



# **Gender Socialization:** How to Avoid Harmful Stereotypes in Childhood Development



# What is Gender Stereotyping?

## Gender:

- Refers to the **characteristics** of women, men, girls and boys that are **socially constructed**. It depends on the context and changes over time.
- **Gender and gender identity** in children develop through external cues, such as parents, peers, and school.

## Gender Stereotype:

- An **oversimplified generalisation** about characteristics and roles that **should be possessed** by a person solely because he or she belongs to the social group of men or women.
- Gender stereotypes can be both **positive** or **negative**.



# The Problem with Gender Stereotypes



Traditional gender roles lead to different treatment for boys and girls and can impact a child's **future goals and experiences**.

# Why is it Important to Prevent Gender Stereotyping?

**Identity formation:** Scholars have shown that the development of identity in early childhood is influenced by gender stereotypes and discrepancies in treatment due to gender.

**Career aspirations:** Research proves that biased exposure to topics in education can influence a child's future career choice. Example: parents who see STEM-based toys as more suitable for boys may discourage a girl to later enter this field (STEM is an abbreviation for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

**Violence against women:** Studies have found that challenging gender stereotypes in early childhood can break down strict views of gender roles and reduce violence against women later in life.

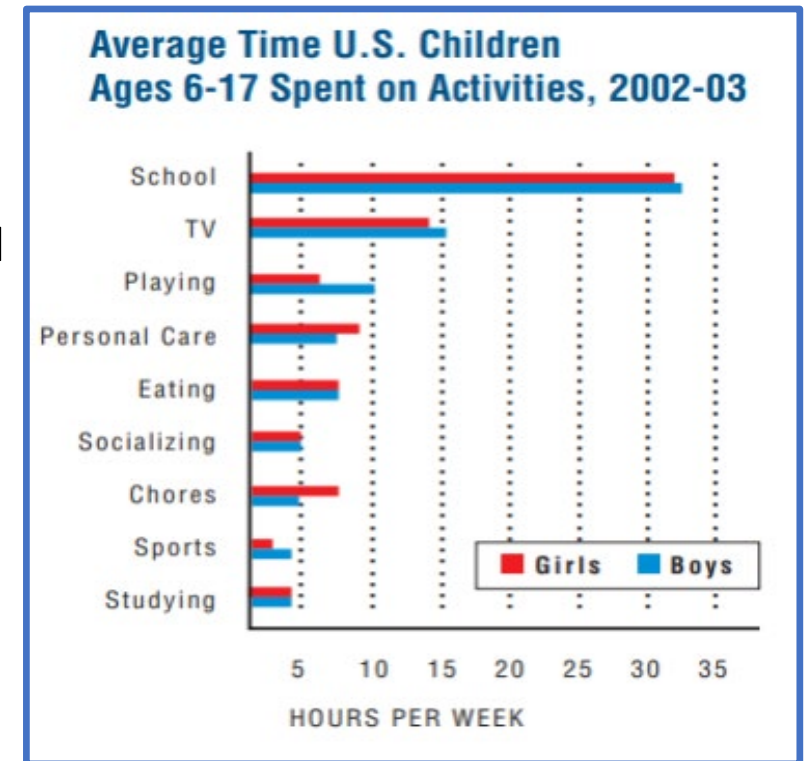
**Men's mental health:** Gender stereotypes can put pressure on males to fit into a narrow perception of masculinity. This may include emotional repression and aggressive tendencies, which may lead to mental health issues

# What Can Parents Do?

## 1: Rethink Playtime

Research shows that playtime is vital to child development. The choice of toys, games, and playmates can shape a child's understanding of the world and gender socialization.

- **Pay attention to gender-specific toys, games, and clothes:** Parents should try to buy gender-neutral or even traditionally gendered toys for the opposite sex.
- **Encourage diverse playmates with different backgrounds, genders, and cultures:** Kids form a part of their values and norms from “peer culture”. Exposing children to a variety of playmates normalises diversity.
- **Domestic chores:** Parents can encourage household help outside of playtime for boys and girls. Equal contribution to household tasks eliminates associated stigma and teaches discipline.



On average, girls spend 2 more hours doing chores than boys, while boys are spending twice as much time playing than girls do. ([University of Michigan's Institute of Social Research, 2007](#))

# What Can Parents Do?

## 2: Pay Attention to Language

Parents can also influence their children by conveying gender biases in their daily talks and language. Parents can have a great influence on their children's perceptions through even small sentences like, "it's tough for women in science" or "you'll be the only boy in your literature program".

Parents can change the words they use to avoid setting expectations based on gender, through multiple ways:

**Avoid broad generalisations** about social groups. Phrases like "Boys are good at sports" can cause a child to unjustly put others into social categories.

**Pay attention to terms kids use** to describe others. Ask them to reflect on what the words mean and the potential messages these words can send.

**Make an effort to use gender-neutral words.** Use terms like 'firefighter' instead of 'fireman', or 'children' instead of making unnecessary distinctions between boys and girls.

# What Can Parents Do?

## 3: Check Your Own Biases

To avoid imposing gender biases on kids, **parents should examine their own beliefs about gender roles**. While parents hold fewer gender-stereotyped perceptions than in the past, they still show biases when describing their children.

For instance, in a study from Meyer and Gelman, parents would describe newborn girls as more delicate and less strong than newborn boys, even when no physical trait can be distinguished.

Parents can hold themselves accountable in different ways:

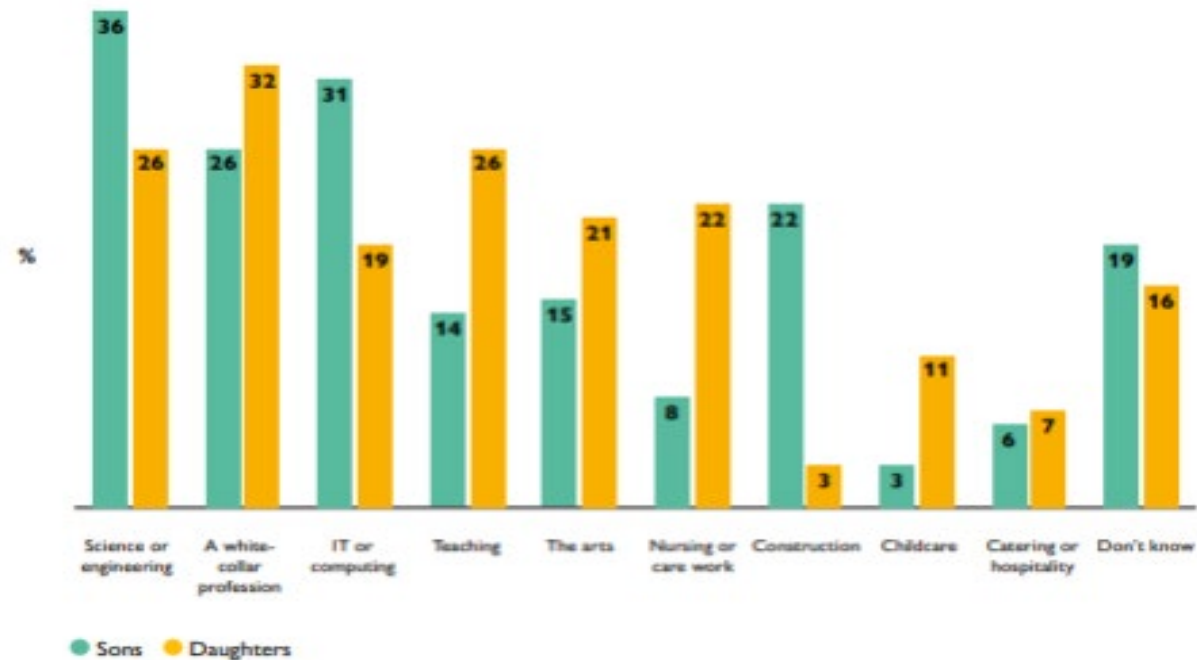
**Ask feedback from kids.**  
Parents can periodically ask their kids if they believe certain family practices are fair and brainstorm solutions together.

**Ask feedback from partners, family members and friends,**  
on whether they are unintentionally expressing gender stereotypes.

# What Can Parents Do?

## 3: Check Your Own Biases

Figure 10: Thinking about your youngest child, which of the following types of work can you most picture them doing when they are grown up? All parents



N: 1,030 parents

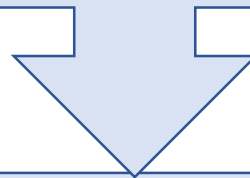
[Fawcett, 2020](#)



# What Can Parents Do?

## 4: Rethink Your Own Role Modelling

Through role modelling, parents influence whether their children are limited by gender stereotypes. **Children internalise parental behaviour**, such as the way that household chores are distributed or the time that each parent spends with them.



For instance, a Fawcett study found that daughters whose fathers spend more time with them are less likely to take up stereotyped careers.

Parents can therefore take time to **discuss with their partner how tasks are distributed** and if there are ways to re-distribute them in a less gender-stereotyped way.

# What Can Parents Do?

## 5: Open the Conversation

One of the main ways to avoid imposing stereotypes on a child is to start a conversation with them, and with the people in their surroundings.

### With Children:

- ❑ Kids are often **unaware of the gender biases** they encounter in everyday life.
- ❑ Parents can help their kids to recognise biases, to **talk about it constructively**, and to learn to avoid being influenced by it.
- ❑ One approach can be to **play games to expose gender biases**. Parents can introduce games that include diverse stories and backgrounds

### With Other Adults:

- ❑ There are **many adults that participate in a child's education**, including other parents, teachers and family members.
- ❑ Parents can **start a conversation** with other adults on the issue of gender stereotypes to uncover biases and create a more gender-neutral environment for the child.
- ❑ A possible way to launch the conversation is to **question someone whenever they include a stereotype** in their speech.

# References

- Adler, P. A., Kless, S. J., & Adler. P. (1992). Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity among Elementary School Boys and Girls. *Sociology of Education*, 65(3), 169-187. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2112807>
- Chaffee, K. R. & Plante, I. (2022). How Parents' Stereotypical Beliefs Relate to Students' Motivation and Career Aspirations in Mathematics and Language Arts. *Frontiers in Psychology* (12), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.796073>
- Fawcett. (2020). *Unlimited Potential - Report of the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood*. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/unlimited-potential-the-final-report-of-the-commission-on-gender-stereotypes-in-early-childhood>
- Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. (2007). *Research Update*. <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/61984/chores.pdf;jsessionid=7001D71465DCFA4C78E604E121417010>
- Fuller, K. (2021, 31 March). *Raising children without perpetuating gender stereotypes*. Kidscape. <https://www.kidscape.org.uk/news-and-blogs/2021/april/raising-children-without-perpetuating-gender-stereotypes/>
- Making Caring Common Project. (2018). *5 Tips for Preventing and Reducing Gender Bias*. Harvard Graduate School of Education, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/5-tips-for-preventing-and-reducing-gender-bias>
- Meyer, M. & Gelman, S. A. (2016). Gender Essentialism in Children and Parents: Implications for the Development of Gender Stereotyping and Gender-Typed Preferences. *Sex Roles* (75), 409-421, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0646-6>
- United Nation Office of the High Commissioner. (2014). *Gender stereotypes and stereotyping and women's rights*. [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagers/Gender\\_stereotyping.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagers/Gender_stereotyping.pdf)
- World Health Organisation. (n.d.). *Gender and Health*, World Health Organisation, Retrieved on 12 December, 2022, from [https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1)