

Creating an Inclusive Environment

Making space for the gender spectrum and diverse families within kindergarten

— Stephanie Gill

A healthy social life is found only when, in the mirror of each soul, the whole community finds its reflection, and when, in the whole community, the virtue of each one is living.

—Rudolf Steiner

This article aims to help practitioners to find practical ways to challenge gender stereotypes and create a safe, welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) children, families and staff. (See References and Glossary at end.)

By reflecting on our practice, we may discover ways that we can weave inclusive language and representation into the life of the kindergarten. This can help us to be supportive of all children and create an environment that is inclusive of all families. The emphasis in kindergarten that “everyone is welcome” is the foundation of this inclusive approach.

Rather than seeing gender as binary (either male or female) and fixed (linked to our physical sex),

we can educate ourselves to perceive a spectrum of possibilities. This could include gender that is fluid or defines itself in a non-binary way, transgender as well as cis-gender people, and those who are intersex. “LGBTQ-inclusive teaching ensures that LGBTQ children and young people, and children and young people with such families, see themselves reflected in what they learn. It also encourages all young people to grow up with inclusive and accepting attitudes.”^[1]

It is a requirement that, in England, every school will need to teach children about relationships and families. This includes LGBTQ families, and that means helping children to understand that it’s OK to have two mums, two dads, or any other family structure. Children deserve to learn about a world which reflects the one in which they are growing up. Many children will have LGBTQ parents, friends or family members, and this new guidance will help them to grow up knowing that their families are accepted as much as everyone else’s.^[2] In the UK, the 2010 Equality

Act, which applies to schools, names sexual orientation and gender reassignment as protected characteristics.

Educating ourselves

It is important that we create safe spaces and study groups to focus on understanding gender identity and expression, and have time to discuss our practice with colleagues, parents and community.^[3] It is important to also raise awareness among non-teaching staff as they may be the first point of contact for people entering the school community. This awareness needs to be embedded in policy and practice. At St Paul's we have recently amended our application forms so that as well as identifying the child's sex (the only options prescribed by the system are male and female) we also ask for their preferred pronouns. It is a small but significant change, which signals to parents and carers that we have a more inclusive picture of gender than the male/female binary.

Making our language more gender inclusive

We are preparing our kindergarten children for a world in which attitudes to gender are changing. Young people who have recently started college say that introducing yourself with your chosen pronouns is now an everyday part of life. We can model this awareness of gender sensitive language in kindergarten. For example, when telling stories or playing circle games about a farmer, we might choose sometimes to use the pronoun "she," sometimes use the pronoun "he," and sometimes use the pronoun "they" to ensure that children take on board the concept that being a farmer is a role open to all genders. When we use the non-binary pronoun "they," we get into the habit of talking and thinking about gender in a non-binary way. For example, we have a verse that we share at the start of our early years meeting and we used to alternate using "he" and "she" pronouns within this verse. In recent years we have chosen to use the pronoun "they" instead.

Allowing our broader understanding of gender to inform our interactions with children

How can we bring our awareness into kindergarten in a developmentally appropriate way? We can ensure that we talk about "children" rather than "boys and girls," and in this way guide the children away from

dividing the group according to gender. Even counting how many boys and how many girls there are in the group reinforces the idea that everyone is either one or the other. The experience for those who don't feel they are either a boy or a girl or who are mis-assigned a gender they don't identify with, is that there is no space for them. Equally, saying "parents and carers" rather than "mums and dads" signals our awareness of different family structures such as people who are single parents, sometimes through choice. Taking care around Mother's Day and Father's Day is important, as this may be sensitive for donor-conceived children or those with same-sex parents. Being aware that co-parenting is a term used by LGBTQ parents who have decided to create a family together, as well as also referring to shared parenting by separated parents, can help us to understand family structures. When we raise our awareness of the possibilities, we can avoid making assumptions when first meeting new families. "Who was waiting for you when you were born?" is a wonderful inclusive question that meets all children, the answer to which is visualized in our kindergarten birthday story.

As teachers, we can also open up the representation of a wider range of family structures. If two children are negotiating who will be the mother in their role play, we can suggest that perhaps this house has two mothers, for example. I have found that coming alongside a conversation, and adding to it, is an effective way to widen the representation without making this conscious for the children. If a child is talking about going to a family wedding, we might add our experience of attending a wedding where the grooms both wore beautiful roses in the buttonholes of their suits. Without overtly raising the issue of same-sex partnerships, we can widen the picture of marriage to become inclusive. Sometimes we just need to allow space for the children's conversation to develop. I've heard children talking about who they will marry within the group, and when a girl chose another girl, another friend said that it needs to be a boy and a girl to get married. I waited to see what would happen next, and another child added, "Two girls can get married." I chose to gently reinforce this by saying "Marriage is for two people who love each other." By focusing on a simple message of understanding, we can celebrate difference.

Presenting our circles and games in ways which are gender sensitive and allow children to self-identify

It may be beneficial to reflect on the language and gender roles in our circles, games, and finger rhymes. In our school we have noticed increasing questioning from parents who ask us about our choice of rhymes and if they perpetuate gender stereotypes.

This is the way the lady rides, trit trot, trit, trot.

And this is the way the gentleman rides, a-gallop, a-gallop, a-gallop, a-gallop.

Traditional rhymes such as this can be problematic for parents, and it is worth considering if we can make adjustments. With this example, I alternate the lady and the gentleman, so that it is not always the male rider going faster.

We have a game where one child is chosen to be the Pumpkin King or Queen, surrounded by a circle of children who make the castle wall. The King or Queen falls asleep and the pumpkin is hidden away, then they awake to search for it. I offer each child the opportunity to decide if they would like to be a King or Queen. This opens up the possibility of choosing for oneself, and choosing differently next time. In the play, I have observed children talking about themselves as both genders, in a fluid way, and another child will try to insist they are one or the other (usually the gender that matches the child's sex). I have gently said "Each of us knows who we are," as a way of planting the seed that it is important to listen to how people self-identify and respect their choices.

Those who work in early childhood settings will be aware that young children are curious about gender and explore this in their language and behavior, such as referring to themselves as both male and female. It is important to acknowledge this gender exploration as part of child development and not map adult perspectives onto young children experiencing gender in a fluid way, while supporting their freedom of self-expression. The term "gender creative" acknowledges this curiosity, and is perhaps more helpful than transgender or non-binary for the young child. Equally, we understand that some children will need

to come to an awareness of gender by adhering to more fixed roles and behaviors. We can accept this as part of their developmental journey. We need to be aware that "children who feel their gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth may experience increased social anxiety because they want to be the same as their peers, but realize they don't feel the same way".^[4] All children do best when their parents or caregivers show them that they are loved and accepted for who they are.

Telling stories which include characters that challenge gender stereotypes

Increasingly, parents question our choice of kindergarten stories, and there is a particular emphasis on needing positive, active role female role models as well as male ones. When we are telling traditional fairytales, it might help to explain to the parents about the way in which they embody archetypes. Otherwise, we can face resistance from parents interpreting fairy tales more literally, concerned about outdated gender stereotypes and passive female characters. It is also good practice to reflect on our choices and balance our repertoire by including fairytales with active female protagonists such as "Katie Crackernuts," or "The Sleeping Prince," who is rescued from slumber by a female character who evades giants and has travelled all points of the compass, until her iron shoes are worn away.

Finding inclusive stories

Our choice of stories and books is significant in terms of representation. We can strive to achieve a balance of traditional fairy tales with stories that challenge gender stereotypes and represent diverse families. Fairy tales such as "The Twelve Huntsmen" and "The Magic Tree," where the female protagonist cross-dresses as a man, open up a transformative space where gender is fluid and able to change. Although fairy tales meet the children and offer them soul food appropriate to their development, we need to look elsewhere to find positive representations of stepmothers or stepfathers, families with same-sex parents, and adoptive families. We can seek out or even write stories which show different family structures, and make space for these alongside our traditional stories.

List of inclusive stories

- ***The Lost Fairy Tales: Fearless girls around the world*** by Isabel Otter—This enchanting anthology of 20 overlooked and forgotten fairy tales has been collected from different cultures around the world. Every story features a strong female heroine, who approaches life with humor, wit, cunning and bravery.
- ***Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales*** by Virginia Hamilton—Female protagonist fairy tales from African American storytelling tradition.
- ***The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*** by Johnny Valentine—A collection of modern fairytales which represent non-traditional families.

The following books bring representation of diverse families to kindergarten

- ***Under the Love Umbrella*** by Davina Bell, ***Love Makes a Family*** by Sophie Beer, ***Who's in a family?*** By Robert Skutch—These books all celebrate diverse families.
- ***And Tango Makes Three*** by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson—A true story of a male penguin couple who adopt a chick together.
- ***Mr. Seahorse*** by Eric Carle—A celebration of one of nature's examples of a male caregiver.
- ***Julian is a Mermaid*** and ***Julian Goes to the Wedding*** by Jessica Love—Joyful picture book with a message of a child and their self-expression being accepted by a supportive grandmother. The sequel depicts a wedding with two brides in a joyful celebration.
- ***Plenty of Hugs*** by Fran Manushkin, illustrated by Kate Alizadeh—A day in the life of a bi-racial same-sex-parent family.
- ***Who's Your Real Mom?*** by Bernadette Green, illustrated by Anna Zobel—A child with two mums answers their friends' questions, enabling them to understand that they are both "real" parents.
- ***Why don't I have a daddy?*** By George Anne Clay—This is a delightful story of a young male lion being raised by a single mother. He notices that other lion cubs have different sorts of families and asks the question in the title of the book that many children of solo mums ask. This gives his

mother an opportunity to give him a positive explanation for his family set-up.

- ***The Growing Story*** by Ruth Krauss and Helen Oxenbury—Beautifully illustrated book about a child and his mother, experiencing the seasons together. Positive representation of single-parent family.
- ***I am Perfectly Designed*** by Karamo and Jason Brown—An exuberant celebration of loving who you are, exactly as you are. In this empowering ode to modern families, a boy and his father take a joyful walk through the city, discovering all the ways in which they are perfectly designed for each other. Positive depiction of a single-parent family.
- ***In our Mothers' House*** by Patricia Polacco, ***Mommy, Mama and Me / Daddy, Papa and Me*** by Leslea Newman, ***My Two Mums and Me/My Two Dads and Me*** by Michael Joosten—These books celebrate same-sex-parent families.
- ***Two Mums*** by Caroly Robertson—A great picture book for two mum families, regardless of how their child came into their life (story does not specify), celebrating diversity of LGBT family life with humor and warmth.
- ***Two Dads*** by Carolyn Robertson—An adopted boy muses on all the benefits of having two dads. A charming ode to diverse (and mixed-race) families.
- ***This Day in June*** by Gayle E Pitman—Picture book celebrating Pride.

Resources that question gender stereotypes or open up the possibility that gender is not fixed and can be chosen.

- ***Want to Play Trucks?*** by Ann Stott and Bob Graham—Jack likes trucks and Alex likes dolls but they find a way to play together.
- ***William's Doll*** by Charlotte Zolotow—One of the first books to address gender stereotypes, William's grandmother finally understands his longing for a doll to care for, saying his nurturing skills will stand him in good stead when he has his own family
- ***The Mountains of Tibet*** by Mordicai Gerstein—A delightfully thought-provoking children's story introducing the concept that life and death are

parts of one whole. A little boy is born, lives a full and happy life and when he dies chooses to reincarnate as on the Earth as a human child, with one difference: "This time I'd like to see what being a girl is like."

- ***A House for Everyone*** by Jo Hirst and Naomi Bardoff—A picture book about a group of friends who build a den together, which includes a range of characters that challenge gender stereotypes and represent children with a range of gender identities and expressions.
- ***Phoenix Goes to School*** by Michelle and Phoenix Finch—A story to support gender-diverse children and to introduce cisgender children to empathising with and understanding the transgender community. Worried that she may be bullied for her gender identity, this is a heartwarming story about Phoenix being accepted by her classmates, which demonstrates how she has approached talking about gender to her friends. ♦

References:

1. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-inclusive-education-everything-you-need-know>
2. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/how-lgbt-inclusive-education-can-change-lives>
3. <https://genderspectrum.org> This poster defines sex, sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity clearly and concisely: <https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/Teaching-Tolerance-Know-the-Difference-Poster-Summer-2015.pdf>
4. Taken from <https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behavior-and-development/gender-identity>

GLOSSARY

From <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/glossary-terms>

CISGENDER OR CIS - Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

GENDER IDENTITY - A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else (see non-binary below), which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

INTERSEX - A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female or non-binary.

LGBT - The acronym for lesbian, gay, bi and trans.

NON-BINARY - An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with "man" or "woman." Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.

TRANS/TRANSSEXUAL - An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, gender-fluid, non-binary, etc.

This article is reprinted with kind permission from Kindling, the UK journal for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education and Care.

Stephanie Gill is currently working as a Steiner kindergarten teacher and Equality and Diversity Lead at St. Paul's Steiner School, London. Before joining the school, she was a Steiner child care giver for 14 years and co-founded Ladybird Playgroup in Stoke Newington, London. In her parallel life she would have her own bookshop, and she spends her spare time collecting diverse and inclusive books to share with the school community.