While Ms. Joan is handing out LEGO® bricks to her preschool class for a spatial reasoning activity, 4-year-old Thomas exclaims, “Ooh, can I have the pink blocks? Pink is my favorite color.”

Other children at the table burst into laughter. One of them announces, “Pink is a girl color, Silly! The pink and purple blocks are only for girls.”

Ms. Joan calmly interjects, “You can all play with any of the colors. All of them are for both boys and girls. Some boys like pink and some don’t, and that’s OK.”

Teachers in early childhood classrooms sometimes overhear expressions of gender bias by young children, and, like Ms. Joan above, they have opportunities to address such bias in the classroom.

Using Developmentally Appropriate Practice
Environments that are free of bias and prejudice, in addition to being age-appropriate, are part of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). The main goal of a DAP classroom is to set realistic and achievable goals for children, while keeping in mind their current skill level throughout the school year (Phillips & Scrinzi, 2013).

Classrooms that are developmentally appropriate and promote positive gender development enrich children’s lives, enhance their self-esteem, and influence their success in the world as citizens.

While often unintended, gender bias does exist in early childhood classrooms, and preventive measures must be taken to eliminate it (Bohn-Gettler et al., 2010). Over the long term, education equips children with skills for a career and helps them establish their futures. Without guidance and correction, children may hold and strengthen their stereotypical ideas—even into adulthood (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009).

Formal and informal education happens in all classrooms. Teachers need to be adequately prepared to address the hurdles of informal education to foster positive gender development in DAP classrooms. DAP classrooms send a message to children that the environment of the class is a safe place to be (Phillips & Scrinzi, 2013).

It is imperative that teachers intentionally and meaningfully examine their classrooms and consider whether they are sending the intended messages to children about their place in the classroom, their identity, and their overall belonging in society.

Learning environments reflect children’s interests
The early childhood environment can foster children’s learning and development if it is well organized and

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has appropriate and diverse equipment and materials (Epstein, 2007). It is in these classrooms that children are challenged, supported, understood, and respected for their individual differences.

A DAP classroom is one in which children are active learners who construct their knowledge based on their own interests (Marion, 2007). With appropriate materials to explore and opportunities for learning, children can take an active part in their learning and development.

Early childhood professionals can enrich and engage children by incorporating children’s interests into their teaching. This does not have to be unduly cumbersome, and it does not mean the teacher has to completely rewrite the curriculum. Instead, children’s interests can be incorporated into the lessons and activities through special topics, books, art, and circle time conversations (Epstein, 2007).

When setting up the learning environment, teachers can choose from a variety of recommended centers. How many there are, how separated they are, and which specific materials and resources are available may depend on space and financial resources as well as whether the child care program subscribes to a specific curriculum that calls for certain learning centers.

What is most important is that children have a variety of options to explore and the centers are developmentally appropriate and appear warm and inviting (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

How gender identity develops
Children come into the classroom with pre-existing ideas about the world around them. These ideas are influenced by the environments to which they have been exposed in their early years (Copple, Bredekamp, Koralek, & Charner, 2013). For example, parents provide children with gender messages through their selection of nursery colors, clothes, and toys. In addition, they often encourage or discourage certain forms of play or activities, and they model gender roles based on employment and household division of labor (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009).

Children also receive many gender messages from the media, including television, videos, video games, and books—all of which often contain at least some amount of gender stereotyping, as well as gender-based social status and role division.

When children enter school, teachers become influential in their gender development as well. Through the design of classrooms and lesson plans, teachers can either promote egalitarian gender norms or inadvertently support more traditional, stereotyped gender roles.

By preschool age (3-4 years), children are naturally curious about what it means to be a boy or a girl (Blakemore et al., 2009). They absorb gender messages from the world around them and soon begin to form ideas about gender roles and abilities, which can ultimately influence their self-efficacy and career aspirations.

Del Rio and Strasser (2013) found that preschool children already perceive girls to have lower math abilities compared to boys. Tisak, Holub, and Tisak (2007) found that preschool children see girls as being more helpful than boys.

Thus, the preschool years make up a crucial period in a child’s life in which teachers need to be purposeful and engaging when deciding which activities and materials can promote positive gender development and which activities need to be re-examined and readjusted so that they are free of stereotype and bias.

Gender bias in early childhood classrooms
In early childhood classrooms, it is not uncommon to find books and toys that tend to promote stereotyped gender roles. For example, male characters appear more often as the central character of children’s
books compared to females (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011). Male characters are more likely to be portrayed as strong, active, and adventurous compared to female characters who are more likely to be weak, passive, and engaged in nurturing or domestic chores (Berry & Wilkins, 2017).

In addition, toys sometimes send subtle gender messages based on their colors. Toys that are traditionally marketed to girls—such as kitchens, dolls, and baby accessories—are often made in pastel colors. By contrast, toys that are traditionally marketed to boys—such as vehicles, construction toys, and action figures—are often made in dark colors. Thus, the color alone may steer children to certain toys over others.

Given that children begin to apply common gender stereotypes to toys as early as age 3 (Raag & Rackliff, 1998), it is important that teachers pay attention to these behaviors and counteract them. For example, assume a teacher overhears a boy say, “I don’t want to play with that—it’s a girl’s toy.” The teacher needs to promptly neutralize the comment by saying something like, “It can be a girl’s toy, but it can also be a boy’s toy. It doesn’t matter who plays with it.”

Teachers may also observe gender stereotypes expressed in children’s play. One example is in the dramatic play area, also referred to as the pretend area or home center. In most preschool classrooms this is where children put on costumes and use real life materials to pretend they are chefs, doctors, police officers, or moms and dads. The intent is for children to engage in pretend play, which benefits their social and emotional development (Epstein, 2007).

Sociodramatic play gives children the opportunity to act out narrative sequences. During this type of play, gender stereotypes may be encouraged or discouraged. It is in these key moments when children pretend to take on a socially complex narrative that gender stereotypes can be addressed and corrected by an intentional teacher.

**ADDRESS IT RATHER THAN IGNORING IT.**

For example, overhearing a boy say, “You’re the mommy, so you need to cook. I’m the daddy, so I have to go to work” is an opportunity to present information contrary to the stereotype. This is important not just for the child who uttered the statement, but for all the children who may have overheard it.

Because children are surrounded by an environment in which certain occupations are male or female dominated, and traditional gender roles are often perpetuated in media portrayals (Signorielli, 2011), children are likely to act out some of these portrayals. For example, a girl may feed the baby while a boy fixes the car, and a boy more likely will pretend to be the doctor and a girl the nurse. In these instances, you can interject, suggest they switch roles, and explain that men can feed babies, women can fix cars, men can be nurses, and women can be doctors.

Gender stereotypes are sometimes obvious and sometimes hidden. Previous research shows that even seemingly innocuous comments and decisions can affect children’s development of gender biases. For example, Bigler (1995) demonstrated that teachers’ functional use of gender categories—such as gender-segregated seating arrangements or even something as simple as saying “Good morning, boys and girls” or “Lisa, can you help the girls put the blocks away?”—can lead to increased gender stereotyping in children.
Similarly, Hilliard and Liben (2010) found that if a preschool teacher made just a few gender-biased decisions a day, children demonstrated more gender stereotypes, less gender flexibility, and less play with children of the opposite sex.

It is important for early childhood teachers to be aware that subtle decisions, such as asking children to line up by gender, creating girls’ and boys’ display boards, or even just regularly referring to children by gender, can have a tremendous impact on young, impressionable preschoolers.

Creating a bias-free classroom

As teachers, we need to be intentional in the way we set up our classrooms and make sure that they promote anti-bias education. We need to work toward outcomes in which each child has confidence, family pride, and a positive social identity (Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

In addition, we want children to express joy with human diversity, understand human differences, and have a strong, caring human connection. Consider these guidelines:

- Make sure your classroom represents culturally diverse people and environments. This includes toys, books, and posters on the wall.
- Examine your classroom to ensure that it is free of both obvious and subtle biases. Carefully select your materials, examine your curriculum and lesson plans, and use stereotypical moments as learning opportunities for all children.
- When buying new materials, give careful consideration to children’s books, figures, puzzles, music, and games. If for any reason stereotypical material is present, address it rather than ignoring it. Sometimes those stereotypical materials can lead to a rich discussion about diversity.
- Be mindful of not encouraging certain toys or activities based on the child’s gender.
- Acknowledge, rather than ignore, existing biases and stereotypes. Address them directly, in a supporting manner, and provide children the opportunity to observe and experience counter-stereotypical evidence. This may ultimately help them be more flexible in their gender attitudes.
- Rather than telling children that their acted-out scenarios are wrong or bad, engage them in supportive dialogue and use these experiences as learning opportunities.

Plant the seed for positive gender development

While you cannot combat or eliminate the gender biases in the larger environment, you can plant a seed that exposes children to different options and help open their eyes to the world of opportunities regardless of their gender.

The best way to combat stereotypes, biased comments, and negative representations of any particular group is to address the situation in real time. Using the teachable moment can truly make a difference to the overall environment in any classroom.

Respecting diversity and ensuring that it is woven into the daily lesson plan is one way to celebrate and positively encourage gender development. In addition, examining the existing materials in the classroom and replacing them with new ones that represent the children being served, will help promote self-confidence and ensure that each child is welcomed, respected, and acknowledged in the classroom.

Over time, efforts to specifically introduce children to literature, people, and ideas that provide counter-evidence can help combat existing stereotypes.

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