

Oh, boy!

Thinking in a more challenging way about gender in early childhood can be daunting but is vital to real understanding, say *Kath Tayler* and *Deborah Price*

It is the morning in an early years setting and the children have recently arrived and chosen what activities they wish to engage with. The children are all three to four years old. Lisa is playing with the bricks. She tells her friend Molly that she is building a house for her guinea pig, Squish. Molly sits beside her, picks up a brick and places it next to Lisa's building. Lisa 'No, it can't go there, it's in the way. Squish likes to run so we have to leave lots of room.'

Molly 'Can I put it here?' (Molly holds a brick above one placed by Lisa).

Lisa 'Yes, it can go there. Let's make it higher. That will keep her in.'

(Billy joins them and asks what they are doing.)

Molly 'We're building a house for Squish.'

Billy 'Who's Squish?'

Lisa 'My guinea pig.'

Billy 'I can build it better. Bigger. I'm stronger.'

Lisa 'No you can't.'

Molly 'He can help. Build it up high. Like a tower.'

(Billy starts putting bricks on top of Lisa's building. Jack joins them.)

Jack 'What you building?'

Billy 'A tower. Big tall tower. Right up high!'

(Billy and Jack add more bricks to the construction. Lisa and Molly wander off. A practitioner notices the building and watches for a while.)

Practitioner 'Wow, boys! What a tall tower!'

How do we understand what happened here as Lisa, Molly, Billy and Jack played with the bricks? What did each child contribute to this activity? What was the adult role? How can we unpick the role that gender played in this exchange between the children and the response from the adult?

Much of our current approach to understanding children's play is to think about it in terms of their development.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

Many early years practitioners are experienced and committed to providing education for young children based on what they believe to be developmentally appropriate. Observation and assessment lends itself to this approach, and the EYFS (DfE 2014) supports it.

We can observe the activities that the child takes part in, make judgements about their development and plan accordingly. If we look at the example above from the perspective of developmentally appropriate practice, we can make several observations about the development of the children involved:

- All four children can concentrate on an activity that interests them.
- All can use language to convey their thoughts.
- They can plan and carry out ideas.
- Lisa makes links between her home environment and the setting.
- Lisa was able to convey her plans to Molly, who was able to understand them and join in.
- Billy is confident about his abilities and able to act on his own ideas.
- Molly, Billy and Jack are able to join an activity that is already in progress.
- Billy and Jack are able to take the activity in a new direction that holds interest for them.
- All four children are able to handle and move the bricks confidently and use the space effectively.
- The four children all use the bricks imaginatively to create constructions that represent their own ideas.



Useful observations can be made from watching boys and girls at play

While all of this is valuable and worthwhile, it is also important to think about what this approach might miss.

What happened in the observation above that has not been covered when viewing it from the perspective of developmentally appropriate practice? What roles did each child take? What aspect of these roles is influenced by gender? What role did the practitioner take?

By stepping outside developmentally appropriate practice and thinking in a more challenging way, we can see that the play choices of Lisa and Molly were marginalised by Billy and Jack. Billy asserted that he was stronger than the girls and that he could build a bigger, better tower. When Jack joined Billy, the activity became focused on

building a tower. The house for Squish was lost and Lisa and Molly left the activity. The practitioner praised Billy and Jack for their tall tower.

- What messages do you think these four children would get from this exchange?
- What about any other children who saw or heard what happened?
- What ethos would this create for other practitioners in the setting?





BIOLOGY

Science is seen as objective and provable and, therefore, is a powerful discourse in many aspects of our drive to understand society. It is easy to feel that if something is shown to be true by clear scientific evidence then it is beyond challenge.

There are many studies that provide ‘proof’ that girls and boys are biologically different. This is nowhere more true than in studies of brain differences between boys and girls in early childhood (Browne 2004). The difficulty with the biological argument is that through this lens, gender behaviour is seen as fixed and unchangeable. If it were the case that being female or male was a biological given, we wouldn’t see the variation that we do between individuals and between cultures.

SOCIALISATION

If notions of appropriate gender behaviour change over time and vary between cultures, it is reasonable to argue that there is something other than biology going on here. From this perspective, children are socialised into what is seen as appropriate gender roles by imitation and reinforcement. Known as social learning or socialisation theory, the suggestion is that children pick up cues from the people around them as they develop their understanding of how to become a girl or a boy. There is sim-

ilarity to this view as it is easy to see how it could make sense of what we observe in young children. If children see their parents behaving in gendered ways, it is clear that this will have an impact on their children.

MOVING ON

There is no doubt that biology and socialisation play a role in the development of gender roles. However, what is ignored in these explanations is the child’s own agency and power and the dynamic between this and the power held by others in settings, families, communities and society as a whole. Let’s return to Lisa, Molly, Billy and Jack.

Lisa and Molly have wandered off from the construction area and are in the mark-making area. Lisa tells Molly she is drawing a picture of the house she wanted to build for Squish. Lisa ‘It has lots of rooms and it has a bed here with straw so he is cosy.’

Molly ‘If we built it, what could we use for straw?’

Lisa ‘There is straw for the rabbits.’

Lisa and Molly go and ask a practitioner if they can have some straw. They explain what happened with the house they were building. Billy and Jack are still in the construction area, although they are now building a road by laying bricks end to end. The practitioner encourages Lisa and

MORE INFORMATION

- Blaise, M (2005) *Playing it Straight: Uncovering Gender Discourses in the Early Childhood Classroom*, Routledge.
- Browne, N (2004) *Gender Equity in the Early Years*, Open University Press.
- Kane, E (2013) *Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in Childhood*, Bloomsbury.
- Martin, B (2011) *Children at Play: Learning Gender in the Early Years*, Trentham.

Molly to share their plans with Billy and Jack.

Lisa ‘We were building a house and you made it into a tower. We didn’t want a tower.’

Billy ‘Now we’re making a road.’

Molly ‘We don’t want a road.’

Jack ‘How would you get to the house then?’

Molly ‘Yeah, we could have a house and a road.’

Lisa ‘The road could lead to the house!’

Practitioner ‘Can you work together to build the house and the road?’

Billy ‘Yeah!’

Lisa ‘Okay. You build the road over there coming up here, and the house can be here.’

The children work together on the construction. Billy and Jack continue building their road, although they change the direction of the bricks so that it leads to where Lisa pointed. Lisa and Molly start to lay out the outline of the house. The practitioner gives them some straw and they explain to Billy and Jack that it is so they can make Squish a bed.

You may feel that the children were still playing in a gendered way. The boys were building a road and the girls were building a house and were concerned about creating a cosy bed for Squish. However, if we look more deeply at the play episode between the four children, we can see that there were some shifts and changes.

By explaining what had happened to the practitioner, they managed to re-engage with the boys and turn the play back to their original plan. Billy and Jack continued to build their road but changed its direction to fit in with the girls’ plan to build the house. These changes can seem minor and are easy to miss but are vitally important signs of children expressing their own sense of power, and they often include significant challenges to perceived norms of gendered behaviour.

To start to think differently about children, childhood and issues such as gender can initially be uncomfortable. It is far easier to imagine that there is truth than to question this and be open to the challenges this presents. ■

This is an edited extract from chapter two of Gender Diversity and Inclusion in Early Years Education by Kath Tayler and Deborah Price (Routledge, April 2016). They are both senior lecturers in early years education at Brighton University.

READER OFFER

Gender Diversity and Inclusion in Early Years Education (Diversity and Inclusion in the Early Years) by Kath Tayler and Deborah Price (Routledge, paperback, £19.99) considers the implications of gender in supporting children and their families. Offering a wealth of practical guidance, case studies and reflective questions linking to the EYFS, the book includes chapters on:

- a theoretical approach to gender development
- current legislation and the impact on early years practice
- understanding gender fluidity and the way in which children express gender
- creating gender equality when working with children and the role of managers in creating a supportive ethos.

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