

## Strand | Community and belonging

### Strand Unit: Rights and fairness

<b>Stage</b>	Stages 3 and 4 (3rd – 6th class). This learning is intended for children typically aged 9–13.
<b>Relevant Key Competencies:</b>	W - Being well AC - Being an active citizen CL - Being a communicator and using language
<b>Focus of this support material:</b>	This support material focuses specifically on the <b>gender stereotypes</b> aspect of the Learning Outcomes below.

### Learning Outcomes

Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences, children should be able to:

Stage 3	Stage 4
recognise examples of stereotypes (including <b>gender stereotypes</b> ), inequality and discrimination, and explore appropriate responses to stand up for oneself and others.	examine the potential impact of stereotypes (including <b>gender stereotypes</b> ), explore how people or organisations can promote human rights, and propose appropriate responses and actions to challenge inequality and discrimination.

#### Relevant definitions from the *Wellbeing specification*:

**Stereotypes** - Stereotypes are images or ideas about a person, group or culture that are based on assumed characteristics, behaviours or activities (page 56).

**Equality** - Equality refers to the importance of recognising, respecting and engaging with the diversity of individuals and group needs, and of ensuring equality in terms of access, participation, conditions and benefits for all people (page 54).

**Equity** - Equity refers to fairness and justice in the way people are treated. It recognises and addresses the diverse needs of individuals or groups. It can involve providing different resources, opportunities or levels of support based on specific requirements or individual circumstances, aiming to ensure that everyone can thrive (page 55).

**Discrimination** - Discrimination includes policies, practices or behaviours that lead to unfair treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of their identity or perceived identity. It can be intentional or unintentional and may be direct or indirect. Irish equality legislation safeguards individuals from discrimination based on various grounds, including gender, marital status, family status, disability, race, religion, age, sexual orientation and membership of the Travelling community (page 54).

## The focus of learning

*“A stereotype is when people have an, often unfair, belief about a group of people based on something like their appearance, where they’re from, or something else. Stereotypes can make us think that everyone in a particular group of people should, or does, look and behave in a similar way. This might make us think about and treat some individuals and groups better, or worse, than others. Sometimes people expect boys and girls should look, think and behave in certain ways, based on their gender. This is called gender stereotyping” (Busy Bodies Booklet, 2023, p. 41).*

Teaching about gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality supports children to think critically about the messages they receive about gender and to recognise how these messages can influence their attitudes, behaviours, identity, sense-of-self and relationships. Challenging gender stereotypes is not about dismissing or undermining anyone’s choice to embrace traditional gender roles. Rather, it is about raising awareness of how stereotypes can shape expectations and experiences, often in limiting ways.

The purpose of this learning is to empower children to make choices that reflect their unique strengths and interests—regardless of gender. As children learn, they develop the language, awareness and empathy needed to build respectful relationships, recognise unfairness and advocate for themselves and others. This contributes to a more equitable and inclusive school culture, where all children feel valued, respected and supported to reach their full potential.

By the age of five, children absorb messages about gender through family life, school, media and social interactions. By the age of five, many children already show signs of being influenced by gender norms and expectations. These early ideas can shape how children see themselves and others and how their interests, friendships, behaviour, participation and future aspirations develop.

When left unchallenged, gender stereotypes can limit children’s confidence, choices and opportunities. By teaching children to recognise and question these stereotypes, we help them understand that their abilities, interests and relationships should not be defined or restricted by gender. This helps create a more inclusive environment where every child is encouraged and supported to pursue their goals and realise their potential.

## Approaches to consider:

Learning about gender stereotypes and gender equality should be grounded in playful and engaging learning experiences that are age and developmentally appropriate and connected to children’s lived experiences. Below are examples of approaches that can be adapted across stages and settings.

- Choose resources that reflect real-world diversity positively and avoid reinforcing stereotypes, for example, ensuring jobs, activities and roles are presented without being tied to a particular gender. Regularly review resources, such as library books, toys and displays, to ensure children encounter a balanced and fair representation.
- Use everyday interactions and ‘teachable moments’ as learning opportunities. For example, if a child expresses a gendered assumption (e.g., *“That’s just for boys”*), respond calmly, promoting empathy and respect to help children understand the impact of their words and actions.
- Model inclusive language that avoids generalisations, for example, using phrases such as *“many girls/boys/children like X”* to acknowledge diversity within groups. When talking about roles and responsibilities at home, you might consider using terms such as *“parents”* or *“someone at home”* to reflect the diversity within family structures and the different ways roles and responsibilities are shared in children’s homes.
- Foster an inclusive and respectful learning environment where children feel safe to share their thoughts, ask questions and listen to different perspectives. Use guided discussion – such as think-pair-share, circle activities or walking debates - to explore where gendered messages come from, how they influence people and what fairness looks like in relationships and everyday life. These conversations can build empathy, critical thinking and a sense of belonging.
- Promote empathy and perspective-taking through a fictional lens. For example, stories, scenarios and role-play activities can help children understand how it feels to be excluded or treated unfairly based on their gender, explore characters who challenge gender stereotypes and imagine alternative actions and fairer outcomes.

- Use media – such as advertisements, picture books, video games, tv characters etc. as a useful stimulus to explore gendered messages. Analysing messages, techniques and target audiences can support children to identify stereotypes, question bias and consider alternative, fairer representations. This also builds awareness of how media can shape beliefs, interests and self-image.
- Use creative activities as a means for children to reflect and express their thoughts and ideas about gender stereotypes and expectations. For example, inviting children to draw or make a collage of different jobs or interests can help uncover unconscious assumptions (e.g., “Boys/girls like to...” or “Draw a scientist”).
- Incorporate play-based or cooperative activities to allow children explore different roles and interests. Activities such as a building task, dramatic play or team challenges offer opportunities to share and rotate roles (e.g., leadership or caregiving roles). These can also create opportunities to observe interactions and gently challenge gender stereotypes in a safe and respectful way as needed.
- Encourage critical thinking and ownership over their learning through projects. For example, older children might research role models in the community or explore changes in gender roles over time.
- Offer a wide variety of activities - from dance and gymnastics to football and tag rugby - to broaden gender associations with certain sports. Include non-traditional games that are not typically labelled as ‘male’ or ‘female’ activities e.g., team building games and child-designed games.
- Share your learning focus with parents and families to support consistent messaging at school and at home. It might be possible to involve parents or community members, for example, sharing their occupation or interests, to broaden children’s understanding of roles, identities and possibilities. Featuring a range of role models – such as women in sport or men in caregiving – helps children see themselves and others in a positive light.

## Possible questions to explore:

Stage	Sample prompt questions
<b>Stage 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Have you heard the word 'stereotype'? It means when people think everyone in a group is the same. Can you think of an example?</i></li> <li>● <i>What are some things people sometimes say boys or girls should wear, like or do? Where do you think those ideas come from—TV, family, ads or somewhere else?</i></li> <li>● <i>Have you ever been told you couldn't do something because you're a boy or a girl? How did that feel?</i></li> <li>● <i>What do you notice in ads about how boys or girls are shown? Do you think that's always fair or true?</i></li> <li>● <i>In some families, people take turns doing different jobs at home. How can families make sure jobs are shared fairly?</i></li> <li>● <i>If you see someone being treated unfairly because they're a boy or a girl, what could you say or do to help?</i></li> <li>● <i>Why is it important to make sure everyone in our class is included and treated with kindness and respect?</i></li> </ul>
<b>Stage 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>What do TV shows, ads, games or other forms of media say about how boys and girls should look or act? Do you think these messages are fair or realistic?</i></li> <li>● <i>How could gender stereotypes make someone feel limited in what they're allowed to do or become?</i></li> <li>● <i>Has anyone ever assumed something about you because you're a boy or a girl? What was that like for you?</i></li> <li>● <i>Do you know any well-known people—musicians, athletes, writers, leaders—who don't fit the usual ideas of what boys or girls 'should' do or be? What can we learn from them?</i></li> <li>● <i>Are there male and female athletes who play the same sport really well? How are they treated or spoken about? Is it the same?</i></li> <li>● <i>What actions can we take or what can we say if we see someone being treated unfairly because of their gender—or anything else?</i></li> <li>● <i>What could we do—big or small—to make sure everyone in our school or local area feels welcome, respected and included?</i></li> </ul>

## Connections across strands and strand units

The Learning Outcomes in the *Wellbeing* specification have been designed to connect and integrate with each other, supporting teachers to explore themes through many entry points. The *Wellbeing* specification provides many meaningful opportunities to address gender stereotypes and promote gender equality across all stages and strands. The following examples may be helpful.

- **Rights and fairness (page 30):** Across all stages, children develop their understanding of rights, equity, equality, fair play and the importance of fairness in relationships and society, with an explicit emphasis on gender stereotypes in Stages 3 and 4.
- **Family (page 29):** Children develop an understanding that families are structured in diverse ways. They explore roles and responsibilities within families, recognising that these can look different in different families and are not defined by gender. In Stages 3 and 4, children reflect on how stereotypes and social and cultural norms can influence families.
- **Identity and Sense of belonging (pages 23 & 29):** Children develop an awareness of the diverse factors that can shape their identity, self-image and self-worth, which may include gender. They are also encouraged to respect and appreciate diversity in others.
- **Relationships (page 24):** Children learn about healthy, unhealthy and harmful behaviours in relationships. They are supported to build and maintain equitable, respectful and supportive relationships now and into the future.
- **Media and digital wellbeing (page 28):** In Stages 1 and 2, children develop an awareness of how media and advertising can influence their thinking and behaviours. In Stages 3 and 4, children learn to identify and critique topics in the media, recognising examples of stereotypes and bias. This can include thinking critically about gendered portrayals in media and popular culture.

## Progression of learning

Learning to recognise and challenge gender stereotypes is not a one-time lesson but an ongoing area of learning, shaped by personal, social and cultural influences. Children begin to form ideas about gender from a young age, and their understanding develops in different ways and at different times, depending on their age, experiences and individual needs.

The examples below illustrate how conversations about gender stereotypes might take place at the different stages of education. These examples are not fixed or prescriptive and may not suit all children at a given stage. They are intended to support your planning and help you explore gender stereotypes in meaningful, age-appropriate and developmentally responsive ways—encouraging children to value diversity, expand their sense of possibility and treat others with fairness and respect.

Early Childhood	Stage 1-2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Junior Cycle
<p><i>Aistear</i> embraces diversity and encourages educators to reflect on their practices to ensure equitable and meaningful experiences.</p> <p>Through the Theme of Identity and Belonging, babies, toddlers and young children receive messages of meas (respect), grá (love) and encouragement. This helps children develop a positive sense of who they are and confidence in expressing themselves.</p> <p>By fostering a sense of identity and belonging, <i>Aistear</i> supports babies, toddlers and young children to feel respected and valued, empowering them to respond to gender stereotypes.</p>	<p>While gender stereotypes are not explicitly mentioned in the <i>Wellbeing</i> specification until Stages 3 and 4, in Stages 1 and 2, children will be beginning to categorise activities, toys and clothing as being ‘for boys’ or ‘for girls’, and an awareness of gender roles starts to form. At this stage, children may also start to feel pressure to conform to what is seen as acceptable for their gender.</p> <p>With guidance from the teacher, children may begin to critically reflect on these early stereotypes by exploring questions such as “<i>Can boys wear pink? Can girls be engineers?</i>” They may also approach this thinking through the lens of fairness and fair play asking questions like “<i>Can boys dance? Can girls play football?</i>”</p>	<p>At Stage 3, children are supported to recognise unfair treatment in everyday situations, for example, in the media, stories, games and peer interactions. They explore how stereotypes can affect how people are treated and how they see themselves. Through guided discussions, role-play or inquiry tasks, children identify examples of gender stereotypes and inequality and suggest ways to respond respectfully and fairly when they or others experience inequality based on gender.</p>	<p>At Stage 4, children deepen their understanding by examining the wider impact of stereotypes on individuals and groups. They discuss how gender expectations can influence roles, opportunities and rights in different aspects of life, for example, exploring how jobs are portrayed in the media or expectations within sport. They explore how individuals and organisations can stand up for fairness, for example, researching diverse role models who challenge gender expectations. They are supported to propose actions to make their school and community inclusive and fair.</p>	<p>In Junior Cycle SPHE, young people build on this foundation by exploring the impact of gender stereotypes and how to promote gender equity by raising awareness, challenging bias, implementing fair policies, using inclusive language, and ensuring diverse representation.</p> <p>The relevant Learning Outcome states: “<i>Students should be able to reflect on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations, behaviour and relationships and discuss experiences/ situations of bias, inequality or exclusion and devise ways to actively create more inclusive environments.</i>”</p>

## Top Tip!

Teachers can play a positive role in challenging gender stereotypes, not just through formal lessons, but also through the 'hidden curriculum' – the unspoken messages conveyed through daily classroom routines, expectations and interactions. This can include how roles are assigned, which behaviours are rewarded or celebrated, who is encouraged to 'lead' or be competitive and what kinds of activities are promoted. It is important to reflect on your own beliefs and expectations regarding gender and how these may be influencing your practice. By reflecting on everyday practices, you can identify subtle ways gender norms might be unintentionally reinforced.

## Reflective prompts

- *What are my own thoughts about gender expectations? How might these influence my expectations of the children or my practice?*
- *How do I respond to gender-stereotyped ideas expressed by children? How can I gently challenge these and promote equality?*
- *What messages about gender might the children be picking up in the learning environment in school and in the classroom?*
- *Do all children see themselves positively represented in classroom resources and displays?*
- *Do I give all children equal opportunities across learning activities?*
- *Can I notice any patterns in how roles or responsibilities are assigned in groupwork?*
- *Are my assumptions about children's behaviour, achievement or participation influenced by gender expectations?*
- *Have I grouped children by gender for activities? If so, why?*

A culture that explicitly values fairness, openness and shared responsibility can send a powerful message about equality, including gender equality. Teachers can support this by ensuring all children have equal opportunities to participate - encouraging them to try new things, take on varied roles and engage fully in school life.

## References

Department of Education (2023). *Social, Personal & Health Education (SPHE): Short Course Specification for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

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Government of Ireland (2025). *Wellbeing Specification for Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: Government Publications

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