

Wee Ones Wee Circle

A Children's Parliament consultation for the First Minister's
National Advisory Council on Women and Girls

June 2021



Purpose

The purpose of this consultation was to gather ideas from children aged between 4 and 6 about what they think the differences are between boys and girls, and to explore gender stereotypes, thinking about how they impact on play or choices or future aspirations.

We hope that Wee Ones Wee Circle will encourage reflection and discussion about how we tackle gender inequality and make Scotland an equal, happy, healthy and safe place for all children to grow up; a place where they can be any kind of girl or boy they want to be.

What we did

Children's Parliament staff worked with 22 children who attend Manor Park Primary School, Aberdeen. The school has been a partner in different Children's Parliament programmes over several years. As always, we are grateful to our colleagues in the school for their support and openness to engage in challenging and innovative explorations of childhood and learning.

In Wee Ones Wee Circle we explored gender and stereotypes with the children, taking time across two days using play, games and creative activities to explore the topic at hand. We worked within the school setting, indoors and outdoors, and we introduced commercial toys and games that children are exposed to. We worked with groups of boys, girls and mixed groups. We also allowed for unstructured play time which gave us an opportunity to observe the children's self-directed play and interactions.



The report offers insight with regard to:

- 1. What children think is the same and different about girls and boys**
- 2. Gender stereotyping in play and toys**
- 3. Adult roles and jobs**

We conclude with some reflections on the work and with **calls to action**.



Images: Playing outside and Den building with girls and boys

1 What children think is the same and different about girls and boys.

We started our work with the children by asking them what they think children their age need to be healthy, happy and safe. The children thought that these were things like fruit and vegetables, a healthy brain, hugs, jumping, adults to help you if you are hurt and friends to help you if you are down. The children felt that boys and girls need these things equally.

The children also thought that there are some things that both boys and girls can do and enjoy; both like to do art and to explore and be outside. The children also felt that boys and girls can be friends, get along and play together.

The forest is for everyone. (boy)

Girls and boys need to get along. (girl)

It's important to hug someone when they are sad. (boy)

Boys like stories, girls like stories. (girl)

During our time with the children, they also began to share views on the things they felt might be different about girls and boys.

Some children think boys are stronger than girls.

They can be builders and build houses. (girl)

My mum can do push ups. (girl)

My mum exercises, she does yoga. (boy)

Boys are strong because they go to the gym. Girls can't go to the gym because they are too beautiful. (girl)

It's true because they exercise and work out. (girl)

Mums might say girls aren't strong. (girl)

Girls don't like blood that much, but boys could deal with it because they are strong. (boy)

Boys can lift up weights. (boy)

When they grow up men can lift up a big giant stone, but girls aren't strong enough. (boy)

Some children think girls are more helpful.

All girls are helping people. (girl)

Girls help boys. (girl)

Mums and dads might tell girls they are helpful - teachers might too. (girl)

Some children think boys like fighting.

Boys spoke about things like fighting, hurting, being strong, being the boss and being able to lift heavy things and deal with things better.

Boys go to the house corner, they playfight there. (girl)

I got hit in the face and it didn't even hurt. (boy)

WWE (wrestling) is boys because girls don't want to get beat up or bruised. (boy)

Some children think boys are better at football.

Boys do football every day so they might be better. (girl)

My brother plays football and my dad. (girl)

Girls don't know how. (boy)

There's not many girls that play football. (boy)

But girls like football. (boy)

**But
girls
like
football**

- Boy

Some children think boys and girls like different colours.

Girls always pick pink because it's their favourite colour. (girl)

Some boys like pink, nice boys. (girl)

Boys don't like pink they always like blue green and black. (girl)

Girls like pink and boys like blue. (girl)

Some children think boys and girls look different.

Boys don't have long hair. (girl)

Boys have short hair, girls have long hair. (boy)

Girls like going in dresses and getting all clean, they like weird colours and like drawing rainbows and watching ponies, but I prefer horses. (boy)

**Boys
don't
have
long
hair**

- Girl

2 Gender stereotyping in play and toys

To explore gender stereotypes we facilitated a number of activities with the children in small mixed and single sex groups, and also observed the children during unstructured play times, particularly at the start of the day when children have what is called a 'soft start'. Soft start is an approach developed by the school to support a gentle introduction to the day and supports an ethos of a play-based approach. By observing this important start to the day and contrasting that with activities planned to explore stereotypes some important observations emerged.

Free play

At 'soft start' the children can choose what to play with, who they spend time with and how. On the mornings observed most children chose to spend the time outside where there is a selection of loose parts to play with. The children played with tyres, water bubbles and a mixture of plastic bottles, boxes and tarpaulin to construct dens, climbing on the fence, hula hooping, playing with snails. None of this material is branded, and little if anything sold commercially as 'toys'.

During this time children were observed playing in mixed sex groups – mostly at the water tray and hula hooping. We observed boys building dens and box towers to climb. Girls were observed climbing, playing with tyres and climbing the fence. When the children were observed playing in single sex groups their play choices did not appear very different. During this time boys and girls all played with lots of different materials and played together. The teacher also commented that it was usual that children played together at soft start, regardless of gender, and across available materials.

In their free play we observed girls being very aware of their clothes. At the water tray they could be seen standing back from the water and pointing out when they got their clothes wet. In a girl group with the Children's Parliament female worker the girls gave the following comments when asked what clothes children need to be able to play, for instance running and playing football.

You need shorts to play football, a skirt won't let you run. (girl)

My school shoes are too good for running. (girl)

I wear my hair up to play. (girl)

Boys don't worry but girls worry, boys might ruin your clothes. (girl)

Are these toys for girls or boys?

It was when children moved away from free play with natural materials and resources, that it was possible to observe gender stereotyping with colours and toys, this was reinforced when children spoke about who they thought would play with certain toys.

To initiate conversations, a selection of different types of toys that represented different types of play - creative, building, nurture focused, reading were made available. Children were asked to organise them into piles depending on who they thought would play with them - boys, girls or everyone. The activity was conducted in mixed and single sex groups and resulted in both girls and boys making similar choices. Generally, children thought boys would play with toys like toy figures, trucks, building blocks, toys that represented male characters or anything with vehicles on it like a book cover. Toys relating to houses, dolls and anything that was pink was put in the girls' pile by everyone.

When the activity was conducted with an all-boy group, the boys showed exaggerated repulsion towards toys they perceived to be for girls such as a doll and Peppa Pig toy, and did not want to touch toys that they felt were for girls. When girls were asked about the toys they thought were for girls, they laughed at the idea of boys playing with toys they thought were for girls.

Some toys did move between girl, boy and everyone 'piles': books, skipping ropes, coloured pens and a ball.

When children had opportunities to choose from a selection of coloured papers and pens, girls unanimously chose pink, whilst boys mostly chose greens and blues.

After the placing of toys in piles (for girls, boys or everyone) children could play with the toys. Having been prompted to identify which toys or games were for which sex, this classification did not then match how and what they chose to play with. In play girls and boys showed most interest in playing with the toys they had placed in the boys' pile, or in the everyone pile. No girls or boys during the follow up play time showed interest in playing with the girls' toys – the kitchen basin, the doll or the pink car, even though girls had identified them as girls' toys.

The children had the following thoughts on why they considered certain toys to be for girls or boys:

Characters that are boys are for boys. (boy)

Girls wouldn't play with Spiderman because Spiderman is a boy. (boy)

A ball is for boys because it's for kicking. (boy)

Peppa soft toy is for girls because 'it has a girls voice'. (boy)

That toy is for girls, girls like to clean dishes. (girl)

I don't think boys would like that barbie car. It's for girls. It says baby on it. (boy)

The toy car is for girls because it's pink, if it was blue it would be for both. (boy)

The basin is for girls because girls wash dishes. (girl)

Play areas in the classroom.

We observed boys and girls playing together, but also engaging in different types of play. The home corner of the classroom had a play kitchen, hair salon and plants in it and was mostly used by the girls. Boys were mostly playing in the construction corner which they liked to use to build things from blocks and sand. Some of the boys had built a 'boys' den' and written "boys only, no girls allowed" in chalk outside it and girls weren't allowed in because "they always destroy it", however there were some girls being allowed to play in the den despite this.

In our time with the children, we observed girls seeking out more support and reassurance from adults, and generally wanting adults to be more present during their play. Girls were more likely to ask for help and wanted to show adults what they were doing. We also observed that the boys were less inclined to go to the female Children's Parliament worker for help or with questions. The male worker was also asked numerous times by boys if he would play with them but "just the boys."



Image: "Paul at the parade"

**Boys
only,
no girls
allowed**

- Boy

3 Adult roles and jobs

The sessions also explored whether early ideas about sex roles and stereotypes might be informing how children saw future adult roles or jobs.

Through a series of games children performed different jobs or activities – acting them out - and the others guessed what job/activity they were doing. Children’s chosen jobs or activities often mirrored gender stereotypes: boys being boxers, boys doing a Rubik’s cube, girls being ballet dancers and cleaners. However, there were also girls being doctors and DJs and boys jumping on trampolines.

When this idea was further explored through a “Who would do this job?” game, clear preconceptions about what jobs boys and girls can do when they grow up emerged. When discussing nurses one boy said it was for boys because “girls don’t like blood that much, but boys could deal with it because they are strong”.

Children’s views on whether women or men can or do a certain job are influenced by people they see in their lives. The children all felt that they could be a boss, on the topic of bosses they recognised that their headteacher was the boss and a woman. The children felt police and fire fighters could be men or women because they had seen them when visiting the station or in school. The children agreed that teachers could also be men or women but mostly women because they see them most at school. Jobs related to cleaning and caring were always viewed as women’s jobs.

Children also recognised who can do certain jobs or activities based on things they had seen on Youtube:

I watch YouTube, I watch WWE. (boy)

Well, girls do soldier stuff sometimes because I’ve seen it on YouTube. (boy)

Some boys did speak about future careers in relation to what male adults in their lives do.

I'm going to work at the place where my dad works, at the engineer place. (boy)

When working in an all-boys group (male worker included) the conversation quickly ended up centring around boys being stronger than girls despite the question being about who could be doctors and nurses. They became somewhat belligerent with each other and many in the group said they were going to be fighters when they grew up; this had not been said in the mixed group.

Oh man, you're gonna get harmed up, if I ever fought you, you'd be beast up. (boy)

In a single sex group, when asked about what they want to do when they are older, many of the girls talked about relationships and family. They talked about boyfriends and kissing, and they asked the female worker about her boyfriend and babies. They talked about movies where women have boyfriends and women in their lives who have babies.

None of these things came up in the same discussions with boys or in mixed groups.

When I am older I want to get married to a strong boy. (girl)

I'd like to be a princess because princesses are beautiful. (girl)

If boys think you are pretty they will want to be your boyfriend. (girl)

Girls need to look beautiful for dates, honeymoon or weddings, like in a movie I saw. (girl)

Some boys felt that girls would be good at nursing and cleaning because they "like helping people" and some felt that "boys are messy" which is why girls clean, others however said they clean and do chores at home. Cleaning and tidying was very much viewed in gendered ways.

Girls mostly do it because they love love love cleaning. (girl)

My Mum says that she does most of the cleaning at home. (girl)

Girls like to clean dishes. (girl)

Reflections on the work

Most typically developing children will recognise and categorise themselves by gender by the age of 3 years; and before this they will recognise and label girl/woman or boy/man. We also understand that from birth children are likely socialised to conform to certain gender roles based on their sex - indeed the trend for 'gender reveal' parties during pregnancy means this can start even before birth. This means that by the time children enter an educational environment, nursery or school, perspectives and behaviours have been influenced in ways that can limit how children - both girls and boys - see themselves and engage with other children and their environment.

While we must always be aware and respectful of the child's choices in their play/learning environment, the children who have taken part in the Wee Circle have given us an insight into what they have already 'learned' about being a girl or a boy. The children shine a light on the need for practitioners to actively ensure that girls and boys are considered equally, that they should not be separated when it comes to learning/play, and to remember that both boys and girls can miss out on important experiences if their play is limited to only some of the opportunities available in their educational environment.

As the report describes it is in their free, unstructured play - without commercial toys - that children are most likely to play with children of both sexes and to play across the range of what is available - running, building, playing with water, engaging with the natural environment, climbing, chatting. It is when commercially available toys or games are introduced, or they are asked to make choices when there are gendered colours or images, that we see their play and creativity diminish.

Some of the gender stereotypes that children have shared with us are stark: from girls/women's responsibilities for domestic chores or needing to be attractive to boys/men, to boys not being soft and being more powerful. When asked to role play activities or jobs, again children have presented limited views based on gender. But why so? This is not a question that we can ask a child, cognitively at 4 or 5 years old they cannot explain their choices or behaviours, but they do give us insight occasionally into what adults have told them, and they clearly respond to the colour/imagery on commercial toys or books which are sold and which adults choose to buy and give them. Clearly then, this points to the need for adults around the child – parents, carers, family members and professionals – to pause and reflect on why a 5-year-old would say things like: *If boys think you are pretty they will want to be your boyfriend (girl)* and *I got hit in the face and it didn't even hurt (boy)*.

It is perhaps helpful to conclude these reflections by returning to the place we started with the children. We posed the question: What do children need to be healthy, happy and safe? In these starter discussions children told us that boys and girls need the same thing – healthy diets, friends, hugs, adults who look after them. The children also thought there are things that boys and girls can all do and enjoy; art, to explore, to be outside. The children also felt that boys and girls can be friends, get along and play together. As we address some of the other more challenging aspects of what we have found, it is worth remembering that girls and boys do not benefit from, or want to be, raised and educated as if they are different, they are happy to be just children.



Image: "Paul at the parade" hat

Calls to action

Children should grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, free from discrimination with all their human rights protected and respected; when they do, they are best able to reach their full potential¹. To tackle gender inequality and make Scotland a truly equal society we must consider childhood. Children's Parliament supports the recommendation by the NACWG to introduce an independent Education and Learning Taskforce (in its 2018 report and recommendations) and in this context, and based on our experience of working with children, we suggest the following actions:

We must give boys and girls opportunities to play on an equal footing. This means giving them chances for free play with loose parts and natural materials.

We must ensure early years and school settings are free from branded, gendered toys and play equipment because these encourage and exacerbate learned stereotypical views and behaviours, in doing so they limit what the child can be and achieve.

We must support girls and boys to engage in play that they do not initially express a preference for – supporting girls to play outdoors and take risks climbing and building; supporting boys to enjoy play that shows emotional/nurturing tendencies.

Girls and boys need to be ready to play. Gendered clothing and shoes can get in the way of children, particularly girls, trying physical or messy activities. Adults also need to ensure that messages to children to stay clean do not limit the child's play, and to consider whether such messages are relayed particularly to girls.

¹ Preamble UNCRC: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

In our support for play and learning we must promote resilience and independence for girls; as adults we must always be available to the child, but overdependence on adult support and over-protective adults can undermine agency and the child's confidence.

As well as encouraging equal play we can at the same time value and promote kindness, care for others and pro-social behaviours, and do our utmost to foster a view that these are valued in girls and boys.

Children need adults to be role models who show them that boys and girls can do and like all kinds of things. As adults - professionals and parents/carers and family members– we can consider whether we create spaces and opportunities for children to be any kind of girl or boy they want to be, or whether we consciously or unconsciously limit our children on the basis of their sex.

About Children's Parliament

Children's Parliament is Scotland's Centre of Excellence for children's participation and engagement. We work with children across Scotland, supporting them to share their thoughts and ideas so that they can be involved in decisions that affect their lives. You can find out more about Children's Parliament at our website:

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