

# Early childhood and gender - Ideas for a workshop for students and professionals of early childhood education

Often generalizations and presumptions about children are made based on gender. These can limit children's self-expression. It is sometimes argued that inequalities between the genders are biologically given. However we should understand that a clear distinction has to be made between sex and gender, meaning the biological processes and the social aspects to being male, female, both or maybe neither of the two. It is a common belief that one can either be exclusively male or female and that a person's outward appearance and behavior should match their assigned sex. However it has to be understood that everyone is an individual and limiting their self-expression can be harmful for their psychological well-being and personal growth.

Unequal treatment of children is usually not a result of intended action but rather happens unconsciously and indirectly. The work community needs an increased awareness to uncover unconscious, unintended behavior towards children. This workshop is aiming to give starting points to think about the meaning of gender for the everyday life. Participants are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences and their work with children. Reflection in groups also enables the search for alternatives from the participants' own viewpoints.

## Objectives of the workshop:

- To explore own assumptions about gender
- To explore how gender is visible and perceived in childhood
- To share different points of view
- To raise awareness amongst students and professionals

## Target groups:

Also combined groups (teachers/parents, students/professionals)

## Time needed:

approximately 3 hours



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## Facilities and equipment:

This workshop can be realized by one facilitator, or a pair of facilitators and a group of ideally 6-8 participants.

- flap board or white board and markers
- 30-40 post-it notes or small pieces of paper and blue tag
- 6-8 pieces of large white paper (A3 or A2) depending on number of participants
- pens, colors
- a room large enough for the group to move freely

*The first parts of the session (exercises 1 and 2) should be targeted at firstly introducing the topic and helping the group to focus on the themes the workshop will be dealing with. Secondly, it is also important to create an area of trust amongst the participants, so they feel safe to share. The third aim is to initiate the conversation between participants.*

## 1. Introduction (Plan approx. 20 min for this)

Instruct the group to sit down in a circle. It can be a circle of chairs or on the floor, depending on the room and the group. Make sure to include those who may have difficulties sitting down.

Introduce yourself and get to know the group. Ask each participant to introduce themselves shortly, give space to talk about hopes and fears for the workshop. Ask each participant to say which was their favorite toy as a child. The purpose of this is for the participants to warm up to each other and to enter the mood of childhood.

Instruct the participants to split into pairs, preferably with another participant they have not met before or do not know well. Give the pairs five minutes to discuss, what gender means to them and thoughts the word brings up.

After five minutes or so, ask participants to share their ideas and insights. Write the word in big letters on a piece of paper, and then write all the words suggested at different angles all around it. Explain that we are going to use our own experience to understand more deeply the meaning of gender and its effects upon our lives.

*This exercise gives the opportunity to discuss gender in a larger context. Questions that usually come up are around the difference between sex and gender and how they are intertwined. Is our behavior shaped by biological disposition, societal factors, or both? How do participants view gender-inequality and its implications on interpersonal, institutional or socio-political level?*



## 2. Childhood games (approx. 20-30 min)

Ask participants to discuss in small groups (2-3 persons), what were their favorite games in childhood. After a few minutes let the entire group decide together on **one or two games** that we can play now in the group. Act out those games. The purpose is for everyone to enter deeper into that mood of childhood and warm-up to each other.

Afterwards discuss how gender is visible in those games from your viewpoint.

- Did you play them mostly with boys/ girls/ or both and did they have different roles and behaviors? What might have been the reasons for the different behaviours?

*After the introductory part of the workshop, that includes a warm-up and establishing the session's focus, facilitators should begin to encourage the exploration further so that participants can deepen their understanding of the topic and identify connection points to their own life. The following two exercises are chosen to follow this purpose.*

## 3. Memory lane (20 - 30 min.)

*This exercise can occasionally bring up difficult memories for some people, so it is important that you give participants the option not to participate if they feel uncomfortable. If you are a facilitator with little experience and you do not feel entirely comfortable to use this method, you can choose to leave out this exercise.*

Explain that in the next exercise we will use our own childhood memories to identify how gender was visible in our childhood. Explain that this exercise is optional and if somebody prefers not to join they can stay out of the circle. Also inform that if difficult feelings arise and someone wishes to talk about them more privately after the session, that this is possible.

Instruct participants to sit in a circle, and close their eyes. Ask them to picture themselves at a certain age, start with age 3. Instruct them to focus on a happy moment at that age. Ask one or two participants what they see, which clothes they are wearing, where they are, who else is there and what everyone is doing.

Repeat the same with ages 6 and 9.



Then ask the group to remember a childhood summer-holiday (this can as well be a celebration, for example christmas. Bear in mind that this might not be a good example in a multicultural group). Instruct the group to focus on a happy moment. Ask: What did you do? What did everyone else do? (e.g. tasks at the summer cottage/ at christmas, presents that were given)

Here we can use a creative method to describe our memories to others, e.g. drawing maps of the home environment. Instruct participants to do this individually. Allow 10-20 minutes of time for this task, then ask the participants to hang up their artworks on a wall as in an art gallery for all the others to see. The group will now look at every picture separately. First, ask the others what they see in the picture. Only after that ask the artist him/herself to explain what they drew.

Afterwards discuss with the group if there were similarities between the memories and what they observed in regards to gender, could they identify different gender-specific behaviors or roles in the family? How have they thought about those back then? How do they think about them now?

*Intermission: at this point ask people if they need a break, have any comments or wishes, how is the general mood?*

#### 4. Human sculptures (20- 30 min)

Ask the participants to split into groups of three and share with each other some situations where they have actively imposed gender stereotypes on a child in their work practice or with their family. In case they can not think of such situations ask them to think of a situation they witnessed someone else having done so.

Ask the participants to choose one situation to show in a human sculpture. The one who experienced the situation is the sculptor and should use the other people in their group as clay. No talking is allowed, participants have to communicate with non-verbal language to form the sculpture. This exercise requires participants to touch each other so it is important for everyone to feel comfortable with each other.

When the statues are ready first ask the participants of the other group to describe what they think the statue expresses and what they think happens in the scene. Afterwards the sculptor him/herself is asked to tell about the situation, what happened, how s/he felt, how the child might have felt, and if s/he thought the situation could have been handled in a different way. Ask him/her to change the sculpture to show the alternative scene that she suggests.



*The Human Sculpture exercise aims to assist participants to re-examine experiences from the new perspectives they have gained through the previous discussions in the group and integrate new knowledge into their thinking. This can be a difficult process and discussions might heat up: it is important that facilitators make sure to keep the space safe for dialogue and exploration.*

## 5. Ideal image (20min):

In the next stage, after reflecting on our past and our current practice, we shall move on to think, what kind of practitioners we want to be. How do we want to work with children? Participants can individually draw up short value statements of what an ideal childhood should be like or early childhood education should be like and collect all those statements in one place where we can look at them together. Now they will gather in small groups (of 3-4 persons) to try to find one umbrella statement that would connect all the other ones that have been written down.

*This exercise gives the opportunity to think about and discuss alternatives for early childhood education. Is there a mismatch between current practice and ideal practice? Are all children treated equally and are they able to express themselves freely? How does that impact on psychological development? What can we do as practitioners to live up to the ideals we have set for ourselves?*

## 6. Evaluation + Networking

Sit again down in a circle. Give each participant space to answer how they feel after this workshop and what they liked or disliked. Ask if participants are interested to further work on this topic and give the option to stay connected through for example an email-list. If you have prepared material for further reading that the participants can take home, hand them out. If you have prepared your own feedback forms ask participants to fill them out before they leave. Or use any other feedback method of your own choice.

**The idea of this workshop is that the methods can be multiplied, so feel free to copy this list of ideas for a workshop or make your own, and hand it out to your participants.**



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## References and recommendations for further reading on workshop facilitation:

Chambers, R. (2002) *Participatory Workshops. A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities*. London: Earthscan.

Smith, Mark K. (2009) 'Facilitating learning and change in groups', the encyclopaedia of informal education. [[www.infed.org/mobi/facilitating-learning-and-change-in-groups-and-group-sessions/](http://www.infed.org/mobi/facilitating-learning-and-change-in-groups-and-group-sessions/)]

Smith, Mark K. (2009) 'Animateurs, animation and fostering learning and change', *the encyclopaedia of informal education*. [[www.infed.org/mobi/animateurs-animation-learning-and-change](http://www.infed.org/mobi/animateurs-animation-learning-and-change)]



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