



In the role-play area, James chooses a pink dress and happily puts it on. He spends time in front of the mirror at the role-play hairdresser's salon.

Adding high-heeled shoes to his outfit, James holds out the dress and twirls and dances to music. Other children watch or join in the dancing.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Pretty in pink

Seeing a young boy do something considered feminine provokes some extended thinking about traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Anne O'Connor explores the issues in practice

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James is in the role-play area. He selects a pink dress to wear. The practitioner tells him 'pink is for girls', but his determined smile shows that James intends to wear it anyway. Another practitioner joins them and quietly confirms his choice.

After spending some time in front of the mirror at the 'hairdresser's', James puts on a pair of high-heeled shoes. He pats his dress, holds out the skirt and begins to sway and dance.

The practitioner spots this and suggests they go to the carpet and find some music to dance to. Other children join them and James dances slowly and gracefully to the music. The adult joins in with the dancers and comments positively on James' dancing skills while encouraging other boys to join in. Two boys decline, but stay to watch.

GOOD PRACTICE

We are all products of our childhood and upbringing and may retain assumptions about gender roles and sexual orientation, passed down to us by the cultural background of our families and reinforced by the media.

As Jennie Lindon points out in her book *Equality in Early Childhood – Linking theory and practice*, we shouldn't have to feel personally at fault because of these assumptions. However, she points out, 'On the other hand, you are responsible now for thinking about your views, being willing to question some of them and to adjust how you behave as

a grown-up towards this generation of young children' (p5).

Looking at our personal prejudices and resolving to 'unlearn' them, while developing the skills and confidence to challenge discrimination and bias, can be tough. But if we don't, we risk unintentionally perpetuating these prejudices in the learning environments we create.

2 Use the simple statement 'pink is for girls' as a starting point for generating discussion about bias around gender as well as sexual orientation:

- What are your beliefs about yourself as a female/male and how might this affect the way you treat children?
- What expectations do you have of girls that might be different from boys? How does this affect the way you treat both boys and girls?
- Walk round a toyshop and look at how the toys are displayed and packaged. What does this tell you about the messages society gives our children about gender difference? Are the same messages there in your setting?
- What kind of role models do you give to children? What do you say about children's abilities and about your own adult abilities that challenge (or reinforce) gender stereotypes?
- Do you challenge children on their expectations and gender assumptions? How do you do this while supporting their need to 'join

the club' of their own gender?

- Do you reflect on your observations in an open-minded way before deciding whether or not a child's activity is valuable or acceptable? For example, do you have fixed ideas about 'superhero' or war play?
- Do you catch yourself expressing surprise at a girl's mechanical expertise or amusement at a boy's preference for dressing up in high heels? How might you reflect on this to challenge your own assumptions?
- Does your setting enable boys and girls to develop a definition of masculinity that redefines what it means to be strong, courageous and admired by others, and a definition of femininity that includes ambitions, technical skills and self-determination?

3 Consider your attitude to homophobia. Do you assume that heterosexuality is the norm?

Do you find it easier to deal with girls playing with boys' toys than the other way round? We don't always recognise it as such, but it is the homophobic attitudes of the adults around them that frequently limit children's choices, for example, the concern that boys wearing dresses signals homosexuality. It can also prevent people behaving in ways not associated with their gender roles (such as boys doing ballet, girls playing rugby) for fear of being labelled gay or lesbian.

- How do you support colleagues in their professional development in this sensitive area, particularly where there may be conflicts with their religious or cultural upbringing?
- What is your response when you hear children using the word 'gay' to mean something worthless?
- Do perceptions of what is appropriate for boys and girls give biased messages to children? For example, it's OK to talk of even a very young boy having a 'girlfriend', but a boy who plays only with girls is a cause for concern?

4 Reflect on the extent to which resources in the nursery and interactions with the children and between staff challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes.

- How is colour used to denote whether it is for a boy or girl? Provide natural/wooden resources whenever possible, or make your own so you can use the full range of colours!
- Are there as many prams as there are bikes? Think about having 'girls-bikes and boys-prams' sessions. This enables girls to monopolise the bikes for a change, but also raises the status of the prams.
- Be aware of images that reinforce gender stereotyping and balance them with those that challenge (for example, female doctor/male nurse). Where you can't find a balance, use the stereotypes to debate with the

FURTHER INFORMATION

● **The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Child Observation No 4 – Pretend Play (James goes dancing)', a DVD showing how play promotes a young boy's development and learning. Visit www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900**

- children – 'Are doctors always men?'
- Use observations to support the use of resources, such as boys in the dressing-up area, girls with the train set.
- Listen to each other and the comments you make about boys/girls, women/men. Find friendly ways to alert your colleagues to their assumptions and ask them to do the same for you.
- Think about playground 'rules' you had to follow as a child to avoid 'put-downs' related to homosexuality. What phrases were used? Do they still have the same power to wound?
- Challenge yourself aloud if you say something inappropriate, then explore with the children better ways of expressing yourself. ■



LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.2** Inclusive Practice
- **EE 3.1** Observation, Assessment and Planning
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- 'All About... Gender' (*Nursery World*, 2 May 2002)
- *Equality in Early Childhood – Linking Theory and Practice* by Jennie Lindon (Hodder Arnold)
- *Start Seeing Diversity – The Basic Guide to an Anti-Bias Classroom* by Ellen Wolpert (Red Leaf Press)