is that the chances are that other people would also be thinking the same thing as you, and in speaking out and calling out these behaviours

when we see them, very often you will be saying what other people are thinking, and other people will be grateful for that. We are not saying that every single time you hear something or some sort of gender stereotype you have to make a big deal out of it, but I guess we just need to start taking responsibility to challenge some of this stuff when we see it

Barbara- So what can we actually do about it? So one thing to note is that an important part of our approach is that it's about equity not neutrality. So we are not pretending that girls and boys are the same and we are certainly not pretending that they are treated equally by society. And that is really what underpins all of this. Girls and boys are not treated the same within society. The world isn't equal. And so they come to us on an unequal footing to begin with. If anybody is not familiar with the difference between equity and equality this is a cartoon that is widely available on the internet and it is really useful to understanding that difference. What it really shows is that people start off at different levels of privilege and with different levels of barriers that they need to overcome and challenges that they need to overcome in their life. And if we treat everybody equally - so looking at the picture on the left, there we have given each of these children 1 box to try and see over this fence but it is still not achieving that equality that we are aiming for because some of them were lower down on the hill to start with and some of them have a higher fence to look over. So giving everybody the same, treating everybody the same, doesn't always achieve that. Whereas in the picture on the right, we have given the children different numbers of boxes according to their needs and according to what status they have started off at and what they need to overcome. By doing that and treating them differently, by recognising their privileges and their barriers, we have actually got to a state of fairness where everybody can see equally over the fence. So this is how we try to explain equity and equality within the gender friendly nursery. The gender friendly approach is really about that equitable approach and about recognising the differences that exist in the world and in the way that the world treats people. So with treating boys and girls, if we treat them the same, this isn't always the answer because they are treated differently and there are different messages society are giving to them. So we encourage nurseries, and anybody really working with young children and families, to think about these differences that exist to begin with and then to think about how an equitable approach can help them to redress that balance.

Susie - So we are going to finish the session now by going over a few suggestions that you may want to consider which are based on the learning for the gender friendly nursery project but which we think are applicable to anyone really who is coming into contact with children and young people. This first one is do notice and challenge your own ideas about gender roles and be curious. So we evaluated the original pilot of the gender friendly nursery project and what it showed us was that the training gave staff the

opportunity to really understand gender stereotypes when they saw them. Hopefully from today's presentation you will begin to see a bit of that from the earlier slides too. But it also gave them an opportunity to really reflect on their own ideas about gender roles. And that takes us back to what I mentioned earlier about that unconscious bias. We all have these biases based on the messages we have received growing up about gender and often these are unconscious and are formed from this lifetime of experiences and can be really difficult to change, and what I guess our approach does is help people explore these a little so that they might be in a better position to notice them when they do begin to impact on their practice. Our approach also provides people with different ways of working that might help to compensate for some of these bias, though they are very difficult to change, but you do begin to notice them creeping in once you become aware of them

Barbara - We would also say do really think about representation. So for nurseries, obviously nurseries work with a lot of displays and resources and anybody really working with children and families will have a number of different ways of getting your message across, whether it is through websites or flyers your resources your staff and your volunteers just the environment that you use. It's really about thinking about making those things inclusive as possible. So the example that we have here in front of us is the people who help us thing which nurseries do a lot and just making sure we have got examples of men and women carrying out a variety of roles. It's not just about putting in a token female police officer to match the many many men who are there in the other roles. It's maybe it's just thinking about that equity thing that we talked about before, where you actually really make sure you have got enough women being represented there, and maybe even just a little bit more. And maybe a few more men representing those caring roles and the roles we don't often see men represented doing. So thinking about those kind of things. Another example in nurseries is where people who help us come in and talk about their job roles - so nurseries can obviously think hard about trying to encourage a male nurse to come in or a female firefighter. And also just also thinking about the wording we use in these examples so not talking about firemen and police men but fire fighter and police officers those kind of things. It's difficult to sometimes work with this because we can only work with the resources that are out there or sometimes the resources that we have. Sometimes we don't have the money to buy in loads of extra stuff and so sometimes it's just about using what you have got, but maybe you can model on an alternative you can show a female fire fighter or police officer or a male in a caring role

Susie - And I guess following on from that we would suggest you look at some of the resources that you use with children. But what we are not saying is to get rid of everything. We are not saying do an audit of all your books and throw away any that have a male fire fighter in them or that kind of reinforce

some of these stereotypes. Because although there are some really brilliant resources out there which thing like the Let Toys Be Toys campaign, they have great lists of gender friendly type retailers who provide resources that we would really recommend, but actually some of those more traditional more gendered stories can be used with children to have those conversations about gender and about gender stereotypes. Because what we don't want to do is create gender neutral environments - we want to be able to work with gender and talk with young people and children about gender. So if we remove all trace of that we don't have all the tools to be able to do that. So it's more about how you use that So examples could be changing the gender of characters within a book and playing around with that a little bit and seeing what the reaction is with the children and how that feels for you if you change the male lead character in the story to a female character. Have conversations and be curious about those kind of things. Absolutely do look at the great resources that are out there but don't discount some of the older resources as well.

Barbara- I'm thinking a little bit more about language. So we have already talked about changing the gender in stories and you can do the same with songs and nursery rhymes. We do find there are a lot of very gendered older nursery rhymes like Polly put the kettle on we'll all have tea. So you can play around with those. But you can also think about what we call the default male. So very many children's stories have animal characters for example who tend to be male. So those are areas where we really need to think about possibly changing the gender of the characters also just the language that we use around the children when we are referring to the adults. So for example in a nursery quite often the staff are referred to as the ladies or perhaps even as the girls. So we talk in our training about what are the problems with calling a group of grown and trained and educated staff the girls which is quite different to talking about having a night out about a group of peers. And we talk about what's the impact of doing that on children who have these well-educated staff members working with them. And also it is a staff group which is predominately female but we are trying so hard to get more men into the nursery and men represented in caring roles so we have to think about what the impact of that is as well.

And still talking about language, we try to encourage the people that we train (and people tend to really understand this by the end of the training) to not focus on girls' appearance. So thinking back to all those gender stereotypes that we talked about and the encouragement for girls to think about their appearance among other things, but to focus very much on their appearance, And going back to equity again the whole world is telling girls they really need to think about their appearance - they need to be pleasing, they need to please the people around them. There is a certain value attached to their appearance more so than for boys. So again if we try to redress this balance we need to stop focusing on how girls appear. We may

even need to stop ourselves from things like praising girls for their appearance which is a very difficult thing to stop doing, because it comes to us all so naturally. If we see a little girl who has really taken care of her hair or has a new dress or something that she is very proud of it can be very difficult to not make a big deal of that. But hopefully we can find ways to recognise that, not to ignore that child we would never advocate doing that, but we can recognise what is special about that child today without putting a value on their appearance. So we can say "oh you have a new dress it has spots on it" or "that's an interesting hair clip it has a giraffe on it" so examples like that. Because language can be very powerful and this is about redressing that balance. Even if we then praise boys for their appearance that would seem to be redressing that balance a little bit and it does a bit, but it's still focusing on appearance having a value and it would be nice if society could have less of a focus on appearance -so that is one thing you can do as well

Susie - And I guess do spread the word about this stuff have a think about your spheres of influence, the places you can have conversations about this stuff. That might be with your family, your friends, your colleagues or your clients. Have conversations about gender and gender stereotypes and recognise when you are seeing gender and gender stereotypes. Those are teachable moments where you can begin to gently challenge some of the stuff we have been talking about today

Barbara - One final do from us is to consider where you would like to get some more reading and some more training just to build up your knowledge on some of these issues. So those public health issues that we talked about. Issues for LGBT people for example and the homophobia and transphobia that still exists out there. The violence against women, domestic abuse, men's mental health and suicide and things like that. There is a load of really good training out there which we can provide links to and we would really recommend that once you start looking at this stuff that you get yourself more informed on how to understand these issues and how to challenge things that will come up for you.

Susie - So thank you so much for listening today. On this slide we've got a link to our resources for the gender friendly nursery project if you are interested in finding about a little bit more. We really have only scratched the surface today and there is so much more out there to learn and dig into a little bit more so do get in touch with us if there is anything today that you want more information on or if you just want to find out a little bit more about what we are doing. And you can follow us on twitter @GFNScotland as well. So thank you so much for your time, and hopefully we will see you one day in real life.