

who is
in your
family?



How children play: challenging myths and stereotypes

Children from rainbow families – regardless of how many mums, dads, known donors or other family members they have – rarely see their families represented in TV shows or books, let alone in traditional fairy tales or nursery rhymes.

For many children, childcare or kindergarten may be the only time they are cared for outside of their family. When they are not in your centre, the majority of children's time is spent with their family, in their home. Encouraging diversity in children's play and stories will go a long way towards ensuring children do not feel isolated from their peers, or that there is anything wrong with their own family.

Having rainbow families in your centre's community may create a positive opportunity to question gender stereotypes in creative ways. To show children that men can be nurturers, and women can use power tools!

By questioning children's assumptions about who can be a parent, or wear a dress, or like a specific colour, you can give children the opportunity to explore the role of gender in society, and open up possibilities for their own choices.

This will help create environments that are welcoming, inclusive and respectful of both children in rainbow families, and of broader diversity amongst children.

Suggestions for encouraging family diversity in play

- Have more than one "male" and "female" doll in the play space or dolls house, as well as dolls of different ages and ethnicities.
- In the cubby house, put up pictures of women and men taking on different household tasks. You might ask the children's families to bring in pictures of themselves working around the house: cooking, gardening, doing the washing up or feeding the baby.
- Make recipe books with the children, encouraging everyone to take turns "shopping" for the ingredients, doing the "cooking", and cleaning up the kitchen!

Questioning gender stereotypes

Much of children's play reflects themes they see portrayed in stories and TV shows, which often include strong stereotypes around gender: that boys cannot cry or like pink, or that girls can't be heroes, or physically powerful. We can reinforce these ideas by not questioning them when they arise in play. Instead, you could:

- Provide a range of dress ups and toys to allow children to explore different roles or different stories.
- Read books that open up the possibilities about what girls and boys can be or do.
- Play a questioning game where children bring in a favourite soft toy to show everyone. Ask if the toy is a

girl or a boy, and how they know this. Ask questions like, "Is it their colour? their hair style?, their name?".

Sometimes children "police" each other around gender. Children might tell two girls who play "getting married" that they can't because they are both girls, or a boy who dresses up in dress and beads that those are "girl" clothes.

As a staff member, you can ask simple questions like, "But why can't Sam wear a dress if he wants too?", or "Why did you say that Nina and Anouk can't get married?". This may provide a unique opportunity for children to gain some awareness about why they see the world the way they do.

Ideas for staff observation and discussion

- Set aside staff meeting time to discuss on how you might observe and reflect on the role of family diversity and gender stereotyping within the children's creative play and experiences at the centre.
- Walk around your centre and audit the representations of girls and boys, and men and women, in the books, posters, songs and activities. Discuss in a staff meeting.
- Discuss ideas for encouraging non-stereotyped play. Are there parents/guardians who could talk to the children about their lives or careers that challenge stereotypes about the roles of women and men?
- Invite the local library to talk to you about books and resources that reflect family diversity, or open up possibilities about what girls and boys can do or be.

Useful resources

Some children's books that address gender stereotypes:

- *Pointy Hatted Princesses* – Nick Sharratt
- *Tidy Titch* – Pat Hutchins
- *Princess Smartypants* – Babette Cole
- *The Sissy Duckling* – Harvey Fierstein
- *The Paper Bag Princess* – Robert Munsch

Available to order online at www.hares-hyenas.com.au.

References

Picture book agenda: the role of gender, www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/every_child_magazine/every_child_index/picture_book_agenda_the_role_of_gender.html

The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Education (2nd edition 2001) Chapter 4 and 5, edited by Elizabeth Dau.

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our families come in all different shapes and sizes. it's love that makes a family.