

**Gender Stereotypes and Expectations in Early Childhood Education:
Dismantling and Understanding the Gender Binary**

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Abstract

Gender norms and stereotypes are a part of human development and socialization in America from an early age. Research shows that not all children identify with those stereotypes and not all families fit into those stereotypical roles. Early childhood educators have the responsibility of implementing a family centered approach to early childhood education and ensure that young children can explore who they are and want to be, in a safe, inclusive environment. This is an important issue, especially in these times when many people have developed changes in their understandings about human identities and gender flexible pedagogy. This article will explore the ways in which educators of young children can create less divisive and more equitable classes where all children have a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, gender binary, gender assignments, gender flexible pedagogy, early childhood education, sense of belonging.

In recent years, Americans have witnessed a change in cultural understanding and incorporation of a wider spectrum of human identities and perspectives. These include, but are not limited to, gender expression, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender roles. There has been an increase in “activism and campaigns for the rights and recognition of LGBTQ+ groups, and most recently a surge of interest in gender and non-binary groups and individuals” (Warin, 2023, p. 3). Many Americans are beginning to uncover and explore what gender means

to individual people and how we can create more equitable, just, and inclusive communities. In this article, I discuss why and how we can create gender flexible early learning environments that are emotionally safe and open to exploration and expression beyond stereotypical gender roles.

Literature Review

Why a Gender Flexible Pedagogy Matters in Early Childhood Education

There are people who would argue that embracing a gender diverse preschool classroom or discussing gender identity is inappropriate at a young age (Meckler, 2022). However, there is evidence that children begin to develop gender identity in early childhood. In one of the first and largest studies examining gender development in young people, Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found almost 80% of their participants felt different about their gender “at or before the age of 12” (p. 40). Some of the participants shared that they felt different “than other people of their assigned gender” as early as 4 or 5 years old (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 41). Of the 75 participants interviewed by phone, the median age of those who began to recognize these differences was 5.4 years old (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 42). Similar results were found in earlier studies by Bolin (1988) and Grossman et al. (2005).

Gender assignment often happens before a child is born. Gender reveal parties and questions such as, “is it a boy or a girl” determine gender according to the anatomy with which a child is born. In much of our society, sociocultural expectations of each gender are assigned as soon as a child enters the world. They enter the world into a gender binary based on biological sex. Bornstein (1994) wrote:

Gender involves not only gender assignment—the gender label given to someone at birth based on their perceived sex—but also gender attribution, gender roles, gender identity, and gender expression. (as cited in Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 20)

The world seems to tell children who they should be before they have a chance to discover who they are.

“Gender identity” refers to how a person feels about their own gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). “Gender expression” refers to how a person chooses to demonstrate their gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Gender expression can be shown through behavior, clothing, make-up, hairstyles, etc. (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). “Genderism” refers to the expectations, beliefs, discrimination, and negative treatment of those who stand with the mainstream gender binary toward people who do not adhere to “dominant gender expectations” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 21). As educators, I believe, we have the responsibility to create classrooms where all students are treated with respect and kindness—where they have an opportunity to explore their gender identity and gender expression without genderism.

Research demonstrate that early childhood educators are likely to have a student (or students) in their classroom who comes from a home with same-sex parents or students who will identify as LBGQT+ in a later part of their lives. The U.S. Census (2019) reported that 14.7% of the 1.1 million same-sex couples in the United States had at least one child under 18 in their household (as cited in Taylor, 2020). Estimates suggested that 1.6 million children ages 13–17 identified as transgender in the United States (Herman et al., 2020). The UCLA Williams Institute School of Law (2020) estimated that 1,924,000 children between the ages of 13–17 identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Conron, 2020). Patterson et al. (2016) found when they “live in supportive environments, LGBTQ+ parents and their children are more likely to thrive” (p. 6). Peterson’s et al. findings are important because their research shows the importance of living with people who are open and accepting, especially with issues like gender identity, and when the school environment supports that acceptance from home, students do better.

Developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020) in early childhood education includes creating a caring, equitable community of learners; engaging diverse families in

reciprocal partnerships; and implementing a culturally responsive and responsible curriculum that includes diversity, equity, and inclusion. Early childhood educators have the responsibility of creating environments where students have a voice, feel they belong, feel accepted where they can safely express their feelings, and explore who they are (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2017).

When young people feel they are different from their peers, it is critical that those young people know they are loved (NAEYC, 2020). Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging is “fundamental to any child’s well-being and happiness” (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008, p. 3). Brooker and Woodhead (2008) continued, “The positive identity which is developed in early relationships is the result of children feeling they are liked, recognized, and accepted for who they are and what they are” (p. 4, para. 1). When students do not feel they belong, they can be distracted by searching for signs of discrimination, or being left out, leaving less energy to engage in learning (Laldin, 2016). Eisenberger and Cole (2012) wrote, “threats to social connection may tap into the same neural and physiological ‘alarm system’ that responds to other critical survival threats, such as the threat or experience of physical harm” (p. 1). The authors wrote that “threat related neural and physiological responding may have health implications” (Eisenberger & Cole, 2012, p. 2). In other words, social health and physical health are connected. According to Holzman (2021), schools can play an integral role in helping students discover their true selves. Holzman wrote:

School should be a brave space for students of all ages to explore their identities and figure out who they are. Yet, transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students report experiencing a hostile school environment year after year. According to GLSEN’s 2019 National School Climate Report, 42.5% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression, and 37.4% felt unsafe because of their gender identity. (para. 7)

Human Needs Theory

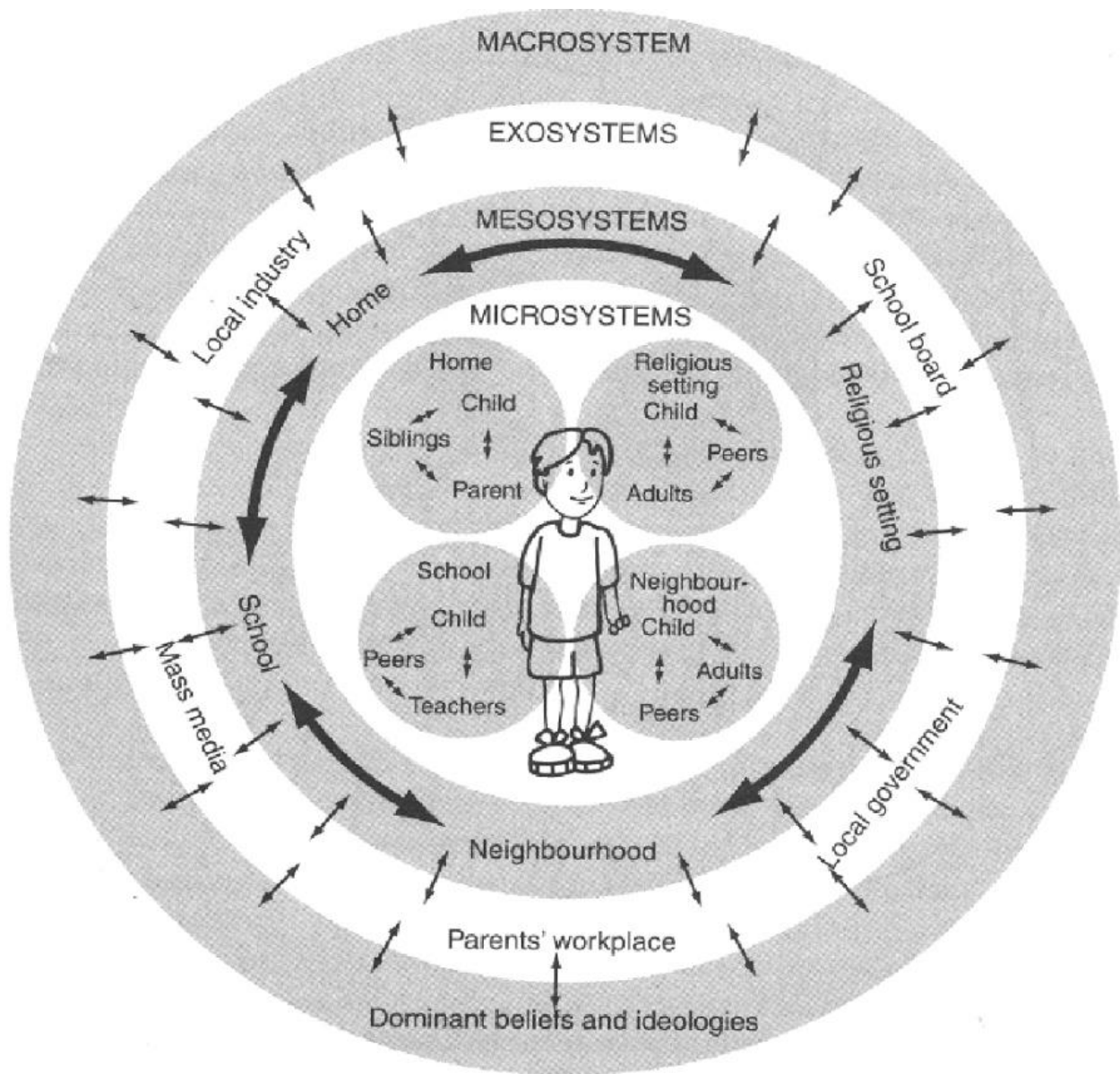
Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs as well as studies conducted by Ryan and Deci (2001), Ryff and Keyes (1995), and Tay and Diener (2011) found there is a direct correlation between well-being and having certain universal human needs met. These needs include a sense of belonging, respect, social support, safety, and security (Tay & Diener, 2011). Families are not the only ones responsible for contributing to the emotional well-being of children. I believe that educators are at the forefront of individuals implementing meaningful educational change and of creating educational environments that celebrate diverse ways of thinking and feeling that allow all children to feel they belong and have a voice.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory (see Figure 1) explains how all of the influences in a child's environment affect child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The environments with the greatest influence on child development are closest to children and are in direct contact with children, such as family, the classroom, and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Gauvain and Cole (1993), the environments impacting child development are also by influenced by other (more removed) systems such as history, societal norms, laws, environment, and the passing of time. All the systems described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) impact families and children. The complex interactions and networking among the ecological systems in a child's environment cause them to influence each other, and eventually, these influences trickle down to impact the child, which shapes their development and well-being (Neal & Neal, 2013).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory



Note. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Adapted from "Understanding early childhood education: Issues and controversies," by H. Penn, 2005. Copyright 2005 by Bell & Bain.

Ecological systems theory is particularly important in understanding how vital it is for early childhood educators to create a learning environment where children can be themselves, feel safe to express themselves, and where they know they belong (Allen & Bowes, 2012). Preschool is often a child's first introduction to school, and these early experiences have a significant impact on brain development and long-term, socioemotional well-being (Allen & Bowes, 2012; OECD, 2018). Exposure to positive factors, especially stable, responsive, safe, and supportive relationships with school, promote long-term positive development (Allen & Bowles, 2012; OECD, 2018). As stated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2022), supportive and safe early learning environments are best practice in early childhood education. It is, therefore, the responsibility of educators to create an environment where all children can feel safe to be themselves because they are treated fairly (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The students who fit in the binary gendered system are not the only ones who have a need to belong.

Culture and Binary Environments

Cultures provide traditional roles and expectations for boys and girls, making gender a socially constructed phenomenon (Warin, 2023). Teachers can see these cultural gender roles expressed in children's play and learning (Brody, 2022). People, the environment, and schools often reinforce stereotypical gender roles without being aware (Holzman, 2021). Queer theory "challenges the concept of identity as something that is fixed and necessary" (Thurer, 2005, p. 99). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that respondents in their study described their gender identity in more than a hundred different ways. If gender is not innate, or fixed, if millions of people do not identify with one gender role or the other, I believe that as early childhood educators we have an obligation to create more gender flexible classrooms where personal expression and the discovery of self is encouraged and supported.

Non-Binary Early Learning Environments

As an educator, I am always asking myself, “What can I do to improve my practices, and how do my practices need to change?” This cycle of inquiry, my observations of children’s play, discussions with non-binary coworkers, reflecting on my own children and their upbringing, and working for a progressive organization, lead me to want to learn more and do better. I have the opportunity to create a safe environment where children can consider different perspectives, challenge the status quo, and be truly themselves. But, how do I get there?

As early childhood educators, we work in one of the “most gendered professions” (Warin & Adriany, 2015). Less than 3% of early childhood teachers around the world are men (Brody, 2014). How do I (as a woman) challenge gender stereotypes in a profession led by women? I want to challenge stereotypical gender roles; there are probably many things I am doing throughout the day to reinforce gender roles without being aware, from the way my classroom is set up, to the way I comfort students, or the stories I read. I am a gendered being.

According to studies cited by Warin and Adriany (2015), teachers must be aware of gender roles and gender possibilities—and be critically reflective—in order to create a gender flexible classroom environment. Nicholson et al. (2019) wrote that teachers should closely examine their own biases, assumptions, and “gender-self” in order to create a classroom environment that reflects “gender justice” (p. 97). The authors continued to say that the commitment to working on change, adjusting teaching practices, and self-awareness is work teachers can do piece by piece (Nicholson et al., 2019) and over time. Being mindful and reflective is the first step toward change. When early childhood educators remind ourselves that our work helps us to create a nurturing and accepting environment where everyone is free to explore their identity (teachers, families, children, and coworkers included), then schools are helping students to feel comfortable with who they are. I am convinced this is the work we need to do to create open and honest connections within our schools and communities.

Nicholson et al. (2019) suggested that teachers begin by looking inward and asking themselves important questions related to the question, “What is gender to me?” Specifically:

- How did I learn about gender?
- How have gender norms limited my life (i.e., what my family, culture, and community communicated to me about what was expected of me related to gender)?
- How have gender norms benefited me?
- What gender assumptions and beliefs do I knowingly cling to?
- What do I love about my gender?
- How does my gender relate to, and interact with, the other social categories I identify with and belong to (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, ability, religion)?
- How does all this influence my work with young children?
- What feelings come up when I think about changing any of my beliefs about gender?
- What have been my historical responses to children breaking the rules of gender?
Are there times when I have felt discomfort?
- What fears do I hold about engaging in the work of gender justice in my program?
- How have my own beliefs about gender affected my teaching?
- How am I modeling my own gender with children? Is it in line with my authentic gender self?

Being aware of my own perceptions and biases will allow me to be more mindful about how I interact and treat others.

As I continue the process of self-assessment, reflecting on my beliefs, and behaviors, I first think about the physical learning environment I am creating for my students. The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) found that nearly 60% of teachers said that they expected boys and girls to choose different activities in their classrooms. Lyttleton-Smith

(2019) in a U.K. study found early childhood classrooms are gendered in the way they are set up. Studies have found that in early childhood programs play areas are often gender-based; often the dress-up clothes are with the kitchen materials, which indicates that construction blocks and dress up do not go together (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019). Educators can do one or the other but not both. Lyttleton-Smith (2019) wrote:

The spaces of the small world and the home corner exerted greater gendering power because of the unproblematic narratives suggested by their content; in the home corner: homemaking, beauty, shopping, and clothes. In the small world: cars, trains, construction, and mathematics. Breaking these narratives that lead girls and boys to play only with objects of a similar (gendering) theme may support children whose interests or skills do not fit such a binary pattern, enabling greater freedom of expression outside of gender expectation . . . no princess dresses outside where they might get dirty was a rule in the nursery featured here, with the effect of preventing girls enjoying princess-play the opportunity to also be active and boisterous. (p. 668)

After reading about gendered and divisive play areas, I placed building blocks in the kitchen area of our classroom, to see what would happen. Suddenly, materials were combined (e.g., clothes and cooking, building blocks dressing up), and engineering mixed perfectly with kitchen and dress up play. Placing toys in a more gender-neutral way and having dress up clothes and toys that are not stereotypically male or female allowed for greater exploration.

Kroeger et al. (2019) suggested that teachers consider having neutral-colored toys in the classroom with gender-nonspecific figures. Kroeger et al. (2019) noted that gender specific materials can lead to gender specific play as children bring their assumptions, expectations, and experiences to those materials. Many gendered toys limit play, creativity, and innovation (Kroeger et al., 2019). My classroom dress-up materials are not gender specific (scarves or animal costumes), allowing for a wider, more open, and creative range of play. As a result of

being a nature-based teacher, my classroom includes endless neutral, natural, play materials for students to interact with, such as wood slices, wood blocks, animals, and sticks.

Another way I can make positive changes in my classrooms is through language. Language is a strong first step in eliminating gender stereotypes in the classroom (Kroeger et al., 2019). When talking about insects or plants, I can try to refer to the insects by their name rather than immediately addressing the creature as “he.” I can begin by addressing groups of children in gender neutral ways such as “friends,” “superheroes,” “everyone.” The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) found that 54% of the teachers in their study often heard “boys will be boys” when boys acted out, nearly half of the participants heard gendered pet names. Being mindful of our binary language can make a significant difference in creating an equal and respectful learning environment.

Literacy and books are an important part of early childhood education. Children immerse themselves in the imaginary stories and act them out. Books are also a wonderful way to have conversations with young children. A study by Abad and Pruden (2013) found that children who are exposed to books that challenge gender stereotypes are more likely to play with “counter-stereotypical toys, change perceptions of what activities and jobs are appropriate for women and men, and widen children’s aspirations” (p. 16). The organization Lifting Limits (2023) wrote:

A review of the top 100 children’s picture books published in 2018 found a child is 1.6 times more likely to read a picture book with a male rather than a female lead, and seven times more likely to read a story that has a male villain in it than a female baddie. Male characters outnumbered female characters in more than half the books, while females outnumbered males less than a fifth of the time. (para. 2)

Teachers can take the time to look through their book collection to see how books portray gender roles. Do I have books that challenge gender stereotypes? Warin (2023) suggested changing pronouns in books when reading to children or singing children’s songs to share

stories that break the binary. Of course, teachers must be mindful of the laws in their states, as they make these kinds of choices.

There are a number of books that teachers may want to consider adding to their libraries. Here are a few:

- *Jacob's New Dress* by S. Hoffman and I. Hoffman (2014)
- *The Paperbag Princess* by R. Munsch (1981)
- *Worm Loves Worm* by C. Smith (2017)
- *Julian is a Mermaid* by J. Love (2019)
- *10,000 Dresses* by M. Ewart (2008)
- *The Different Dragon* by J. Bryan (2011)

The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) wrote, “strong evidence shows that using counter-stereotypical reading material can reduce gender stereotyped views and behaviors, and improve wellbeing, among young children” (p. 8).

Books, posters, and nonstereotypical play areas may spark discussions and interactions with students about individual choices, possibilities, experiences, and points of view. Teachers may be fearful of what parents, administrators, or school boards will say about addressing these topics in an early childhood setting. It is important that educators share with parents that a nonbinary classroom allows for children to discover who they are and creates a space where all children belong. The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) found:

Gender expectations significantly limit our children, causing problems such as lower self-esteem in girls and poorer reading skills in boys. The report finds that stereotypes contribute towards the mental health crisis among children and young people, are at the root of girls' problems with body image and eating disorders, higher male suicide rates and violence against women and girls. Stereotyped assumptions also significantly limit career choices, contributing to the gender pay gap. (pp. 6–7)

Additionally, their study found “80% of parents agree that they want to see their child’s school or nursery to treat boys and girls the same, with the same expectations and opportunities” (The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes, 2022, p. 8).

Conclusions

Early childhood educators who engage in reflective practice (Bleach, 2014), prioritize creating a caring community of learners and understand the importance of creating supportive, inclusive, and accepting classrooms, will be models to students and families as to how we can create equal opportunity and widen understanding of the gender spectrum. Gender sensitivity (Warin, 2023) gives our children the freedom to discover who they are without a socially constructed gender binary which may lead to feelings of being different, ashamed, unsafe, or not belonging (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). When students feel supported in their classroom environments, their learning is more successful (Sousa, 2017).

I began writing this article to reflect on my own early childhood education practices to ensure that I create a learning environment that not only welcomes all students and their families but also allows individual students to feel they belong. Reflecting on my own experiences and observations has been eye opening. It is my hope that any educators who read this article will take a few ideas back to their own classrooms. Meier and Henderson (2007) wrote, “early childhood is the foundation for young children’s views and experiences with getting along with one another, and with understanding and taking a stance toward the world of relationships” (p. 178). Early childhood educators are therefore in the unique position of helping to start a healthy vibrant human ecosystem that represents, celebrates, and supports diversity.

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