



# Gender Equity in the Classroom: What it Looks Like and What You Can Do

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*“Ballet is for girls.”  
“She’s so bossy.”  
“Boys don’t cry.”  
“She can’t play, she’s a girl.”*

**These gender-stereotypical comments**, spoken by children in 2020, probably seem old-fashioned, and almost quaint. They might even be considered fairly harmless; not exactly appropriate, but not particularly attention-worthy.

Think again. In recent years, it has become abundantly clear that the routine gender stereotypes we are exposed to as children are incredibly formative. These gender stereotypes go on to shape our adult lives, creating patterns that dictate our career choices, home life, relationship dynamics, health, appearance, and child-rearing.

Gender stereotypes are bad for individuals and bad for society. They perpetuate inequality and reinforce differences. They make it harder for us to see and treat others as individuals and equals. Stereotypes put pressure on boys and girls to conform to certain notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity,’ influencing the activities children engage in, their relationships, their perceptions of their own skills, and ultimately the roles they play in society as adults.

## Gender differences are pervasive:

- ▶ Girls as young as seven report feeling they cannot say or do what they want because of gender stereotyping.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Fully 80% of girls report having been on a diet by age ten.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ By high school, on average, boys are receiving lower grades; in the US, men receive fewer bachelor’s degrees.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ As adults, men tend to die younger, commit suicide more often, and suffer poorer health than women.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Adult women are more likely to be concerned about climate change and hold pro-environment views.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Women still spend twice as much time on housework and childcare as men.<sup>6</sup>

Most of us do not realize our roles in either perpetuating or combatting these stereotypes. Adults subliminally have very different expectations for girls and boys and transmit these expectations in myriad ways. Parents overwhelmingly want their children to explore interests free from limiting gender stereotypes,<sup>7</sup> yet they too, perpetuate these patterns.

Teachers are critically important to eliminating stereotyping. Studies have shown that girls taught for more than a year by teachers with traditional gender values have lower

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/21/girls-seven-uk-boxed-in-by-gender-stereotyping-equality>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.common sense media.org/children-teens-body-image-media-infographic>. The same report notes that 87% of female TV characters ages 10 - 17 are below average weight.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/das/epubs/2005169/>. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/11/gender-education-gap/546677/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter\\_article/mars-vs-venus-the-gender-gap-in-health](https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/mars-vs-venus-the-gender-gap-in-health)

<sup>5</sup> <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/gender-differences-in-public-understanding-of-climate-change/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/chapter-5-americans-time-at-paid-work-housework-child-care-1965-to-2011/>

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *No Limitations Guide* [http://whe.org.au/custom\\_type/no-limitations-guide/](http://whe.org.au/custom_type/no-limitations-guide/)

performance in both math and verbal tests, to cite just one example.<sup>8</sup>

We have an extremely important role to play helping all our students – boys, girls, gender-nonconforming children – develop and thrive free of limiting gender stereotypes and harmful biases. We have the power to fully celebrate children for their individuality, helping them aspire to reach their full potential. By encouraging gender-neutral norms and expectations more fully, we help reduce the negative consequences of inequality and gender discrimination.

## Is This a Montessori Issue?

First, the good news: Montessori practitioners have a head start in understanding and mitigating gender inequities. The Montessori method is inherently gender-neutral. The work materials in the classroom appeal to all children and each child moves at their own pace. Furniture is gender-neutral, unlike the “home” or “kitchen” corners of yesterday’s traditional preschools. Montessori materials in the well-prepared environment are brightly colored and appealing without using color-coded pink and blue: there’s the Brown Stair, the Red Rods, and the Pink Tower, and all children find them appealing.<sup>9</sup>

Nor do Montessori lessons reflect any traditional gender stereotypes. Every child is shown how to wash a table, how to pour, and how to button a shirt. Every child is shown the geography puzzle maps and the land and water forms. Every child is introduced to the alphabet phonetically and every child is prepared for mathematics by being introduced to the base-10 system. Maria Montessori herself rarely referred to gender distinctions.

Yet in the wider world, vast gender inequities continue to exist today. Children absorb them from home life, media, peers, sports, and yes, from school, so we know we must do more.

## First, Observe.

Before addressing gender stereotypes and inequality in the classroom, reflect on the self. We are all products of our cultural upbringing, education, and life experiences, and acknowledgment of our own biases is a great place to begin. When growing up, did we look down on men who showed emotions like crying or sensitivity? Did we receive gender-coded messages about our clothing or career choices? Were we aware of female, as well as male, public figures and their accomplishments? We are all influenced by vast amounts of cultural imprinting; awareness of that helps.

Next, observe the classroom with an eye toward gender. Consider the ways children’s choices may be influenced by gender. Start with language: children do express sentiments such as,

“she can’t play; she’s a girl,” or, “That’s so gay!” Look also at their choices of activities. Elementary-age boys often start to opt-out of dance classes or avoid literature featuring girls and women. Watch behaviors in groups. Are boys who manifest more stereotypically “feminine” behaviors teased? Do preteen girls routinely defer to boys to be group leaders? Are boys habitually talking over girls?

And finally, think about other adults – parents, coaches, caregivers. Do parents automatically assume that children live with “mom and dad?” Do they refer to mixed-gender friends of young children as their “boyfriends” or “girlfriends,” with a clear but premature romantic implication? When giving gifts, do they offer boys Legos and action figures while girls receive nail polish and arts and crafts kits? All these serve only to reinforce preconceived personality-limiting stereotypes.



<sup>8</sup> [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/rest\\_a\\_00756](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/rest_a_00756)

<sup>9</sup> <http://persephonemagazine.com/2011/07/the-montessori-approach-to-gender-neutral-education/>

## Be Part of the Solution.

School policies, children's ages, and overall classroom culture all dictate different types of issues and solutions. Consider some of these successful strategies:

► **Don't highlight gender unnecessarily.** Many cultures use gender as a social divider; we frequently talk of "men and women" or "boys and girls" when there is no actual reason to segregate by gender. Doing this provides a constant message to children that what matters most is their gender, reinforcing the imperative to fit into a gender box. Ask yourself, "is it necessary to call attention to gender, or would a gender-neutral term like children, students, participants, or people work just as well?" Look for this especially in activities outside the regular classroom. Is an outdoor game organized into boys vs girls or are 'boys and girls' ushered to lunch or dismissal?

► **Promote gender inclusivity from the very beginning.** Recognize that transgender and gender nonconforming children will need acceptance and validation in the classroom. Assume there might be gender-nonconforming children in every class; model acceptance and inclusivity even absent a parent's special request.

► **Language is all-important.** Use gender-neutral language, including "they" or "them" instead of defaulting to masculine pronouns (he, him, guys). Career and professional positions can always be made gender-neutral (firefighter, salesperson, garbage collector). Don't assume a female caregiver - mother, grandmother, stepmother - is the primary family manager in children's homes. Model gender-neutral language for parents as well, who may revert to gender stereotypes when arranging young children's play or parties. "Should we call your mom?" or the use of "guys" for mixed-gender groups are both still very common expressions.

► **Refrain from commenting on appearances, and this includes clothing and hair.** We know girls have felt the pressure of appearance conformity for generations, but boys are increasingly developing unhealthy body and image issues. Gender-nonconforming children especially, may be uncomfortable with appearance comments, even well-meaning ones. Model comments on personal attributes other than appearance when with coaches, caregivers, or young children, and discuss the topic directly with older students.

► **Seek out examples of people displaying diverse and non-stereotypical roles, as well as representing varied family compositions.** Show boys and men displaying emotions other than anger and 'leadership' and in roles such as nursing, caregiving, and taking direction from others. Show women and girls in leadership roles and involved in science, technology, political leadership, and sports.

► **Provide equal opportunity for all children to speak; avoid responding more quickly to children of one gender than another.** In middle and high school, many teachers still provide more feedback to boys and engage less with girls. In groups, male students have a much greater tendency to ignore girls' comments and contributions and dominate group discussions.<sup>10</sup> These habits, begun at very early ages, create patterns that can last a lifetime. Involve older students in identifying ways to ensure all students have leadership and speaking opportunities.

► **Survey the curriculum.** Montessori-specific materials are inherently gender-neutral and open to all. But think about other curricular materials. In read-aloud texts, are figures portrayed



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Still-Failing-at-Fairness/David-Sadker/9781416552475>

only in gender-stereotypical roles? Make sure independent reading selections offer plenty of female authors and books with female main characters, as well as options showing non-traditional family structures. If students select public figures for biographies or research projects, encourage a selection from diverse figures.

► **Pay special attention to math and language arts instruction, curriculum areas where higher gender disparities in learning exist.**<sup>11</sup> Older male students may lag in language skills and study habits. Do everything possible to keep boys reading a wide variety of materials, offering plenty of opportunity for written self-expression. Likewise, combat the stereotype of weak math skills in girls. Team up students to support one another across these subject areas.

► **Make sure a study culture is supported for all students; identify both male and female role models who manifest good work habits and inspire a personal achievement mindset.** During free time, avoid offering choices between indoor study time and outdoor activity, which tend to become highly gender-segregated.

► **Look at the overall environment.** While Montessori materials may be gender-neutral, are there places where gender segregation is practiced? Can your school establish gender-neutral bathrooms? Where permitted and practical, this simple step goes a long way to deemphasizing gender for all as well as reducing the anxiety of gender-nonconforming students.



<sup>11</sup> See, for example, <https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/the-remarkable-academic-superiority-of-high-school-girls-vs-high-school-boys/> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232974467\\_Why\\_boys\\_achieve\\_less\\_at\\_school\\_than\\_girls\\_The\\_difference\\_between\\_boys\\_and\\_girls\\_academic\\_culture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232974467_Why_boys_achieve_less_at_school_than_girls_The_difference_between_boys_and_girls_academic_culture). <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/gender-achievement-gaps-us-school-districts>

► **Take a look at school policies: are school dress codes and uniforms gender-neutral?** This should extend beyond polo shirts and closed-toe shoes to make sure hair, jewelry, and nail polish policies, if any, are uniform as well.

► **Help children develop responses to address hurtful gender put-downs and explore their ideas about gender identity.** Honor children when they stand up for themselves or others in the face of gender bias; support older students, especially, when they demonstrate ally-ship and empathy for others.

► **Consider lessons explicitly addressing gender equality.** Older students, in particular, will find these interesting and valuable; such lessons can explore topics involving gender-related issues in the media, personal appearance, role models and career choices.<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Gender Equality Lessons for Schools<sup>13</sup> or other publicly available plans.<sup>14</sup>

► **Find compatible local organizations for extra-curricular programs.** For example, GirlUp trains and supports young women to be social change activists beginning in Middle School;<sup>15</sup> there are many other such groups as well.

► **Finally, find opportunities to educate parents, caregivers, and other teachers.** Family attitudes toward gender play a huge role, often in ways caregivers may not realize. Studies have shown that parents' gender-biases toward reading, for example, directly affect their children's learning outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

## Yes, It Matters.

It is estimated that globally, gender parity will not be reached for nearly 100 years, so we haven't a moment to lose. We must help prepare children to be the adult models we need. Every child who grows up to be equally respected and valued, free to develop their full range of emotions, skills, and interests, helps us advance toward a more gender-equal world. **imc**

## DEFINITIONS

- **Cisgender:** a term used to denote individuals whose gender identity conforms to their designated biological sex (e.g. a cisgender male would identify as male and be born with male genitalia.)
- **Gender-Nonconforming or Gender Variance:** a concept whereby individuals act and exist outside of traditional gender norms; an individual whose behavior or gender expression does not align with expected or traditional gender norms.
- **Gender Diversity:** the notion that issues of diversity should include gender in all its variations. While it is often understood as equal representation, acceptance, and fairness for both men and women, increasingly it has expanded to incorporate gender variation outside of a traditional male/female binary.
- **Transgender:** an umbrella term to describe individuals whose sense of gender identity and expression does not correspond with their biological sex assigned at birth.
- **Gender Constancy:** a term denoting a person's understanding that the assigned gender is constant and is accompanied by expectations related to that gender; this occurs as early as 3 but no later than 6 years of age.
- **Gender Inclusivity:** the idea that all gender expressions and identities should be validated and included.
- **Gender Fluid:** a person whose gender identity is not fixed but fluctuates between masculine and feminine.
- **Non-binary or Genderqueer:** a spectrum of gender identities that are not exclusively feminine or masculine; a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with both, neither, or a combination.

**Note:** gender identity is separate from romantic or sexual orientation. Cisgender and non-binary people both have a range of sexual or romantic orientations (heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, etc.)

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<sup>12</sup> <https://seejane.org/education/gender-equality-lessons-for-schools/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://seejane.org/education/gender-equality-lessons-for-schools/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://ncte.org/resources/gender-representation-9-12/>. <https://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/lesson-plans/transgender-youth/transgender-with-books/>. <https://www.tolerance.org/topics/gender-sexual-identity>

<sup>15</sup> <https://girlup.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959475218306601>