

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

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As a starting point for this book I ask you to think about some of the casual misuses of words concerning gender and sexuality that you might hear in a day. These are some of the ones that occurred to me:

- ‘that’s gay’ in relation to anything
- ‘man up’ in telling someone to be stronger or more courageous
- ‘you’re doing that like a girl’ in saying that it’s being done at a low level.

I also wanted to share a story told to me by someone who was in a well-known shop that sells children’s toys and equipment:

## CASE STUDY 1.1: CHOOSING TOYS

Mother, to son: I'll buy you something, what would you like? How about this? (standing in front of car racing track)

Son (around age 3–5): (runs up to toy kitchen stuff) I want this!!

Mother: No, you can't have that girly cake mixer. Choose something else. Look over here.

Son: (now grabbing it and hugging it) But I want this!

Mother: Well you can't, stop being silly. Otherwise you can't have anything else.

### REFLECTION

How did you feel reading this? Can you recognise yourself in this case study or anyone you know? If you are a parent I am sure that you, like me, have said things when under pressure and stress that you later regret. What would have been a more positive outcome to this incident?

The good practice that you carry out in your setting makes a difference. It is a positive environment in a world

where there are too many instances of casual everyday gender stereotyping and homophobia. What you as an enlightened practitioner can provide is a respite from this relentless ongoing negative input that children and adults suffer from. Your setting can be somewhere that children will learn from the world that you offer them, and from you and your colleagues as role models, how to be a man or a woman in a positive and free way that allows them to grow up and express themselves openly.

The most important starting point in this book is that positive practice in thinking about gender diversity and sexuality is part of a wider picture of positive equalities work. Good equality and diversity practice should be the cornerstone of every practitioner's work. Every setting should be a completely inclusive experience for all children where they and their families feel welcomed and supported.

This starts with the families' and children's first steps into the setting.

## **ACTIVITY 1.1: FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

As an exercise try to imagine a family's initial moments walking into a setting and think about what they might first see as they walk through the door. This is a good way to audit an early years setting. To make this exercise most effective think about it as stepping into the family's shoes by

physically walking in the entrance of your setting. Also imagine this as a child and think about what could be seen from their height.

### **REFLECTION**

The environment should be one that emphasises the diversity of the setting and the wider world. Families and children should be able to see representations of themselves and their lives around the setting and it should be obvious that all children's work is valued and displayed. This last is especially important, as children and families are more likely to build an attachment to a setting if they see their own families and lifestyles affirmed there.

Think about the feelings and reaction of a child coming to a setting and being unable to find any pictures on the wall or in any of the books that show themselves and their family positively. Families leaving their children in the settings should also be able to see them reflected in the setting so that they can truly believe that the setting recognises and affirms them. In this way the connections that the setting makes with the children and the families are strengthened.

Another important point is that it is not only in the relationships between the setting and the families and children that diversity and inclusion should be seen. This should also extend to the way that staff teams work

and interact with each other. Relationships should be supportive and respectful and children should be able to see, as their role models, adults who work with each other in a professional way. When we are thinking about the way that society is reflected in the microcosm that is the setting we can see that children should be able to view men and women caring for them in a variety of ways. This should be much more than women fulfilling the caring domestic roles and any male workers confined to playing in a more active way, for example always being in charge of outside sports.

This direction in adult interaction has to start with the manager and leader of the setting and cascade down. Because of this there is a section in this book on the manager's particular role in providing the impetus for an enhancement of practice and/or a change in direction for the setting. However, the manager can only lead and manage a team if they subscribe to the values and beliefs that are inherent in good gender diversity practice. The manager and leader have to win the hearts and minds of the team and they need to carry out the activities and ideas with conviction. Both men and women practitioners should be able to find useful information in this book and also feel that they are reflected in the case studies that are featured. The information and practices that are discussed are for all practitioners to think about and use to enhance their practice.

All of the above is part of positive equalities practice and gender diversity is included within this. Boys and girls should be able to see all of the things that they are interested

in, all of the ways that they are within their families and wide-ranging images of the different ways to be boys and girls and men and women. This is also extended to families, who should be able to see a comprehensive and varied reflection of the richness of the wider world in terms of gender and roles reflected in the day-to-day practice of an early years setting. It is important for families to see themselves and their children reflected in the setting. It is also important to extend this by showing that there are a range of families and lifestyles as well. This is especially important if the setting is in an area where there is not much diversity.

A crucial point to make is that when we are talking about sexuality we are not talking about sex. We are talking about young children's future sexuality, their capacity for sexuality. Sexuality itself is a wide-ranging term that can include someone's ideas about their gender and their sexual orientation. The child today is the adult of tomorrow and we need to remember this as early years practitioners.

In this book you will find practical, real-life examples, case studies and ideas that will move your setting forward in its equality practice. The ideas and examples of practice have been taken from real working settings and have been used successfully by them. In the same way that Case Study 1.1 imagines the first impressions of a child and their family walking into a setting, the book will go through all aspects of an early years environment and think about it in

terms of gender diversity. The book can be read from start to finish. It can also be used as an audit to work through, a tool to use to examine current practice and think about ways to move forward in all aspects of practice.

This book does deal with some challenging subjects, for example, the inclusion of LGB diversity and an examination of transgender awareness and support. The general ideas about gender might also be thought provoking if they contrast with the reader's deeply held beliefs about ways to be boys and girls, men and women. It is the intention within this book to start where the practitioner is and then, with a clear underpinning of theory and legislation, extend the range of thoughts about gender and the way that the setting can move forward in practice. This move forward can only happen if the practitioners truly understand why such practice is necessary and desirable.

Only when the adults in the setting make this essential shift in their thinking can the practice become part of the setting's everyday work. If practitioners carry out the activities and ideas about gender without fully understanding and agreeing with the theory and core reasoning behind the practices then the most positive effects will be lost.

By the end of the book every aspect of working with children in early years settings will be examined and analysed in terms of gender diversity.

## **Overview of the book**

### **Chapter 2: Background to Legislation**

This chapter gives an overview of key legislation that underpins our work around equalities in early years. This covers work with parents and as a staff team.

### **Chapter 3: The Manager**

The thrust for outstanding equalities practice must come from the manager of a setting. In this chapter I look at how a manager can lead and inspire a team in this work. I examine what strategies they could use for encouraging positive attitudes towards equalities practice. This chapter also introduces the idea of mission statements and shows how effective they can be in making sure that equalities practice permeates every decision that is made in a setting.

### **Chapter 4: The Team and the Individual Practitioner in the Setting**

This chapter draws on ideas that have been suggested by practitioners that will enhance practice within the team and show how good equalities practice can run through day-to-day activities and routines in a setting.

There are also some suggestions for team training and included are some example outlines of training for one hour, half a day and a full day.



### **Chapter 5: The Environment of the Setting and Ideas for Activities**

This chapter examines and details a range of activities and ideas to carry out with children in the setting. There are also suggestions regarding the setting up of the environment and auditing what is already there.

### **Chapter 6: Supporting Families**

This chapter discusses work with parents and considers good practice in terms of communication and interaction. Through case studies it also considers situations that can be difficult and proposes some solutions and strategies.

### **Chapter 7: LGB and Transgender Issues in Early Years**

This chapter focuses on an often-overlooked aspect of equalities work in early years and thinks about LGBT work with children, staff and families. There is also a section on transgender and how this might impact on early years work.

### **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

This chapter reflect on work done and considers ways forward.

## **Chapter 9: Resources**

This chapter looks at resources that support the equalities work in a setting. Suggestions for books are also included and these include books suitable for children and also sources of information and further reading for staff members.

## **Conclusion**

Finally I want to leave you with this thought about the nature of children and who they are. There are many theories about gender and its attributes and how this is manifested in young children.

Think about any perceived differences between boys and girls and whether any differences might be due to biology such as hormonal and brain differences or due to the socialisation children receive within their families, early years settings and communities. While acknowledging the importance of both sides of this nature/nurture debate, you will then be asked to consider if there is another way of viewing this issue. Do children have their own power to challenge norms of gender behaviour or are there fixed truths about gender, which are beyond challenge? (Tayler and Price 2016: 10)