

ANNEX 1

TIP SHEETS ON GENDER-RESPONSIVE PARENTING



© UNICEF/UN038690/Pirozzi

This section covers tips and messages for parents* on some key aspects of gender-responsive parenting. These can be adapted to regional and country contexts.

- Gender socialization in child development – the first 5 years
- Gender identity, diversity and dysphoria among children
- Engaging fathers in childcare
- Gender-responsive toys and games for children
- Books, media and advertising for children
- Care for caregivers



Gender socialization in child development – the first 5 years

In the first five years of life, a child's brain develops faster than at any other time in her/his life. Children's early experiences – their relationships and the things they see, hear, touch, smell and taste – stimulate their brain, creating millions of connections. This is when the foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life are laid down. These foundational development needs are the same for children of all genders.

Children also begin to develop a sense of gender identity around the age of three which further intensifies as they grow older.¹ Parents act as a critical influencer of gender socialization – how individuals learn to behave according to gender norms – especially during early child-

hood. By the age of five, children have a sense of gender stability and begin to express this in words or actions.

Parents and caregivers can deliberately or unconsciously transfer their own gender biases to their children. From a young age, girls may be praised for their looks, and boys for their physical strength. Parents may treat girls as more vulnerable while boys may be encouraged to 'be strong'. Parents may be more overtly physically affectionate towards girls while more stoic towards boys. Therefore, through a system of social incentives and penalties, children are gradually taught to behave according to the pre-defined, accepted norms of their gender. However, parents – as the primary influencers of young children – also have the power to break the intergenerational cycle of gender discrimination to create a more equitable society.

¹ UNICEF, 2019. Summary note on promoting positive gender norms and socialization.

*Note: The term parent is not limited to biological parents but extends to any guardian or caregiver providing consistent care to children and adolescents. This includes adoptive or foster parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives and young adolescents, who are also parents. Childcare providers also play a significant role in caring for infants and young children.

Tips & messages for parents:

- While children may develop at different rates, the developmental milestones for girls and boys are the same.
- Ensure girls and boys are provided with equal and adequate nutritional and health services.
- Ensure girls and boys are treated equally with love and care from birth – a child’s relationship with her/his parent is the foundation for development.
- Engage children equally in play, and in physical and mental stimulation; actively use toys, games, books, media that promote a child’s initiative, sense of self-empowerment and agency, e.g. toys that encourage building or creating something; books that depict both male and female protagonists in non-traditional roles, etc.
- Encourage children to build relationships and networks within their neighborhood and community, e.g. with neighbouring children.
- Refrain from strongly assigning and asserting gender identities onto children, Instead, encourage them to develop their own sense of identity and agency in a nurturing, accepting environment.
- Avoid language or jokes that can reinforce gender stereotypes intended to be derogatory, e.g. ‘he cries like a girl’, ‘she’s such a tomboy’, ‘she’s too bossy’, ‘he’s too soft’, etc.
- Model gender-equitable behaviour and roles that positively challenge gender stereotypes, e.g. doing activities traditionally connected to the opposite gender like fathers cooking in the kitchen, mothers participating in outdoor sports.
- Be emotionally open, honest and accepting towards girls and boys, and encourage them to express their feelings.
- Participate in parenting training and education programmes to develop skills and enhance awareness about addressing internal gender biases.

Resources:

- Karraker, Vogel, & Lake, 1995: Parents’ Gender-Stereotyped Perceptions of Newborns: The Eye of the Beholder Revisited
- Rafferty, 2018: Gender Identity Development in Children
- UNICEF Home Visiting Nurses Training Module on Gender Dynamics & Socialization in Families
- UNICEF ECARO Parent Buddy App

**Gender identity, gender diversity and gender dysphoria among children**

Gender identity is a child’s sense of who they are – male, female, both or neither. Gender is different from sex. The term ‘sex’ is defined to mean the biological differences between women and men. ‘Gender’ is a social construct and refers to the social relationships between women, men, girls and boys that vary from one society to another and at different points in history. It is normal for children and teenagers to experiment with gender roles.

A child might identify as ‘cisgender’. This is when the child’s gender identity is male or female, and it is the same as the sex the child was given at birth.

When children and teenagers are ‘gender diverse’, they might behave or dress in ways that are not what people expect of their sex. This includes

- transgender – the child’s gender identity does not match the sex given at birth
- non-binary – the child’s gender identity is neither male nor female, or it is a blend of male and female
- gender fluid – the child moves between gender identities
- agender – the child does not identify with any gender

All children discover more about their gender identity over time. This might mean they express this identity in new or different ways. Some children grow up thinking of themselves as a girl or a boy and do not question their gender, while others do. It’s important to note that there are children and adolescents in all cultures that identify as a gender that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.

‘Gender dysphoria’ is when a person feels distressed because their gender identity differs from the sex they were given at birth. During their teenage years, a child will start exploring her/his sexual identity. This can be a period of added stress for many children as they also begin to undergo puberty.

Beyond gender identity, children also grow up to absorb norms, behaviours, practices associated with the gender they identify with. This can be constraining and discriminatory in many cases - especially when the self-identified gender deviates from the gender others assign to the child (perhaps because of the sex assigned at birth). For example, young girls in many communities are restricted in opportunities for learning, skills and development and are socialized from a very young age to be solely responsible for caregiving. For girls (per birth) who identify as boys, it can be even harder to understand and cope with these restrictions imposed by socialization.



Tips & messages for parents:

- Refrain from strongly assigning and asserting gender identities onto children. Instead, encourage them to develop their own sense of identity and agency in a nurturing, accepting environment.
 - Model gender-equitable behaviour and roles that positively challenge gender stereotypes, e.g. doing activities traditionally connected to the opposite gender, like fathers cooking in the kitchen, mothers participating in outdoor sports.
 - Engage children equally in play, and in physical and mental stimulation; actively use toys, games, books, media that promote a child's initiative, sense of self-empowerment and agency, e.g. toys that encourage building or creating something; books that depict both male and female protagonists, media that challenges stereotypes, and encourages healthy self-expression, etc.
 - Be aware that children discover their gender identities and associated gender norms over time, and may consequently express themselves so in different ways, e.g. by dressing a certain way or proclaiming "I am a boy or girl".
 - It is normal for children to experiment with different gender roles; experimenting does not mean that your child is gender diverse.
 - While most children go on to feel comfortable with the gender that was assigned to them at birth, in all cultures there are children and adolescents who identify as a gender that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.
- For children close to puberty, offer holistic, accurate and practical information on gender and sexual identities, as well as sexual and reproductive health, while respecting and protecting their agency, and promoting positive gender portrayals and behaviors. Two-way dialogue and communication is essential to encourage adolescents to express their feelings and address their concerns.
 - Not all gender diverse children have gender dysphoria.
 - If your child shows signs of gender dysphoria, e.g. anger when called a boy or girl, anxiety in social situations, depression, self-harm, etc. the key to supporting your child is to show that you love and accept them as they are.
 - If your child shows signs of gender dysphoria, support your child to understand their gender identity, work with your family and community to create an enabling environment for your child's transition.
 - Do not hesitate to seek professional help for your child or family.

Resources:

- Mayo Clinic, 2021: Children and Gender Identity: Supporting your Child
- Butler, De Graaf, Wren et al., 2018: Assessment and Support of Children and Adolescents with Gender Dysphoria
- Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018: Gender Dysphoria among Adolescence: Current Perspectives
- UNICEF Home Visiting Nurses Training Module on Gender Dynamics & Socialization in Families
- UNICEF ECARO Parent Buddy App



Engaging fathers in childcare

In most societies around the world, childcare is considered to be the mothers' responsibility, while fathers are often discouraged from participating. Many national policies and businesses have codified such norms, for example, in the form of gender-biased policies that provide only limited or no parental leave for fathers, or that restrict flexible work hours. This prevents the full enjoyment of parenthood by fathers, while placing a considerable burden for care on mothers. It also perpetuates existing gender norms and roles, and deprives children of important aspects of their emotional and cognitive development that come from fathers' involvement in childrearing.

Fathers have strong innate capacities to bond with, relate with and care for infants. Father-infant bonding has both a hormonal/neurobiological basis and a psychological basis and is critical for development of a child². Fathers have a huge impact on their child's life, and caring for their child also immensely enhances their own emotional well-being.

Fathers must also share household responsibilities – including those that go beyond immediate caregiving – with their partners, not only to model and promote inclusive, positive gender socialization for their children, but also to show care and support for their partners (caring for caregivers).

Tips & messages for fathers:

- Before your child is born, plan to take advantage of parental leave policies, manage work hours, etc. to make sure you are ready to dedicate adequate time for childcare and share household responsibilities with your partner.
- Becoming a father might feel overwhelming at first and involve a huge learning curve. You may feel that your partner has everything under control, while you don't. Remember that all fathers have an innate ability to bond with and nurture their child and the experience of parenthood is very rewarding for both the child and parent.
- Babies are ready to bond with their parents – both mother and father – from birth through touch, talking, playing, reading, singing, bathing, changing, and getting involved in daily care – these everyday activities help build confidence and a sense of security for both the child and parent.
- Participate in your child's health check-ups, nutritional intake, immunization schedule, etc., and actively engage in discussions with health care workers, and with your partner about your child's health and well-being.
- Spend one-on-one time with your baby or young child. These moments when your child gives you her/his com-

plete attention provide the best opportunity to connect and build a bond, while also growing your child's self-esteem.

- Learn children's cues through their behaviour and body language, e.g. a baby's cry can sound different when they are hungry and when they are tired.
- Paternal skin-to-skin contact, also known as kangaroo care, particularly for newborns, is proven to have health benefits for children. Physical touch makes your baby feel safe and secure and builds trust and connection with you and stimulates your baby's brain development.
- Talk often to your children, tell stories, sing, and encourage two-way communication.
- Support partners with breastfeeding, understanding that this can often be challenging and exhausting during the first few months after birth, e.g. give encouragement, hold the baby between feedings, give a bottle as needed, etc.
- Seek help and information from peers or professionals, e.g. fathers' groups, health care workers, psychological support, etc.
- Care for your partner and relationship by being positive, supportive and ready to negotiate and compromise to create an environment of nurturing and care at home.
- Look after your mental and emotional well-being and take time out for self-care, for e.g. exercise, spend time with friends, etc.

Resources:

- UNICEF Home Visiting Nurses Training Module on Engaging Fathers
- UNICEF, 2017: Early Moments Matter for Every Child
- UNICEF Sri Lanka Parenting Hub: Masterclasses for Fathers
- UNICEF, 2019: Family Friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future
- UNICEF ECARO Parent Buddy App



Making toys and games for children more gender-equitable

Making time for play with children every day helps their learning and development – and play builds the relationship and bond between parent and child. However, parents should be aware of the possible gender-related implications of the toys, games and activities they select for their children. Parenting practices initiate gender socialization of children, and can reinforce gender stereotypes of the roles men and women are traditionally expected to play in society.

² <https://familyincluded.com/fatherhood-researchers-respond-who-unicef-early-childhood-development/>

For example, girls are often encouraged to play with dolls indoors while boys are encouraged to play outside. While this teaches girls to be caregivers from an early age, it also impedes their ability to develop cognitive, physical and social skills. In some contexts, girls of five years and above can be discouraged from playing altogether and made to assume household responsibilities, therefore stagnating opportunities for learning, growth and social development. Boys are often given toys such as guns to play with and encouraged to participate in physical, and often more aggressive, activities with other boys or male caregivers, which can promote unhealthy expressions of masculinity. It is important to note that physical activity is essential for the healthy development of all children, no matter their gender, and children should be encouraged to engage in physical play as early in life as possible, e.g. through sports, going to the playground, playing games with their friends, etc.

Parents should aim to develop a holistic range of socio-cognitive and creative skills for children and ensure that girls and boys receive equal play time, indoors and outside.

It must be noted that the digital gaming industry is a fast-growing sector which is also deeply gender-biased, sexualized, and condoning of violence in its content. With adolescents often a target audience, this industry has the capacity to deepen gender biases, and promote unhealthy and harmful behaviour and attitudes in future generations.

Tips & messages for parents:

- Encourage school attendance and give girls and boys equal and adequate time to play and participate in household chores.
- Encourage children to play with toys and games that develop the complete set of social and cognitive skills, e.g. games that develop literacy, numeracy, spatial, cognitive, social skills; toys that stimulate creativity and problem-solving, etc.
- Encourage children to play with toys and games traditionally associated with the opposite gender, e.g. both girls and boys can play with dolls and cooking toys as well as engage in physically-active games/sports.
- Avoid toys and games that deliberately encourage gender stereotypes, e.g. pink packaging, unicorns, rainbows, hearts for girls versus blue packaging, robots, spaceships, and toolboxes for boys. Ensure that toys and games given to children are inclusive and diverse in their representation.
- Prevent children from playing with guns and violent toys, including overtly violent or sexualized digital games. Replace such digital games with constructive physical activities, such as sports and outdoor games.
- Encourage children to translate anger and frustration into problem-solving, positive communication and constructive physical activity rather than use aggression or bullying.

- Toys and games should ultimately be tools that enable children to become agile and adaptive learners and citizens, including skills such as creativity, communication and problem solving.

Resources:

- BBC experiment: Girls' vs Boys' Toys
- Blakemore and Centers, 2005: Characteristics of Boys' and Girls' Toys
- The Lego Foundation and UNICEF, 2018: Learning Through Play
- UNICEF ECARO Parent Buddy App



Books, media and advertising for children

A large amount of the content in children's books, media, and advertising, including school textbooks, can perpetuate discriminatory gender stereotypes and roles. Therefore, parents' selection of books and media for their children is extremely important to promote positive gender socialization, starting from a very young age.

For example, bedtime stories of princes saving princesses, when listened to repeatedly, can encourage children to connect certain traits with the gender that they identify with, in this case, that girls need 'saving' from boys when they are in trouble, or that girls are weak and need boys who are strong to save them. Children, therefore, can unconsciously begin to absorb the accepted roles, behaviours and expectations connected to their gender at an age where they are not yet able to think critically. This leads to the development of implicit gender biases and perpetuation of unequal power structures within societies. The same issue is observed in media of all kinds, including advertising targeted at children.

Moreover, as use of online media increases among young children, control over what they are exposed to begins to shrink. Children, especially adolescents, are at greater risk of online sexual harassment and bullying, and exposure to violent and sexualized content detrimental to their mental and emotional development. While there are numerous benefits to the ever-expanding availability of online content for both education and entertainment both for adults and children, parents must at the same time remain aware and vigilant about managing the negative impact and potential dangers, particularly since children are too young to make critical choices and independent decisions in their best interest.

Tips & messages for parents:

- Actively seek out books and media that reflect strong protagonists of all genders and that are inclusive in representation; avoid stereotypical stories that can perpetuate

traditional notions of inferiority and superiority between genders, identities and abilities; e.g. the website 'A Mighty Girl' focuses on promoting confidence and self-esteem for girls with many recommendations for books, games and media that emphasize the role of strong, confident, brave girls. The website Commonsense Media promotes safe technology and media for families.

- Encourage children to engage with books and media traditionally associated with the opposite gender.
- Model positive and healthy habits of digital technology use, including limiting children's time online and remaining vigilant to signs of abuse, or exposure to inappropriate content.
- Schools should be encouraged to revise textbooks to ensure gender-equitable and inclusive representation.

Resources:

- World Economic Forum, 2018: Children's Books are Having a Worrying Effect on Gender Equality in Science
- Filipovic, 2017: Gender Representation in Children's Books: Case of an Early Childhood Setting
- Kneeskern and Reeder, 2020: Examining the Impact of Fiction Literature on Children's Gender Stereotypes
- The Australian Parenting Website: Advertising: How it Influences Children and Teenagers
- World Federation of Advertisers, 2018: WFA Guide to Progressive Gender Portrayals in Advertising
- Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and Plan International, 2019: Rewrite Her Story: How Film & Media Stereotypes Affect Lives and Leadership Ambitions of Girls & Young Women
- Plan International and Geena Davis Institute, 2019: Taking the Lead
- New York Magazine, 2017: 16 Feminist Kids' Books for Dismantling the Patriarchy
- Common Sense Media: Age-Based Media Reviews
- A Mighty Girl: The World's Largest Collection of Books, Toys and Movies for Smart, Confident, and Courageous Girls



Care for caregivers

Parenting and childcare, while in themselves already demanding and stressful, is only compounded by professional demands and other household responsibilities. It is important for caregivers and families to ensure they can balance their other responsibilities with childcare not only to ensure that children grow up in a nurturing and loving environment, but that parents possess the emotional capacity and well-being to facilitate this environment without damaging their own mental health. Parents, as caregivers, should practice self-care, seek support from others such as friends and extended family, and even get

professional help if possible to ensure that they do not feel 'burnt-out'. Parents, as partners, should be aware of each other's stressors and needs, provide support and encouragement to each other, and most importantly, participate equally in caregiving and other household tasks and responsibilities.

Needless to say, all forms of violence at home – including domestic violence and violent discipline – are unacceptable and must be prevented – violence creates a toxic home environment and directly harms the psychological development and well-being of children. Parents and caregivers must ensure that they work with employers that have family-friendly policies in place that support balanced and sustainable work and family lives.

Tips & messages for parents:

- Prior to childbirth or the arrival of adoptive or foster children, plan for managing work responsibilities, and take advantage of maternal and paternal leave policies and other related benefits (if these exist) to ensure adequate time can be spent on childcare and household responsibilities.
- Prior to childbirth or the arrival of adoptive or foster children, discuss and take joint and equitable decisions with your partner on how home (and potentially work) responsibilities will change after your child's arrival.
- Both fathers and mothers should equally share care and household responsibilities, support one another, take turns in childcare, and jointly take decisions affecting the family's health and well-being.
- Take time out for self-care; partners (and other family members) should support this and step in to help make this possible for caregivers.
- All caregivers should be encouraged to continuously seek out information and support from peers and professionals, e.g. parenting groups, parenting training and psychosocial support if required. Special consideration needs to be applied to adolescent mothers, to ensure that their mental and emotional well-being, as well as physical capacity to care for their children is supported.
- All forms of violence – against children as well as against or amongst adult family members - at home must be prevented and reported; caregivers should be encouraged to seek professional help as required.

Resources:

- UNICEF, 2019: Family Friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future
- UNICEF, ILO, UN Women, 2020: Family-Friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of COVID-19: Key Steps Employers Can Take