

Disrupting Gender Bias: Getting Started



Spark & Stitch Institute
Ignite Courage and Connection with Kids

Children start learning race and gender right away.

Babies and toddlers quickly learn about their world and wonder “What is important here?” It doesn’t take long for them to learn that race and gender matter a lot. Toddlers are already making observations and organizing their world based on things they can see and they learn quickly that some categories matter a lot more than others. Race and gender at the top of the list because children are constantly cued to their significance.

What do these categories mean?

Once children notice these categories, they start actively seeking clues about what their gender and racial identities and possibilities mean. They are linking their own feelings and experiences with observations of what they see around them, what they guess to be true, what they absorb in the toy aisles, what they see on screens and in books, and what they experience with family and friends.

In the absence of explicit conversations and experiences that disrupt rigid gender roles, children quickly draw conclusions that conform to stereotypes. The stakes are high. Children as young as four years old show gender biases. Unfortunately for our kids, gender bias and rigid gender norms don’t just limit how they think about the world and its possibilities, they have a clear impact on their health and safety.

We’ve come a long way. Sort of.

There is plenty of evidence that gender stereotypes are alive and well in the United States. For example, Harvard’s Making Caring Common Project recently found that teenagers were most likely to give more power to the school council if it was led by white boys. The same study found that forty percent of teens who identify as boys and twenty-three percent who identify as girls prefer male over female political leaders. Of course these data aren’t just about political aspirations or electability. [Decades of research](#) have found that when young people internalize narrow feminine and masculine ideals, they have lower outcomes related to mental and physical health, education, and economic security. In other words, rigid gender norms hurt all kids.

Getting started

Disrupting gender bias helps all children thrive. This short guide is designed to help you think about how you can get started with young children. While you can use these tips with all kids, they are specifically designed for preschool through early elementary. This work is “alive” and adaptive to the world around us, so consider this an offering rather than a conclusive checklist. The best thing we can model is that we are learning right alongside our kids.

Get curious about the stories you've inherited as a parent.

As parents, we each bring our own lessons, stories, myths, and morals that shape the way that we see, experience, and perform gender. As Dr. Susan Witt notes, us parents tend to “overtly or covertly pass on our own beliefs about gender.” Getting curious about those beliefs can help us decide which we want to pass on and which we hope to shift, disrupt, and change as we pass them on to our kids.

What did you learn growing up about the kinds of jobs, clothes, feelings, expectations, roles, and rules that belong in this box?

Act Like A Girl

What did you learn growing up about the kinds of jobs, clothes, feelings, expectations, roles, and rules that belong in this box?

Act Like A Boy

Reflect

Reflect on the words and phrases you wrote in the boxes on the last page, then **choose one or two questions from the list below and write about them.** Don't worry about writing well or having all of your thoughts together. You can write this on your own or use any of these questions to have a conversation with your parenting partner or other parents you are close to.

—> Where and when did you learn about what belongs in each box? Did you feel like there were different “rules” outside your home than inside?

—> Look at your words in the boxes on the last page, what happened when you or other kids acted “outside the box” of these gender roles?

—> Do you remember a time when you felt rewarded or punished because of your gender? Included or excluded? How was this shaped by other parts of your identity like race or class?

—> Do you remember a time when you felt powerful because of your gender? How was this shaped by other parts of your identity like race or class?

—> What was the gender makeup of your closest friends at different stages in your life? Why?

—> How might your kids fill in the boxes above? What is the same? What has changed? How would you re-write, re-imagine, and change these roles for your kids?



Language Matters

Research shows that *routine and unnecessary* references to the gender binary reinforces narrow gender roles. This doesn't mean that you ignore gender or avoid talking about gender stereotypes, gender identity and gender expression. But unnecessary and arbitrary gendered language contributes to gender biases and shapes more stereotypical views of gender. So let's try something new!

INSTEAD OF

Good morning boys and girls!

Which boys and girls are you inviting?

Let's look in the boy's section.

Girls over here and boys over here.

That is a girl's movie. I don't think you will like it.

Looks like the mailman came.

[Fill in your own]

+ TRY

Good morning friends!

Which children do you want to invite?

Let's look in the next aisle.

Let's form two groups.

That is a kid's movie. Let's check out the reviews!

Looks like the mail carrier came.

Write down one unnecessary reference to the gender binary that you use consistently. What phrase or words will you replace this with? Write it down here. Practice with a friend! You got this.

Engage observations and interactions

Avoiding *unnecessary* references to the gender binary does not mean that we avoid or ignore conversations about gender or gender roles. Indeed, these are the exact times when we can help our kids build more expansive understanding of gender roles and disrupt gender bias when we see it.

"You've noticed that lots of kids who identify as girls at your school have long hair! Do we know any kids who identify as boys who have long hair? What about girls with short hair? Now we see that different kids have really different kinds of hair! What do you like about your own hair?"

"I noticed that the check out person at the grocery store told you your dress was pretty. A lot of grown ups say that to you! I wonder if they tell kids wearing pants or shorts the same thing or if they tell boys they look pretty too. I think you look beautiful. But I also know that there is a lot more to you than what you are wearing."

"I noticed that the boy in the show was pretty worried about crying in front of his friends. Why do you think that is? I think it might have something to do with what some people think boys should do with their feelings. We know that all kids need a good cry sometimes to feel better."

"I heard you say earlier that only boys can be firefighters. Let's talk about the kinds of skills you need to be a firefighter... it sounds like all genders could be a firefighter if they practice!"

Provide and practice counter-stereotypes

From movies to chores to art to toys - we can provide kids with plenty of “counter-stereotypes” that present a broader world of gender possibilities. We can also model counter-stereotypes in our own homes. Involve your kids early and often in conversations about gender roles and “make visible” the personal and cultural forces that shape who does what in your household:

→ Household chores and who does what.

→ How we have and share feelings.

→ How decisions get made.

→ How we talk about bodies and appearance.

→ Who takes care of whom.

→ Who plays with which toys.

→ _____
[Fill in your own]

→ _____
[Fill in your own]

Examples:

“Did you notice that in lots of movies the girls do kitchen chores and boys do outside chores? In our family, we make sure we all learn how to help out and take care of each other.”

“No one taught me how to do my own laundry when I was growing up because I was a boy. But now I know how and in our family I am going to teach you because we all make clothes dirty!”

“In our home, we know that bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Some advertisements want us to be smaller and take up less space - but that isn't fair! Let's think about what amazing things our bodies can do and how we can take care of them!”

Talking to our kids about these dynamics within our home helps activate their critical thinking about gender roles. This doesn't mean that every activity or role has to be counter to stereotypes! Indeed, when our activities do align with traditional gender roles it is all the more reason to talk about it, explain why, or add complexity to their understanding by highlighting multiple attributes.

Examples:

“You notice that I do a lot of the cooking. Some people think that is a mom's job. I cook dinner a lot because I enjoy it more and my schedule makes it easier for me. That's why it is so important that we share the grocery shopping and the dishes so we all help keep our family fed.”

“I notice you love twirling in your princess dress. That looks so fun! You also love digging in the dirt and running as fast as you can. I love all those things about you.”

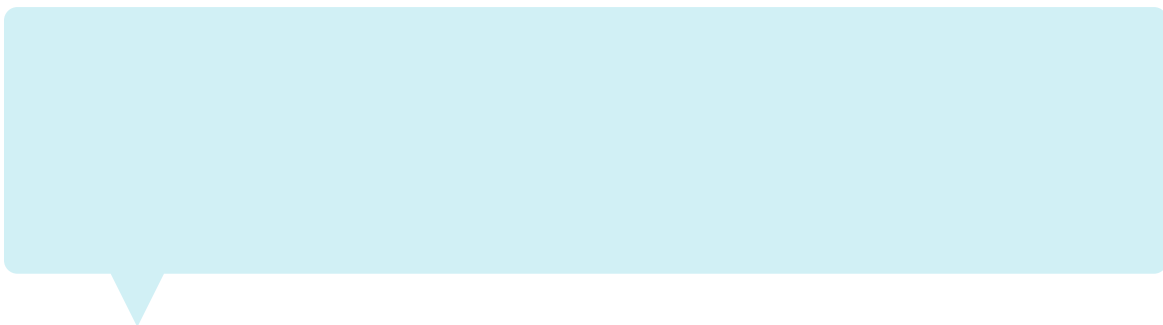
Don't rely on subtle messaging

Unfortunately, young children are exposed to a firehose of gender stereotypes so counteracting these messages often requires explicit instruction. In other words, don't expect that a poster of a female identified judge or a gender creative board book will undo bias. Instead, walk them consistently and methodically through alternative ways of thinking presented by the book or media.

"In this book, this man is the daycare teacher. At your daycare, you only have people who identify as women taking care of you. But that doesn't mean that other people can't. The only rules about being a daycare teacher is that they love kids, know how to take care of them, and want the job! This means that adults of all genders can be daycare teachers if they want to be. Does this mean that a man can be a daycare teacher? Yes!"

"In this movie the kid who identifies as a girl is the leader of the club! So cool! I noticed that one other kid called her bossy. Any kid can be good leader but sometimes girls are called bossy when they lead. It sounded to me like she just had good ideas. What is the difference between being bossy and being a good leader? Sounds like anyone can be a good leader. When might you actually need to be bossy to stand up for yourself or for others?"

Think of one recent experience you have had with your child where you could have directly engaged them in more explicit exploration of gender roles rather than hoping that they just absorbed the lessons from a book, movie, or experience. What could you have said? **Practice what you could say here:**



Focus on skills, not just awareness

Research demonstrates that it is also not enough just to read or watch stories and hope that children will stand up for themselves or others when they see bias play out in real life. Instead, we need to engage our kids as active learners. Kids need practice building the emotional regulation, capacity and stamina to confront stereotypes and bias when they experience them. Use books and movies as a starting place for *practicing and roleplaying skills* and model to your kids that we are practicing, learning, and growing alongside them.

Pause and relate.

While reading books, pause and ask your child to relate the story to their own context and experiences. Ask questions like, "Have you ever seen anything like this happen to others at your school? To you?" and, "How did it feel?" and, "How did you or others respond?"

Practice spotting bias.

"In this story, this child feels left out because the other kids are saying that he can't wear pink shoes to school." What stereotypes are at play here? How else do kids feel left out or targeted? What does it feel like to belong?" Brainstorm specific scenarios in which belonging or exclusion might play out based on stereotypes.

Practice stopping bias.

"What can we do if we see this?" "What could we say or do to protect ourselves and others from this hurtful stereotype?" Remind kids that there isn't one strategy that always works for every identity in every scenario.

Process.

We know that it takes a lot of practice to disrupt bias in the moment. It can also be exhausting or unsafe for kids who are the target of bias to constantly spot and stop these dynamics. Remind your kids that they can always process what happened with you for listening, support, and brainstorming next steps. Finally, acknowledge and open the door for your child to talk to you about times when they perpetuated stereotypes and need to practice apologizing and making amends as well.

Role play.

With young children, the more we practice and engage them in active learning, the more likely they are to stop bias when they see it. Adopt roles and practice together. Use puppets, characters, and acting to work through ways to respond.

These lessons don't happen in one long, formal lecture or rehearsal. They will look different in each of our households depending upon our culture and our identities. But our kids do rely on us to help them build a toolkit for action that matches their growing awareness of identity, difference, and bias.

Follow Up Resources

Please check out the following resources for to keep learning and growing!

Dr. Michelle Borba: Bully Buster Upstander Skills - peacemakermn.org/latestnews/guest-blog-bully-buster-six-strategies-to-help-children-become-upstanders

Common Sense Media: Watching Gender - commonsensemedia.org/research/watching-gender

Gender Doesn't Limit You! learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/general/tt_gender_doesnt_limit-2.pdf

Harvard's Graduate School of Education: Consent at Every Age - gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/12/consent-every-age

Harvard's Making Caring Common Project - 5 Tips for Preventing and Reducing Gender Bias - <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/5-tips-for-preventing-and-reducing-gender-bias>

Spark & Stitch Institute: The Goal of Emotional Regulation - sparkandstitchinstitute.com/goal-of-emotional-regulation-is-not-quiet-compliant-kids/