Gender Stereotypes: Tackling The Impact on Men and Boys

Gender stereotypes are not just an issue for women and girls - there are wide ranging harms associated with gender inequality which affect us all.

The "Man Box" is a way of thinking about the dominant societal ideas, qualities and characteristics to which males must aspire to in order to be seen as a "real man". The pressure to conform to this narrow idea of manhood, to stay in this gender box, can begin in childhood, and is reinforced in unconscious, subtle and direct ways which cause very real harm to boys and men.

Strong
Doesn't show emotion /
Don't cry
Dominant
Powerful
Tough
Violent
Breadwinner
Sporty/muscular
Career before family

Did you know that:

- Boys are permanently excluded from school at three times the rate of girls.
- In Scotland, 96% of prisoners are male - a pattern we see across the UK.
- Men are more likely to suffer a drug related death than women.
- Three times as many men take their own lives than women.

There is clear evidence that the pressures and expectations to conform to gender stereotypes are part of these problems and are a very real problem for men and boys.

What can we do about it?

If we want to address these issues then we need to change the narrative around masculinity. As well as doing what we can to reduce the stereotypes in our early years settings, we can also demonstrate to young children, and boys in particular, that there is no one way to be a boy or a man, compensating for the narrow portrayals of men and masculinity that they are likely to be seeing in the world around them. Here are some of our suggestions which may help you to consider your own approach:

- In all of this it is important that boys are not made to feel ashamed of being a boy. Many men say that the "toxic masculinity" narrative can have this effect. Yes, there are some aspects of masculinity which when misused can cause harm, but there is nothing inherently wrong with being strong, brave and confident.
- Are there areas of the nursery that you notice boys tend to avoid, or activities where they show less interest? Children should have free choice, however it's worth considering if this is a genuine preference or a result of social pressures and stereotypes which discourage them from certain things. Find creative ways to give them the opportunity to try things without fear of judgement.
- Use books, stories, displays, visitors to the nursery and staff (if you are lucky enough to have male staff) to show men and boys undertaking a variety of non stereotypical roles. Make sure that the children notice these, as our brains have a tendency to forget examples which go against the stereotypes our brains have absorbed.
- Use resources which promote emotional literacy and pay close attention to boys in the group when doing these lessons.
- Create spaces for boys to talk and share with each other.
- Encourage them to ask for help when they need it - from each other, from girls and from adults. Learning about healthy friendship, caring for others, and teamwork are all really important.

Find out more in "Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years: Changing the Narrative" - available now from all good booksellers!

Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years

Changing the Narrative

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